# Evaluating tourist experience in Italian cultural districts.
## The case of San Gregorio Armeno

**Abstract**

Consumers are becoming increasingly demand in their experience consumptions (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). They want to receive more than the simple utilitarian value for perceiving feelings and emotions to share emotional values with relatives and friends (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011). In tourist context, people search something an authentic and original experience when away from home (Otto, Ritchie, 1996; Prebensen, Chen, Uysal, 2014), either through cultural products that may have an additional emotional basis if purchased in the country of origin (Vescovi, Gazzola, 2007). In particular, the experience of the vacation has a strong symbolic value because it is a sum of all the intangible and tangible elements of the destination (i.e. landscape, heritage sites, typical handcrafted productions, social interaction).

Despite the richness of works on the tourism experience (Mossberg, 2002; Volo, 2009; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011; Tung and Ritchie, 2011) few studies have investigated the experience economy framework (Pine, Gilmore, 1998) in a cultural district (Santagata, 2007; Martínez-Pérez, García-Villaverde, Elche, 2016) and its effects on memorable experience and behavioral intentions. So, the present work analysed in depth the role of cultural districts to create and co-create value for tourists.

The purpose of the study is threefold: a. to test the Pine and Gimore's experience framework in the context of a cultural districts to verify the kind of perceived experience by the tourists; b. to evaluate the impact of tourist experience on the memorability; c. to verify if the tourist experience might predict their behavioral intentions (to return and to recommend the cultural districts).

**Keywords**. *Cultural Districts, Tourist Experience, Memorable Experience, Behavioral Intentions, San Gregorio Armeno*

## 1. Introduction

Italy is worldwide known for its cultural heritage and historic districts that help to preserve and enhance the traditional Italian culture and history (Brooks, 2011). Travel to cultural districts can be classified as heritage tourism, which refers to travels undertaken with the intention to experience the places, activities, and artifacts that reflect the cultural history and stories in an authentic manner (Chaudhary & Aggarwal, 2012; Lu, Chiu and Liu, 2015). Tamma (2010) considers culture as an intangible element of the territory take shape in the cultural-based goods, people, and typical productions. This Author gives a wider definition of cultural goods by including all the products offering based in a specific context, characterized of a high symbolic and experiential value (Vescovi, Gazzola, 2007). As well argue in literature, post-modern tourists search authentic experience when on holiday (Otto, Ritchie, 1996; Prebensen, Chen, Uysal, 2014) through the local products of a different culture, which have more value if bought in the country of origin. So, since visitors seek a total experience, including leisure, culture, education, and social interaction the study of customer experience is one of the key concepts in the cultural heritage marketing. The primary purposes of cultural tourism include gaining knowledge and appreciating local art, architecture, and traditions (Lu, Chiu and Liu, 2015). Therefore, tourists' experience is an essential element for heritage tourism management (Chaudhary & Aggarwal, 2012).

Based on these premises, this study aims to examine tourist experience in cultural context, focusing in depth on the case study of *"The district of San Gregorio Armeno"* in

Naples (Italy). This area is known in all over the world for the hand-crafted productions of nativity. In fact, every year - especially in the winter season (from October to January) - thousands of Italian and foreign tourists come to visit the streets of the nativity named San Gregorio Armeno. The purpose of the study is threefold: a. to test the Pine and Gimore's experience framework in the context of a cultural districts to verify the kind of perceived experience by the tourists; b. to evaluate the impact of tourist experience on the memorability; c. to verify if the tourist experience might predict their behavioral intentions (to return and to recommend the cultural districts). Implications for tourism development at historic districts are provided drawing on the findings of this study.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 The tourist experience

Both in service and in tourism literature, experience has been conceptualized as an overall perception of various stimulus and events (Otto & Ritchie, 1996) able to influence the tourist value perceived and the future response (Fernandes & Neves, 2014). According to the consumer experience model of Pine and Gilmore (1998), experiences formed at special events result from interactions with the environment or responses to various stimuli, such as physical things (products, facilities, and the scenario), processes (services) and people (event staff).

The four types of experience proposed by Pine & Gilmore (1998) – education, entertainment, escapism and esthetic - are the result of combinations between the two dimensions: participation and engagement. This model has been tested in different service context because it is pragmatic and it allows to monitoring the potential gap from the creation of experience (*supply-side perspective*) (Skarzauskaite; 2013; Campos et al., 2015) and the consumer perceived experience (*demand-side perspective*) (Harrison & Shaw, 2004; Radder *et al.,* 2015). In particular, the stage of education experience is focused on the role of the experience as provider of knowledge. The entertainment experience typically occurs when people passively observe others' activities and/or performances (Manthiou *et al.*, 2014). Escapism is the more complex type of experience. It implies an active participation and an immersive engagement. The esthetic represents the basic form of experience and refers to the overall atmospherics and the physical environment (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). These elements might include the museum's physical space, colour, lighting that influence the cognitive, affective and behavioral response (Bitner, 1992; Goulding, 2000).

Rivera et al., 2015 have tested the Pine and Gilmore's framework to the cultural event context putting in relationships the overall experience with the memorable experience and the behavioral intentions showing positive correlations.

### 2.2 Focus on heritage tourism and cultural district

In literature, heritage tourism is considered the strategic destination management to increase local culture and expands tourism attractiveness in seasonal and geographic perspectives (Richards, 1994, 1996). Managing the historic districts, multiple issues have emerged over time and become the primary concerns for developers and local governments, such as (Hu, 2010): 1. the loss of authenticity; 2. lacking uniqueness; 3.. distortion, ambiguous cultural image; 4. over commercialization.. Zhu et al., (2010) put in evidence that the cause of these problems is related whit "*the application of inappropriate strategies without considering tourists' experience and the distinctive nature of heritage tourism*"

To the best of our knowledge, despite the relevance of the phenomenon, there is not a unique definition of cultural district. Santagata (2007) defines a cultural district as a collective system oriented to the production of goods based on the local culture characterized by a. high level of symbolic value; b. high social cohesiveness and cooperation among local producers; c. an identity founded on specific place-related elements. Others scholars (Yang, Lu, & Wang,

2004; Lu, Chiu and Liu, 2015) have defined cultural districts as historic areas that reflect the traditional features, including social, economic, cultural characteristic, lifestyle, as well as local traits originated from a historic time.

*2.3 The memorable experience*

The concept of memorable tourism experiences is relatively new and was first proposed by Kim, Ritchie, and Tung in 2010. In the museum context, the focus on the role of emotions is crucial to identify the cognitive and emotional response and to use them to segment the target audience (Del Chiappa *et al.*, 2014). According to Kim *et al.*, (2010) a person can forget the exact location and date of a visit, but rarely forgets the feeling and emotion experienced. The construct of memorable tourism experience has been operationally defined as a tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred. In tourism literature, the memorable tourism experience concept has been applied in tourism studies (Ali, Hussain, & Ragavan, 2014; Ali, Ryu & Hussain, 2016) and examined in conjunction with other variables. For example, in the leisure resort hotels, the relationships amongst education, entertainment, escapism and memories were confirmed (Ali *et al.*, 2014). Rivera *et al.* (2015) used three items to measure construct memorable experience. As the memorable experience is the result of positive feelings and memory, in this work we assume that the construct is positive correlated to the experience and it could be a dimension of the visitor hedonic value perceived.

*2.4 The behavioral intentions*

Behavioral intentions are considered as the better predictor of business performance than satisfaction. Behavioral intentions refer to the willingness to share the experience with others or repeat the experience. In a case of a museum, these two drivers are particularly relevant (Harrison & Shaw, 2004; Hume, 2011; Simpson, 2000; Yucelt, 2000). In order to measure the value created and co-created for the museum and the tourist destination, in this study, behavioral intentions have been operationalized as: (a) intention to recommend the museum, and (b) intention to revisit the museum. This operationalization is found in the general literature on marketing, tourism, and hospitality (Bigne *et al.*, 2001; Baloglu *et al.*, 2003).

## 3. The research framework

Based on the above review and the objectives of the current research, we developed an original research framework (see Figure 1) and subjected it to empirical verification. First, the present work emphasises the role of experience using the basic four realms conceptualized by Pine and Gilmore (hedonistic perspective). Second, the perceived experience may create value in terms of memorable experience. Third, to verify if the perceived experience might predict the behavioral intentions to return to and recommend the area. A so framed visitor experience, based on the four realms and the economic value, is related to some outcome variables: memorable experience, and behavioral intentions (intention to recommend and intention to return).

After having verified that esthetic, entertainment, education and escapism have an impact of the tourist experience, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

*HP1: Visitor experience has a positive impact on memorable experience*
*HP2a: Memorable experience has a positive impact on intention to return*
*HP2b: Memorable experience has a positive impact on intention to recommend*

**Fig. 1 – The research framework**
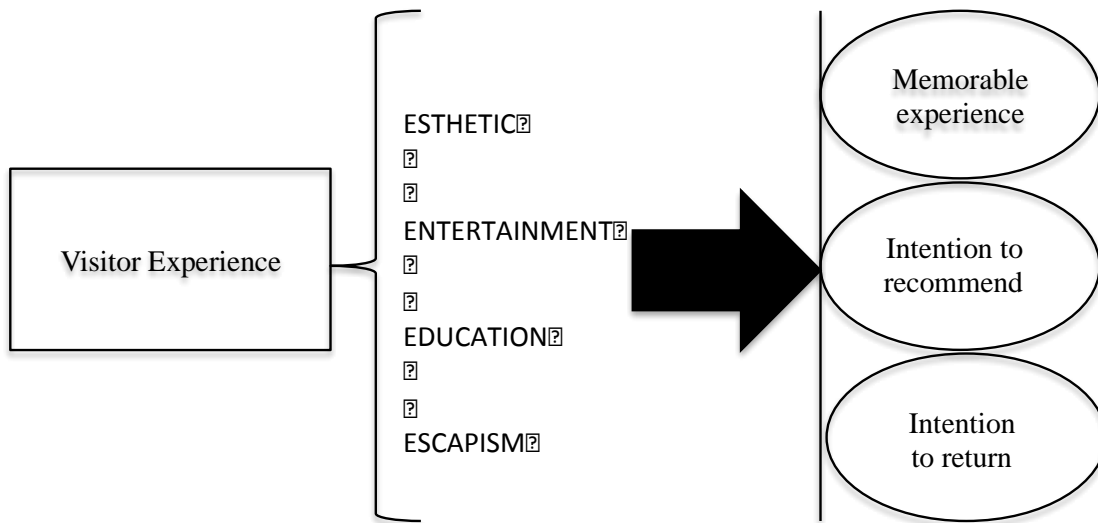


Source: our elaboration

## 4. Empirical study: The cultural district of San Gregorio Armeno

*4.1 The cultural district's profile*

*The district* of San Gregorio Armeno (SGA) is based in the historical centre of Naples. It is known for its typical specialized on the traditional production of hand-crafted nativity. Every year, especially during the Christmas time, thousands of tourists visit the area to buy the typical sculptures or the entire nativity, or simply to experience that particular Christmas market. According to Cuccia and Santagata (2007) and De Caro, Marrelli, Santagata (2008), the firm's local system based in San Gregorio Armeno (SGA) may be defined as a "cultural district" because: a. it is characterized by the presence of many small family firms specialized on the nativity hand-made production; b. the area is well known in the world launched by the Borbone Royal Family age in XIV century; c. there is a shared international business orientation among the firms; d. there is a strong place identity and solid cultural values that allows the transmission of the knowledge; e. there is an informal integration among the firms mainly based on the information sharing.

So, the definition of the cultural district goes beyond the physical existence of the firms. It includes a more hedonic mean of the culture of a specific context, which could represent the history and the historical tradition of a place. In fact, this intangible value perceived by people over the past, generates visits of locals and tourists interested in buying the nativity or single sculptures. Most of the foreign tourists come from France, USA and above all Spain due the common origins linked to the presence of Spanish Kingdom of Borbone in Naples.

*4.2 Methodology*

In order to test the aforesaid purposes, the paper is based on a quantitative analysis of primary data gathered through a survey of a convenience sample of tourists (n=400) conducted from 12th of December 2016 to 25th of April 2017 at San Gregorio Armeno, a local cultural districts based in Naples, very popular for the historical tradition of nativity handcrafted in all over the world. Main findings reveal that the analyzed local cultural context is an experiential platform perceived as an entertainment experience that positively impact on the memorable experience and the behavioral intentions. For destination managers and local firms, this study

throws light on the importance of creating a cultural experience within a destination. Moreover this study provides some findings that contribute to enrich the existing background confirming the positive relationships between tourist experience and behavioral intentions.


## 5. Findings

*5.1 Socio-demographic profile of the sample*

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents is presented in the Table 1. The majority of the visitors were male (52.5%), 46.7% were Italian and 53.3% were foreign tourists. The target audience seems to be included between adult aged between 25-34 (22.3%) and 35-44 (29.5%). The education level show that the 40.8% of the respondents had a university degree, a 37.5% had under-graduated or secondary school. Moreover, the behavioral profile consists of 70.8% of repeaters tourists, while the 29.2% were people who were visiting the area for the first time.

*Table 1 - Demographic and behavioral information*

| Gender | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Male* | 210 | 52.5 |
| *Female* | 190 | 47.5 |
| **Age** | | |
| *18-24* | 42 | 10.5 |
| *25-34* | 89 | 22.3 |
| *35-44* | 118 | 29.5 |
| *45-54* | 77 | 19.3 |
| *55-64* | 56 | 14 |
| *65+* | 18 | 4.5 |
| **Nationality** | | |
| *Italian* | 187 | 46.7 |
| *Foreign* | 213 | 53.3 |
| **Education** | | |
| *Secondary school* | 23 | 5.7 |
| *Undergraduated  School* | 150 | 37.5 |
| *Degree* | 163 | 40.7 |
| *Post-degree* | 64 | 16 |
| **Number of visits** | | |
| *First time visitors* | 117 | 29.2 |
| *Repeaters visitors* | 283 | 70.8 |

*5.2 Scale validation*

Before testing the proposed hypotheses, an explorative factor analysis (EFA) with the principal component analysis method (PCA) method based and varimax rotation has been used to check the validity of the multi-items scales of visitor experience (measured with the four realms model of Pine and Gilmore, 1999), the memorable experience and the behavioral intentions.

*Table 1 - Assessment of the Measurement models*

| Construt Indicator | Mean | SD | Loadings | Cronbach's α | Factor name |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Education** | | | | | |
| The SGA visit experience stimulated my curiosity on Naples | 5.69 | 1.13 | 0.80 | | |
| I learned more about Nativity handcrafted thanks to the SGA visit | 5.64 | 1.29 | 0.79 | 0.79 | |
| Thanks to the visit at SGA, I know more about local culture | 5.62 | 1.18 | 0.64 | | |
| **Entertainment** | | | | | |
| I thought the visit was interesting | 6.03 | 1.04 | 0.70 | | |
| The SGA atmosphere was truly captivating | 5.84 | 1.13 | 0.67 | 0.81 | Visitor Experience |
| My visit wasn't just at SGA, Naples was also beautiful | 6.18 | 0.98 | 0.82 | | |
| **Escapism** | | | | | |
| The Festival feels surreal and spiritual | 4.92 | 1.40 | 0.54 | | |
| By visiting SGA, I was able to escape my normal life | 5.04 | 1.62 | 0.81 | 0.67 | |
| I felt particularly involved in the situation and forgot everything else | 4.88 | 1.57 | 0.82 | | |
| **Esthetic** | | | | | |
| Overall, SGA is an attractive area | 5.97 | 1.02 | 0.62 | | |
| The location where SGA is situated is attractive | 5.82 | 1.02 | 0.62 | 0.73 | |

Source: our elaboration

In order to review expected dimensionality of questionnaire items and to make preliminary decisions regarding the allocation to scales, an explorative factor analysis (EFA) was performed on the multi-items scales (i.e., visitor experience with the four realms model (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). To check the validity of the scales, EFA was conducted using the principal component analysis method (PCA) method based and varimax rotation because all the latent constructs were based on cognitive scales. The methodology enables good representation of most of the information provided by survey responses. The explorative factor analysis yielded a 1-factor solution and the factors were labeled "visitor experience". The solution for the likelihood ratings presented by the three factors explains 68.05% of the phenomenon. All items significantly loaded on their specified latent construct, by confirming the conceptual framework. The factor loadings of all measurement indicators were statistically significant, ranging from 0.62 to 0.82 and the preliminary results of the EFA confirmed the validity of the construct.

These preliminary findings confirm the conceptualization of the latent construct visitor experience as indicated in the proposal conceptual framework. The test of reliability was performed of all sub-scales (esthetic, entertainment, education, escapism) of "visitor experience" and the results show a satisfactory level of Cronbach's α (from 0.67 to 0.81).

*5.3 Bivariate correlations*

After having verified the main construct through EFA, the second step of the study was the analysis of the casual relationships among the visitor experience (esthetic, entertainment, education, escapism and economic value) and its consequences effects on memorable experience and behavioral intentions (intention to recommend and intention to return).

In this explorative step, the hypotheses and the corresponding causal relationships among the variables were tested using Pearson correlation matrix.

*Tab. 2: Correlation matrix*

| | Mean | SD | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) | (10) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Education | 5.65 | 1.00 | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| (2) Entertainment | 6.02 | 0.88 | ,666** | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| (3) Escapism | 4.98 | 1.35 | ,519** | ,584** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| (4) Esthetic | 5.89 | 0.92 | ,613** | ,700** | ,583** | 1 | | | | | | |

| | Mean | SD | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (5) Memorable experience_SGA | 5.87 | 0.99 | ,638** | ,712** | ,562** | ,710** | 1 | | | | | |
| (6) Memorable experience_Naples | 6.01 | 1.05 | ,558** | ,677** | ,550** | ,657** | ,808** | 1 | | | | |
| (7) Return SGA | 5.34 | 1.68 | ,533** | ,576** | ,503** | ,552** | ,693** | ,636** | 1 | | | |
| (8) Recommend SGA | 6.00 | 1.15 | ,532** | ,713** | ,553** | ,641** | ,738** | ,673** | ,700** | 1 | | |
| (9) Return Destination | 6.15 | 1.13 | ,405** | ,523** | ,305** | ,427** | ,452** | ,485** | ,633** | ,451** | 1 | |
| (10) Recommend Destination | 6.37 | 0.89 | ,433** | ,650** | ,421** | ,581** | ,582** | ,583** | ,496** | ,663** | ,677** | 1 |

Source: our elaboration

In order to evaluate the effect of the visitor experience on outcome variables, we have analyzed the correlation index among the aforesaid constructs (Table 2). The first important result is that all the constructs are correlated with each other, by confirming all the hypothesis (level of significance was set to 0.01). The "visitor experience" is positive related to the memorable experience (*H1 confirmed*), especially the esthetic dimension (.710) and the entertainment dimension (.712) The *HP2a and HP2b have been confirmed* by showing a very positive relationship among visitor experience − and related sub-dimensions - and behavioral intentions. In particular, the highest scores are related to the intention to recommend rather then the intention to return. Moreover, the entertainment is the visitor experience dimension that more affects the word of mouth (.713). Surprising the impact of the visitor experience on the behavioral intentions related to the destination. In fact, the last two lines show positive scores in terms of intention to return and recommend the city of Naples, in particular the entertainment is highly correlated to the word of mouth (.650).

Finally, an independent t-test was performing to understand possible experience perceptions between first-timer visitors and repeaters. Findings revealed significance between the two groups, by showing that repeaters have highest scores of experience.

| Visitor experience | | N | Mean | SD | Std. Error Mean | Sign. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Education | First Timers | 291 | 5.55 | 1.00 | 0.05 | 0.00 |
| | Repeaters | 109 | 5.90 | 0.95 | 0.09 | 0.00 |
| Entertainment | First Timers | 291 | 5.89 | 0.91 | 0.05 | 0.00 |
| | Repeaters | 109 | 6.34 | 0.69 | 0.06 | 0.00 |
| Escapism | First Timers | 291 | 4.83 | 1.39 | 0.08 | 0.00 |
| | Repeaters | 109 | 5.23 | 1.21 | 0.11 | 0.00 |
| Esthetic | First Timers | 291 | 5.82 | 0.95 | 0.05 | 0.01 |
| | Repeaters | 109 | 6.08 | 0.81 | 0.07 | 0.00 |

Source: our elaboration

## 6. Discussion

Results from this study indicate that customer experiences can be classified in four dimensions: esthetic, entertainment, education and escapism, by confirming the experience model by Pine & Gilmore (1998). These four dimensions can develop memories of consumers and influence their behavioral intentions. From the bivariate correlations, the sub-dimension of entertainment has a high importance in predicting memories and willingness to recommend and/or return. Moreover, the means related to the four realm of experience highlighted in the Table 4 seem to be all pretty similar (Education 5.65, Entertainment 6.02, Escapism 4.98, Esthetic 5.89) but the entertainment experience is higher perceived from people

In doing so, the district of San Gregorio Armeno provides an entertainment experience especially during Christmas time because it creates an original atmosphere where people are immersive in. Brida, Disegna and Osti (2012) have analysed the Christmas markets experience by showing that the primary reasons to visit are: a. to enjoy and relax and b. to experience the Christmas market. This is basically confirmed by the entertainment experience. In the original model of Pine and Gilmore (1998), this kind of experience in which the participant passively absorbs what is happening, such as concerts and theatre performances. This cultural district is exactly like this because people can walk, look and visit the local shops and absorb the atmosphere. The overall perceived experience has a positive impact on the future memories and the intention to recommend and revisit the district and the destination of Naples. This latest result is important to understand the trigging impact of the district on the destination. Moreover, the sample is made by a relevant share of repeater visitors (70.8%). This latter aspect suggests that the experience is able to keep the visitors. An important managerial implication that come out is to improve the core experience by stimulating the curiosity and introducing others functional and emotional tools (i.e. social interaction, practical labs) that could help the cultural district to increase the specific experience in the district and the tourism for the destination of Naples. Moreover, marketing efforts focusing on first-time visitors should be based more on the antecedents of first timers' experience (emotional response, atmosphere, history of the destination) while marketing toward repeat visitors should focus on the antecedents of repeaters' perceived value (price, quality, and emotional response) (Petrick, 2004).

### 7. Conclusion, limitations and future research opportunities

The present work explores the role of the cultural districts as an experiential place and as co-creator of value for tourists by identifying the impact on some value outcomes (memorable experience, intention to recommend and intention to return). Although the findings are in a preliminary step, they confirm the role of the cultural district as an experiential place, which provides some positive cognitive and emotional reactions able to influence the behavioral response. The positive results from the memorable experience and intention to recommend the cultural districts and the destination (Naples) explains the hedonistic value created for visitors that returns as value created for the museum in terms of free publicity derived from the positive word of mouth. The theme of the co-creation of value in the heritage sector is pretty recent but it is interesting many researchers. Prebensen *et al.*, (2016) verified empirically the moderator effect of the co-creation between the perceived experience and satisfaction in a heritage sector by showing that the more satisfied a tourist is with his or her experience, the more likely it is that he or she will return to the same service provider and recommend the service provider to others. In the model proposed in this work, we show the passive role of the visitor during the visit absorbed by the atmosphere of local shops, typical streets, local people, typical sounds that contribute to have positive experience for tourists and produce positive memories, word of mouth and intention to return.

Although the results of the current study have shed light on several important issues, some limitations need to be considered in future research. First, a convenience sampling on a single case study was used, so results cannot be generalized. Second, the memorable experience has been used with general variables, so we can advance the study by developing a scale that measure how meaningful is it. Third, the statistical analysis is in a preliminary step. Future studies should be done in order to give the opportunity to better explore the relationship between the phenomenon by using more sophisticated statistics techniques (i.e., the structural equation model), to compare different cultural experience (i.e. cultural event, cultural destination).

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