

Analysing customer experience in heritage tourism: Empirical evidence from an Italian cultural district

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Abstract

Despite the multitude and richness of works on tourism experience, few studies have analysed the experiential approach and its key effects in cultural district context. The purpose of this paper is to provide an exploratory investigation of the magnitude of the experiential approach in the specific area of cultural district tourism as a contribution to the scarce and preliminary literature on this topic.

To achieve this aim, a structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis is applied to a sample of 400 tourists at *San Gregorio Armeno* (Naples, Italy) to test the relationships among visitor experience, tourist satisfaction, memorable experience and behavioural intentions. The selected cultural district is an agglomeration of local firms embedded with the aim of producing hand-crafted goods (by respecting traditions, history and the local community), thereby driving unplanned heritage tourism development based on the visit experience delivered to customers.

The findings of this empirical study show positive relationships among the constructs and interesting moderating effects of the variables (i.e., gender and past experience). Based on these results, the main contributions to theory are explained, managerial implications (for local firms and policy makers) and future research directions are suggested.

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Introduction

According to 2018 data from the Italian Tourism Studies Center, cultural tourism attracted nearly 123 million of 426 million visitors to Italy. These incoming flows are mainly concentrated in art cities such as Rome, Florence, Naples (including Pompeii), Turin, Venice and Milan, and it is quite evident that the most popular destinations are also those with strong historical and cultural heritage (CTS, 2019). However, cultural tourism cannot be limited to the art cities because the cultural tourism concept is much broader and includes those who travel to experience the places, activities and artefacts that reflect cultural history and stories in an authentic manner (Chaudhary and Aggarwal, 2012; Lu, Chiu and Liu, 2015). Great examples of less-popular destinations are so-called cultural districts, in which a group of local firms coexist in a limited geographical area to maintain historic traditions with a high potential for tourist attraction (e.g. Nuryanti, 1996; Pearce, 2001; Santagata, 2007)¹. In the existing literature, cultural tourism has been addressed mainly as a form of tourism that can promote local art, architecture and traditions (Lu, Chiu and Liu, 2015), for its benefits or disbenefits to the host community (Besculides, Lee and McCormick, 2002) and as a link between tourism and cultural heritage (McKercher, Ho and Du Cross, 2005; Chaudhary and Aggarwal, 2012; Lu, Chiu and Liu, 2015). Few studies have examined the adoption of the experiential approach in cultural tourism districts. To fill this gap, the present study aims to provide an exploratory investigation of the magnitude of the experiential approach in the specific context of cultural tourism as a contribution to the scarce and preliminary literature on this topic. In particular, this study tests the relationships among lived experience, tourist satisfaction, memorable experience and behavioural intentions as well as the moderating role that gender and past experience can play in such relationships.

To achieve this aim, a structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis is applied on a sample of 400 tourists visiting *San Gregorio Armeno* (Naples,

¹ Interesting cases in Italy can be found in the agro-food industry (i.e., the Parmigiano Reggiano consortium and the balsamic vinegar consortium of Modena) or in some districts of the textile sector (the industrial district of Prato), the jewellery industry (i.e., Vicenza, Arezzo, and Tari in Marcianise), or ceramic product sector (i.e., the district of Sassuolo).

Italy), a popular historic district specializing in the hand-crafted production of nativities that experiences a rich variety of tourists every year.

This research advances knowledge in the cultural tourism field by analysing the experiential approach and its effects on satisfaction, memorable experience and behavioural intentions in an original context by offering an empirical investigation. The results provide interesting insights at three levels: for individual firms (*micro level*), for the district (*meso level*) and for the destination (*macro level*).

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Heritage tourism and cultural district

Despite the strategic role of heritage tourism in urban tourism development (Richards, 1994, 1996), its definition remains broad, and the term is defined from different perspectives (Adie, 2018).

Nuryanti (1996) defined heritage tourism as a way to draw on the past in the present. In the cultural context, heritage can be used to describe both material forms (i.e., monuments, historical or architectural remains and artefacts) and immaterial forms (i.e., philosophy, traditions and art in all their manifestations and events).

In this latter perspective, recent works have underlined the importance of heritage as an integral part of a community (Yi, Fu and Jiang, 2018) by defining the related form of experiences as “community-based” to emphasize the sense of community in organizing inclusive activities in local environments. Through the intrinsic symbolic value of the local people, they create distinctive events accentuated by the local history (Murphy, 1995; Del Chiappa et al., 2018).

Some authors have analysed in more detail the local environments where culture is produced and tourism is consumed, introducing the concept of cultural districts (Pearce, 2001; Brooks and Kushner, 2001; Ritchie and Inkari, 2006; Arnaboldi and Spiller, 2011).

Brooks and Kushner (2001) define a cultural district as a city area with a high concentration of cultural facilities capable of attracting visitors. Pearce (2001) points out the role of the district in the definition of urban tourism development and clustered the districts into six typologies (historic, ethnic, sacred spaces, redevelopment zones, entertainment destinations, functional tourism districts).

Yang et al. (2004) define cultural districts as historic areas that reflect traditional features, including social, economic, cultural characteristics, lifestyle, and local traits originating from a historic time.

Santagata (2007) defines a cultural district as a collective system oriented to the production of goods and based on the local culture. In this perspective, a cultural district is characterized by a high level of symbolic value and high social cohesiveness and cooperation among local producers and is founded on specific place-related elements.

More recently, Arnaboldi and Spiller (2011), after reviewing the existing definitions, propose the concept of “Tourist Cultural District” as a system of public and private institutions, individuals and the local community within a geographical area where the role of local culture and traditions are strategic to achieving sustained value creation.

Lu, Chi and Liu (2015) define a cultural district as a historic and cultural conservation area that reflects local lifestyle and traditional features.

Goldberg-Miller and Heimlich (2017) define a cultural district as an unplanned agglomeration of creative and cultural producers (i.e., New York City’s SoHo, Beijing’s 798 Arts District) with the potential to attract international visitors.

As clear from this analysis, in the existing literature, there is no yet a consensus on how a cultural district can be defined. However, due to the intrinsic characteristics related to the uniqueness of the place identity, the environment of the cultural district seems to be strongly adapted to provide cultural experiences to attract visitors.

Consequently, based on the contributions outlined above and following the approaches of Santagata (2007) and Goldberg-Miller and Heimlich (2017), in this study, a cultural district is defined as a delimited area where an agglomeration of local firms is embedded with the aim of producing genuine hand-crafted goods relying on the traditions, history, identity and folklore of the local area, thus generating a unique, authentic and lived atmosphere that is able to please visitors seeking to experience the identity and authenticity of the destination as the primary or secondary motivation of their visit to the city.

1.2. The tourist experience

In their pivotal work, Pine and Gilmore (1998) identify two main dimensions of customer experience (i.e., engagement and participation) and suggest four different types of experience: education, entertainment, escapism

and aesthetic. In particular, the stage of education experience is focused on the role of the experience as a provider of knowledge; in contrast, 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, implying active participation and immersive engagement. Finally, aesthetic represents the basic form of experience and refers to the overall atmosphere and the physical environment (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

This experience framework proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) has been tested in different service contexts such as museums (Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011; Radder & Han, 2015), tourism destinations (Oh, Fiore and Jeoung, 2007) and cultural events (Rivera et al., 2015).

In the particular case of cultural events, Rivera et al. (2015) advanced the experience model by testing the effects of visitor perceived experience on memorable experience and re-patronage intentions to recommend or revisit the host destination. Their findings show a large impact of visitor experience on memorable experience and willingness to recommend and revisit the destination in the future. Based on this work, in our empirical study on cultural districts, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Tourist experience has a positive impact on overall satisfaction.

H2: Tourist experience has a positive impact on memorable experience.

H3: Tourist experience has a positive impact on behavioural intentions.

1.3. Overall satisfaction

Satisfaction can be conceptualized as a “consumer’s subjective satisfaction judgment resulting from observations of attribute performance” (Oliver, 1993) or as a result of an overall evaluation. From a more utilitarian perspective of a consumption experience, satisfaction is also intended as a trade-off between “giving” and “getting”, that is, what is sacrificed versus what is received in an exchange. (Zeithaml, 1988; Mano and Oliver, 1993).

In the tourism literature, satisfaction is often measured with a multi-item scale (Pizam, Neumann and Reichel, 1978; Kozak, 2003) and rarely through a single item (Tse and Wilton, 1988; Del Bosque and Martin, 2006). In both the marketing and tourism literature, satisfaction is often related to antecedents and behavioural consequences. In particular, most of the literature has shown that a tourist’s perceived experience has a direct impact on his or her satisfaction and behavioural intentions. While the impact of satisfaction on

behavioural intentions has been widely tested in the tourism literature (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Hui, Wan and Ho, 2007), limited empirical research has focused on the relationship between satisfaction and memorable experience (Simpson, 2000; Harrison and Shaw, 2004; Radder and Han, 2015). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H4: Overall satisfaction has a positive impact on memorable experience.

H5: Overall satisfaction has a positive impact on behavioural intentions.

1.4. Memorable experience

The focus on the role of feeling and emotions has become crucial in determining tourist experiences. This relevance is also shown by several studies developed in cultural-related research settings. For example, Del Chiappa et al. (2014) show that emotions can be considered as a relevant variable to segment visitors at a museum. Recently, authors have stressed the importance of delivering a product, service or experience in a way that elicits a highly positive emotional status in the consumer's mind so that the experience becomes unforgettable and memorable and persists over time (Kim, Ritchie, and Tung, 2010).

Accordingly, the construct of memorable tourism experience has been operationally defined as a tourism experience that is positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred. In the tourism literature, the memorable tourism experience concept is often examined in conjunction with other variables; for example, in leisure resort hotels, the relationships among education, entertainment, escapism and memorability have been confirmed (Ali, Hussain and Ragavan, 2014; Ali, Ryu and Hussain 2016). As a memorable experience is the result of positive feelings and memorability, in this work, we assume that the construct is positively correlated with future behavioural intentions. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Memorable experience has a positive impact on behavioural intentions

1.5. The moderating effects of gender and past experience

Several studies distinguishing tourists define first-time visitors as people who visit a destination for the first time and repeat visitors as people who have already experienced the destination (Oppermann, 1997; Chi, 2012).

Gitelson and Crompton (1984) assume that repeat visitors return to a destination because they hope to reduce the risk of making a bad decision, to meet people similar to them, to show the destination to friends, or because they want to explore new experiences in a familiar place.

Other authors have underlined the influence of past experience on behavioural perceptions (e.g., the level of satisfaction, behavioural intentions, memorability). For example, Del Chiappa, Tinaz and Turco (2014) verified that there are significant differences between first timers and repeaters in terms of their satisfaction with and behavioural intentions towards destination in the context of motor sport events. In particular, their findings showed that first timers were more satisfied than repeaters but less willing to repeat the experience.

In contrast, Del Chiappa, Melis and Atzeni (2017), found that repeaters scored on higher satisfaction and significantly higher on willingness in terms of their intention to return to the event and to the destination and their intention to recommend the experience to others.

Among the other socio-demographic moderating variables explored in the tourism literature, analyses of gender have been limited and have yielded contradictory findings.

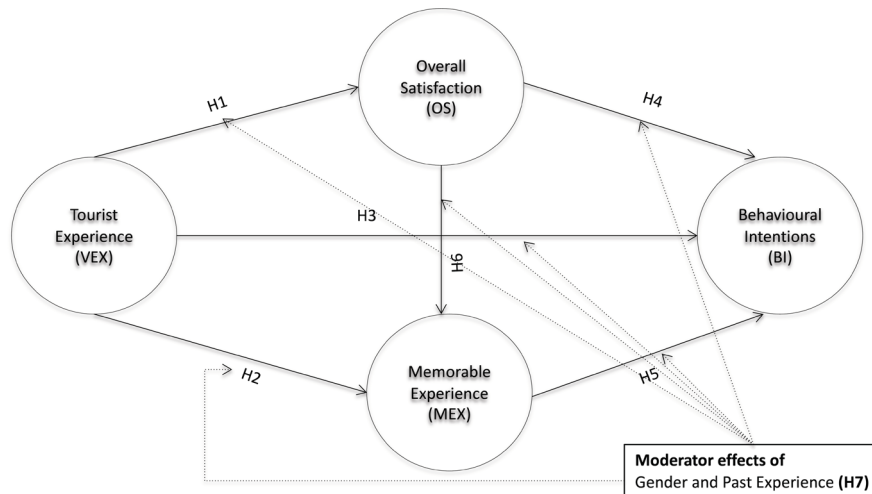
In fact, in some cases, gender appears to have no moderating effect on the relationships among destination image, satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Li and Yang, 2015); in others, gender has a significant moderating effect on hotel service delivery (Suki, 2014).

On this basis, we suggest that these two variables influence the relationships among the latent constructs, and we formulate the following hypothesis:

H7: Gender and past experience have moderating effects on experience, satisfaction, memorable experience and behavioural intentions

Based on the above review and the objectives of the current research, we develop an original research framework (see Figure 1) and subject it to empirical verification.

Figure 1 – The proposal framework



Source: our elaboration

2. Empirical study: The case of San Gregorio Armeno

2.1. The cultural district's profile

The district of San Gregorio Armeno (SGA) is based in the historical centre of Naples. The district is known for its specialization in the traditional production of hand-crafted nativities. Every year, especially during Christmas time, thousands of tourists visit the area to buy typical sculptures or entire nativities or simply to experience that particular Christmas market. According to Santagata (2007) and Goldberg-Miller and Heimlich (2017), the local system of firms based in the SGA area may be defined as a “cultural district” because a. it is characterized by the presence of many small family firms specialized in the hand-made production of nativities, b. the area is well known worldwide and was launched by the Borbone Royal Family in the XIV century, c. there is a shared international business orientation among the firms, d. there is strong place identity and solid cultural values that allow for the transmission of knowledge, and e. there is an informal integration among the firms mainly based on information sharing.

Thus, the definition of the cultural district goes beyond the physical existence of the firms. The definition includes a more hedonic meaning 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 time generates visits of locals and tourists interested in buying the nativities or single sculptures. Most foreign tourists come from France, the USA and, above all, Spain due the common origins linked to the presence of the Spanish Kingdom of Borbone in Naples.

Figure 2 – The cultural district of San Gregorio Armeno



2.2. Methodology

To test the aforementioned hypotheses, this paper is based on a quantitative analysis of primary data gathered through a survey of a convenience sample of tourists ($n = 400$) conducted from the 12th of December 2016 to the 25th of April 2017 at San Gregorio Armeno. The survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire consisting of five sections: section 1 on visitor experience (VEX) with 11 items, Section 2 on memorable experience (MEX) with three items, Section 3 related to overall satisfaction (OS) with three items, Section 4 on behavioural intentions (BI) (the intention to recommend SGA, intention to revisit SGA, intention to recommend Naples, intention to revisit Naples), and Section 5 related to socio-demographic and behavioural information (i.e., country, age, gender, education, group composition).

The examined constructs in this study were mainly operationalized by adapting a multi-item scale after an elicitation study and a review of the relevant literature. In particular, the measurement items for tourist experience, overall satisfaction and behavioural intentions were identified following relevant studies in the literature (Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011); Rivera et al., 2015; 2016. By contrast, memorable experience was measured by adapting Rubin & Kozin (1984); Manthiou et al. (2014) and Rivera et al. (2016).

All constructs were measured in terms of agreement with a series of sentences related to the items on a 7-point Likert scale (*1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree*). Overall satisfaction was measured in terms of satisfaction according to three sentences (*1 = extremely dissatisfied, 7 = completely satisfied*). Data were gathered by using SPSS 23 and XLSTAT. An SEM approach based on partial least squares path modelling (PLS-PM) (Wold, 1982, 1985; Lohmöller, 1989), was used to assess the hypothesized cause-effect relationships with the latent constructs. The PLS technique was considered a more appropriate methodology in this study since it is a soft modelling approach, i.e., less restrictive assumptions are required compared to classical covariance-based approaches in terms of distributions, sample size and measurement scales. The PLS technique, in fact, is a distribution-free approach (it does not rely on data belonging to any particular distribution).

3. Findings

3.1. Socio-demographic profile of the sample

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents is presented in 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 adults between the ages of 25-34 (22.3%) and 35-44 (29.5%). Regarding education level, 40.8% of the respondents had a university degree, and 37.5% had undergraduate or secondary school. Moreover, regarding the behavioural profile, 70.8% were repeat visitors, while 29.2% were people who were visiting the area for the first time.

Table 1 – Demographic and behavioural information

Gender	N	%
Male	210	52.5
Female	190	47.5
Age		
18-24	42	10.5
25-34	89	22.25
35-44	118	29.5
45-54	77	19.25
55-64	56	14
65+	18	4.5
Nationality		
Italian	187	46.75
Foreign	213	53.25
Education		
Secondary school	23	5.75
Undergraduate School	150	37.5
Degree	163	40.75
Post-degree	64	16
Number of visits		
First-time visitors	117	29.2
Repeat visitors	283	70.8

3.2. Assessment of the measurement model

To test the research hypotheses, the proposed research model was estimated by PLS-PM. The goodness of fit indexes (GoF) (Tenenhaus *et al.*, 2005) were equal to 0.657, which exceeded the cut-off value of 0.36, meaning a large effect size for GoF, as proposed by Wetzels, Schroeder, and Oppen (2009). Thus, the findings obtained adequately validated the PLS model globally.

The indicators, the constructs, and the values of the reliability index Cronbach's alpha (Guilford, 1954; Chin, 1998) are all displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 – Theoretical constructs, indicators and Cronbach's alpha

Theoretical constructs	Indicators	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha MAV	AVE
Visitor Experience (VEX)	The SGA visit experience stimulated my curiosity about Naples	0.728	0.915	0.544
	I learned more about hand-crafted nativities thanks to the SGA visit	0.711		
	Thanks to the visit at SGA, I know more about local culture	0.678		
	I thought the visit was interesting	0.833		
	The SGA atmosphere was truly captivating	0.850		
	My visit wasn't just to SGA, Naples was also beautiful	0.590		
	The festival feels surreal and spiritual	0.673		
	Visiting SGA, I was able to escape my normal life	0.748		
	I felt particularly involved in the situation and forgot everything else	0.742		
	Overall, SGA is an attractive area	0.772		
The location where SGA is situated is attractive	0.756			
Overall Satisfaction (OS)	Overall I'm satisfied with the prices paid at Naples	0.689	0.774	0.687
	Overall the visit to SGA has merited the time and money (eventually) used	0.897		
	I'm fully satisfied with the visit to SGA	0.884		
Memorable Experience (MEX)	I'll not forget my experience at SGA	0.890	0.906	0.842
	I'll remember many positive things about this visit to SGA	0.946		
	I'll have wonderful memories of this visit to SGA	0.915		
Behavioural Intentions (BI)	I'm going to return to visit SGA	0.864	0.864	0.707
	I will suggest visiting SGA to relatives and friends	0.872		
	I'm going to return to visit Naples	0.794		
	I will suggest visiting Naples to relatives and friends	0.832		

Source: authors' elaborations

The Cronbach’s alpha value provides a reliability indicator of internal consistency. The alpha values of almost all the constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), indicating that the measurement scales displayed adequate internal consistency.

The measurement model used in this study involved four constructs: visitor experience, overall satisfaction, memorable experience and behavioural intentions. To assess the reflective measurement model, convergent validity and discriminant validity must be established. Convergent validity was assessed in two ways: first, by examining the indicator loadings and, second, by examining the average variance extracted (AVE).

As shown in Table 2, all factor loadings were higher than 0.70, and the AVE values were higher than 0.50 for each construct (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Chin, 2010); thus, convergent validity was confirmed (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

In contrast, discriminant validity (Tab. 3) was tested by comparing the AVE values with the squared correlations between pairs of constructs. As shown in Table 4, all the squared correlations between any pairs of constructs were less than the AVE of each construct, suggesting that discriminant validity was fulfilled (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 3 – Discriminant validity

	Visitor experience	Overall satisfaction	Memorable experience	Behavioural intentions
Visitor experience	0.544			
Overall satisfaction	0.602	0.687		
Memorable experience	0.657	0.671	0.842	
Behavioural intentions	0.586	0.554	0.625	0.707

Note: The bold values along the diagonal are AVE values. The squared correlations are below the diagonal.

Source: authors’ elaborations

3.3. Assessment of the structural model

The overall evaluation of the structural model was based on the explained variance in the endogenous variables (R^2 and Q^2). The model showed good predictability, accounting for an explained variance (R^2) of the dependent variables ranging from 0.602 to 0.748. The predictive measure for the endogenous constructs, Q^2 , achieved values higher than 0 (ranging from 0.414

to 0.630), showing that the models had predictive relevance (Chin, 1998). The findings indicated that the model could adequately predict behavioural intentions.

Table 4 – Structural model assessment

Endogenous latent variable	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Redundancy Q ²
Overall Satisfaction	0.602	0.602	0.414
Memorable Experience	0.748	0.747	0.630
Behavioural Intentions	0.681	0.679	0.482

Source: authors' elaborations

In relation to the structural model, hypotheses H1 - H6 were tested (Tab. 5).

Table 5 – Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	From	To	Standardized Path Coefficients
H1	Visitor Experience	Overall Satisfaction	0.776***
H2	Visitor Experience	Memorable Experience	0.439***
H3	Visitor Experience	Behavioural Intentions	0.300***
H4	Overall Satisfaction	Memorable Experience	0.478***
H5	Overall Satisfaction	Behavioural Intentions	0.191***
H6	Memorable Experience	Behavioural Intentions	0.391***

*** p-value < 0.01

Source: Authors' elaboration

Hypothesis H1 showed that the direct effect between visitor experience and overall satisfaction was positive (path 0.776) and significant (p-value < 0.001); therefore, this hypothesis was supported. Hypothesis H2 was tested to investigate the causal effect of visitor experience on memorable experience. The findings revealed that there were positive (path coefficient of 0.439) and significant (p-value < 0.001) effects; thus, H2 was also supported. In addition, H3, which considers visitor experience as a predictor of behavioural intentions, is confirmed (path 0.300, p-value < 0.001). The findings also confirmed H4; thus, overall satisfaction is a predictor of memorability (path 0.478, p-value < 0.001).

Additionally, H5 showed that overall satisfaction is a predictor of behavioural intentions (path 0.191, p -value < 0.001); thus, the hypothesis is also supported. Finally, H6 was confirmed; memorable experience is a predictor of behavioural intentions (path 0.391, p -value < 0.001).

Finally, the global model supposed that visitor experience, overall satisfaction and memorable experience were predictors of behavioural intentions. The estimated structural paths were all found to be positive and significant. The direct effects of visitor experience, overall satisfaction and memorable experience were positive and significant.

In addition, visitor experience affected behavioural intentions through memorable experience (its indirect effect is equal to 0.465). The total effect (path = 0.765) of visitor experience on behavioural intention was almost all indirect effect (60.7%). It can be concluded that memorable experience has a strong mediating role in the relationship between visitor experience and behavioural intentions.

Moreover, visitor experience affected behavioural intentions through overall satisfaction (its indirect effect is equal to 0.187). The total effect (path = 0.378) of visitor experience on behavioural intention was equally distributed between direct and indirect effects (50.5%). The R^2 for behavioural intention is equal to 0.681, which suggests that 68% of the variation in behavioural intention can be explained by its predictors (i.e., visitor experience, overall satisfaction and memorable experience).

It can be concluded that memorable experience has a stronger mediating role in the relationship between visitor experience and behavioural intentions than overall satisfaction.

3.4. Moderating effects

To improve the analysis, some moderator variables were tested to verify hypothesis 7. The results of the multi-group analysis are displayed in Table 6. The moderating effect of past experience (by comparing the path coefficients of the first time and repeat visitors) and gender (by comparing the path coefficients of male and female visitors) were tested by groups in each of the six causal relationships. The findings showed that the two moderator variables significantly affected only one out of the six relationships: the impact of overall satisfaction on behavioural intentions.

In particular, the difference between the paths of overall satisfaction and behavioural intentions is greater for females.

Regarding the moderating effect exerted by the variable “loyal behaviour”, it was found that for the repeat visitors are more willing to return and recommend the visit than first time visitors.

Table 6 – Results of multi-group analysis

	PAST EXPERIENCE	GENDER
	First time vs Repeat Visitors	Male vs Female
VEX→ SAT	0.026 (0.628)	0.019 (0.693)
VEX → MEX	0.087 (0.413)	0.002 (0.980)
VEX→ BI	0.079 (0.577)	0.045 (0.604)
SAT → BI	0.290 (0.038)*	0.299 (0.030)*
MEX → BI	0.228 (0.180)	0.156 (0.257)
SAT → MEX	0.019 (0.856)	0.101 (0.485)

* p-value < 0.10

Source: Authors' elaboration

4. Discussion and managerial implications

The results confirm the magnitude of the experiential approach in influencing satisfaction, memorability and behavioural intentions in the context of cultural district tourism. In particular, the overall perceived experience has a positive impact on future memorability and the intention to recommend and revisit the district and the destination of Naples. This latest result is important in understanding the triggering impact of the district on the destination.

Moreover, gender and past experience were both found to moderate the model. Regarding the first variable, our results show that the relationship between satisfaction and behavioural intentions is stronger for female visitors than for male visitors. The same holds true for first timers and repeaters; that is, repeat visitors are more willing to return and recommend the visit than are first-time visitors. This latter aspect suggests that the experience is able to retain visitors.

This study supports some previous studies but disconfirms others. For example, the present findings support studies reporting that tourist experience affects satisfaction, memorable experience and behavioural intentions (Rivera et al., 2015; Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Hui, Wan and Ho, 2007); however, it also disconfirms the fact that tourist experience is necessarily a multi-

dimensional construct (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011; Ali, Hussain and Ragavan, 2014; Ali, Ryu and Hussain 2016), highlighting the need to advance research in this specific context from a more holistic perspective. This contradictory result requires further research in comparative cultural districts to verify whether lived experience is really perceived without rational boundaries.

Moreover, the results show that repeat visitors are more willing to return and recommend the visit than are first-time visitors, according to Del Chiappa et al. (2017). In some studies, gender did not have moderating effects on behavioural relationships (Li and Yang, 2015); however, this study confirms a more positive relationship between satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Suki, 2014) for female visitors. Nevertheless, this result needs to be investigated in depth in future research to understand the underlying reason.

Overall, the present results contribute to the current body of knowledge suggesting that a visit at a cultural district (such as San Gregorio Armeno) is perceived as an overall immersive experience, one that people cannot categorize under a specific typology (aesthetic, education, entertainment and escapism). Finally, the positive impact of lived experience on the behavioural intentions to return and recommend the destination makes it possible to imagine that the cultural district is a potential triggering factor for the whole destination.

Important managerial implications are provided for individual firms (*micro level*), for the cultural district (*meso level*) and for the entire destination (*macro level*). From micro-level perspective, these results underline that the visiting the district, the influence of word of mouth and returning to the destination also have a positive impact on satisfaction and memorability. From a marketing perspective, consumer feedback should stimulate firms to work to improve their offerings. Every firm can behave more proactively by stimulating consumers to enter the store. For example, the experience design can be further enriched through a wider set of functional and emotion-based stimuli that can be offered to individuals visiting the cultural district (e.g., crib art classes).

From the meso-level perspective, these results should encourage individual firms to create a more organized district experience.

Because people perceive a holistic experience, individual firms can create a unique brand to plan the promotion of their experience-based value proposition.

Finally, from the macro-level perspective, the power of the cultural district to generate thousands of visitors and a positive visitor experience suggests an emerging triggering factor for the destination. Thus, local managers

and policy makers should understand this potential and help firms promote a district brand experience.

The insights derived from this research highlight an unexpressed potential of this district, which should encourage destination managers to formulate a planned marketing strategy; additionally, destination managers should include the district in their destination tourist offering as one of the city's tourist attractions.

Although the results of the current study have shed light on several important issues, some limitations need to be considered in future research. First, convenience sampling for a single case study was used, so the results cannot be generalized. Second, experience was "narrowly" considered and operationalized in the survey as a multidimensional construct rather than according to the more appropriate Pine and Gilmore model. Third, memorable experience was used with general variables; thus, we can advance the study by developing a scale that measures how meaningful it is. Future studies should run SEM by subsample (i.e., gender-based, nationality-based) to determine whether the model works and/or to also consider behavioural intentions in the digital environment (i.e., electronic word of mouth (e-WOM)).

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