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Leveraging Visitor Satisfaction to Enhance cultural Sites Management: Fresh Insights from Bourbon Heritage

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Abstract

This study explores visitor satisfaction with regard to the Bourbon cultural heritage sites in Campania, adopting a mixed-methods approach to assess key dimensions of the visitor experience. Through preliminary interviews with site visitors, the research applies an expectancy-disconfirmation framework to analyze the relationship between perceived quality and importance attributed by audiences. Findings reveal significant appreciation for the cultural and historical value of the sites, while identifying critical gaps in infrastructure, digital accessibility, and post-visit engagement. In particular, mismatches between visitor expectations and actual service delivery emerge, especially in areas such as online communication and complementary services. Demographic and behavioral insights highlight a growing interest in thematic experiences and personalized itineraries, underlining the need for adaptive and visitor-centered management strategies. By integrating satisfaction metrics with site management considerations, this study contributes to the advancement of cultural tourism research and offers a foundation for future initiatives in destination management and sustainable cultural development in Southern Italy.

Framing of the research. *Tourism is one of the sectors that significantly contributes to a country's economic development, together with the many industries connected to it (Wang et al., 2017). Within this broader framework, cultural tourism represents a strategic pillar of the global tourism economy. In Southern Italy, Bourbon heritage sites represent an underexploited yet high-potential resource for cultural tourism enhancement. Despite their historical and cultural relevance, these sites remain marginal in traditional tourist itineraries, limiting their visibility and integration into wider heritage circuits. In this context, understanding visitor satisfaction emerges as a valuable tool for unlocking their potential. Rather than providing definitive answers, preliminary evidence from visitor experience analysis can reveal areas of strength and weakness, offering useful insights for shaping more effective local destination management strategies (Greco et al., 2024). In particular, the perceived quality of the visit-shaped by both the content offered and individual expectations-plays a crucial role in the overall experience. Adopting a visitor-centered approach to managing cultural heritage, even in its early stages, can serve as a lever for future planning aimed at more inclusive, engaging, and sustainable development of heritage-based tourism.*

Visitor Satisfaction in Cultural Heritage

A strategic emphasis on visitor satisfaction depends on the quality of interactions with cultural heritage (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012) and aligns with broader efforts to enhance the attractiveness and accessibility (Napolitano & Bifulco, 2024; Cerdan Chiscano & Jiménez-Zarco, 2021) of heritage sites, transforming them into pivotal elements of the cultural identity and tourism economy. The expectation-disconfirmation theory provides an effective theoretical framework for assessing visitor satisfaction by comparing pre-visit expectations with actual experiences (Clemons & Woodruff, 1992). Applied to cultural heritage sites, this approach links satisfaction to factors such as the quality of the attraction, its state of preservation, and its perceived cultural value (Huh, 2002). A key determinant of overall satisfaction is the quality of the visitor experience. In this regard, a study conducted in the historic center of Macau identified four primary dimensions - experiential quality, perceived value, heritage image, and satisfaction - which significantly influence tourists' behavioral intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010).

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Place attachment also plays a crucial role in fostering visitor satisfaction and encouraging sustainable tourism behavior. Buonincontri et al. (2017) developed a conceptual model integrating heritage experiences, emotional connections to the site, and sustainability, emphasizing how affective bonds can enhance the cultural value of heritage sites and encourage repeat visits. Similarly, Beeho and Prentice (1996) highlight the importance of understanding both the emotional and cognitive responses of visitors to develop customer-oriented marketing and planning strategies. In line with this perspective, De Rojas and Camarero (2007) propose a model that combines cognitive and affective approaches to satisfaction, underscoring the pivotal role of emotions in shaping visitor experiences.

Even if Nicolais (2023) has initiated research on enhancing Bourbon sites, with a particular focus on sustainability efforts at the Real Sito di Carditello, the current body of literature reveals a significant gap in the application of multidimensional visitor satisfaction assessments to Bourbon heritage sites, as well as in the evaluation of place attachment. This lack of empirical studies underscores the need for comprehensive analyses to fully understand the potential of these sites as cultural tourism destinations, facilitating the development of targeted and sustainable valorization strategies. Future investigations should prioritize tailored satisfaction assessments and foster collaboration with local stakeholders. Adopting a systematic strategy could strengthen the role of Bourbon heritage sites within Italy's cultural tourism sector, ensuring a balance between visitor experience and heritage conservation.

Grasping Perceived Quality and Attributed Importance to Inform Destination Management Strategies

Cultural tourist satisfaction is a multifaceted concept that goes beyond the perceived quality of the services provided. The literature emphasizes the importance of considering both the quality of services and the value attributed by visitors based on their individual priorities (Mariapina & Della Lucia, 2019). Some scholars identify key factors influencing overall satisfaction and confirm that it is shaped by a variety of service quality elements, each with varying degrees of relevance. Cultural experiences significantly impact satisfaction, as the perception of the quality of cultural services is crucial in determining tourist satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the cultural context and perceived authenticity play a significant role in overall satisfaction, as tourists are increasingly drawn to authentic and meaningful experiences (Dominguez-Quintero et al., 2020). The perceived quality of public cultural and tourism services positively affects the quality of life of visitors, highlighting how the importance attributed to these services plays a critical role in overall satisfaction. Additionally, the perception of safety during visits to cultural sites directly impacts satisfaction, as visitors value experiences that provide comfort and tranquility. The emotional impact of the experience plays a crucial role in tourist satisfaction. The competence of tour guides also significantly influences satisfaction, as visitors place great importance on the quality of interaction and the knowledge provided during the tour (Huang et al., 2010; Fyall et al., 2012; Kara et al., 2023; Karacaoğlu, 2024). To accurately assess cultural tourist satisfaction, it is essential to consider both the service quality and the importance of key aspects of the experience. This approach helps refine offerings, improve satisfaction, and encourage repeat visits. Analyzing service expectations and gaps can further enhance the design of the tourist experience.

Purpose of the paper. The primary objective of this exploratory study is to examine emerging patterns from preliminary visitor experiences at Bourbon heritage sites in Naples, with the goal of informing local destination management strategies. By identifying key factors that influence visitor satisfaction, the study aims to provide insights into how addressing specific strengths and weaknesses—such as the appreciation of cultural content, infrastructural gaps, limited digital accessibility, and insufficient post-visit engagement—can improve the positioning of Bourbon heritage sites within a broader destination management framework. This research integrates visitor feedback with managerial implications, laying the groundwork for future projects focused on fostering sustainable, visitor-centered development in the context of local cultural tourism.

RQ: “Which emerging patterns from preliminary visitor experiences at Bourbon heritage sites can inform local management approaches?”

Methodology. This research focuses on prominent, historically authentic Bourbon heritage attractions located in Naples, selected for their cultural significance and potential to represent the broader network of Bourbon destinations in Campania. A qualitative approach was adopted to explore visitor satisfaction. Preliminary interviews were conducted with visitors on-site to gather insights into key dimensions of the visitor experience, using an expectancy-disconfirmation framework to compare perceived quality with the importance attributed to various service aspects. While these initial findings are not yet exhaustive, they offer valuable insights that can guide further, more structured investigations.

This approach provides a structured framework to understand visitor expectations and identify areas for improvement in service delivery, aligning with previous studies that have explored Experiential Quality and its impact on engagement in cultural heritage (Chen and Chen, 2010; Buonincontri et al., 2017). The analysis considers both physical and digital aspects of the visitor journey, recognizing the growing role of digital engagement in shaping pre-visit expectations and post-visit experiences. Data were gathered using a Likert scale (ranging from 1 to 5), a standard tool in customer satisfaction studies, which allowed respondents to articulate their perceptions of quality and the significance of different aspects of their visits. This approach yields a comprehensive understanding of visitor experiences and their satisfaction levels.

This study adopts a qualitative perspective to assess visitor satisfaction at Bourbon heritage sites. This methodological framework combines structured surveys with an expectancy- disconfirmation model, which measures satisfaction by analyzing the gap between perceived quality and the importance attributed to various aspects of the visitor experience. By applying this approach, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of visitor expectations and areas requiring service improvements, aligning with existing research on experiential quality and cultural engagement, which enables a holistic analysis of both subjective and objective aspects of the visitor experience, providing valuable insights for improving service delivery and enhancing the overall visitor experience at Bourbon heritage sites.

Results. *By assessing visitor satisfaction at Bourbon heritage sites using the aforementioned methodological framework, the study revealed a series of key findings.*

Findings indicate that both sites are highly appreciated for their cultural offerings, such as exhibitions and artifacts, yet notable gaps exist in accessibility, supplementary services, and post-visit engagement. For what concerns the first site, online information availability and digital post-visit support receive lower satisfaction ratings compared to their perceived importance, suggesting the need for enhanced pre-visit communication and sustained interaction after the visit. Accessibility also presents a challenge, as it scores lower in perceived quality than in attributed importance, indicating that visitors expect a more seamless experience. Complementary services, including online booking and ticketing, receive mixed evaluations, reflecting the necessity of further optimization to improve ease of access.

Similarly, the second site demonstrates strong performance in core cultural experiences but faces significant shortcomings in digital engagement, which rank among the lowest-rated dimensions of visitor satisfaction. Additional services are particularly underwhelming, with a significant negative satisfaction index, highlighting the need for investment in visitor amenities.

The study also emphasizes the growing role of digital engagement in shaping both pre-visit expectations and post-visit experiences. Visitors increasingly rely on online information before their visit and expect continued interaction through digital platforms afterward. The analysis highlights that improving these aspects, along with accessibility and complementary services, will be essential for aligning visitor experiences with their expectations. Implementing targeted service enhancements, such as better online resources, expanded amenities, and interactive feedback mechanisms, could contribute to higher satisfaction levels, fostering repeat visits and reinforcing the long-term attractiveness of these cultural heritage sites. Moreover, strengthening digital post-visit engagement strategies could enhance visitor loyalty and encourage deeper interaction with the cultural institutions beyond the physical visit.

Implications. *By analyzing satisfaction-related dimensions across multiple aspects of the visitor experience, this exploratory study highlights key areas in need of targeted improvement-most notably, accessibility, online communication, and complementary services. These preliminary findings provide useful indications that can inform the design of future strategies in local destination management for cultural heritage.*

From a theoretical standpoint, the results reinforce the importance of deepening our understanding of visitor expectations and experiential dynamics within the context of heritage tourism. In particular, the data suggest a growing relevance of digital engagement and information accessibility, dimensions that may not yet be fully integrated into existing theoretical frameworks (Iodice & Bifulco, 2024; Chen & Chen, 2010). Furthermore, the study draws attention to the emotional dimension of the visitor experience, underscoring how affective connections to heritage sites contribute to overall satisfaction and future loyalty. Although prior research has emphasized immersive technologies as drivers of engagement, the current evidence suggests that digital communication and post-visit interaction remain underdeveloped in the case of Bourbon heritage sites. This points to the need for further studies on digital heritage strategies and their role in long-term visitor engagement (Clemente & Bifulco, 2023; Apollonio et al., 2019).

From a managerial perspective, the data reveals significant gaps between visitors' expectations and the perceived quality of online information available before the visit. Enhancing digital channels to offer more transparent, intuitive, and accessible content could improve the planning phase and align visitor expectations with the actual site experience (Della Lucia et al., 2023; Kara et al., 2023; Russo & Van der Borg, 2002; Fyall et al., 2012). Moreover, strengthening complementary services-such as food offerings, digital ticketing systems, and initiatives to maintain contact with visitors after their visit-could improve both the comfort and the memorability of the experience, ultimately fostering stronger emotional bonds with the site (Presenza et al., 2024; Karacaoğlu, 2024).

The study also identifies a clear interest in more interactive and personalized forms of engagement, including thematic tours and educational activities. Expanding these formats, and embedding them within broader, itinerary-based tourism frameworks, could significantly contribute to increasing visitor involvement and satisfaction (Ford, 2020).

Taken together, these insights-although preliminary-underscore how the analysis of visitor satisfaction can serve as a strategic lever to guide future research and inform the development of more adaptive, sustainable, and visitor-centered destination management practices in the cultural heritage sector.

Research limitation. *While this study offers preliminary insights into visitor satisfaction at Bourbon heritage sites, several limitations should be acknowledged in light of its exploratory nature. The research is based on an initial set of interviews conducted at a limited number of sites, which, although valuable for identifying key satisfaction dimensions, does not yet allow for broad generalization across the wider network of Bourbon cultural locations. Expanding the investigation to include a more diverse range of heritage sites would enhance the robustness of the findings and provide more representative inputs for shaping future destination management strategies.*

Moreover, the reliance on structured interviews and self-reported data, while effective for capturing visitor perceptions, may be subject to certain biases, such as social desirability or memory distortion. Future research could benefit from integrating complementary methods, such as observational studies or real-time visitor tracking, to triangulate and validate the insights gathered.

Another consideration is the cross-sectional design of the study, which offers a snapshot of visitor satisfaction at a specific moment in time. Longitudinal approaches could better capture the evolution of expectations and experiences, providing a more dynamic understanding of how service improvements influence satisfaction over time.

Finally, as digital engagement becomes increasingly central to the cultural tourism experience, there is a need to explore more innovative and responsive methodologies to evaluate its impact. Developing tools to assess digital interactions, before and after the visit, would help capture their role in shaping visitor perceptions more accurately.

Overall, these limitations underscore the importance of scaling up the analysis to build a more comprehensive and actionable foundation for future research and for the development of destination management practices tailored to the specific needs of Bourbon heritage tourism.

Originality of the paper. The originality of this work lies in several key aspects.

The study proposes an innovative model of itinerant tourism, connecting Bourbon heritage sites through thematic narratives and integrated visitor experiences. This approach aims not only to increase the visibility of these sites but also to position them as strategic resources within regional tourism development. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the growing role of digital interaction in the visitor experience, highlighting the need to enhance virtual touchpoints both before and after the visit. By expanding digital platforms to support clear communication and effective planning, the study suggests improving the overall visitor engagement. Lastly, the research suggests reinforcing ancillary services, such as resting areas, dining options, and post-visit engagement opportunities, by enhancing the visitor experience with personalized itineraries, interactive content, and post-visit activities. This approach could foster a deeper cultural connection and encourage repeat visits. Lastly, the study contributes to improving local destination management practices by positioning visitor satisfaction analysis as a strategic lever for rethinking and enhancing cultural heritage tourism management practices, promoting sustainable development focused on the visitor. These aspects provide a fresh perspective for enhancing Bourbon heritage tourism, going beyond traditional analyses and focusing on integrated and innovative management strategies.

Key words: Cultural Heritage; Tourism Bourbon Heritage; Visitor Satisfaction; Destination Management

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