

# The Characteristics of Tourist Experience: Evidence from Italy

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to describe how actual tourists experience a cultural city. New trends in cultural consumption suggest that tourists are looking for a holistic experience, which means that cultural city may be experienced in many different ways. In particular, the goal of the paper is twofold: 1) the first goal is to identify the socio-demographic characteristics and behavior of tourists in a cultural city; 2) the second goal is to understand the main positive and negative aspects of their visiting experience.

The study adopts a quantitative method and descriptive statistics and content analysis. In particular, a sample of 300 tourists of Urbino were interviewed in the period July-September 2019. Urbino was selected as it represents an interesting art Renaissance city, a UNESCO site with the Ducal Palace, one of the most wonderful palace in the world which hosts a collection of key Italian artists. The study stresses that the main positive aspects of the visiting experience are the good state of conservation of the city, the beauty of arts and monuments and the atmosphere of a small, quiet, medieval, renaissance and university city, while among negative aspects are the “up and down” and the expensive and scarce car parking areas. Furthermore, this study highlights some managerial implications and future research directions.

**Keywords:** Cultural city, Cultural heritage and Tourism marketing.

## Introduction

Cultural organizations are important in our society as they are called to pursue three goals (Chong, 2002; Kotler, Kotler, 1998; Boylan, 2004): to preserve aesthetic integrity and excellence of cultural proposal, to increase and acculturate consumers (tourists, citizens, etc.) and to reach economic and financial balance and social consensus. The mission of cultural organizations includes also the preservation of the cultural heritage over time, the divulgation of aesthetic values and the protection of community interests (Zan, 2003).

Furthermore, cultural heritage plays a strategic role in economy, as arts and culture are key inputs to promote creativity and innovation in all industrial sectors and, more directly, they are key elements of cultural tourism which represents one of the main income sources for many developed countries like Italy (Banca d'Italia, 2018). In particular, Italy houses the highest number of UNESCO heritage sites (55).

Considering the strategic role of cultural heritage and cultural organizations in our society and in our economy and the increasing importance of valorization of cultural heritage to satisfy cultural visitors (tourists and residents) and to reach cultural organizations and community purposes, this study aims to understand the

characteristics of the tourists of a cultural city and to identify the positive and negative aspects of the visiting experience of a cultural city. Therefore, the study contributes to better understand tourist experience, which is important to develop strategies to improve the attractiveness of the cultural city and tourist satisfaction.

## **Theoretical background**

In early studies of cultural tourism, motivation was an important issue which was clearly related to learning (Richards, 1996). The two broad groups of cultural tourists are still evident in recent studies (Galí-Espelt 2012): tourists who are mainly motivated to consume culture and those for whom culture is a secondary motivation. The distinction is based on the degree or 'depth' of the desired cultural experience (du Cros, McKercher 2014).

Tourists like consumers in general look for two kinds of values: utilitarian value (or functional value) and hedonic value (or experiential value) (Addis, Holbrook 2001). In particular, cultural tourists are increasingly seeking not only the educational value of cultural experiences but they are also looking for emotions (Poria et al., 2006; Hosany, 2011), leisure, and social interaction that lead to positive tourism experience.

Other studies have shown that the level of satisfaction derived from a cultural site depends both on individual attributes (level of education, interest for art, exposure to art during childhood, etc.) and destination attributes (services offered by the tourist destination) (Huh et al. 2006). Dwyer et al. (2004) and Crouch (2011), however, underline the fundamental role of cultural heritage in contributing to the competitiveness of the destination.

Furthermore, cultural consumers' engagement is enhanced by the use of technologies (for example augmented reality) (Addis, 2005; Marthy, 2007; among others). In the last few years, technology has been increasingly adopted in cultural sites as an effective tool both to innovate on-site communication and to improve the quality of the overall cultural site experience. In particular, mobile and interactive technologies have increased and diversified, due to their impact on the visitors' learning process. However, the scientific literature and managerial practice tools which measure the impact of ICTs on museums visitor's satisfaction (and cultural consumers more generally) and cultural site/museum attractiveness is still low (Conti, Cerquetti, 2019). Focusing on museums, recent studies stresses that the cognitive, emotional (Del Chiappa et al., 2014), and social aspects (Caldwell, 2002; Brida, et al. 2017) of a cultural visit should be considered when measuring visitor satisfaction at a museum. It seems that emotional affect is influenced by the exhibition environment, ambient environment, and museum size (Jeong and Lee, 2006). In particular, scholars affirm that emotional affect is positively influenced by elements of the exhibition environment (content of the exhibits, methods of exhibition, lighting, etc.) and negatively influenced by the ambient environment (crowdedness, temperature, noise, etc.).

In addition, Hood (1983) and Sheng and Chen (2012) identified six criteria for a desirable leisure experience in museums: engaging in social interaction; doing

something worthwhile; feeling comfortable and at ease in one's surroundings; being challenged by new experiences; having the opportunity to learn; and participating actively. Other studies have concluded that museum visitors do not seek knowledge enrichment but recreation, entertainment, and social interaction (Nowacki, 2010). Poria et al. (2009), focusing their attention on the experientially based approach introduced by Apostolakis (2003), noted the importance of customized information, emotional involvement, and a strong connection with the cultural location.

Cultural tourists experience has been studied also in the experiential perspective (Conti et al., 2017; 2019; among others), in particular, in the Pine and Gilmore (1999) model cultural tourists experience may include one or more of the following experience dimensions: esthetics, education, entertainment and escapism.

In line with these studies, previous study on Italian and Finnish museums highlighted the heterogeneity of museum visitors: 50% of visitors can be considered traditional visitors ("Global experientials" and "Aesthetic learners"), while the remaining 50% includes "new targets" of visitors (Conti et al. 2017; 2019).

Therefore, there are many ways to experience cultural heritage sites. However, the visiting experience of a cultural city is under-investigated, and the goal of this paper is to identify the positive and negative aspects of the visiting experience of a cultural city in the perspective of tourists. Specifically, the two research goals are: 1) to identify the socio-demographic characteristics and behavior of tourists of a cultural city; 2) to understand the main positive and negative aspects of the tourist visiting experience.

## **Methodology**

The study adopted as a survey technique the personal interview, based on a structured questionnaire consisting of four sections. The first section serves to identify the following tourist information: gender, age, education (secondary school, bachelor, postgraduate), country of origin (national, foreign), occupation, museum visiting frequency per year (no one, one, twice or more) and visiting party (alone, partner, family with children, group).

The second section is aimed to understand tourist behavior, in particular travel intensity (1, 2, 3-5 or more than 5 trips per year), the average length of stay in Urbino (1-2 nights, 3-4 nights, 1 week, 2 weeks), the apps used in the city (Google Maps, Trip advisor, Facebook, Booking, QR Code, Expedia, Groupon, Gambero Rosso), if Urbino was visited for the first time or not, the main reason to visit Urbino and the cultural sites visited of the city.

The third section investigates the level of satisfaction of the tourism service of the city, (adopting a Likert scale from 1 to 3: 1=little satisfied; 2=quite satisfied; 3=very satisfied): road directions to get to the city, road directions in the city;

restaurant service; accommodation; guided tour services of the city; information services of touristic office; the level of friendliness and kindness of residents.

The fourth section asks tourists the main positive aspects and the main negative aspects of Urbino visiting experience.

All questions are closed except the last one which is an open question. Sections one and two allow to answer the first research question (the identification of the characteristics and behavior of cultural tourists) and the sections three and four allow to answer the second research question (the positive and negative aspects of the experience).

Urbino was selected as it represents an interesting art Renaissance city, a Unesco site with one of the most wonderful palace in the world, the Ducal Palace which hosts a collection of key Italian artists.

Answers to closed questions (dichotomous and multiple choice) were elaborated through the Survey Monkey software which also produced the relative frequency graphs of the various response options.

Answers to the open question (positive and negative aspects of the experience) were analyzed with the traditional ex-post “codification” method adopted for qualitative research (Saldana, 2007; Molteni, Troilo, 2007). Portions of text, after a careful reading, were “coded” manually and frequency were calculated for each code.

## **Findings**

The final sample is composed of 300 respondents. In the sample (Tab. 1), there were more females (55%) than males (45%). The majority of respondents are adult of 31-60 years (62%) are office clerks, educators and free-lancers/entrepreneurs (63%), visit museums at least two times per year (74%) and in couple (71%) and are Italian (69%). Nearly half of the sample (48%) are graduated (6% got a post-graduate degree) and 45% attended a secondary school.

With regard to tourist behavior, the study stresses that:

- tourists mainly make 2 trips per year (38% of the sample) and between 3 and 5 trips per year (28%). Lower percentages are recorded for tourists who travels once a year (22%) and those who make more than 5 trips per year (12%);
- 36% of tourists’ travel trips last 3-4 nights, 30% a week, 27% one or two nights and only 7% of two weeks. The financial crisis that heavily involved Italy and Europe has greatly influenced the travel habits of Italians and foreigners, in terms of the number of number of trips and their duration. From the free comments, it emerged that in a period characterized by hardship and renunciation, those who are now traveling once a year, some years ago they did at least two trips. Respondents who take 3/5 and more than 5 trips are all mostly adults with the greatest financial availability and Italian retirees with more free time available;

**Tab. N. 1 - Profile of the tourists' sample**

Description	N.	%	Description	N.	%
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Number of museum visiting per year</b>		
Male	136	45	0-1 times	78	26
Female	164	55	2-3 times	123	41
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>	Over 3 times	99	33
			<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age</b>			<b>Occupation</b>		
Below 18	3	1	Student	27	9
18-30	57	19	Office Clerk	99	33
31-45	75	25	Educator	33	11
46-60	111	37	Freelancer/ Entrepreneur	57	19
Over 60	54	18	Unemployed	6	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>	Retired	39	13
			Other	39	13
			<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Education Level</b>			<b>Visiting party</b>		
Primary/ Middle School	18	6	Partner/ Family	213	71
Secondary School	135	45	Friends/ Group	63	21
Bachelor/ Master degree	129	42	Alone	24	8
Post- Graduate	18	6	<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>		
			Italy	207	69
			Rest of the World	93	31
			<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

- google Maps (51%), Trip advisor (18%) and Facebook (12%) are the most used apps in Urbino by tourists, especially by the youngest respondents. Booking (4%) is used in a very low percentage (1%) and even less Groupon, Expedia and QR Code. The traveler 2.0 mainly uses apps that facilitate him/her to find information: navigator, tourist guide, reviews. However, 41% of tourists interviewed – mainly over 46 - did not use any app;

- 62% of respondents said they visited Urbino for the first time, 38% had already been there.

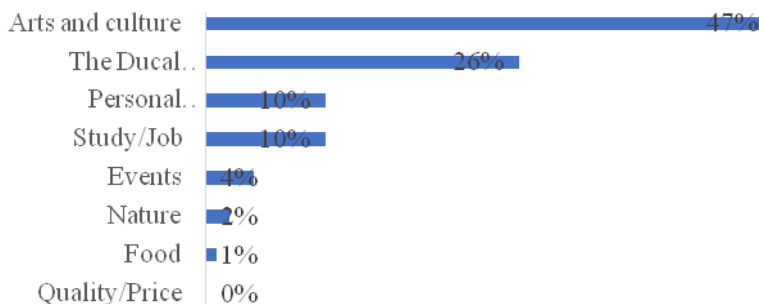
Further findings of the second, the main reason to visit Urbino, the cultural sites visited in the city and the level of knowledge of the Ducal Palace, if not visited.

The main reasons for visiting the city of Urbino (Fig. 1) are “art and culture” (47%) and the Ducal Palace (26%), the most important artistic and architectural attraction of the city and of the Marche region and a jewel of the Italian Renaissance. The option “art and culture” includes not only palaces, churches and oratories but also the University.

Significantly lower percentages are recorded for the visit to the city carried out for "personal reasons" (11%) and “work / study” (10%): in the first group tourists are included who go to Urbino mostly to visit friends and relatives, often university students, and in the second those tourists who are in the town during some conference, seminar or to take information to study at the university.

Very few tourists interviewed replied “events” (4%), nature (2%) “food and wine / catering” (1%) and the “quality / price ratio of services” (none) but one could expect the aforementioned answers in a city of art, since the respondent was asked to indicate only the main reason for visiting (only one reply option). With regard to the events, it was requested to specify and the 12 respondents indicated: graduation ceremony (6), University (2), Festival of the Duke (2) and visit to relatives / friends (2).

**Fig N. 1 – The main reason to visit Urbino**



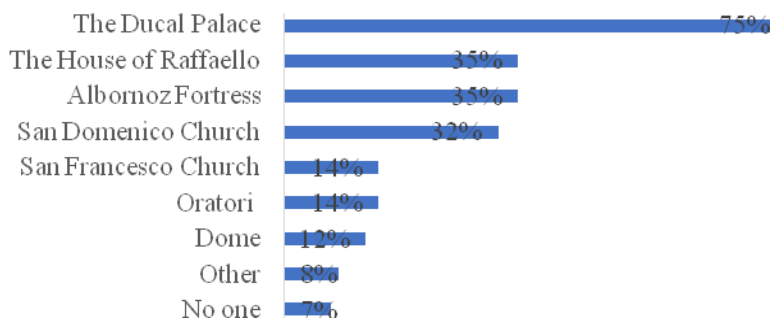
Interviewed tourists affirmed that during their stay in Urbino, they visited first the following cultural sites:

- The Ducal Palace (75%)
- The House of Raphael (35%)
- Albornoz Fortress (35%)
- San Domenico Church (32%)

The 38% of respondents had already been to Urbino, therefore they did not visit many places during their stay in the city.

Visitors interviewed (table 2) are on average quite satisfied (2,56) with services (in a Likert scale 1 to 3) of Urbino, especially for hospitality and kindness of residents(2,67), guided tour service (2.67) road directions in the city (2.62).

**Fig N. 2 – The cultural sites of Urbino visited by tourists**



The majority of respondents (average 70%) are fully satisfied with all the services except for restaurant service, road directions to get to the city, touristic office and restaurant service. However, the majority of the sample of visitors has evaluated four kinds of services in table 2 - directions to the city, direction in the city, restaurants and hospitality of citizens - while the minority of visitors interviewed has used and evaluated the other services: accommodation, tourist office and guided tour of Urbino.

**Tab. N. 2 -Satisfaction for city services by tourists**

Average evaluation/ Service	Road directions to get to the city	Road directions in the city	Restaurant service	Accommodation	Guided tour service	Information service of touristic office	Hospitality and kindness of residents
Average evaluation	2,45	2,62	2,38	2,52	2,67	2,48	2,67

Despite the evaluation of services is very positive, we can stress that only kindness of residents is included among the main positive aspects of the visiting experience of Urbino by tourists (table 3).

In fact, from the analysis of the main positive aspects of Urbino visiting experience, tourists appreciate mostly the good level of conservation (14%), cleanness and tidiness (13%) of the town together with its history, art, and culture (12%) and a quiet town with no traffic (9%). Alike, the beauty of Urbino (9%) is among the main aspect of the experience, in particular architecture, monuments (7%) and the natural landscape (7%). Other elements captured the attention of tourists: the youthful atmosphere as Urbino is a university city and, more generally, the relaxed and friendly atmosphere of a small and typical medieval and renaissance city. It seems, in fact, for some tourists to live in another time. Urbino is also appreciated for University, gastronomy and food, the sensation and the most well-known event, the festival of the Duke Federico da Montefeltro which takes place in August.

**Tab. N. 3 - The main positive aspects of Urbino visiting experience**

<b>Positive aspects</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Well-preserved city	14%
Clean and tidy town	13%
Art / History / Culture	12%
Quiet town (with no traffic)	9%
Beauty of the town	9%
Beautiful architecture and monuments	7%
Natural landscape around the town	7%
Youthful atmosphere with students	6%
Typical medioeval and renaissance Italian town	6%
Friendly and easy to visit city	4%
Gastronomy and food	3%
University	3%
Relaxed and friendly atmosphere	2%
Cordiality and kindness of residents	2%
The sensation to live in another time	2%
Festival of the Duke Federico da Montefeltro	1%
Total	100%

The analysis of the main negative aspects of the city visiting experience (table 4) stresses that the majority of the tourists have indicated that there are no negative aspects (23%), too many “up and down” (20%) and scarce and expensive parking areas (18%). Other negative aspects are connected to bad connections to other cities and scarce internal directions (e.g. no indication of elevators), lack of communication for tourists, expensive restaurants and public means, too many cars in the center. Furthermore, some tourists think that the city should be cleaner and with more décor, have better restaurants, be more active and less closed and that cultural sites and shops should have more adequate opening time.

**Tab. N. 4 - The main negative aspects of Urbino visiting experience**

<b>Negative aspects</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
No negative aspects	23%
Too many “up and down”	20%
Few and expensive car parking areas	18%
Bad connections to other cities	7%
Absence of directions for elevator	5%
Expensive city to live in (restaurants, houses, flats, etc.)	4%
Few events and initiatives for tourists	3%
Lack of communication for tourists	3%
More décor and cleanliness is needed	3%
Too many cars in the city center	3%
Expensive and not frequent public means	2%
Not very lively city	2%
Restaurants (expensive, no typical food but street food)	2%
Inadequate opening time of cultural sites and shops	2%
Poor signage inside the city	1%
No elevator in the city center	1%
Small and closed town	1%
Total	100%



## **Discussion and conclusions**

The study allowed to answer to the research questions: first, the majority of tourists are female, adults over 30, with a medium level of education, Italian. They travel mostly with family, make 2-3 trips per year, lasting for 3-4 days and use Google maps, Trip advisor and Facebook to visit Urbino. Furthermore, they main reason to visit this city are art and culture and the Ducal Palace, the major cultural attraction of Urbino.

Second, the study shows an interesting and unexpected picture of the positive and negative aspects of the visiting experience of the cultural city. The main positive aspects of the visiting experience are the good state of conservation of the city, the beauty of arts and monuments and the atmosphere of a small, quiet, medieval, renaissance and university city, while among negative aspects are the “up and down” and the expensive and scarce car parking areas and scares communication for tourists and directions to the city and in the city.

The study confirms previous research on tourist segmentation and motivations (Galí-Espelt 2012; du Cros and McKercher 2014) as the majority of tourists of Urbino interviewed are mainly motivated to consume culture and desire to make a cultural experience, but for a smaller group of tourists interviewed culture is a secondary motivation. Furthermore, cultural tourists are increasingly seeking not only the educational value of cultural experiences but they are also looking for emotions (Poria et al., 2006; Bigné et al., 2008b; Hosany, 2011) - connected in this case to beauty and atmosphere of a medieval city - and social interactions-with students and residents - that lead to positive tourism experience.

Alike, in line with the literature, tourists are increasingly use technologies (Addis, 2005; Marthy, 2007; Conti, Cerquetti, 2019; among others) especially the youngest respondents, but nearly half of the sample did not used them. This study investigated the positive and negative aspects of the visiting experience, thus contributing to better understand tourist experience of a cultural city. The study uses a convenient sample and in order to generalize results it is necessary to examine representative samples and analyze tourists of other cultural cities. Some preliminary managerial implications to improve tourist satisfaction and attractiveness of the city are the following: 1) to preserve cultural heritage;2) to valorize cultural heritage (e.g. creating new events and improving services); 2) to strengthen communication policies for tourists (e.g. online and offline and in English).

Future research could be addressed to better understand tourist experience in the experiential perspective, for example by applying the Pine and Gilmore (1999) model in this sector, and to understand the relationship between characteristics/behavior of tourists, satisfaction for services and experiences. In particular, this model includes the following experience dimensions: esthetics, education, entertainment and escapism.

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