Unlocking destination cultural reputation: the role of sustainable on-site activity involvement as moderator

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to provide a detailed definition of Destination Cultural Reputation while also exploring its impact on tourist satisfaction through an investigation of the dynamics between these two elements. Additionally, the potential moderating role of on-site engagement in sustainable activities has been investigated, examining whether satisfaction prompts tourists to exhibit behaviors such as the intention to return and recommend the cultural destination.

Design/methodology/approach – To achieve these objectives, a survey and a structural equation model, based on a sample of 647 visitors to an important UNESCO World Heritage site (i.e. Urbino), have been adopted.

Findings – Findings confirm tourists' recognition of the destination's cultural reputation, supporting its relationship with visitor satisfaction. Additionally, tourist satisfaction is positively associated with destination loyalty. However, on-site sustainable activities negatively moderate the relationship between destination reputation and tourist satisfaction. This suggests that a favorable cultural reputation should align with quality sustainable activities in the destination to prevent tourist dissatisfaction.

Practical implications – The paper offers valuable practical insights for destination managers and policymakers aiming to enhance appeal and sustainability.

Originality/value – The study contributes to enhancing the understanding of the complex relationship between reputation, satisfaction, and loyalty in cultural destinations. In addiction it measures the reputation of tourist destination through the specific cultural dimension.

Keywords Destination cultural reputation, Cultural tourism, Sustainable on-site involvement, Tourist satisfaction, Destination loyalty

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable tourism, as defined by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), refers to tourism that is mindful of both its present and future impacts and is

capable of fulfilling the needs of visitors, local communities, the environment, and businesses. Expanding upon this definition, extensive analysis of the concept of sustainable tourism has sparked a lively debate concentrating on the theoretical relationship between tourism and sustainable development across various practical contexts (Isaksson *et al.*, 2023; Sharpley, 2020).

In particular, a considerable body of studies and literature has described sustainability by focusing on its social, environmental, and economic dimensions (Blancas *et al.*, 2016; Loach *et al.*, 2017).

Today, the literature has shifted away from the traditional approach, embracing a holistic and multidimensional viewpoint regarding the concept of sustainable tourism. This expanded perspective encompasses additional dimensions, including social, cultural, environmental, political, economic, and ethnic aspects (Woosnam and Ribeiro, 2023). This novel outlook highlights the significance of the cultural dimension as a foundational element in societal construction and as a specific facet of sustainability (De Oliveira *et al.*, 2022; Magliacani and Francesconi, 2022; Soini and Birkeland, 2014; Throsby, 2016).

To comprehend the crucial facets pertaining to the sustainability of this dimension, it is necessary to examine the concept of cultural tourism, defined 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" (Richards, 2018, p. 13).

Specifically, cultural tourism resources embody the fundamental characteristics of any destination, comprising elements such as cultural heritage (Bui *et al.*, 2020), human lifestyle and traditions (Carreira *et al.*, 2022), social and cultural transformations within local communities (Stephens and Tiwari, 2015; Woosnam and Ribeiro, 2023), museum heritage (Cerquetti and Cutrini, 2023; Pencarelli *et al.*, 2017), intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003), traditional festivals (Deng *et al.*, 2023), and the relationship between tourists and the local community concerning their impacts (Jamal *et al.*, 2010).

Cultural destinations are recognized as focal points that significantly contribute to regional and national tourism development, particularly in Italy. The pivotal role of cultural tourism has generated heightened interest in academic studies as well (Du Cros and McKercher, 2020; Richards, 2018; Spencer and Sargeant, 2022). Existing literature has extensively explored various aspects of cultural tourism concerning sustainability, encompassing heritage conservation, tourism management, and the positive and negative impacts on local communities and cultural sites (Dans and Gonzales, 2019).

Despite the breadth of existing literature, one relatively underexplored area of study pertains to destination reputation (Su *et al.*, 2018). Within the sustainability context, this concept has been applied to the environmental dimension as "eco-friendly" (Su *et al.*, 2020) and to the social dimension as "destination social responsibility" (Tran *et al.*, 2023), but it has rarely been applied to the specific cultural dimension.

Moreover, a study by Su *et al.* (2020) has illustrated that, akin to corporate reputation (Chang, 2013), a positive ecological reputation of the destination can directly influence tourist satisfaction. Concurrently, prior research has affirmed that satisfaction plays a pivotal role in fostering visitor loyalty to the destination (Kumar *et al.*, 2020; Tran *et al.*, 2023). Lastly, in the context of tourist experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), some studies (e.g. Zatori *et al.*, 2018) have highlighted the positive impact of on-site engagement activities on satisfaction and loyalty behaviors (Hung *et al.*, 2019). However, only a few studies have considered sustainable involvement activities (Breiby *et al.*, 2020).

Despite these studies, the most recent literature underscores multiple gaps in the analysis of tourists' intentions and behaviors within the context of cultural destinations, including: (1) a scarcity of studies analyzing the impact of destination reputation on tourist behavior (Su *et al.*, 2018; Tankovic and Musanovic, 2022); (2) a lack of empirical analyses focused on

aspects related to the specific dimension of cultural sustainability (De Oiliveria *et al.*, 2022;
Magliacani and Francesconi, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021); (3) limited studies linking destination
reputation to tourist satisfaction (Shrivastav, 2023; Su *et al.*, 2020); (4) a shortage of studies
addressing the influence of on-site involvement in sustainable activities (Breiby *et al.*, 2020;
Liu *et al.*, 2016); (5) the predominance of existing studies analyzing the role of cultural tourism
solely from the perspective of UNESCO site managers, neglecting the demand perspective (De
Oliveira *et al.*, 2022).

Based on these premises, the objective of this study are: (1) test the specific cultural
reputation of a destination; (2) examine the relationship between sustainable cultural
reputation and tourist satisfaction; (3) explore, within this relationship, the potential
moderating role of on-site engagement in sustainable activities; (4) investigate whether
satisfaction may prompt tourists to exhibit behaviors such as the intention to return and
recommend the cultural destination, and to examine the potential moderating role of on-site
engagement in sustainable activities.

2. Literature review and research hypothesis

2.1 Destination cultural reputation (DCR)

In recent years, scholars' attempts to define tourist Destination Reputation (DR) have been
somewhat limited due to an excessive dependence on corporate reputation theories.
Nevertheless, Darwish and Burns (2019, p. 159) have proposed a comprehensive definition at
the destination level: "The objective and subjective evaluation by both internal and external
stakeholders based on the communication capacity of the destination, the stakeholders'
emotions, backgrounds, direct experiences of the destination, and/or in direct experiences
which might be collected from a variety of sources including but not limited to offline/online
word-of-mouth, internet, print, digital, and broadcast media".

In the context of the tourism industry, literature on reputation has predominantly evolved
from the perspective of corporate offerings (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2017). In recent years, there has
been notable development from the standpoint of destinations (Inversini, 2020; Micera and
Crispino, 2017; Su *et al.*, 2018; Tankovic and Musanovic, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*,
2021). Specifically, studies focusing on DR have explored various aspects, such as city brand
policies for the development of tourist cities (Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca, 2019),
destination competitiveness (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997), the influence of DR on tourist
behavior (Zhang *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021), the relationship between DR and tourist
satisfaction (Loureiro and Kastenholz, 2011; Su *et al.*, 2020; Tran *et al.*, 2023), online DR (Cillo
et al., 2021; Komšić and Dorčić, 2016; Inversini *et al.*, 2010; Micera and Crispino, 2017;
Rodríguez-Diaz *et al.*, 2018), the connection between tourist familiarity with the destination
and DR (Artigas *et al.*, 2015; Yamashita and Takata, 2020), the impact of DR on loyalty
attitudes (Christou, 2007; Yamashita and Takata, 2020; Widjaja *et al.*, 2019), and reputation
crises and DR (Mingchuan, 2015).

In comparison to the sustainability theme, the recent article by Tankovic and
Musanovic (2022) analyzed the role of sustainable communication policies on DR, whereas
other studies attempted direct measurements of DR in a sustainable context. Several
studies (Hassan and Soliman, 2021; Su *et al.*, 2018; Tran *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2022) have
explored the concept of Destination Social Responsibility (DSR), which concerns the
responsibility of all destination stakeholders to minimize the negative impacts of tourism
on the economy, the environment, and society at large, while simultaneously enhancing the
well-being of communities. Specifically, Tran *et al.* (2023) focused on the concept of
Perceived Destination Social Responsibility (Perceived DSR), highlighting how
sustainable initiatives from economic, social, and environmental perspectives,
undertaken by the destination through various communication channels (e.g. word of

mouth, social media, and personal experiences), influence tourists' perceptions of a specific destination (Hassan and Soliman, 2021).

More in detail, Su *et al.* (2020) measured the "Destination eco-friendly reputation", which represents "the tourists' overall assessment of valence regarding ecological practices of the destination's" (Su *et al.*, 2020, p. 561), and that arises from the estimation, judgment, evaluation, and opinion that the tourist holds regarding the ecological or environmental activities of the destination. An attempt to identify a scale capable of measuring "Cultural Heritage Reputation" is that of Wang *et al.* (2021), who identified five different items: Catering quality, Accommodation condition, Landscape, Cultural attraction, and Recreation and entertainment activities.

Inspired by the definitions provided by Su *et al.* (2020) and Barnett *et al.* (2006), who delineate the concept of "Destination eco-friendly reputation" and adopting the perspective of the cultural dimension of sustainability (De Oliveira *et al.*, 2022; Throsby, 2016), this study defines DCR as follows: an overall evaluation by visitors regarding the destination's image, which is based on its capacity to convey its cultural sustainability. This includes aspects such as cultural identity, tangible and intangible heritage, encompassing traditions, genius loci, language and lifestyles, artistic expressions, cultural innovations, and the relationship between nature and culture. In this regard, reputation is nurtured through the destination's effective communication of these elements, alongside the certifications it adopts and the evaluations provided by tourists themselves.

Overall, the cultural reputation of a destination is a dynamic and complex construct, reflecting interactions among destination managers, tourists, and local communities. Enhancing this reputation requires a constant commitment to authenticity and sustainability, which is essential for ensuring that the tourism phenomenon remains a positive force in preserving and enriching the global cultural heritage.

A positive DCR can offer several advantages to the destination. Primarily, it can boost its competitiveness, both internally by enhancing the operational performance of various stakeholders and externally by influencing and attracting specific segments of clients who prioritize sustainability concerns in their choice of destination (Campos-Soria *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, a positive DCR, particularly when reinforced by prestigious recognitions such as heritage certification (e.g. UNESCO), can foster positive expectations among potential visitors, significantly impacting travel perceptions and decisions. However, these expectations must be validated during the actual experience at the destination (Carreira *et al.*, 2022).

Following the definition of DCR provided in this paragraph, this study aims to evaluate tourists' perceptions regarding this specific dimension of sustainable reputation and other constructs, such as tourist satisfaction.

2.2 DCR and tourist satisfaction

In marketing research, the relationship between reputation and satisfaction was initially investigated within the corporate context (Herbig and Milewicz, 1995; Silva and Alwi, 2006). Even within the realm of tourism, this relationship has predominantly been studied from a business perspective (Chang, 2013; Wu *et al.*, 2018). Loureiro and Kastenholz (2011), focusing on rural tourism in Portugal, found that the reputation of lodging establishments significantly influences tourist satisfaction and pleasure. Wu *et al.* (2018), investigating cruise trips, confirmed that corporate reputation impacts tourist experiential satisfaction. Su *et al.* (2020), in line with corporate reputation research (Chang, 2013), investigated this relationship from the destination perspective, demonstrating that a positive ecological reputation of the destination directly affects tourist satisfaction.

Additionally, according to signaling theory, a positive ecological reputation suggests that the destination has implemented favorable environmental initiatives, thus positively impacting tourist satisfaction (Han and Yoon, 2015). Given the significant role of the cultural dimension of sustainability in tourism (De Oliveira *et al.*, 2022; Magliacani and Francesconi, 2022), we propose the hypothesis that a positive DCR may indeed have a favorable impact on tourist satisfaction. Hence, based on these premises, our hypothesis is:

H1. DCR positively influences tourist satisfaction.

2.3 Satisfaction and destination loyalty

Previous studies in the realm of the affective component have affirmed that satisfaction plays a pivotal role in fostering destination brand loyalty behaviors (Kusumawati and Rahayu, 2020; Kumar *et al.*, 2020; Tran *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, visitors who feel more satisfied with a specific destination tend to exhibit behaviors supportive of the community, adopting attitudes related to loyalty dynamics, such as the intention to return (Vareiro *et al.*, 2019) and to recommend the destination (Altunel and Erkurt, 2015). Building upon these observations, our hypothesis is:

H2. Tourist satisfaction has a positive influence on destination loyalty.

2.4 The influence of sustainable on-site activity involvement

Involvement is a widely recognized concept in marketing, drawing significant attention and application in studies of behavior, including those in social psychology (Abbasi *et al.*, 2023). Within the tourism sector, the concept of "involvement" is extensively applied across various activities such as leisure, Internet usage, and tourism itself (Sallaku and Vigolo, 2022; Chua *et al.*, 2017; Taheri *et al.*, 2014). It is often linked to the theme of experiential marketing, exploring the role of experiences and activities in tourists' engagement within destinations (Dini *et al.*, 2023; Mastroberardino *et al.*, 2022; Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Han and Hyun (2018) highlighted the pivotal role of involvement in the pre-holiday phase or the decision-making process when selecting a tourism product. Additionally, Castellani *et al.* (2020) emphasized that participation and involvement in quality activities during holidays contribute to positive experiences and enhance value for participants (Zatori *et al.*, 2018).

In relation to the role of involvement in tourist satisfaction, Kim *et al.* (2015) identified a positive relationship between the two constructs, a findings corroborated by other authors within the perspective of experiential marketing (Hausman, 2011; Jasrotia *et al.*, 2023), thus confirming the positive influence between "experiential involvement" and "experiential satisfaction".

Recent studies (Hung *et al.*, 2019; Lu *et al.*, 2015) have introduced the variable "on-site activity involvement", identifying its moderating role in the relationship between tourist satisfaction and other emotional constructs.

In cultural destinations with a positive sustainable reputation, it can be hypothesized that participation and involvement in on-site activities might positively influence tourist satisfaction. Additionally, if sustainability significantly shapes tourists' perception of reputation, it can be hypothesized that sustainable on-site activity involvement may crucially impact the relationship between DCR and satisfaction (Liu *et al.*, 2016).

In this context, recent studies have shifted focus to sustainable experiences and activities as a means to gain a competitive advantage while enhancing destination sustainability and visitor experiences (Breiby *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2016; Smit and Melissen, 2018). Particularly, Breiby *et al.* (2020) proposed the existence of four dimensions of sustainable experience, one of which pertains to cultural heritage, labeled as "interaction with the cultural environment". Liu *et al.* (2016) explored the relationship between sustainable experiences and satisfaction in

natural resource conservation areas, finding a positive association between sustainable tourism and satisfaction.

Within the scope of this study, building upon the concept of "on-site activity involvement" from Hung *et al*. (2019), it is hypothesized that on-site involvement characterized by activities specifically related to the sustainable cultural dimension can positively moderate the relationship between DCR and satisfaction. Hence, based on these premises, our hypothesis is:

H3. Sustainable on-site activity involvement (SOSAI) positively moderates the relationship between the DCR and tourist satisfaction.

In the context of hypothesis H3, some studies have underscored how on-site involvement activities can influence tourists' behavioral loyalty attitudes (San Martin *et al*., 2013). Rooij (2015) corroborated how involvement impacts behavioral loyalty in the context of cultural activities, demonstrating that the concept of cultural activity involvement comprises six dimensions: attraction, centrality, self-expression, social bonding, cultural transmission, and financial contribution. Lee *et al*. (2007), focusing on forest tourism, highlighted that satisfaction and involvement in recreational activities can foster the development of loyalty attitudes towards the destination. Japutra (2022) suggested that fostering enduring cultural involvement among tourists can result in heightened engagement, leading to the development of loyalty attitudes towards the destination. Based on these considerations, we postulate our last hypothesis:

H4. Sustainable on-site activity involvement (SOSAI) moderates the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

3. Methodology

The study employed cross-sectional primary data and a non-random sampling approach. Questionnaires were administered to tourists in Urbino's historic center, a significant UNESCO World Heritage site renowned worldwide as one of the primary capitals of the Italian Renaissance and the birthplace of Raffaello Sanzio. In recent years, the growing academic literature that examines the relationship between cultural destinations and medium to long-term sustainability has prompted scholars to give greater attention to UNESCO sites. These sites undoubtedly provide privileged locations for empirical case studies (Tran *et al*., 2023; De Oliveira *et al*., 2022; Magliacani and Francesconi, 2022; Aimar, 2022; Scuttari *et al*., 2021; Dans and Gonzales, 2019; Colavitti and Usai, 2015).

The respondents were recruited as part of a student project; they were provided with a digital tablet containing the questionnaire, which they could independently fill out. A translation-back-translation method was employed to conduct the survey in multiple languages.

After eliminating incomplete responses and discarding respondents with a uniform response style (Völckner *et al*., 2010), we ended up with 647 valid responses. The sample consisted of 52% female and 47% male respondents and 1% that preferred not to respond (for gender). Of the total respondents, 14% were between 18 and 29 years of age, 39% between 30 and 49, and 47% above 50. In total, 60% of the respondents were Italians (coming from 18 regions), while 40% were foreigners (from 24 different countries).

With a total of 647 respondents, the sample is above the rule of 200 and the sample to item ratio is 43, which is more than the acceptable ratio of 5:1 (Gorsuch, 1990). Thus, an adequate sample size was achieved. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) as well as Bartlett's Test of Sphericity to measure sampling adequacy were calculated. KMO is 0.845 (> than 0.5) and Bartlett's Test

of Sphericity is significant at 0.000 (below $p < 0.05$); therefore, both values are over the threshold and the data is suitable for factor analysis.

For the operationalization of the constructs, we employed existing and empirically validated scales. Survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement for each of the items using a seven-point Likert scale, from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (7). Appendix 1 contains the complete list of the items and the source adopted for each construct.

4. Findings
4.1 Validity and reliability tests
Several analyses were conducted to test our model. Exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modelling were used to test the hypotheses. Employing principal factor analysis showed that all items loaded on the proposed constructs. Overall, the four factors explain an 75.0% cumulative variance. None of the 15 items had significant cross-loadings (>0.50). All scales are reliable with Cronbach's alpha values higher than 0.7 (see Table 1).

Common method bias is assessed by Harman's single-factor test. This method assumes that the presence of common method variance is indicated by the emergence of either a single factor or a general factor accounting for the majority of covariance among measures (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The single factor results in explaining 40.1% of the variance. Given that this value is far below the 50% mark, we are confident that common method bias is not an issue with our data. Further, the order of the questions was chosen carefully. Participants were also informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of the survey, as well as the fact that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers, and that they should answer as honestly as possible.

To assess the multicollinearity, a series of regressions models were run on the various constructs to calculate the variance inflation factor (VIF) and the tolerance test for multicollinearity was conducted (Kleinbaum *et al.*, 2013). The values for the VIF are between 1.18 and 1.52 and the tolerance test's values are between 0.66 and 0.84; therefore, no evidence for multicollinearity exists. Further, the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs was assessed through a confirmatory factor analysis. Average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) form convergent validity. To obtain convergent and discriminant validity, the AVE should be > 0.40 (Floyd and Widaman, 1995) and the CR should be > 0.60 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). We found the AVE values to be between 0.537 (loyalty) and 0.669 (satisfaction) and CR values to range between 0.837 (SOSAI) and 0.865 (loyalty). Thus, all the AVE and CR values are acceptable. Discriminant validity was established by comparing the square root AVE values (in the diagonal) with the correlation estimates. For discriminate validity, the diagonal elements should be larger than the off-diagonal elements. The details concerning the mean and standard deviation of the constructs, as well as Cronbach's α, AVE, CR, and correlation values, are displayed in Table 1, below.

	Mean (SD)	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	5
1. DCR	5.385 (1.276)	0.845	0.845	0.647	*0.804*			
2. Satisfaction	5.913 (1.168)	0.841	0.858	0.669	0.402	*0.818*		
3. Loyalty	5.657 (1.437)	0.875	0.865	0.537	0.319	0.555	*0.733*	
4. Sustainable On-site activity involvement (SOSAI)	5.580 (1.416)	0.816	0.837	0.637	0.335	0.409	0.523	*0.798*
Source(s): Table by authors								

Table 1.
Summary statistics and correlations among study variables

4.2 Hypotheses testing

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed using SPSS AMOS 28 to test the hypotheses for the present study. For testing the interaction hypothesis, we adopted the double-mean-centering strategy (Lin *et al.*, 2010), i.e. all the observed indicators are mean-centered before creating the product terms, and the product terms are then mean-centered before fitting the model with the latent interaction factor. Lin *et al.* (2010) noted that this approach improves modeling latent variable interactions compared to previous approaches that required to incorporate the use of mean structures and non-linear constraints (see also discussion by Steinmetz *et al.*, 2011). They argue that the double-mean centering strategy is preferable to using residual centering (orthogonalizing) on two grounds: (1) the residual centering strategy is potentially more cumbersome given it requires a 2-step process for centering; (2) although residual centering and double-mean centering will result in equivalent results when the first order factors are bivariate normal, the latter approach performs better when the factors are not normal. Further, we utilized an "all-pairs" approach when forming product indicators (Foldnes and Hagtvet, 2014). Then, the interaction is probed by generating simple slopes of the effect of a focal independent variable at different levels of a moderator variable and testing them for statistical significance. The following formula is applied: $SS = (\beta_1 + \beta_3 M)$, where M represents the level of the moderator a given test is being carried out at. The simple slopes are tested using the AMOS bootstrap utility. To determine levels of the moderator simple slopes are generated at estimates of the standard deviation of the moderator (Hayes, 2013). In the presence of a significant interaction, simple slope analyses were estimated to evaluate the effect of satisfaction at high (+1 SD) mean, and low (−1 SD) values of SOSAI.

The findings show an acceptable model fit with $\chi^2 = 135.587$; df = 49; $p < 0.001$; χ^2/df = 2.767; NFI = 0.981; RFI = 0.974; IFI = 0.988; TLI = 0.983; CFI = 0.987; and RMSEA = 0.047. *Satisfaction* is influenced by DCR ($\beta = 0.411$; $p < 0.001$), confirming H1. *Satisfaction* ($\beta = 0.556$; $p < 0.001$) influences *Destination Loyalty*, thus confirming H2. Figure 1 provides an overview of the significant results of our model testing, schematically represented.

Lastly, we tested to see if *SOSAI* moderates the relationship between *DCR* and *Satisfaction* as well as *Satisfaction* and *Destination Loyalty*. To test these hypotheses, we created an interaction term for *DCR* and *SOSAI* as well as *Satisfaction* and *SOSAI*.

The results of the moderation test revealed that the relationship between *DCR* and *SOSAI* is significantly strengthened when tourists' on-site activity involvement increases, supporting H3. The results are displayed in Table 2, below.
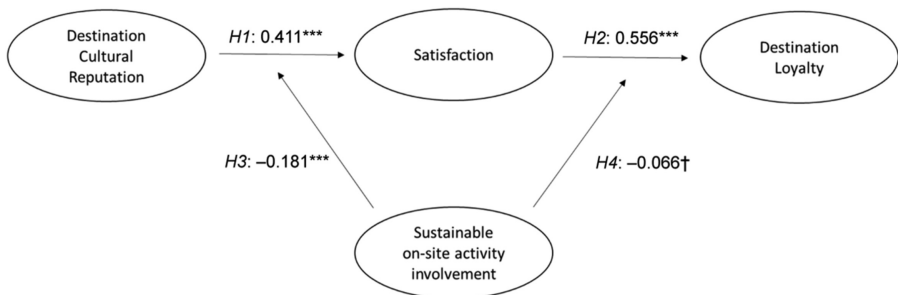

Figure 1.
Summary of results

Note(s): ***$p < 0.001$; †$p < 0.10$
Source(s): Figure by authors

We conducted a simple slope analysis for the significant interaction effect of *DCR* with *SOSAI*. Simple slope analysis showed that when *SOSAI* is low (below the mean; $B = 0.316$; $p = 0.001$) or medium (1 SD at the mean; $B = 0.237$; $p = 0.001$), the relationship between *DCR* and *Satisfaction* is higher compared to the relationship between *DCR* and *Satisfaction* when *SOSAI* is high (1 SD above the mean; $B = 0.157$; $p = 0.001$). Thus, the less tourists were *involved* with the location and the higher the *DCR* at the destination was, the more they were *satisfied* with the location.

The results of the moderation test for the relationship between *Satisfaction* and *SOSAI* shows an interaction effect ($\beta = -0.066$; $p = 0.056$) that is significant only at a 10% level, thus H4 is not supported. The results are displayed in Table 3, below.

We conducted a simple slope analysis for the interaction effect of *Satisfaction* with *SOSAI*. Simple slope analysis showed that when *SOSAI* is low (below the mean; $B = 0.319$; $p = 0.003$) or medium (1 SD at the mean; $B = 0.289$; $p = 0.001$), the relationship between *Satisfaction* and *Destination Loyalty* is higher compared to the relationship between *Satisfaction* and *Destination Loyalty* when *SOSAI* is high (1 SD above the mean; $B = 0.258$; $p = 0.001$). Thus, the less tourists were *involved* with the location and the higher the *Satisfaction* at the destination was, the more they were *loyal* with the location. Nevertheless, this effect is not significant and the confidence intervals of the three levels are overlapping.

Hypothesized relationship	Standardized effect		*t*-value
Sustainable On-site activity involvement → Satisfaction	0.269		6.452
DCR x Sustainable On-site activity involvement → Satisfaction	−0.181		4.669
	Unstandardized effect	95% CI	*p*
DCR → Satisfaction at low level of SOSAI	0.316	[0.220; 0.418]	0.001
DCR → Satisfaction at mean level of SOSAI	0.237	[0.162; 0.315]	0.001
DCR → Satisfaction at high level of SOSAI	0.158	[0.083; 0.240]	0.001

Note(s): SOSAI: Sustainable On-site activity involvement; low level: 1 SD below mean; medium level: mean; high level: 1 SD above mean
Source(s): Table by authors

Table 2.
Moderation test of on-site activity involvement between reputation and satisfaction

Hypothesized relationship	Standardized effect		*t*-value
Sustainable On-site activity involvement → Satisfaction	0.313		7.487
DCR x Sustainable On-site activity involvement → Satisfaction	−0.066		1.914
	Unstandardized effect	95% CI	*p*
Satisfaction → Loyalty at low level of OSAI	0.319	[0.208; 0.424]	0.003
Satisfaction → Loyalty at mean level of OSAI	0.289	[0.211; 0.381]	0.001
Satisfaction → Loyalty at high level of OSAI	0.258	[0.162; 0.392]	0.001

Note(s): OSAI: On-site activity involvement; low level: 1 SD below mean; medium level: mean; high level: 1 SD above mean
Source(s): Table by authors

Table 3.
Moderation test of on-site activity involvement between satisfaction and loyalty

5. Discussion and conclusions

Findings corroborate how DCR can significantly drive the long-term success of cultural destinations, contributing to both competitiveness and sustainability.

Firstly, the study confirms tourists' recognition of cultural aspects as a specific dimension of destination reputation (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Secondly, it affirms that cultural reputation has a positive and direct impact on tourist satisfaction (Su *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, the study confirms that tourist satisfaction can lead to the adoption of loyalty behaviors towards the destination, even in cultural destinations (Tran *et al.*, 2023).

Moreover, although the study did not confirm the hypothesis regarding the mediation of the SOSAI variable (H3) and found it to be non-significance (H4), it provides crucial insights for reflection on this outcome. Concerning on-site activities, the study indicates a negative moderating role in the relationship between tourists' perception of DCR and their satisfaction. In destinations considered culturally sustainable by tourists, the destination's conditions and SOSAI may not have met these expectations, contributing to a decrease in tourist satisfaction. As suggested by Wang *et al.* (2009), tourist satisfaction is influenced by factors such as created expectations, the destination's reputation, and the perceived quality of the experience. Consequently, tourist satisfaction heavily depends on their expectations and how these are confirmed during the vacation (Del Bosque and San Martin, 2008).

This highlights how sustainable activities can enrich the on-site tourist experience (Mastroberardino *et al.*, 2022; Breiby *et al.*, 2020), but also how they might potentially impact the experience negatively if tourists cannot positively evaluate their involvement in sustainable activities. This particularly holds true for destinations focusing their strategies on sustainability aspects, obtaining certifications and recognitions that enhance the destination's appeal. The study of the impact of SOSAI in the cultural context represents an initial attempt to explore the role of sustainable activities, an area of research that requires further development in terms of knowledge and managerial implications, particularly concerning the issue of over tourism (Seraphin and Chaney, 2023).

5.1 Theoretical implications

The study provides valuable implications on both theoretical and managerial levels. Theoretically, it aims to address several gaps in the literature. Specifically, the research (1) empirically analyzes the specific dimension of cultural sustainability (De Oliveira *et al.*, 2022; Magliacani and Francesconi, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021); (2) contributes to enriching the existing literature on reputation theory, emphasizing the impact of destination reputation on tourist behavior (Su *et al.*, 2018; Tankovic and Musanovic, 2022); (3) empirically explores the connection between destination reputation and tourist satisfaction (Su *et al.*, 2020; Tran *et al.*, 2023); (4) enriches the extant literature focused on analyzing UNESCO sites (De Oliveira *et al.*, 2022; Carreira *et al.*, 2022); (5) tests the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty behavior in cultural destinations, thereby contributing to the literature that analyzes the consequences of tourist satisfaction (Vareiro *et al.*, 2019); (6) examines the moderating role of SOSAI, aiming to address a gap in the literature concerning the limited number of studies that have analyzed its impact on tourist satisfaction (Breiby *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2016).

5.2 Managerial implications

The study offers practical implications for destination managers and policymakers seeking to enhance their appeal and sustainability. This involves considering the role of cultural and on-site activities involvement in shaping tourist experiences and behaviors.

More in detail, the study highlights the significance for destinations and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to prioritize sustainability aspects in their branding

policies. Emphasizing the value of the cultural dimension becomes essential in attracting and satisfying tourists.

These considerations are particularly relevant in the current era of cultural tourism growth, where destinations facing mass tourism must effectively communicate cultural sustainability practices. Moreover, emphasizing sustainability not only addresses the urgency to preserve cultural integrity and heritage for future generations but also serves as a strategic approach to mitigate the various negative impacts associated with overtourism and undertourism (Blázquez-Salom et al., 2023).

The narrative surrounding cultural sustainability thus becomes a fundamental pillar for destinations aspiring to balance tourist hospitality and heritage conservation, guiding visitors towards more conscious and respectful tourism. In this context, digital communication, amplified by social media and potentially enhanced by tools like Artificial Intelligence (AI), facilitates authentic and targeted storytelling. This aids in audience segmentation and visitor engagement (Martínez Suárez et al., 2021), which are fundamental in the realm of cultural tourism.

While UNESCO sites serve as strategic venues for leveraging this communicative dimension, it is essential not to overlook potential pitfalls associated with highlighting cultural sustainability aspects.

Sustainable branding policies, while attracting quality tourists, may raise visitor expectations that, if unfulfilled, can directly impact satisfaction levels (Wang et al., 2009). Notably, the study reveals that during their stays in cultural destinations, both environmental and cultural SOSAI negatively influence tourist satisfaction.

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), especially those overseeing certifications and destination-level recognitions, along with stakeholders in the tourism industry, should pay more attention to SOSAI, as it is fundamental for tourist satisfaction and loyalty policies. For instance, providing guided tours where tourists participate in small sustainable activities (Scuttari et al., 2021; Breiby et al., 2020). Effective destinations should represent sustainable tourism ecosystems, characterized by physical and virtual touchpoints, enabling tourists to engage in experiential and sustainable activities (Barile et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2016).

Furthermore, DMOs should encourage and provide training and informational courses to enhance the skills and attitudes of local operators who interact daily with tourists in the destination.

In summary, destination certifications such as UNESCO not only enhance the cultural profile of a destination but also elevate visitor expectations regarding authenticity, conservation, education, uniqueness of experience, sustainability, and service excellence. This delineates a complex framework in which destinations must manage to meet and exceed tourists' expectations within the context of culturally responsible and sustainable tourism.

From the perspective of destination management, handling these expectations requires a holistic approach to tourism planning and development. This involves striking a balance between destination promotion and heritage conservation to enhance and preserve the destination's cultural uniqueness, while avoiding excessive commercialization or trivialization of cultural experiences (Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2021). In the age of digital ecosystems (Cassia et al., 2020), this systemic approach can be embraced by adopting the perspective of smart destinations (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2013), particularly in the case of cultural destinations, termed as smart cultural tourism (Jankova et al., 2023). This approach also implies the active involvement of local communities in the planning and development of experiences, ensuring that tourism positively contributes to the cultural vitality and economic well-being of the destination. However, from the perspective of the local community, it is also necessary to assess the impact of cultural reputation in terms of tourist attractiveness. This can result in heightened anthropological pressure on the

destination, leading to a strained relationship between tourists and the local population, ultimately resulting in a loss of authenticity and cultural integrity.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The main limitations of the study arise from data collection focusing on a single site and the lack of sample segmentation (e.g. age, social status, origin, education level). Therefore, future research should deepen the DCR topic by considering other sites and specific tourist characteristics, such as their geographical and cultural origins, which can significantly impact their perception of destination reputation (Campos-Soria *et al.*, 2021).

Secondly, regarding the measurement of DCR, the study employs generic scales for the construct, thus necessitating the development and adoption of additional scales that consider other specific elements or factors of this complex construct related to various aspects of the cultural dimension of sustainability (De Oliveira *et al.*, 2022). On the supply side, investigating individual components affecting cultural reputation, such as the environment, culture, communication policies, etc., is important (Wang *et al.*, 2021).

Thirdly, the SOSAI construct was measured using a generic scale, indicating the need for further investigations and adaptations. In this perspective, it becomes fundamental to explore tourists' attitudes within destinations through qualitative research methodologies, especially regarding the role individual sustainability activities play in impacting tourist satisfaction and experience (e.g. active heritage preservation, support for local craftsmanship and traditions, respect for local culture).

Fourthly, the study analyzes a tourist site characterized by a specific certification; prospectively, it is appropriate to consider destinations with other types (Costa *et al.*, 2019).

Lastly, considering the importance of cultural tourism on a global scale, there is a need to develop a conceptual model that harmonizes the principles of Smart Destinations (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2013) with the pillars of sustainability (Shafiee *et al.*, 2019) and collective (wellness Dini and Pencarelli, 2022) through a conceptual model (e.g. Smart Cultural Wellness Destinations).

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Cultural destination reputation
In general, Urbino has a good reputation in the culturally sustainable field
Overall, Urbino has a positive culturally sustainable reputation
Overall, Urbino has a favorable reputation for culturally sustainable practices

Adaptation from Su *et al.* (2020)

Satisfaction
I was satisfied with this visit to Urbino
My expectations for this visit were exceeded
I am pleased with this visit

Adaptation from Hung *et al.* (2019)

Destination Loyalty (Recommendation intention – Revisit Intention)
I will recommend Urbino to a relative or friend
I will introduce the positive aspects of Urbino to relatives and friends
When other people question me about Urbino, I will recommend it

Adaptation from Altune Altunel and Erkurt (2015)

I intend to revisit Urbino in the future
I plan to revisit Urbino in the future
I will revisit Urbino in the future

Adaptation from Hung *et al.* (2019)

Sustainable On-site activity involvement
I visited a place where I really want to go
While visiting Urbino, I enjoyed cultural/sustainable activities which I really wanted to do
I was interested in the cultural/sustainable activities Urbino hosted

Adaptation from Hung *et al.* (2019)

Source(s): Table by authors

Table A1.
: Construct operationalization

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