

Article

# Marketing Research for Cultural Heritage Conservation and Sustainability: Lessons from the Field

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the contribution of marketing research to cultural heritage conservation and sustainability, based on the assumption that the comprehension of the meaning of cultural heritage by new and extended audiences is a prerequisite for the future survival of tangible and intangible heritage. After discussing steps and achievements in the scientific debate on museum marketing, current gaps and possible further developments are considered. Since the early 1980s, marketing research has investigated visitors' profiles, motivations, and behaviors, and has progressively focused on improving the experience of cultural heritage, especially through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in museums and heritage sites. A literature review suggests that scant attention has been paid to qualitative research that is aimed at investigating the knowledge and skills of visitors and non-visitors and their understanding of the value of cultural heritage. Moving from these results, and taking into account recent data about the attitudes and opinions of people in Europe on cultural heritage, the field research focuses on the perception and communication of local cultural heritage among young generations. The results of six focus groups conducted in 2016 with undergraduate and postgraduate students (University of Macerata, Italy) are analyzed. The research findings reveal a number of difficulties and limitations with regard to communicating and understanding the value of heritage. In order to better investigate these gaps, the outcomes of this preliminary study could be tested and put to cross-analysis using different methods. However, they do provide useful evidence for understanding the link between audience development and cultural heritage sustainability.

**Keywords:** museum marketing; audience development; sustainability; focus group; cultural heritage; museums

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## 1. Introduction

The Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, signed in Faro in 2005 [1] (art. 2a), finally stated that cultural heritage is “a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions”. Including “all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time”, it is part of our everyday life. As confirmed by the Special Eurobarometer on Cultural Heritage [2], released by the European Commission in December 2017, most Europeans are exposed to cultural heritage in their daily lives: they live close to historic monuments or sites (more than 73%), and think cultural heritage is important to them personally, as well to their community, region, country and the EU as a whole (more than 80%) (p. 4). These percentages decrease if we analyze access to cultural heritage: in the last 12 months, just 61% of European citizens have visited a historical monument or site, while 52% have attended a traditional

event, and 50% have visited a museum or gallery (p. 48). However, more than two thirds (68%) would like to know more about Europe's cultural heritage.

Shifting our attention to Italy and young generations, a survey of young people (*#giovani*) that was carried out by the National Statistical Institute in 2014 [3] (pp. 16–17) revealed that in 2013 just 30% of young people aged between 15 and 34 had visited an exhibition or a museum (27.9% male and 32.1% female) and only 22.7% (21.4% male and 24% female) an archaeological site or monument.

In the last few years, the number of museum visitors has increased in Italy. The final figures for 2017 marked a new record for Italian national museums: more than 50 million visitors (attendance) and almost 200 million euros (takings), an increase of about 5 million visitors and 20 million euros compared to 2016 [4]. Even though these data are positive and against the European trend, the most visited museums and heritage sites are the usual well-known attractions (Colosseum in Rome, Pompeii, Uffizi Gallery and Accademia Gallery in Florence and Castel Sant' Angelo in Rome). Moreover, these data only refer to national institutions, which account for less than 9% of Italian heritage sites and museums. The situation is quite different if we consider local institutions, which make up the majority of Italian cultural institutions, spread all over the country and not just in the most important art cities, and for which it is still difficult to obtain data on management and attendance. Moreover, as pointed out by Black [5] (p. 5), nowadays there is a decline in attendance by traditional audiences and a continuing failure to engage new ones: "museum audiences in the Western world remain overwhelmingly white, are substantially from the well-educated and affluent professional classes, are aging, and are in decline at many—particularly smaller—museums".

The implications of these data have to be carefully analyzed, and new strategies need to be implemented in order to drive effective change and increase both museum attendance and people's interest and involvement in cultural heritage matters.

Aimed at fostering innovation in cultural heritage management, this research begins with the assumption that the conservation of cultural heritage for future generations depends on the ability of a wide number of citizens to perceive, understand, and appreciate its value [6]. It means that the survival of cultural heritage is related to the use people make of it, from public enjoyment to "the construction of a peaceful and democratic society, [ . . . ] and the promotion of cultural diversity" [1] (art. 1d). In line with the principles stated in the Faro Convention, this research focuses on the perception young generations have of Italian local cultural heritage.

Local cultural heritage is both a *source*, that is, evidence of the local history and changing identity of a place, and a *resource*, a place-specific asset and key factor for sustainable local development. In the global context, it is a two-faced Janus, directed both at the past and the future. In Italy, it is an emergency, because of its continuity, its all-encompassing and pervasive distribution all over the country, even in peripheral and vulnerable areas [7]. For this reason, we consider local cultural heritage that is still preserved in inland areas of Central Italy—more specifically, 15th century paintings—to be a good field of investigation.

As far as the research target is concerned, given the role of addiction in cultural consumption [8], young people are an important cluster when it comes to audience development and visitor satisfaction. Starting from this postulation, the field research focuses on students of the University of Macerata, Italy. On the one hand, this cluster is in the age bracket (between 19 and 25 years old) of those who, after school and family obligations, gradually and often inexorably visit museums less and less [9]. On the other hand, this cluster could provide a useful contribution to identifying reasons for visiting museums and heritage sites and effective strategies for approaching new generations and increasing museum visitors.

First, this research aims to analyze how marketing research has approached museums and cultural heritage by examining its steps and achievements in attracting and involving new audiences. In this first part, the evolution of museum marketing is discussed, focusing not only on its concept but also on strategies and tools that are used to improve the quality of the museum experience and on methods that are used to investigate visitor needs. Then, after current gaps and possible further developments are

highlighted, the results of explorative research involving undergraduate and postgraduate students are discussed in order to understand: (1) how cultural heritage is perceived by young people—specifically, if it is perceived as a common good; (2) what difficulties university students have in understanding communication content about cultural heritage; (3) what strategies are more effective for increasing comprehension of the value of local cultural heritage. Specifically, the reasons underpinning certain answers are investigated in order to understand the role of education in creating museum visitors and the innovations that are required to ensure that cultural heritage and its significance are preserved in the future.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Emerging Trends in Museum Marketing Research

In 2007, when analyzing the evolution of museum marketing, Rentschler [10] identified three distinctive periods: (1) the Foundation Period (1975–1983); (2) the Professionalization Period (1984–1993); and (3) the Discovery or entrepreneurial Period (1994–present). In the mid-1970s, marketing research approached cultural institutions such as museums by opening new and challenging perspectives for cultural heritage management, thus modifying their approach to market. During this time, “a data-collection focus rather than a strategic action-oriented focus” (p. 16) prevailed, but museum staff were at least able to raise awareness of the benefits of visitor studies. Subsequently, marketing was applied to nonprofit organizations, and marketing departments were added to museums. The beginning of a new era was marked in the mid-1990s, when marketing was recognized not only as a tool to increase revenues but as “the management process which confirms the mission of a museum or gallery and is then responsible for the efficient identification, anticipation and satisfaction of the needs of the users” [11] (p. 220).

Since then, many handbooks have become more and more popular all over the world among scholars and cultural managers, with a focus both on service and cultural organizations in general [12–15] and on museums and heritage attractions in particular [16–19]. Gradually, the purpose of museums has changed from *object-based* to *people-based* [10]. In line with this innovation in definition, more recently, Mudzanani [20] restyled the 4Ps of the museum marketing mix as the 4 Cs, namely, customer value (product), convenience (place), customer cost (price), and communication (promotion), thus suggesting a more customer-centered approach.

Due to some skepticism still present among museum professionals [21], it should be emphasized that a gap between theory and practice persists [22]. However, if current trends in museum studies are examined, a widely shared visitor-oriented and visitor-centered approach emerges [23–25]. After changing from being institutions *about something* into institutions *for somebody* [26], nowadays museums are expected to design and provide their services *with somebody* [27] (pp. iii). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, they have extended access to cultural heritage to different and new clusters of users and promoted their active participation [28], “engagement and extensive dialogue” [29] (p. 1387) with service providers: “museums are not simply ‘objects’ oriented environments; they are also ‘people’ oriented social contexts [30] in which people come together around the content of the site they visit and share opportunities of gaining ‘mutual benefits’ from each other’s presence [27]. [ . . . ] As Simon (2010) indicated, museums could have this capacity to stimulate connections between people” [31] (p. 1738). As argued by Jafari et al., “museums are, therefore, not just about *what to see* and *what to relate to*, they are also about *who to see* and *who to relate to*” [31] (p. 1746) and visitors are “not just idle audiences who stand and watch the game take place” [30] (p. 205) but cultural participants interested in co-creating their experiences and actively engaged within the museum context: “create, share, and connect with each other around context” [27] (pp. ii–iii) is becoming the pay-off of the museum of the twenty-first century. This approach develops the principles launched by the “new museology” during the 1970s and experimented with by eco-museums all around the world [32,33].

The innovation in the definition of museums stems from the awareness that society has profoundly changed and new challenges have to be faced in order to achieve the mission of the museum. Specifically, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, museum studies have been responsive to the impact of new media and the digital shift on visitors' skills, and hence to the way people learn and get information. The literature on this matter has focused on offering the visitor a wide range of choices—'reservoir of possibilities' [34]—thanks to the opportunities provided by new technologies [35–40].

As a consequence, museum marketing studies have analyzed the implementation of new technologies within museums as an attempt to get closer to visitors, who are "constantly in search of intelligent, fun, interactive education and of overall immersive experiences" [41] (p. 209). An increasing number of scholars have investigated how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) affect the museum experience. Three different research strands can be identified:

- the impact of ICT-supported mediation (e.g., mobile communication devices, high-tech exhibits etc.) [42–45];
- the opportunities and risks of edutainment [46]: on the one hand, thematization, spatialization, and scenarization [47]; and interaction and immersion [48,49]; on the other hand, spectacularization, trivialization, and Disneyfication [50];
- the emerging role of the co-production and co-creation of value [51]. Beside these studies, a recent nascent trend has been focusing on the role of social media [52].

## 2.2. New Challenges and Research Gaps

Trying to face new challenges that have emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, museum marketing research has focused on the analysis and evaluation of the museum experience and on-site behavior [53–59]. "Practices through which people examine and make sense of exhibits" [60] (p. 73) have been explored, adopting video-recordings and field observations of behavior and interaction in museums and galleries [61,62]. As already argued, the interaction with ICTs within the museum context has been one of the main topics of museum marketing research.

Although the analysis of museum writing remains important in museum studies [63], from a marketing point of view, scant attention has been paid to people's perception and understanding of museum texts. If museum marketing is "responsible for the efficient identification, anticipation and satisfaction of the needs of the users" [11] (p. 220), it is essential to investigate how people perceive communication content about cultural heritage, mainly within museums. Specifically, the knowledge, skills, and needs of visitors and non-visitors, and their perception of the value of cultural heritage, need to be investigated. Moreover, this approach needs to involve art museums and galleries, not only scientific museums, which have always been more sensitive to the communication of complex scientific concepts.

This approach could allow us to understand the difficulties of visitors and non-visitors in understanding communication content within museums, to get them interested in cultural heritage and help them to appreciate its value. In a nutshell, it could ensure the preservation of the significance of cultural heritage among an increased number of people, and, hence, the conservation of cultural heritage in the future.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Methodological Rationale

At an international level, audience research is currently gaining an increasing role in cultural heritage management because of its importance in pursuing and achieving the mission of cultural institutions [64–66]: "audience research in museums is uniquely placed to add value to organisations, not only through attending to the interests, learning needs and understandings of those who use their services, but to provide a meaningful and strategic role in the learning that takes place within

the organisation” [67] (p. 67). The attention is focused on strategies that are aimed at reaching and involving new and wider clusters of visitors and increasing the level of participation and engagement of current audiences [68] (p. 7). In this perspective, in addition to the study of motivational factors [69], marketing research is focusing on the analysis of the museum experience [70,71], especially on the evaluation of service quality and visitor satisfaction [24,72–74].

However, many surveys fail to capture the real difficulties visitors encounter during their visit and put forward alternative or ameliorative solutions, particularly if the focus of the evaluation is on communication content: “defining the product itself, and extracting particular elements which have affected consumer satisfaction, is extremely difficult. This is why vague questions such as ‘did you enjoy the visit?’ are often used in questionnaires, although a high percentage of ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answers cannot tell what is good or wrong about those museums with any degree of reliability” [75] (p. 31).

Moreover, these kinds of studies do not provide us with answers about non-attendance. For example, in Italy, surveys about non-visitors are less relevant in the wide and increasing literature on this matter, with the exception of some research reports [76,77] and qualitative research papers [78].

Even though qualitative research does not allow us to generalize research results or to achieve a good level of statistical representation [79], it does enable the collection of information that is difficult to find through quantitative research [80]. Moreover, in the cultural heritage field, it allows researchers to approach not only visitors but also non-visitors or potential visitors in ‘neutral’ contexts, so they can acquire useful information for the continuous improvement of the cultural service.

Of various qualitative methods, the strengths of focus groups should be highlighted. Scientific literature considers a focus group to be an in-depth group interview [81] or a carefully planned discussion [82] or an informal discussion [83] about specific topics. In a focus group, a moderator suggests some topics that are to be discussed by a small group of people; such groups are set up ad hoc on the basis of the research objectives, in the presence of an observer.

As argued by the wide literature on this matter [84], compared to other research methods, a focus group allows one to:

- approach groups that are not necessarily central to the focus of the research;
- promote freer expression of participants’ opinions in a more informal and friendly climate, in order to avoid the risk of non-committal, ‘noble’ answers;
- achieve, through face-to-face interaction and discussion, a closer examination of topics that could remain on the surface through questionnaires or interviews [85].

Specifically, the distinctive feature of focus groups is interaction among participants, which enables both immediate comparison of the ideas expressed and easier identification of similarities and differences among opinions, thus highlighting strengths and weaknesses of each position [86]. Moreover, adopting non-standardized procedures for data gathering, the focus group is a flexible method that allows in-progress review and fine-tuning of the research structure [84]. Finally, in designing the research, which is in the first step, a focus group allows new hypotheses to emerge, which require further empirical evaluation including through other methodologies—e.g., unobtrusive and obtrusive observation, questionnaire, etc. [87].

In the context of this research, focus groups were adopted as tools for exploratory research [88], allowing an in-depth analysis of young people’s points of view. Given that the aim of the research was not to evaluate customer satisfaction, the focus groups allowed the researchers to approach the target in a ‘neutral’ context, not in museums, in order to examine aspects that are difficult to investigate and emerge from other research tools, such as the analysis of texts and images.

### 3.2. Research Design

In order to investigate the perception that young generations have of cultural heritage and analyze the effectiveness of cultural communication, field research was conducted among university students and focused on the perception and communication of the value of local cultural heritage.

The research involved a sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Macerata (UniMC), one of Italy's oldest universities. UniMC is a medium-sized public University, which is quite similar to many other Italian Universities in terms of characteristics and number of students enrolled. It is the only university in Italy that is focused solely on socio-economic sciences and humanities in 5 departments (Department of Law; Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism; Department of Political Science, Communication Science and International Relations; Department of Humanities; Department of Economics and Law). In the A.Y. 2017/2018 the academic offering includes 11 BA courses and 17 MA courses. Students come from central and southern Italian Regions—especially Marche, Abruzzo, Apulia, and Sicily. Five percent of students are foreign.

The research was conducted between February and April 2016 and involved a probabilistic sample of 37 students aged between 19 and 27 (average age: 21), enrolled in 3 BA (Philosophy; Foreign Languages; Economics) and 3 MA courses (Tourism Management; International Political Studies; Education Sciences). The study adopted focus groups, supported by an introductory semi-structured questionnaire for better triangulation of data. Six focus groups were organized for different courses in order to have homogeneous contexts for discussion and to favor interaction among participants. The research structure is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The research design: objectives, tools, and content (Source: own elaboration).

Objectives	Tools	Content
Identify the characteristics of the cluster of "University students"	Questionnaire/open and closed questions	Information about museum visits (e.g., frequency and occasions, museums visited, etc.)
Investigate awareness of local cultural heritage	Questionnaire/open and closed questions	Awareness of the presence of a museum in the town of residence and the willingness to visit it
Investigate the perception of cultural heritage	Questionnaire/free association	Words associated with concepts such as 'museum' and 'cultural heritage'
Identify reasons for low museum attendance among young people	FG (step 1)	Discussion of national statistical data 2014
Measure the level of perception of cultural heritage as a common good	FG (step 1)	Discussion of MiBACT's campaign 'If you do not visit it, we'll take it away' (2010)
Investigate the effectiveness and appreciation of some types of museum communication	FG (steps 2, 3)	Discussion of museum signs, labels and captions. Reading and analysis of museum information texts *
Identify the best type of communication to attract young audiences	FG (step 3)	Reading and analysis of information texts. Compared analysis and discussion of different texts about the same work of art ( <i>Madonna del Monte</i> by Lorenzo D'Alessandro)
Identify the content young audiences expect from museum communication	FG (step 3)	Analysis and discussion of images without labels

\* Selected texts illustrated: *Transfiguration* by Lorenzo Lotto (Recanati, Civic Gallery), a Villanovan biconical vase (Ancona, National Archeological Museum), and *Madonna del Monte* by Lorenzo D'Alessandro (Caldarola, Collegiate church of S. Maria del Monte).

The anonymous questionnaire submitted to each participant contained 7 questions that aimed to gain an overview of museum visits and perceptions of museums and cultural heritage. Each focus group involved an average of 6–7 students guided by a moderator, in the presence of an observer.

First, the discussion examined statistical data about visits to museums and other cultural sites [89]; then, it focused on the communication campaign launched by the Ministry of Culture Heritage, Cultural Activities, and Tourism (MiBACT) in 2010 entitled 'If you do not visit it, we'll take it away' (*Se non lo visiti, lo portiamo via*) [90]. The second part of the focus groups analyzed some types of museum communication, while the third and last stages sought to identify what aspects of the value of cultural heritage might induce greater interest among young people. In this last section, the discussion did not focus on well-known masterpieces or famous paintings that are kept in the most important and largest international or national museums but on local cultural heritage, because of its local dimension and ability to narrate the specific culture and identity of a place.

As already argued [91], the competitive advantage of Italian local cultural heritage does not lie in the aesthetic and formal value of each work of art, but in:

1. its deep historical stratification and uninterrupted evidence through time (*continuity*);
2. its widespread distribution throughout the national territory (*capillarity*);
3. the deep cultural and historical relationship between museum collections and the local context—not only piazzas, roads, monuments, and the countryside, but also works of art preserved beyond museum doors, in churches, convents, monasteries, and other historical buildings and open spaces (*contextuality*);
4. mutual links between local museums, so that each museum makes reference to the others, as in the game of ‘snakes and ladders’ (*complementariness*).

These 4Cs develop Chastel’s 1980 definition of Italy as a ‘threefold natural museum’ [92], where the collection, the historical building where it is preserved, and the town where it is located are mutually linked in an exemplary manner as three different aspects of the same museum.

The last section of the focus group tried to understand how these features are communicated and how they are perceived by participants.

Several different texts about three local works of art from scientific catalogues or museum websites were submitted to participants; three of the proposed texts made frequent use of technical terms and references to the formal and stylistic aspects of a work of art; one text, on the other hand, featured more accessible language, with a greater focus on descriptive and historical aspects and on reconstructing the painting’s relationship with the original, historical, social, and cultural context. Five images too were shown, but without labels (Table 2). In this case, students were asked to identify the images they were most drawn to, explaining their reasons and illustrating the type of information they would like to receive from a hypothetical informative text during a visit to the museum.

**Table 2.** Images discussed during the focus groups (source: own elaboration).

	Author	Painting/Object	Date	Place
1.	Lorenzo Lotto	<i>Transfiguration</i>	1512	Recanati, Civic Gallery
2.	Vittore Crivelli	<i>Il beato Giacomo della Marca</i>	15th Century	Urbino, National Gallery
3.	Anonymous	<i>Madonna Lauretana</i>	15th Century	Visso, Diocesan Museum *
4.	Anonymous	<i>Biconical vase</i>	Villanovan Age—II phase	National Archaeological Museum
5.	Lorenzo D’Alessandro	<i>Madonna del Monte</i>	15th Century	Caldarola, Collegiate Church of S. Maria del Monte *

\* These paintings were removed from their original place after the earthquakes that struck central Italy in August–October 2016 and January 2017 and stored in special warehouses.

The data collected were analyzed manually, using no specific software for coding analysis, but adopting an interpretation framework defined during the research design and fine-tuned during the focus groups. This framework was structured around three main conceptual points:

- form and content of the texts offered for each work of art;
- stylistic analysis and description of the subject represented in the selected works of art;
- presence of anecdotes and remarks about the context.

The analysis focused on the following interpretation codes: reasons for non-attendance; awareness of the value of cultural heritage; suggestions to improve the relationship between museums and their audiences; perception, clarity, and understanding of museum signs, labels, and captions; questions and curiosities about the paintings presented; and capability to recognize painting subjects.

#### 4. Results

University students turned out to be less willing to express their point of view explicitly and without filters than teenage visitors and non-visitors. Indeed, teenagers tend to be more open about their relationship with the museum [78].

When analyzing data about museum visits, the majority of participants could be placed in the 'visitors' category: 72% of the participants in the focus groups had visited at least one museum in the last year; museums are also one of the destinations during a visit to a new city or nation for 86% of the sample. Moreover, when discussing data about young people's low attendance of museums and heritage sites, most of the students said they were not represented by this picture.

Almost all the focus groups revealed that the perception of cultural heritage as a common good is not well rooted—although it does apply in some cases. This aspect clearly emerged during the discussion of the MiBACT's campaign 'If you do not visit it, we'll take it away', while during the second part of the focus groups physical and intellectual accessibility to cultural heritage was never recognized as a cultural right. All the participants said they did not understand the meaning of the captions provided and that texts were full of unknown technical words and expressions that were too difficult and complex. One student stated: "we have heard of these words, but understanding them requires knowledge that not everyone has, such as 'Mannerism'" (FG 1, undergraduate student, female). However, according to some students the use of these words in museum communications is quite satisfactory, because "if anyone goes to a museum, it has to be assumed that he/she is already informed about this stuff" (FG 1, undergraduate student, male) or because "a visit to a museum could be an opportunity to find out something new in depth" (FG 4, postgraduate student, male). Although most of them considered these types of communication not to be effective—one undergraduate student stated: "It doesn't attract me, because I don't understand what I'm reading!" (FG 1, undergraduate student, male)—no one suggested that these expressions should be reformulated to make them understandable to everyone. A significant portion of the sample deemed some specialist idioms to be useful, because they respond to the interests of some clusters of users or "increase the charm of the work of art", even if their attraction is low: "a text that begins with 'flared rim' is not really the absolute limit" (FG 6, undergraduate student, male).

In almost all the focus groups, the tendency to confuse the concepts of style and technique also emerged: "it seems to me that the text focuses more on the technique, that is, on the method used by Lotto, rather than on the description of the work of art" (FG 1, undergraduate student, male). In addition, stylistic/technical notes are perceived as more important than iconographic aspects: "[in this text] there is almost nothing about the technique, but more about the description of the work than anything else" (FG 1, undergraduate student, female).

As far as information about the historical context is concerned, some students considered the historical references as too detailed and even extended the text unnecessarily. For example, one student said: "When the text starts talking about the brotherhood, the attention is shifted away from the painting and it talks at length. I would take this part off" (FG 2, postgraduate student, F).

When comparing two different texts that referred to the same work of art, the inclusion of an anecdote attracted more attention: "the myth at the beginning makes the text more interesting"; "the first way to bring people closer to a work of art is to attract them with a story" (FG 6, undergraduate student, M). Only one student did not appreciate the presence of an anecdote at the beginning of the text; she criticized the reference to a legend and not to a historical fact: "the reference to a myth could also be fine, but not at the beginning of the text; if I go to a museum, it is to understand things, not to have an impression" (FG 6, undergraduate student, F). Thanks to the presence of the anecdote, almost half of participants preferred this text than the other one, even though it continued with a series of remarks that were very little appreciated by almost the entire sample, because of the use of technical terms and the focus on unclear formal issues. On the one hand, these results confirm the importance of storytelling in museum communication [93]; on the other hand, they also demonstrate that the user's attention tends to decline after the first lines. The strength of the other text was identified in the



description of the image. Almost no one referred to information about the historical context, which helps explain the iconography (absent in the previous text) and the style (present in both texts, albeit with different content and formal solutions).

In the last part of the focus groups, no one was able to recognize the subject of the *Madonna del Monte* by Vittore Crivelli, even though participants had just read a text referring to a work of art by a different artist but describing the same iconography. When participants were required to find familiar elements in the painting, the most widespread attitude was to venture assumptions about the author, the era and style, or to allude to well-known or locally displayed works of art. This result allows two further observations for a better understanding of the profile of young visitors. On the one hand, works of art cannot convey certain content without proper explanation, and a written text is not always the best tool for achieving this goal. Therefore, it could be useful to adopt graphic representations or illustrations that could be easier and more immediate to read. On the other hand, young people tend to relate to works of art on the basis of conceptual categories from the prevailing teaching method of art history that focuses on the aesthetic value of an object, leaving aside the relationship between the object and its historical, political, social, and cultural context.

One final comment should be made about museum visits. While stating that they do not represent the percentage of young people who do not visit museums and heritage sites, students also admitted that they do not visit museums as frequently as they would like to, because museum tickets are too expensive. Yet, they said they attended temporary exhibitions, which are more expensive than museums. Given that young people usually have a right to reduced or free admission, the participants' point of view reveals that museums are considered relatively expensive, that is, in relation to the value young people assign to and derive from them. It also means that an intellectual barrier, not an economic one, prevents them from visiting museums.

Moreover, as already argued, museums are not considered to be common goods. This is confirmed by the fact that participants did not claim the right to receive fully comprehensible information about museum artefacts that are public and belong to them. They passively accept this situation as if museums were not merit goods that ought to be "provided free for the benefit of the entire society" [94] but rather positional goods that are seen as status markers such as luxury items or institutions that provide access to exclusive entertainment venues [95]. Indeed, although they are merit goods [96], museums usually act as positional goods [97] (Table 3). The effect of this double situation is the progressive elimination of young people from museums, as confirmed by recent data on cultural consumption [3,9,98].

**Table 3.** Research findings.

Areas of Investigation	Findings
Museum attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The majority of university students belong to the 'visitors' category;</li> <li>• An intellectual barrier, not an economic one, prevents them from visiting museums.</li> </ul>
Perception of cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural heritage is not perceived as a common good: physical and intellectual accessibility to cultural heritage is not recognized as a cultural right;</li> <li>• Museums are considered positional goods rather than merit goods.</li> </ul>
Perception and understanding of museum communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The meaning of the captions is not understood because of the presence of unknown technical words and difficult and complex expressions;</li> <li>• The concepts of style and technique are misunderstood;</li> <li>• Stylistic/technical notes are perceived as more important than iconographic aspects;</li> <li>• Historical references are considered too detailed;</li> <li>• The inclusion of an anecdote attracts more attention.</li> </ul>
Strategies for increasing comprehension of the value of local cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graphic representations or illustrations could be easier to read and more immediate;</li> <li>• An effective storytelling is essential for enhancing actual and specific historical and iconographic data related to local cultural heritage.</li> </ul>

It should be noted that, in this situation, young people are the most exposed cluster in a complex system of relationships and influences from socio-cultural, educational, and family backgrounds. Therefore, this issue must be contextualized within a much broader and more complex issue and process regarding the democratization of culture that has not been fully addressed yet.

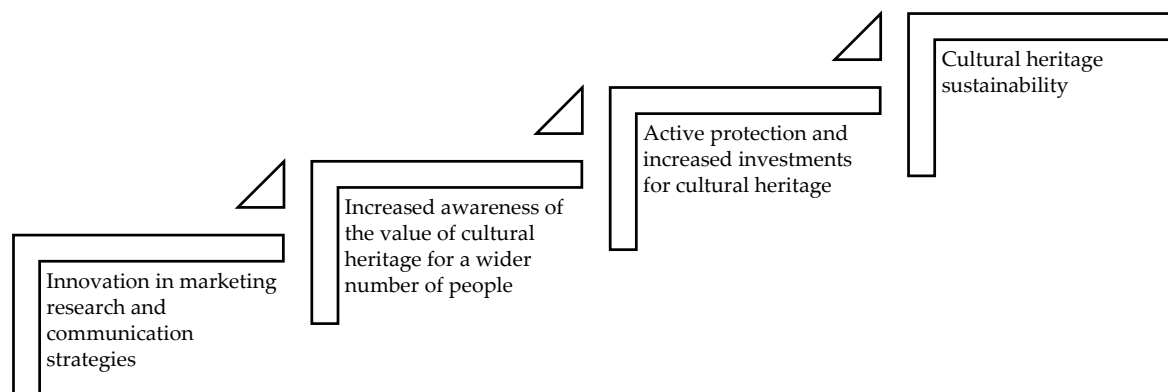
## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our findings enable us to share a number of reflections on the role of education in creating museum visitors and influencing their perception of cultural heritage, thus explaining difficulties they meet in museums and heritage sites. In addition, the research provides a few initial guidelines and recommendations for marketing research in the cultural sector and its possible contribution to the conservation of cultural heritage through the design and innovation of museum communication for audience development.

The prejudices that emerged during the discussion and the lack of awareness about the cultural right to museum communication that should be comprehensible to all audiences reveal how cultural heritage continues to be perceived not as a common good but as a positional good [6]. It is a scarce good, not in some absolute sense but in a way that is imposed socially [97].

Furthermore, the focus on some aspects rather than on others in the analysis of works of art is an indicator of how eyesight has been trained by education. Specifically, students are more inclined to focus on aesthetic and stylistic components than on historical and documentary aspects. It is not only museums that have great responsibility in this process, but also schools, especially with regard to how art and art history are taught. If we focus on the abovementioned distinctive features of local cultural heritage, this approach has some important limitations. In this case, communication activities would not rely on formal and stylistic aspects, except as “the language of a period, an area, a school and a circle” [99] (p. 8), but should aim to enhance the unique and distinctive relationship that local cultural heritage has with its context of origin and production.

In both schools and museums, innovation should not concern only ICT but should primarily involve communication content, overcoming the traditional focus on the formal and stylistic values of artefacts, which often adopt a language that is excessively technical and is the same in museums all over the world. A new kind of communication has to be preferred, based on actual and specific historical and iconographic data related to cultural heritage. For example, if we consider that most cultural heritage preserved in many Italian local museums comes from churches or other holy places, information about the history of worship and devotion cannot be neglected. This approach would achieve two purposes. On the one hand, it would allow a wide audience—not only experts or connoisseurs—to understand the value of cultural heritage, even local heritage; on the other hand, it would give back to communities their own heritage by explaining the historical reasons for their cultural belonging and the development of their multi-faceted local identities. In a nutshell, it would help preserve the significance of cultural heritage and, through that, cultural heritage itself. If people recognize and appreciate the value of cultural heritage, they may be more willing to preserve it for future generations by being actively involved in ensuring it is maintained and safeguarded over time. In addition, more resources could be submitted for cultural heritage protection, both *directly*, through the willingness of citizens to pay for it (e.g., museum tickets, donations, memberships, etc.), and *indirectly*, through an increase of public and private expenditure on cultural heritage, since policy makers, sponsors, and other stakeholders would be more willing to invest in cultural heritage if it created value for a large number of people (Figure 1). Therefore, a virtuous cycle in value creation would be activated [100].



**Figure 1.** Innovation in marketing research and communication strategies for cultural heritage sustainability.

From a marketing point of view this kind of value should be communicated through effective storytelling as the ability to narrate the specificity of local cultural heritage, fine-tuned to the needs and backgrounds of different clusters of real and potential visitors. If it is widely shared, a narrative can contextualize and re-contextualize, discover or invent connections among heterogeneous elements, exclude or include, manage and organize, dramatize and immerse, activate individual and collective memory processes, and retain visitors [101]. According to Nielsen, “a narrative is essentially a structure that can be based on emotional, learning, educational, interactive, individual or social, imaginative, fictive or non-fictive, digital or non-digital, subjective or objective engagements. It gains attention by evoking feelings, memories and curiosity. [ . . . ] Storytelling can be viewed as the concept that combines *the articulation of understandings* that defines museum communication and *the engaging narrative* that forms the story. [ . . . ] The power of storytelling lies in the fact that it provides methods for emphasizing meaning, understanding and feelings. [ . . . ] A museum that uses storytelling internally has the opportunity to consider the authenticity of stories and enhance external communication with target audiences [102] (pp. 52–55). [ . . . ] Storytelling can be one of the most important tools for creating meaning—and can ensure emotional engagement among visitors and staff” [93] (pp. 6–7).

As far as the limitations of this explorative research are concerned, the full neutrality of the moderator could be discussed [103]; participants might have adapted their answers and opinions, if and when they were guessing the aspects that the research wanted to highlight. Moreover, even though the discussion among participants was quite lively, some topics, such as the perception of cultural heritage as a common good, were not analysed in-depth because of the low level of interaction among participants. Finally, texts with more markedly differentiated communication solutions could be submitted to participants in order to make the discussion easier and allow some positions and points of view to emerge more clearly.

Further research development could address students from other universities (e.g., from scientific and technological universities) or non-university students in order to have a more representative sample of the cluster of young people aged between 19 and 25. Furthermore, for the purpose of the triangulation of results, unobtrusive observation within museums could be used to analyze the behavior of young people. Finally, there should be a careful study of the effects of social, cultural, political, and economic macro-systems on the behavior of young consumers [104] in order to reach communication solutions based on cooperation between museums, schools, and universities, and with a review of their relationship with the public, thus ensuring the fulfillment of citizens’ rights to culture.

Even though this research is a preliminary study and the results cannot be generalized, some managerial implications have to be pointed out. Specifically, methodological recommendations can be drawn from the field research. From a marketing point of view, this study highlights the effectiveness of qualitative methods when analysing the perception and understanding of cultural communication

content. From the perspective of museum management, it suggests new possibilities for innovating on-site experiences, not just through digital technologies, but also by improving the quality and typology of communication content.

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