

# Enhancing cultural tourism through the development of memorable experiences: the “Food Democracy Museum” as a phygital project<sup>1</sup>

Received  
14<sup>th</sup> October 2021

Revised  
8<sup>th</sup> February 2022

Accepted  
9<sup>th</sup> March 2022

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## Abstract

**Frame of the research:** Because of increasing global competition and the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism service providers need to understand how cultural tourism can be enhanced locally through the development of memorable cultural tourism experiences.

**Purpose of the paper:** The study aims to examine how to enhance local cultural tourism through the development of memorable experiences. More specifically, it identifies dimensions and triggers of memorable experiences in cultural tourism from the experience provider's perspective.

**Methodology:** The study follows a qualitative approach by means of an in-depth case-study analysis. The Food Democracy Museum (FDM) - a diffused and digital museum aimed at enhancing the cultural heritage of the historical city center of Verona - was examined as a single case study. Interviews with various stakeholders were carried out and analyzed via content analysis by means of the NVivo software.

**Findings:** The FDM project contributes to developing memorable experiences in cultural tourism through the following dimensions: significance of the experience, authenticity, engagement, cultural exchange, culinary attraction, quality of service, and experience sharing. Social entrepreneurship supports digitalization, value co-creation, and the multi-stakeholder approach as triggers of such experiences.

**Research limitations:** Limitations include the use of a qualitative research method (single case study) and the sole consideration of the experience provider's perspective. Thus, any resulting generalizations need to be treated with caution.

**Practical implications:** Experience has to be enriched with significance, authenticity, engagement, cultural exchange, culinary attraction, quality of service, and sharing both offline and online. SMEs can invest both in staff training to educate employees about aspects of service quality and local cultural tourism, and in technology-which does not need to be expensive.

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1 **Funding:** Food Democracy Museum project is funded by the European Social Fund in pursuance dated DGR n. 254 dated March 2nd, 2020 “Il lavoro si racconta. Botteghe e Atelier aziendali. Itinerari di scoperta dei patrimoni d'impresa” (“Work tells about itself. Workshops and Business Ateliers. Itineraries for the discovery of business heritage”) promoted by the Veneto Region.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would sincerely like to thank Dr. Michael Cortelletti, Dr. Giulia Sammarco, Dr. Gaia Passamonti and Pensiero Visibile for their assistance during this research.

**Originality of the study:** *The proposed model can be used as a point of reference to improve memorable experiences in cultural tourism, while the FDM project can be adapted and replicated in other local areas.*

*Key words: cultural tourism experience design; social entrepreneurship; digitalization; value co-creation; multi-stakeholder approach; innovation.*

## 1. Introduction

In the tourism industry, the memorability of the experience is one of the most valuable attributes (Kim, 2018; Kim and Chen, 2019) to make the destination competitive. Furthermore, due to the increasing global competition and the recent devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rivera *et al.*, 2021) destinations are even more in need of understanding how to create and deliver memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) to obtain and maintain their competitive advantage (e.g., Kim, 2014; Chen and Rahman, 2018). This study focuses on cultural tourism, which is a well-established phenomenon in many tourism destinations (Richards, 2018). In 2018, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defined cultural tourism as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination” (UNWTO, 2018). In 2021, the historical and artistic cities of Italy were confirmed as the preferred tourism product, welcoming 43.6 million tourist arrivals (of which almost 60% come from the USA, Germany and France) with a 35.4% share of the total arrivals (RBS, 2021).

An extensive stream of literature on cultural tourism identifies various components that may significantly improve the cultural tourism experience and, accordingly, contribute to enhancing the competitiveness of cultural tourism destinations (Chen and Rahman, 2018). For example, various studies highlight how destination heritage (Bec *et al.*, 2019), cultural inheritance (Bessière, 2013), local cuisine (e.g., Han, 2012), and the procurement of new information and experiences in the cultural field (e.g., Richards, 1996; Lee, 2015) can significantly enhance tourists’ experience. In this regard, the use of technology-especially immersive technology, such as virtual or augmented reality (Chung *et al.*, 2015; Bec *et al.*, 2019)-has the potential to create (and enhance) immersive and memorable tourism experiences (Azis *et al.*, 2020; Bec *et al.*, 2019; Little *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the incorporation of technology into these experiences is becoming increasingly crucial in enriching MTEs in the cultural tourism context (Little *et al.*, 2019) and, consequently, influencing cultural destination competitiveness (Tscheu and Buhalis, 2016). In addition, several studies have shown the importance of technology in contributing to value co-creation processes between companies and their territories (Akaka and Vargo, 2014), also with specific reference to the tourism industry (Thrassou *et al.*, 2014; Yung and Khoo-Lattimore, 2017). However, businesses, especially SMEs, which are typical of the tourism industry, may lack the resources to obtain certain cutting-edge technologies

and innovations. Therefore, collaboration with other stakeholders such as residents, other enterprises, local organizations, and tourists (Gomes *et al.*, 2018; Baccarani *et al.*, 2019) is needed to enable smaller firms to access innovation processes that favor the involvement of internal and external stakeholders in the co-creation of value (Leonidou *et al.*, 2018). In this scenario, innovation can be favored by social entrepreneurship, a process aimed at overcoming social problems and meeting social needs (Austin *et al.*, 2006; Acs *et al.*, 2013) by creating value for society and achieving an equitable distribution of social and economic capital (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). SMEs that are driven by social entrepreneurs, that is by entrepreneurs with the propensity to reinvest profits in the social mission by creating collective benefits in favor of society (Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Bacq and Janssen, 2011), can achieve these goals.

In sum, several scholars (e.g., Kim *et al.*, 2012; Chen and Rahman, 2018; Seyfi *et al.*, 2019) have theoretically examined the concept of MTEs and its domains, also with reference to the context of cultural tourism, and they highlight the key role of technology in enhancing the final tourist experience rather than contributing to value co-creation processes, in some cases from a multi-stakeholder perspective. However, the intersection of these research streams has not been explored in depth, and there is a lack of empirical contributions in this field. In addition, very few studies have explored the role of social entrepreneurship in the creation of MTEs in cultural tourism. Considering these research gaps, this paper focuses on the following research question: How can cultural tourism be enhanced locally through the development of MTEs?

To answer this research question, this study aims to examine how to enhance local cultural tourism through the development of memorable experiences by specifically identifying dimensions and triggers of memorable experiences in cultural tourism from the experience provider's perspective. Based on this purpose, it proposes the Food Democracy Museum (FDM), a diffused and digital museum aimed at enhancing the cultural heritage of the city of Verona, as a single case study.

The results of this research have theoretical, managerial, and social implications. First, the study proposes a model about the development of MTEs in cultural tourism by filling the existing gap in this context. Second, the study supports cultural tourism managers in designing such experiences and, at the same time, better orienting phygital tourists and citizens towards less known places and typical attractions. Third, it suggests some social benefits emerging from this project.

The paper is organized as follows: after reviewing the main research streams regarding MTEs, the role of technology, and social entrepreneurship in cultural tourism, and after presenting the study method, the main results are described and discussed. Finally, the paper concludes by providing implications, limitations, and future research.

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## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Memorable tourism experiences in cultural tourism

Ritchie and Crouch (2003) suggested that “what makes a tourism destination truly competitive is its ability to increase tourism expenditure, to increasingly attract visitors while providing them with satisfying, memorable experiences, and to do so in a profitable way” (p. 2). An MTE is defined as “a tourism experience remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim, 2010, p. 2). According to the seminal work of Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012), the memorability of a tourism experience is provided by seven domains: hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge. The components of different experiences may vary because experience itself is created by individual subjective evaluations (Tung and Ritchie, 2011).

Different components have been identified with specific reference to cultural tourism (Chen and Rahman, 2018). For example, Tung and Ritchie (2011) suggested that learning and understanding the history, local culture, residents’ way of life, and language of a destination are among the most significant components of MTEs. A destination’s cultural inheritance can significantly enhance tourists’ experience (Lee, 2015), and several researchers have indicated a positive relationship between cultural and heritage tourism and memorable experiences (Bessière, 2013; Seyfi *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the appropriate management of heritage attractions not only helps heritage preservation but also contributes to the enhancement of the overall tourism experience (Bec *et al.*, 2019). Cultural inheritance also involves local cuisine (Han, 2012; Lee, 2015) and gastronomic experience (Williams *et al.*, 2019). Various studies have shown that the experience of consuming local food enables tourists to create positive and unforgettable memories, and such positive memories further enhance their strong attachment to local attractions and behavioral intention (Tsai, 2016; Cao *et al.*, 2019; Baratta and Simeoni, 2021). In addition, for gastro-tourists, eating good food is generally not enough and sharing the experience is an integral part of MTEs (Williams *et al.*, 2019). Given that cultural tourists are mostly driven by “the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs” (Richards, 1996, p. 24), a proper scale to measure memorable experiences in cultural tourism has been developed and consists of the following six key factors: (1) prior perceived significance of the experience, (2) authenticity, (3) engagement, (4) cultural exchange, (5) culinary attraction, and (6) quality of service (Seyfi *et al.*, 2019).

### 2.2 Digital innovation technologies, value co-creation, and multi-stakeholder approach for memorable tourism experiences

Digital innovation has left no industry untouched (Serravalle *et al.*, 2019), cultural tourism included. Through the Internet and social media, tourists can share their experience with family, friends, and the rest of the world (Volo, 2010; Xu *et al.*, 2017), and MTEs are often associated with

positive shared experiences (Chandralal *et al.*, 2014). Digital innovation technologies can make tourists more conscious about their visit (Capuano *et al.*, 2016), thus enhancing their knowledge and the overall learning experience (Yung and Khoo-Lattimore, 2017); technology may also allow easier memorization of new information, and hence a more enjoyable and interactive visit (Tom Dieck and Jung, 2017). Furthermore, technology has the power to increase customer satisfaction and customer engagement, and to enrich the memories of visitors (Bec *et al.*, 2019). Phygital phenomena, i.e. the integration of physical and digital resources, are increasingly important in enhancing tourism experiences (Ballina *et al.*, 2019). In addition to the creation and enhancement of immersive and memorable tourism experiences (Azis *et al.*, 2020), technology and digital innovation play a fundamental role in securing the future viability of the cultural tourism experience (Chung *et al.*, 2015). In other words, technology can be considered a key factor in leveraging and enriching MTEs in cultural tourism (Little *et al.*, 2019).

In addition to its positive impact on the tourism experience and generation of revisit intentions (Sugathan and Ranjan, 2019), technology also allows tourists to participate in the value co-creation process (Kelly *et al.*, 2017). Studies have revealed not only that co-creation in the tourism industry is facilitated by the use of technology (Thrassou *et al.*, 2014; Yung and Khoo-Lattimore, 2017), but also that technology can contribute to value co-creation processes between companies and their territories (Akaka and Vargo, 2014; Baccarani *et al.*, 2019). In cultural tourism, organizations should create long-term value according to a multi-stakeholder approach (Pencarelli *et al.*, 2016); therefore, value is created by-and delivered to-all the involved stakeholders. Serravalle and colleagues (2019) suggested that the incorporation of technological innovations in museums allows the co-creation of multiple values for different stakeholders, including visitors, government agencies, and the local community.

For long term-value creation and the sustainable development of tourist destinations, the benefits of tourism should be equally distributed among the local community, hence encouraging the development of local companies and the creation of more employment (Meyer, 2010; Crnogaj *et al.*, 2014). Prior literature has already stressed the relevance of adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective for the effective implementation of sustainable tourism (Waligo *et al.*, 2013). In addition, a multi-stakeholder approach contributes to the improvement of the overall tourist experience since stakeholders collectively generate more value than the sum of the value created by each actor (Pera *et al.*, 2016).

### 2.3 Social entrepreneurship in favor of memorable tourism experiences creation

Given its specific nature, cultural tourism can be connected to social entrepreneurship, which is understood as an entrepreneur's inclination to carry out activities that combine commercial purpose with social goals by using innovative approaches to address social problems and needs or to create social wealth. Social entrepreneurship is a rapidly

evolving phenomenon affecting diverse economic sectors (Terán-Yépez *et al.*, 2020; Bacq and Janssen, 2011). According to Chell (2007), social entrepreneurship can be positioned along a spectrum ranging from purely philanthropic to purely commercial activities, and its key feature consists in the purpose to create value for people and communities also through a market-based approach (Bacq and Janssen, 2011). Therefore, social entrepreneurship is developed in business industries as well as in non-profit organizations such as social enterprises. In both of these perspectives, profit is not the end per se, but rather a means to create not only economic value for entrepreneurs but also welfare for society (Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Sinthupundaja *et al.*, 2019). Social entrepreneurship encompasses “the activities and the processes undertaken to discover, define, and exploit opportunities in order to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organizations in an innovative manner” (Zahra *et al.*, 2009, p. 519), and can therefore contribute to the overall quality of tourism through this innovative approach. Moreover, social entrepreneurship is about creating value for society and achieving equitable distribution, rather than accumulating social and economic capital (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). Positive externalities are also generated for other economic players, and, in this respect, social entrepreneurship can help in linking the benefits of the tourism industry to the local community and territory.

Even though cultural tourism is connected to-and could benefit from-social entrepreneurship, research on this topic is still in its infancy (Crnogaj *et al.*, 2014; Swanson and DeVereaux, 2017). In their literature review on social entrepreneurship, Terán-Yépez and colleagues (2020) reported very few examples from the field of tourism. Some of these studies have fully or partially adopted the principles and concepts of social entrepreneurship in alternative forms of tourism, such as ecotourism (Sakata and Prideaux, 2013), social tourism (Hunter-Jones, 2011), and volunteer tourism (Coghlan and Noakes, 2012). At the tourist destination level, social entrepreneurship can be a useful approach to minimize the negative consequences of the tourist industry on the local community, to create social value (Aquino *et al.*, 2018), and even to improve residents’ quality of life (Crnogaj *et al.*, 2014). Altinay and colleagues (2016) reported that stakeholder collaboration, relationship development, and local community empowerment are the main resources to leverage for the creation of social value.

Social entrepreneurship and MTEs have generally been investigated separately. To the best of our knowledge, only one study has recently been conducted in this regard (Castellani *et al.*, 2020). The authors focused on the MTEs offered by tourism social enterprises in little-known Italian tourist destinations by arguing that social entrepreneurship can contribute to tourism development in several ways and that the memorability of the experience is an outcome of the specific characteristics of tourism social enterprises. Therefore, existing literature neglects the role of social entrepreneurship in the creation of MTEs in cultural tourism with specific reference to for-profit firms. However, since social entrepreneurship recognizes technological innovation as an opportunity for value co-creation and involves diverse stakeholders’ perspective, it can enhance the

overall tourist experience and be considered an appropriate environment for the design of MTEs in cultural tourism.

This research therefore aims to investigate how to enhance local cultural tourism through memorable experience development by identifying the dimensions of MTEs in cultural tourism and the role played by value co-creation, multi-stakeholder perspective and digitalization, fostered by social entrepreneurship, in the design of these experiences, by adopting the service provider perspective.

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### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Research strategy

The present research examines the dimensions and triggers of memorable tourism experiences by following a qualitative approach. A case-study analysis - one of the most used methods in exploratory research - was developed as a strategy of inquiry to undertake an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2003). Robson (2002, p.178) defines a case study as "a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence". Within a case study, the boundaries between the studied phenomenon and the context within which it is studied are not evident. A single case study enables the portrayal of the concrete realities and real people that are involved in such realities (Lamnek, 2010). In addition, a single case study is an appropriate research strategy when it represents a very rare phenomenon that few have considered before (Yin, 2003). In this sense, the case examined for this study can provide cultural tourism scholars and practitioners with theory understanding and explanations that could be useful for other cases (Yin, 2003), by enabling in-depth investigation and inspiration for new ideas (Siggelkow, 2007).

#### 3.2 The case study

The case study analyzed was that of the Food Democracy Museum (FDM), a diffused and digital museum created to enhance the food and wine traditions and support the local cultural heritage of the city of Verona (Italy). More precisely, food and wine products-which are highly representative of Italy-and the presence of local supply chains allow the visitor to travel on foot through a series of itineraries that were specifically designed for this project. In addition, visitors are guided by a web app to uncover the links between food and wine traditions and Verona's history and architecture, thus enabling them to discover more about lesser known cultural, rather than traditional, aspects of the city. The project involves four restaurants in the historic center of Verona -which are not social enterprises but rather for-profit businesses-, scholars of the University of Verona, a web communication agency, the Veneto Region, and citizens in order to enhance visitors' knowledge of the city from multiple cultural points of

view ranging from typical food and wine products, which are an expression of the local territory, to palaces and monuments, which are symbols of historical, artistic, and cultural heritage. Thanks to the FDM, architecture and history, along with food and wine, come together to portray Verona through an innovative, original, and comprehensive narrative. Within such a context, storytelling is used as a means of conveying experiences.

The FDM was chosen for the present investigation because it elicits insight for a better theoretical understanding, as is required by the case-study method (Siggelkow, 2007). Moreover, this case represents an interesting example of a for-profit company with high growth potential for catering, trade, and tourism. The company boasts more than 40 years of experience in commercial catering and a team of professional employees who are enthusiastic and competent. The FDM is a commercial company—and therefore not a social enterprise—that pursues the creation of value through a market-based approach. However, the FDM may be considered a project of social entrepreneurship because it was realized through the foresight of an entrepreneur, who aimed to combine digital innovation technologies in a multi-stakeholder perspective in order to create social benefits for the local community by leveraging cultural tourism in an innovative manner.

### *3.3 Data collection and analysis*

For data collection, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out with the following key stakeholders of the FDM: (1) the founder of the project, (2) managers and employees of the firms (restaurants and communication agency) that were involved in this project, and (3) the scientific director of the university team. All interviewees received an email informing them about the research topic, its purpose, and a brief overview of the issues to be covered during the interview. This method enabled researchers to gather interviewees' thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and experiences in accordance with the purpose of the research (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2005).

Face-to-face interviews were organized by following a conversation with purpose approach (Burgess *et al.*, 1991) because this technique enables interview participants to adjust the detail of their answers and the order of the questions, in order to facilitate information gathering and the clarification of activity planning and development. Each interview lasted approximately 1-2 hours and took place between May and June 2021. Each interview followed a protocol that was developed by considering the emerging literature about MTE development and cultural tourism (Yin, 2003). More specifically, the protocol covered questions related to examining the project subject, the reasons that led to its realization, the relationships with MTE creation, how the project was developed, the local actors that were involved, and the activities that were developed with these actors.

The choice to interview different stakeholders by adopting the investigator triangulation method (Jack and Raturi, 2006), that is, to interview multiple observers, was motivated by the following two needs:



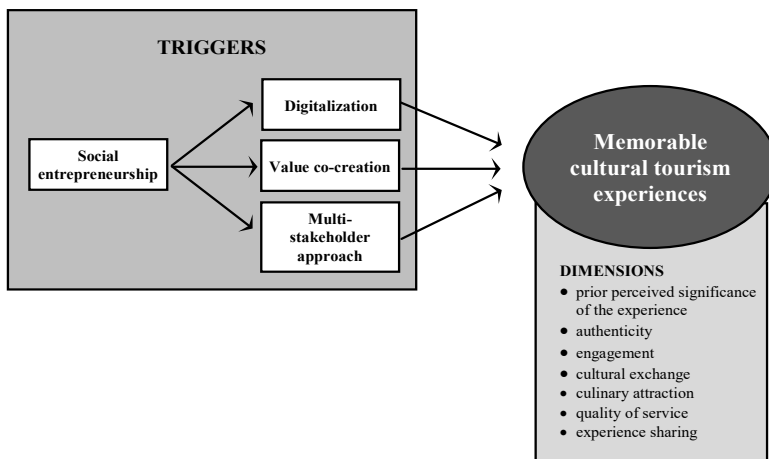
(1) to collect the perspectives of both those who designed the project and those who participated in the project according to a multi-stakeholder approach, and (2) to overcome common problems related to single-source bias.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy. Prior to analyzing the data, respondents were asked to review the interview transcripts and confirm the accuracy of the information. The data was examined by using the NVivo 11 software to perform content analysis. The coding of themes was inductively carried out (Saldaña, 2009) in relation to the study's purpose. The two researchers conducted the coding work independently to search for themes and then compared and discussed the coding results and reached a consensus on common themes. The data analysis followed a blended approach, which was theoretically driven. However, further themes inductively emerged from the data (Miles *et al.*, 2014).

#### 4. Results

This section presents prior perceived significance of the experience, authenticity, engagement, cultural exchange, culinary attraction, and quality of service, as well as experience sharing as the MTE dimensions that are developed in cultural tourism thanks to the FDM project, and proposes social entrepreneurship, along with digitalization, value co-creation, and a multi-stakeholder approach, as triggers of memorability in the FDM experience. A model for enhancing local cultural tourism through memorable experience development is provided (Figure 1) and can serve as a stimulus or enabler in the design of an MTE from the service provider perspective. In support of these research results, a selection of representative quotations are offered as empirical evidence.

Fig. 1: Model for enhancing local cultural tourism through the development of memorable experiences



Source: Authors' elaboration

#### 4.1 Dimensions of memorable experiences in cultural tourism

##### 4.1.1 Prior perceived significance of the experience

The dimension of prior perceived significance of the experience was highlighted during the interviews in terms of visiting a destination by creating awareness, knowledge, and desire about its landmarks in order to affect the decision of (re)visiting that specific destination. Verona, which has been on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2000, is among the most visited cities in Italy, and its international arrivals represent two-thirds of total arrivals (Osservatorio del Turismo Regionale Federato, 2021). The cultural heritage of this city is not only preserved in museums but also widespread throughout its environmental and urban surroundings. However, some culturally important places are usually neglected by tourists - and also by citizens - during their visits, only because they are less known and, thus, not included in the main tourist itineraries. In addition, Verona is known for its rich cuisine: polenta, risotto, gnocchi, the famous tortellini of Valeggio, and even horse and donkey meat, prepared with recipes handed down for more than a thousand years, along with many wines are just some of the typical products of this territory. The FDM project represents the opportunity of creating (further) awareness of and knowledge and expectations the city of Verona and its cultural and gastronomic uniqueness. As stated by the owner of the examined restaurants:

*“An open-air museum is important for Verona, a city of culture and art whose value deserves to be diffused. Moreover, when thinking about the tourist attractiveness of our city, the primacy of Italian cuisine emerges, and the most popular dishes in the world are pizza and pasta”.*

##### 4.1.2 Authenticity

In the FDM, the visitor's experience is made authentic by the artisanal preparation of traditional gastronomic products, which are coherently combined with the historical and artistic heritage of the city. The stories of the four restaurants are closely intertwined with the growth of the city and the historic buildings in which they are housed. Moreover, in preparing the recipes, the products' seasonality is also considered, thus increasing not only the authenticity of the experience, but also the sustainability of the project. Finally, the FDM philosophy is to offer dishes that are not prepared for tourists but eaten by the Veronese themselves, and that represent the typical and traditional culinary experience of Verona. A restaurant manager described the project as follows:

*“The FDM provides a close experience of culinary traditions that is highly representative of local production chains and goes from the surrounding territory to the ‘table’ as the final location of the experiences, where they can be enjoyed by everyone: Italian and international tourists and citizens”.*

#### 4.1.3 Engagement

The services and activities that were proposed by the FDM project are capable of stimulating emotions such as interest and curiosity, also interactively, and of encouraging visitor engagement. Corporate storytelling, which is carried out throughout itineraries, combines traditional gastronomic routes with historical and artistic knowledge of the city. In addition, both tourists and the local community are engaged in the FDM experience. As described by the owner, the purpose of the project is as follows:

*“The aim is to create an emotional impact on FDM visitors. The innovative interventions are aimed at engaging both residents and Italian and foreign tourists, to enable them to discover and rediscover the historical and artistic links of some very famous locations”.*

#### 4.1.4 Cultural exchange

Through the authenticity of the experience and the engagement of the local community within its activities, the FDM allows cultural exchange to take place. In this respect, the original contents of itineraries that meet the experience-seeking tourists’ needs were created to propose different experiences using the app of FDM project. These contents were developed based on ad hoc research on local art, history, culture, cuisine, customs and traditions, lifestyles of the past, and even anecdotes and fun facts about the city. Indeed, the communication agency provided the following description of the project:

*“FDM allows a close, deep and meaningful experience of the city, combining traditional gastronomic itineraries with artistic and historical knowledge of the city, and with the residents themselves. A combination that describes tourism in Verona so well: culture and cuisine! Everyone - tourists and citizens - can freely visit less known places of this city by better learning about its typical and unique aspects”.*

#### 4.1.5 Culinary attraction

The valorization of local food, together with the history and culture of the city, is the main tourist attraction of the FDM, which therefore presents itself as a project where culinary attraction plays a key role. The protagonists of the project are, in fact, four restaurants that are located in the historic center of Verona and have followed the history of Italian and Veronese cuisine since the end of the 1800s. Moreover, although the itineraries and paths of the project cover different aspects of local culture and traditions, one of them is entirely focused on discovering local food. As reported by the manager of one of these restaurants:

*“The FDM responds to the need to enhance the historicity of the city’s gastronomic proposal and the culinary craft of local traditions. Food then, in its historical and artisan value, is enhanced as an element of tourist attraction in itself”.*

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#### 4.1.6 Quality of service

In the FDM, the quality of the service is ensured not only by the excellent raw ingredients used in preparing typical dishes, but also by the presence of friendly staff and customized service. One of the restaurant managers stated as follows:

*“Our employees have the opportunity to enhance not only their technical skills, but also their ability in proposing and showcasing the quality of our high-quality raw materials and dishes. The FDM favors the qualification of waiters as a professional in customer care”.*

Service quality is also enhanced by the overall accessibility of the experience. During the development of the different routes, architectural barriers and other elements of physical accessibility were carefully considered. The project is also economically accessible, as all the involved restaurants are positioned in an average price range. As reported by the business owner:

*“It is an experience that everyone can access. The name of the project is actually based on our corporate philosophy and derives from the desire to offer Italian culture and cuisine to a wide audience and make it accessible to all: Food Democracy”.*

#### 4.1.7 Experience sharing

The interviewees highlighted the importance of cultural tourism experience sharing. More specifically, the results of this study indicate that the FDM is an experience that can be shared both online and offline during the trip while tourists contextually enjoy on-site activities. By incorporating digital technologies, visitors can share online contents directly via the social media that are linked to the FDM app. The communication agency that was involved in this project thus described this opportunity of experience sharing:

*“The sharing of this heritage of traditions and culture takes place thanks to the technological infrastructure, and in particular thanks to the dedicated app that allows experience to be transferred and shared among all those involved”.*

As regards offline sharing, the FDM’s services and activities can be enjoyed individually as well as with other tourists, and the whole experience is characterized by continuous interactions with the staff and the local community. This fact is demonstrated by the business owner:

*“The FDM also favors a moment of shared experience, given by the personal and collective growth that comes from discovering and sharing different ways of living, thinking and-why not-eating, and that therefore represents the deepest values of tourism... the table is an ideal place to share an experience!”*

## 4.2 Triggers of memorable experiences in cultural tourism

### 4.2.1 Social entrepreneurship

The FDM is an example of social entrepreneurship project because a forward-looking entrepreneur of a for-profit firm was able to create a new tourism product in an innovative manner. The project is intended not only to create economic value for the companies involved - which are of a commercial nature - but also to make a social contribution by addressing tourists' experiential needs in local cultural tourism and, at the same time, enhancing the local community welfare. Indeed, the social and economic externalities that are generated by the FDM's entrepreneurial activities are also distributed to other economic players located in the destination. The project is inextricably linked to the territory that hosts it and promotes the creation of value for people and communities. According to the business owner:

*"The FDM is an important project for everyone: restaurants, employees that are qualified as customer care personnel, cultural tourists that expect high quality products and services, the cultural value of the city of Verona, and the development of the entire surrounding Veronese territory".*

This project, in recognizing technology as an opportunity for value co-creation and involving diverse relevant stakeholders, can enhance the overall tourist experience and design memorable cultural tourism experiences. Therefore, social entrepreneurship plays a fundamental role as a trigger of digitalization, value co-creation, and the adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach that, in their turn, contribute to fostering memorable experiences in cultural tourism.

### 4.2.2 Digitalization

During the interviews, the importance of enhancing local cultural tourism by leveraging digital technologies emerged as one of the fundamental aspects capable of fostering and enriching the memorability of tourism experience and, consequently, satisfying phygital tourists and citizens. In this regard, the FDM was designed using a web app because it is considered to be one of the simplest to use tools via smartphones in terms of graphical interface, navigation and functionality. Accessing the FDM web app is possible via different paths: in addition to a direct link to the web app, a totem equipped with a QR code, whose scan allows visitors to access multimedia content, is located in the restaurants. The QR code is also shown on the disposable placemats that are distributed to the customers of each restaurant to allow faster access. Prominence is given to the digital museum through the company's websites and social channels, from which it is possible to access the FDM. The project is therefore aimed not only at residents but also national and international tourists through reading paths that are translated into multiple languages and united by the extensive use of images, which overcomes cultural limits. With these words, the business owner described the importance of investing in digitalization to create the FDM project:

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*“Digital technology is designed to both promote the dissemination of the experience, by involving an inter-company and intergenerational audience, and minimize the infrastructure within the sites that welcome the restaurants (all under artistic constraint), by focusing on infrastructural lightness and widespread diffusion of the Web”.*

#### 4.2.3 Value co-creation

The FDM project encourages a joint process of value creation. During the preliminary steps of the project, several meetings were held with both the primary stakeholders (i.e., those directly in charge of designing the experience) and the secondary stakeholders (e.g., the local community and schools, and the municipalities). Thanks to the technological infrastructure, tourists are also involved in the value co-creation process. The value that is co-created from a multi-stakeholder approach, in turn benefits not only companies, but also their employees, tourists, and the local community. According to the communication agency, the joint design of the project enriches the final experience and technology allows the leveraging of existing synergies among different stakeholders:

*“In order to jointly create a memorable experience, the project design was shared among different stakeholders. The purpose was to enable each participant in the project to contribute with ideas and suggestions throughout the development of the app. Technology in turn enables the transfer of co-created value to companies and visitors, be them tourists or Veronese”.*

#### 4.2.4 Multi-stakeholder approach

The FDM project was conceived to realize an innovative product whose aim is to enhance local cultural tourism through memorable experience development. In this sense, the web app that is necessary to orient phygital tourists and citizens towards less known places and typical attractions of the city of Verona requires synergies among different actors. For this reason, the project was realized through the joint work of several stakeholders, including the local tourism and catering industry, the local administration, the University of Verona, and the citizens. As argued by the scientific director of the university team:

*“This project was realized through the joint action of multiple actors of the territory that usually do not interact and collaborate. The integration of multiple stakeholders was aimed to incorporate different needs and expectations that best satisfy the cultural needs of tourists and residents”.*

### 5. Discussion

This study revealed the dimensions and triggers of memorable experiences in cultural tourism from the experience provider perspective in order to enhance local cultural tourism and orient phygital tourists and citizens towards less known places and typical attractions. As regards the dimensions of MTEs in cultural tourism, the results of this research provide

empirical evidence for the dimensions of MTEs within the FDM cultural tourism project, thus supporting the idea that the FDM is an example of a memorable cultural tourism experience. More specifically, the interviewees argued the importance of the six following dimensions in enhancing local cultural tourism through memorable experience development: prior perceived significance of the experience, authenticity, engagement, cultural exchange, culinary attraction, quality of service, and experience sharing.

With specific regard to the first dimension - that is, prior perceived significance of the experience - this research, in line with prior studies, highlights that the significance of the experience exists before travel to the destination and affects destination choice, tourist satisfaction, and future travel intentions (Seyfi *et al.*, 2019; Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013). It is created based on prior knowledge of what one is going to visit in the destination, and thus depends on the reputation and iconic components of a destination, i.e., the city center of Verona in this case. In this regard, the web app enables visitors to know about the destination in terms of number and types of itineraries, including the environmental and urban contexts (e.g., Pencarelli *et al.*, 2016; Golinelli, 2008), as well as what is necessary to better know the city from a cultural and gastronomic point of view, before travelling. Second, the authenticity of the experience is among the most important needs of cultural tourists (Richards, 1996), and travelers often remember authentic tourism experiences positively (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013). In this sense, in the FDM visitors are provided with authentic cultural and culinary experiences. Third, the activities of the FDM are capable of stimulating positive feelings and emotions because they are based on engagement, which is defined as involvement with and commitment to a tourism experience (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). More specifically, tourists' (and citizens') engagement has a positive impact on their satisfaction and on the overall tourism experience, as Taheri *et al.* (2014) argued. Fourth, with reference to the cultural exchange dimension, cultural contact measures the "purpose and depth of experience tourists seek" when traveling for cultural reasons (Gnoth and Zins, 2013, p. 738). Thus, cultural exchange, which refers to the exploration of local culture, knowledge, and lifestyles, takes place in the FDM. Fifth, this study confirms that culinary attraction is important in enhancing local cultural tourism, as past studies have outlined (Cucculelli and Goffi, 2016; Karim and Chi, 2010). Sixth, service quality, which is another necessary element for MTEs in general (Kim, 2014) and in cultural tourism (Seyfi *et al.*, 2019), is also provided to FDM visitors. Lastly, FDM allows visitors to share the experience both online and offline. This is in line with evidence that demonstrates that sharing a tourism experience with other people enhances the meaningfulness of the experience and post-trip evaluations (Chandralal *et al.*, 2014). Although most studies have addressed experiences that are shared online, tourists also go on holiday to socialize with friends and family and to develop new friendships (Xu *et al.*, 2017). In the FDM, the tourism experience is actually shared during the trip and in context with on-site activities, especially when culinary attraction plays a key role (Williams *et al.*, 2019).

With precise reference to the triggers that have been proposed in this study, the results provide evidence of the fact that social entrepreneurship is

an appropriate environment for fostering digitalization, value co-creation and a multi-stakeholder approach in order to act as triggers for memorable experiences in cultural tourism. In this sense, this study presents empirical evidence on project that was developed not for exclusively commercial purposes, but rather as a result of the inclination of an entrepreneur who aimed to create socio-cultural benefits. Indeed, thanks to this social entrepreneur, the FDM project recognizes technological innovation as an opportunity for value co-creation and involved diverse stakeholders' perspective, thus enhancing the overall tourist experience, in accordance with the aims of social entrepreneurship (Zahra *et al.*, 2009). In the FDM, digital technologies have the power to enhance visitors' satisfaction and engagement and to enrich the memorability of tourism experiences, which is in line with previous research (Bec *et al.*, 2019). Value is created by the customers' lives and experiences (Heinonen *et al.*, 2013), as well as their perception of reality and interactions with others. Moreover, through technological infrastructure, tourists are also involved in the value co-creation process (Kelly *et al.*, 2017). The FDM was created thanks to the joint participation of diverse stakeholders according to the quadruple helix model (Carayannis and Campbell, 2009), that suggests that innovation requires synergies among different actors, namely, the government, the tourist industry, universities, and civil society.

## **6. Theoretical, practical, and social implications**

This study provides several theoretical, practical, and social implications. From a theoretical viewpoint, this study advances the limited literature on memorable experiences in cultural tourism (e.g., Tung and Ritchie, 2011; Bessi re, 2013; Lee, 2015) by confirming the five dimensions that are usually suggested in the cultural tourism literature (Seyfi *et al.*, 2019), and adding experience sharing as a further dimension to be considered, as argued by other scholars (e.g., Volo, 2010; Chandralal *et al.*, 2014; Xu *et al.*, 2017; Williams *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, this research shed light on the triggers of MTEs in a cultural tourism context. In this regard, the study adds to the emerging stream of research dealing with social entrepreneurship in the tourism context (Crnogaj *et al.*, 2014; Swanson and DeVereaux, 2017), and with the relevance of digital innovations for value co-creation in tourism (Serravalle *et al.*, 2019). In addition, while social entrepreneurship and MTEs have generally been investigated separately, except for limited studies (e.g., Castellani *et al.*, 2020), this research helps to fill this gap by providing evidence that social entrepreneurship is an appropriate environment for digital innovation technologies, value co-creation and the adoption of a multi-stakeholder perspective to act as a trigger of memorable experiences in cultural tourism. Finally, this study supports the social entrepreneurship literature according to which for-profit entrepreneurs combine commercial purposes with social goals by using innovative approaches to solve social problems.

With reference to practical implications, the results of this study make suggestions to effectively design memorable experiences in cultural tourism



by combining value co-creation synergies and digitalization according to a multi-stakeholder approach, particularly when they are supported by entrepreneurs with social entrepreneurship propensity. The results of this research suggest all cultural tourism destinations, especially those with a strong reputation like Verona, can enhance local cultural tourism through the development of memorable experiences with the potential contribution of each category of stakeholder. After all, both cultural heritage and local food are valuable, unique, and non-imitable resources of experience creation that should be leveraged to achieve long-term competitive advantages (Barney, 1991). As this study highlights, memorable experiences in cultural tourism can be triggered not only through strategic actions carried out by one or more tourism firms, but also joint actions of multiple stakeholders that belong to the main categories of the quadruple helix model (Carayannis and Campbell, 2009), that is, business, university, government, and civil society. From this perspective, this research suggests enriching the experiences of new information and significance, authenticity, engagement, cultural exchange, culinary attraction, and quality of service in order to satisfy tourists' and residents' cultural needs. In addition, this study recommends ensuring that these experiences are shared both offline and online. To move in this direction, entrepreneurs of SMEs can, on the one hand, invest in staff training where employees, especially front office personnel, have to develop not only service quality skills but also knowledge about local cultural aspects such as customs and traditions, fun facts that the inhabitants of the area usually know, and anecdotes that the customers of a restaurant, for example, do not expect a waiter to tell. In addition, employees can be taught of communication and relationship-building techniques in order to create appealing cultural experiences for their customers. In particular, experiential training could help employees better conceptualize how to communicate and interact with customers/tourists so that the staff can transfer what they have learned into their professional life. In general, experiential training nurtures specific skills such as the ability to reflect, guarantees self-discipline, and strengthens the willingness to learn. For example, training methods inspired by art forms such as theatre and cinema are able to better develop participants' soft skills (e.g., Gibb, 2004; Baccarani and Bonfanti, 2016). On the other hand, SMEs can invest in different forms of technology that are not necessarily very expensive, such as web apps and digital totems. The challenge is to offer cultural tourism experiences that stimulate and gratify them in terms of knowledge, engagement, cultural exchange, relationships, and sharing. In addition, technology can contribute to offering unexpected benefits so participants can make their own discoveries and share their experiences with others.

Lastly, the results of the study show that the FDM project also has important social implications. More specifically, this research argues that cultural tourism can be promoted locally through a multi-stakeholder approach in which value is jointly created by several stakeholders. In consideration of the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic also from a social perspective, it is necessary to restore social cohesion and a sense of belonging to the community, so residents' involvement in

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tourism recovery strategies is critical (Qui *et al.*, 2020). In the FDM, the local community is empowered through the valorization of local culture and traditions, which either remain written in books or imprinted in the knowledge of those who have learned them, or disperse into nothingness. Thanks to this project, on the contrary, local culture and traditions can continue to be disseminated locally as well as learned on a larger scale. They can be a source of curiosity and debate, as well as a means of comparison with other local customs by increasing local knowledge and culture. This project suggests the importance of investing in the local memory of a territory in various terms such as heritage, art, food, and beverages such as wine, by investing in projects that can not only culturally but also economically engage people, companies, and governments that are interested in keeping the cultural tourism of a specific territory alive. In this way, the project can provide further occasions of both social employment and relationship development.

## 7. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine how to enhance local cultural tourism through the development of memorable experiences by identifying the dimensions and triggers of memorable experiences in cultural tourism from the experience provider perspective. The results of the content analysis indicate that the FDM project develops such experiences through specific factors fostering them. The FDM is located in a tourism destination that enjoys a strong reputation for its cultural and culinary attractions, hence enhancing the significance of the experience prior to the visit. Culinary traditions play a key role as a factor of attractiveness, and also satisfy visitors' need for authenticity when coherently connected to the historical and artistic heritage of the city. Eating at the same table can represent the concluding point of the experience and provide an element not only of culinary attraction but also of engagement and cultural exchange. Overall, excellent service quality is always maintained. Thus, these findings support the study by Seyfi and colleagues (2019) indicating prior significance of the experience, authenticity, engagement, cultural exchange, culinary attraction, and quality of service as dimensions of memorable experiences in cultural tourism. Moreover, visitors of the FDM have the possibility of sharing their experience both online and offline, an aspect that is considered to have a positive impact on tourists' attitudes and behavioral intentions because it contributes to making the experience even more memorable. Value co-creation, a multi-stakeholder approach, and technology are found to enable the design of memorable experiences in cultural tourism from the service provider perspective, when supported in turn by social entrepreneurship.

This research has some limitations that reside in having adopted a qualitative research method (single case study) and considered only the experience provider perspective. Although this study referred to multiple stakeholders and subsequently engaged different analysis perspectives, generalizations need to be treated with caution.

This study can represent a starting point for further research on the continuous evolution of the case by means of a longer and real-time analysis as well as on the implementation of memorable experiences in the cultural tourism model over time through a longitudinal case study. In addition, further research could generalize the conclusions obtained with other similar case studies in Italy and international contexts. This could be done by identifying other analogous projects and replicating the research presented here. Future investigations could also establish whether and which stakeholders could be involved in the research. Another path for future research consists in a deeper investigation of the relationships among the different triggers and dimensions of memorable cultural tourism experience, thus aiming at establishing a possible causal relationship between triggers and dimensions of memorable experiences in cultural tourism. In this respect, a quantitative, explanatory approach should be preferred. Lastly, future research could relate to the validation of the dimensions and triggers of memorable experiences in cultural tourism from the customer/tourist/resident perspective by carrying out a quantitative analysis through a structural equation modeling approach.

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