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Developing Tourism in Reggio Emilia: a case study on authentic and sustainable
development

Abstract

Reggio Emilia, known for its cultural heritage and innovative educational philosophy, seeks to transform these assets into drivers of sustainable economic growth and international recognition. This thesis explores how cultural heritage tourism can support economic development and place branding through a multidisciplinary approach combining urban planning, marketing, and cultural management.

Focusing on cultural events, gastronomy, and the arts, the study examines how these elements enhance Reggio Emilia's appeal to both domestic and international visitors. The city's unique features such as its UNESCO-recognized educational approach and authentic culinary and historical traditions are central to its tourism potential.

A mixed-methods methodology was employed including stakeholder interviews, tourism data analysis, and a community survey. Survey responses revealed strong local support for promoting local cuisine, improving infrastructure, and preserving cultural sites, emphasizing the importance of community involvement in tourism strategies.

The research highlights the role of digital tools such as an increased online presence through social media campaigns in expanding global visibility while preserving authenticity. Findings suggest that integrating sustainable tourism with cultural promotion can position Reggio Emilia as a leading cultural destination. The thesis offers a strategic model for mid-sized cities to align heritage conservation with economic development and international branding.

Riassunti

Reggio Emilia, nota per il suo patrimonio culturale e la sua innovativa filosofia educativa, cerca di trasformare queste risorse in motori di crescita economica sostenibile e di riconoscimento internazionale. La presente tesi esplora come il turismo culturale possa sostenere lo sviluppo economico e il branding del territorio attraverso un approccio multidisciplinare che combina urbanistica, marketing e gestione culturale.

Concentrandosi su eventi culturali, gastronomia e arti, lo studio esamina come questi elementi aumentino l'attrattiva di Reggio Emilia sia per i visitatori nazionali che internazionali. Le caratteristiche uniche della città, come il suo approccio educativo riconosciuto dall'UNESCO e le autentiche tradizioni culinarie e storiche, sono fondamentali per il suo potenziale turistico.

È stata impiegata una metodologia mista che includeva interviste agli stakeholder, analisi dei dati turistici e un sondaggio tra la comunità. Le risposte al sondaggio hanno rivelato un forte sostegno locale alla promozione della cucina locale, al miglioramento delle infrastrutture e alla conservazione dei siti culturali, sottolineando l'importanza del coinvolgimento della comunità nelle strategie turistiche.

La ricerca evidenzia il ruolo degli strumenti digitali, come una maggiore presenza online attraverso campagne sui social media, nell'espandere la visibilità globale preservando al contempo l'autenticità. I risultati suggeriscono che l'integrazione del turismo sostenibile con la promozione culturale può posizionare Reggio Emilia come una destinazione culturale di primo piano. La tesi offre un modello strategico per le città di medie dimensioni per allineare la conservazione del patrimonio con lo sviluppo economico.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Tourism has increasingly been recognized as a key driver of regional economic development, particularly in small and medium-sized cities seeking to diversify their economies and enhance global visibility (Richards, 2018; UNWTO, 2019). In this context, cultural heritage, gastronomy, and place identity play a fundamental role in shaping destination competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

Recent studies emphasize that cities with strong local identity and cultural capital can leverage tourism not only as an economic tool but also as a mechanism for strengthening social cohesion and territorial branding (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010). However, the ability to translate these assets into a coherent tourism strategy remains a significant challenge, particularly for cities that are less visible within established tourism networks.

1.2 Research Problem

Although Reggio Emilia possesses rich historical heritage, gastronomic traditions, and cultural identity, the city has struggled to establish a strong tourism brand compared with neighboring cities such as Parma and Modena. Despite belonging to the globally recognized Emilia-Romagna region, Reggio Emilia remains relatively underrepresented in tourism promotion and visitor flows.

This gap raises important questions about how mid-sized cities can leverage cultural assets, community participation, and sustainable tourism practices to strengthen their economic development and place identity.

1.3 Tourism as a Driver of Economic Development and Place Branding

Tourism has increasingly become a strategic tool for economic development and cultural preservation in small to medium-sized towns across Italy. For Reggio Emilia, a town known

throughout Italy for its historical and cultural heritage, tourism presents an opportunity to enhance its economic standing and establish a distinctive brand within Italy and internationally. This research examines how Reggio Emilia can utilize tourism to boost its local economy and create a unique identity by drawing insights from existing research on tourism's impact in similar contexts and how the slow food movement, sustainable tourism and rural tourism can help share its landscape.

Economic Benefits of Tourism

Tourism significantly contributes to the economy of small towns, generating direct, indirect, and induced benefits. In Italy, tourism accounts for 13% of GDP, a trend that resonates strongly in smaller towns like Reggio Emilia (OECD, 2011). Direct benefits include revenue from hospitality and services, while indirect benefits stem from supply chain activities. Induced benefits further spread through increased household spending by those employed in tourism-related sectors (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025).

For Reggio Emilia, the potential lies in developing its unique assets to draw tourists, thereby boosting local businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and artisanal shops. Tourism plays a significant role in economic development, contributing to employment generation, regional competitiveness, and sustainable growth (OECD, 2011; UNWTO, 2019). The town's reputation for Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and its proximity to other gastronomic hubs in Emilia-Romagna are instrumental in creating a robust gastronomic tourism marketing strategy. As scholars note, Italian city centers concentrated commerce, law, and public life within a spatially symbolic urban core (Kostof, 1991; Najemy, 2006). This structural model continues to shape Reggio Emilia's contemporary identity and its potential for heritage-based tourism development.

Branding and Identity through Tourism

Effective tourism strategies not only boost economic growth but also enhance a town's image and branding. Branding plays a critical role in attracting both domestic and international tourists by creating a compelling narrative about a location's uniqueness. According to Kavaratzis and

Hatch (2013), place branding involves the strategic communication of a location's culture, heritage, and values to target audiences.

Reggio Emilia is uniquely positioned to capitalize on its cultural and historical identity. It offers a diverse range of cultural and experiential assets, including gastronomy, heritage sites, and community-based initiatives, which together contribute to its potential as a tourism destination (Richards, 2018; Reggio Emilia Welcome, 2025). Additionally, its innovative educational model, the Reggio Emilia Approach, could serve as a distinctive element in its branding strategy. By aligning tourism efforts with these unique attributes, Reggio Emilia can differentiate itself from other Italian towns and attract niche markets, such as educational tourism. The city is also recognized for its extensive network of cycling infrastructure, which presents opportunities for the development of sustainable and low-impact tourism experiences.

1.4 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this thesis is to analyze how Reggio Emilia can strengthen its tourism sector while preserving cultural heritage and supporting sustainable local development.

Specific objectives include:

- Analyze the historical and cultural foundations of Reggio Emilia
- Examine the role of tourism in regional economic development
- Investigate residents' perceptions of tourism development
- Identify opportunities for sustainable tourism growth
- Propose policy and branding recommendations for the city

1.5 Research Questions

This thesis addresses the following research questions:

1. How can Reggio Emilia leverage its cultural heritage to strengthen tourism development?
2. What role do local residents play in shaping sustainable tourism strategies and preservation of the city?
3. How does Reggio Emilia compare to neighboring cities such as Parma and Modena in terms of tourism identity?
4. How can slow tourism, gastronomy, and cultural tourism contribute to Reggio Emilia's place branding?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study can be used by the tourism agency of Reggio Emilia and Emilia-Romagna to better serve these communities. It can also be applied by local and international tourism operators to better understand their customers' needs and desires when creating products and services.

1.7 Methodology Overview

This research adopts a **mixed-methods approach** combining:

- Literature review on tourism development and place branding
- Historical and regional analysis
- A quantitative and qualitative survey of residents
- Comparative analysis of neighboring cities

The survey gathered 315 responses from residents and international participants, providing insights into local perceptions of tourism, infrastructure, cultural identity, and regional collaboration.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized as follows:

Chapter 1 introduces the research problem, objectives, and methodology.

Chapter 2 provides the historical and regional context of Emilia-Romagna.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on tourism development and place branding.

Chapter 4 explains the research methodology and survey design.

Chapter 5 presents the survey results and statistical analysis.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to tourism development theories.

Chapter 7 concludes with policy recommendations for Reggio Emilia.

Chapter 2 – Historical and Regional Context

This chapter provides a historical overview of the Emilia-Romagna region and its role in shaping regional identity and urban development.

2.1 Historical Development of Emilia-Romagna

2.1.1 Roman Foundations and the Via Emilia

The Roman Empire played a central role in shaping the infrastructure and urban organization of the Emilia-Romagna region. Although historical evidence remains limited, the influence of early civilizations is evident in the archaeological and infrastructural legacy of the region. The Roman Empire, formally established in 27 BC, played a central role in shaping political, economic, and infrastructural systems across the Italian peninsula until its decline in the 5th century AD. Roman engineering innovations, including bridges, roads, and aqueducts, continue to influence modern infrastructure systems. The northern Italian region consists of plains, valleys, hills and mountains and with different rivers (Po River) running through it, making it a fertile agrarian land. It is situated between the Lombardy region to the north and Tuscany to the south. The region has been shaped by successive waves of political control and territorial governance. It has two parts; to the west Emilia and to the east Romagna alongside the Adriatic Sea coast (see map below). Known as “*padana*” or “*pianura padana*” in English “Po Valley” this area is characterized by its green plains and fog. The Emilia-Romagna region developed historically along the Via Emilia, a Roman road connecting key urban centers such as Parma, Reggio Emilia, and Modena. This infrastructure played a significant role in shaping regional economic and urban development. A more detailed historical analysis of the Via Emilia and the development of these cities is presented in Chapter 2.



2.1.2 Medieval Period and the Lombard League

Change in Reggio Emilia

Regium Lepidi, the original name of Reggio Emilia, once had a river running through the town, today known as “Corso Garibaldi”, a famous street named after the unifier of Italy. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the city center consisted of only the main squares (Piazza Grande, Duomo, Palazzo Vescovile, La basilica di S. Prospero). Power shifted in many ways in Reggio Emilia due to its geographical location. Hungarian forces plundered the city in 899 A.D and in 924 A.D. Shortly after, for protective reasons, they joined the Lombard League. The Lombard League was formed in 1167 as an alliance of northern Italian city-states to resist the authority of the Holy Roman Empire (Gamberini, 2012; Jones, 1997). This alliance combined powers of different

families such as the Estensi in Ferrara, Da Polenta in Ravenna, Sforza from Milan who controlled Parma and Piacenza. These families experienced many challenges in holding power from the Church as the League's strength continued to grow with time.

The Lombard League at one point included: Verona, Padua, Vicenza, Venice, Cremona, Mantova, Piacenza, Bergamo, Brescia, Milan, Genoa, Bologna, Modena, Reggio Emilia, Treviso, Vercelli, Lodi, Parma, Ferrara. Furthermore, other surrounding cities like Florence became interested in obtaining power and influence in the fertile lands. However, the papacy continued efforts to control the region and eventually obtained power through military means in the central west part of Emilia-Romagna, this lasted till 1796 with the formation of the short-lived Cispadane Republic and later the Cisalpine Republic. The formation of the Cispadane Republic in 1797 led to the first Italian sovereign state to adopt the Italian tricolor colors and is celebrated in Reggio Emilia on January 7th.

2.1.3 Renaissance and Napoleonic Influence

The Renaissance was a crucial period in the development of Europe, especially for Italy as the growth of the nation and its citizens continued to change. From the Black Plague which caused severe losses in people and armies in Italy, England, Germany, to the age of light and revival where the different humanities of philosophy, art, music and culture thrived. Italy was a leader in the bloom of the intellectuals. With powerful cities such as Florence, Rome and Milan, and intellectuals like Michelangelo and Leonardo Di Vinci, Italy was a force to be reckoned with. The rise of the nobility over the papacy became apparent during these times.

In Emilia-Romagna different families such as the Estense wheeled their wealth in different towns. They exerted power in the communes and nepotism became a common practice as each town was under its own jurisdiction. Reggio Emilia, Modena and Parma experienced an enormous growth in population and city places between the 12-15th century. The people among them themselves identified more with the local traditions and ways, each with their own flag and dialect. A fight for power became increasingly apparent with the construction of beautiful buildings and towers in the region. For instance, the Teatro Valli of Reggio Emilia was built between 1852 and 1857, a theater created as a way to show wealth and grandeur, and most

importantly, as a symbol of pride for Reggiani. Another famous building is that of the Ghirlandia of Modena, built over the period from the 12th to the 14th century by many noble families. Moreover, the influence of the French is one that cannot be ignored especially in the study of the towns of Reggio Emilia, Modena, and Parma. Napoleon Bonaparte famously invaded and controlled the region, leaving a mark with the French revolution. The city of Parma is often referred to as “Little Paris” due to its refined urban character and strong historical connections to French influence, particularly during the rule of Marie Louise of Austria, Napoleon’s second wife, who significantly shaped the city’s cultural and social development (Italia.it, n.d.; Travel Emilia-Romagna, 2025).

Napoleon was especially drawn to Reggio Emilia for its active civic life. As noted in the book “Il tricolore: Duecento anni” by Ugo Bellocchi, he loved the community and the responsibility the citizens felt for the town. During this time, he was very beloved and pushed the noble family away, resulting in the displacement of several noble families and the restructuring of local governance. Most important during this period, is the creation of the Italian flag in Reggio Emilia, symbolizing the unity of the state and democracy for all. The livelihoods of many people improved as more canals were built and roads created for commerce, connecting the rural areas to the city center more. In particular, the bond between its citizens both from the city and rural farm areas increased as politics and civic dialog became more noted and voices became heard. The creation of departments for different aspects of life is an important contribution of Napoleon.

2.1.4 Italian Unification and Modern Regional Identity

The unification of Italy led to wide changes that many were not prepared for. To begin with, the country did not have an official language, many regions spoke local dialects and old wars between them led to diminished trading among different towns. Also, jurisdictions, local ordinances and laws were designed for each local town, this fragmentation created significant challenges for trade, governance, and economic integration. However, Garibaldi united Italy and had an idea of a united country. Politics were and still are a touchy subject as many cultural differences continue between the Northern and Southern parts of Italy. Different political parties emerged and helped shape the politics of today. In Reggio Emilia, it is known for its active role against Mussolini's Fascism and helped with his demise and eventual execution.

2.2 Urban Development Along the Via Emilia

The development of urban settlements in Emilia-Romagna is closely linked to the construction of the Via Emilia during the Roman period. This road became the central axis of economic, political, and urban organization across the region.

2.2.1 The Role of the Via Emilia in Regional Development

The original Via Emilia was erected by Consul Marcus Emilius Lepidus, a military general who used logic to build this road and for whom it is named after. The Romans built the Via Emilia over pre-existing roads that were used by travelers who went from the Adriatic Sea to the Typhus Sea and vice versa according to (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d). Hence, Modena, Reggio Emilia and Parma are approximately 30 km from each city as this was the distance most Roman soldiers could endure to walk in a day. According to Travel Emilia-Romagna (n.d.), the Via Emilia featured around 13,000 stops and played an important organizational and territorial control role within the region. The Romans developed towns alongside the road such as Forli, Imola, Piacenza, Bologna, Rimini, Modena, Reggio Emilia, Parma etc. and integrated its new people into their empire.

This road was an essential marker in the history of the Emilia-Romagna region. It goes north toward the Lombardy region and south towards the Tuscany region. The *Via Aemilia* served as the decumanus maximus and core spatial axis around which the territory of Emilia-Romagna was organized in the Roman period, through its linkages with urban centuriations and settlement patterns. The development of cities along the Via Emilia reflects the principles of Roman urban planning, characterized by structured street grids, strategic connectivity, and the integration of economic and administrative functions within urban centers (Kostof, 1991; Laurence, 1999).

An important feature that marks the region is the Via Emilia, an important road that connects the area from east to west. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* (n.d.), the name Emilia comes from the *Via Aemilia*, a Roman road that traversed the region from Ariminum (Rimini) in the southeast to Placentia (Piacenza), and these cities and others; such as *Reggio Emilia*, founded along the road, grew up as key centers of settlement and economic life in the territory that later became Emilia-Romagna. The long road stretches from Rimini up to Piacenza are considered till

this day one of the most important roads in Northern Italy. The Via Emilia played a fundamental role in structuring urban development in northern Italy, shaping settlement patterns and economic connectivity (Boschi, 2000). The road leads to the Lombardy area of Milan, where a long history of struggle for power and control continued for decades to come.

The region itself has different terrains, ranging from the sea to plains and with many rivers in between. The geographical space of the region made it an excellent place to farm and host life (see figure). The Romans constructed different towns in key areas to create tolls and new cities for its empire to grow and keep enemies away.

2.2.2 Development of Reggio Emilia, Parma and Modena

Founding of Reggio Emilia

Regium Lepidum, now known as Reggio Emilia was founded in 175 B.C by Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. The city began as a small town alongside the Via Emilia which was also built by Lepidus. Reggio Emilia has had a history of wars and changes of power which started after the introduction of Christianity in 1 AD. From 1 AD to 900 various political and cultural groups, including the papacy, barbarian tribes, and later medieval powers, influenced the development of the city.

Founding of Modena

Mutina (Modena) was a Roman colony founded in 183 BC. It is the city to the south of Reggio Emilia. It is characterized by similar features of Reggio Emilia: greenery, plains, hills and was also built as a Roman town along the Via Emilia. It has a history of important Roman wars such as the War of Modena, fought between Mark Anthony and Octavian against Brutus.

Founding of Parma

Parma, named after the “parma” shield by the Romans, was founded in 183 BC with the colony of Mutina. According to the book “Emilia Romagna” by Touring Club Italiano, “it’s named the little capital”. However, before 183 BC it was under the control of the Galli Celti and was taken away by the Romans and given to the Pollia tribe.

These historical development patterns reflect broader processes of Roman urban planning and territorial organization, where infrastructure, military strategy, and economic connectivity shaped long-term urban hierarchies and regional integration (Laurence, 1999; Keay, 2013).

2.3 Regional Identity and Campanilismo

The historical development of cities in Emilia-Romagna has produced strong local identities that continue to influence regional cooperation and cultural perception. This phenomenon is often described as *campanilismo*, a term referring to strong attachment to one's local community and municipal traditions.

2.3.1 Local Identity in Italian Cities

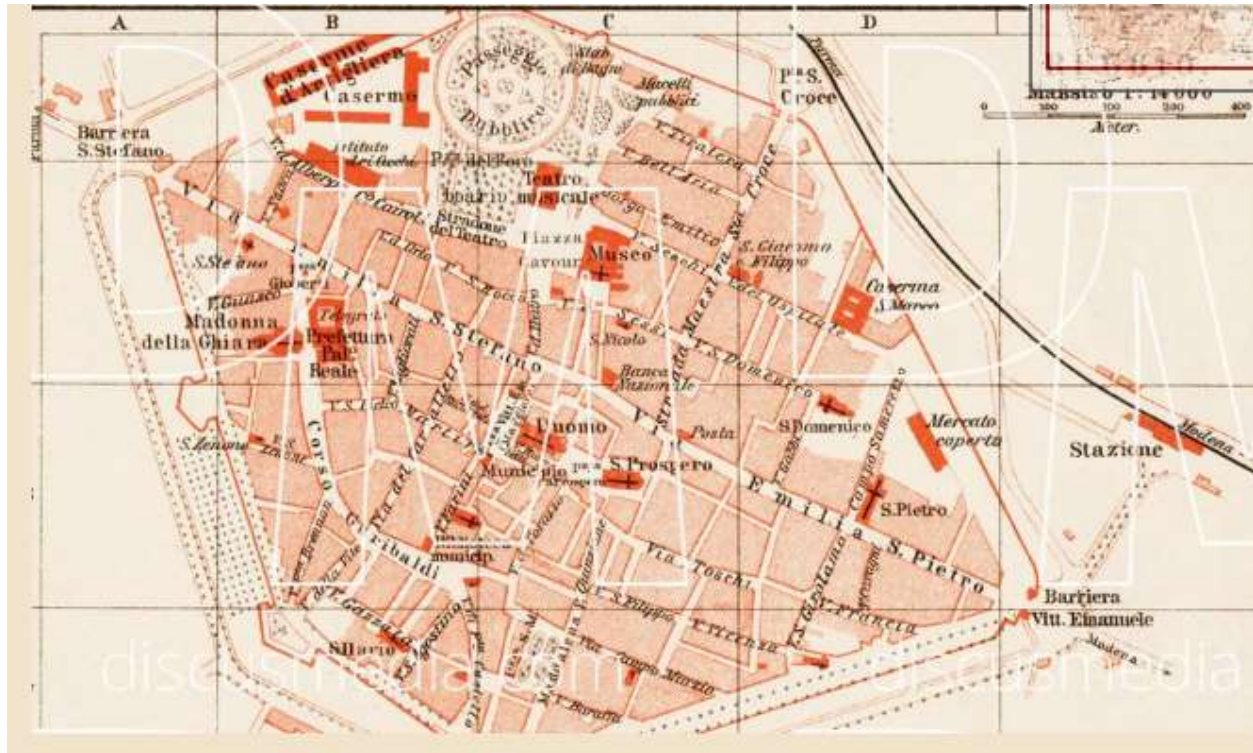
Urban culture:

The individual identity of Italians is tied to the city rather than Italy. This is due to the fact that Italy had a complicated history and was not completely unified until 1871. Therefore, many cities were left on their own or controlled by noble families, which encouraged local production and values. With each city having been invaded and controlled by different rulers, the town identity strengthened as a protection mechanism. Regional dialects, food, music, and art make each town unique and proud of their local heritage. Each local identity unifies people to their own town with every town having their own flag, symbols and traditional dishes.

The famous “city center”

The tumultuous times in Italian history led to physical infrastructure changes and implementation of methods to protect its people and buildings from outsiders. What is known as the “city center” in Italian urban tradition developed as a multifunctional civic space designed to host merchant life, commercial exchange, legal institutions, and public social interaction (Kostof, 1991). In medieval and Renaissance Italy, the piazza and surrounding civic buildings became the focal point of economic regulation and communal governance (Brucker, 1983). In Italy, the center of town is characterized by a main church, commonly referred to as a “duomo” or square in English. During the Roman period, the town center was a square with two side streets. The city

centers were a place of meeting and sharing, where citizens could congregate and the church was a leading moral force in citizens' lives. Each town with its distinct culture and takes on music and food created its city identity, one that prevails over the national identity to this day.



2.3.2 Rivalry Between Reggio Emilia, Parma and Modena

From a sociological perspective, the cities of Reggio Emilia, Parma and Modena all had a mix of identity and struggles between themselves and the surrounding cities of the region. The historical relationships between Parma, Modena, and Reggio Emilia were shaped not only by political and territorial disputes but also by deeply rooted traditions of *campanilismo*. Italian urban culture has long emphasized strong municipal attachment, fostering competitive identity construction and symbolic hierarchies among neighboring cities (Agnew, 2002). In Emilia, this dynamic manifested in cultural and economic rivalry, where cities asserted claims of refinement, political prestige, and economic distinction. The medieval commune system fostered strong local autonomy and competition among cities, contributing to fragmented regional identities (Jones,

1997). Such patterns of localized pride often limited sustained inter-city collaboration and contributed to fragmented regional identity formation and can still be seen today (Gamberini & Lazzarini, 2012).

For example, there was not much sentiment felt towards *Modenesi*, people from Modena as they sided with the Estense family from Austria while the *Parmanesi*, people from Parma, sided with Napoleon's French ways. Bologna, the capital of Emilia-Romagna, also had disdain for Modena due to both having noble families who sought control.

2.3.3 Medieval Instability and Urban Defense

During the early medieval period, Reggio Emilia's strategic position along the Via Emilia also made it vulnerable to external threats and political instability. Historical sources indicate that the city was subjected to raids by Hungarian forces in 899 and again in 924, reflecting the broader fragmentation of power across northern Italy following the decline of centralized imperial authority (Wickham, 2016).

In response to these conditions, cities increasingly relied on collective defense and regional alliances. Reggio Emilia became part of the Lombard League in the 12th century, a coalition of northern Italian communes formed to resist the authority of the Holy Roman Empire (Gamberini, 2012; Jones, 1997). This alliance not only strengthened military capacity but also reinforced political autonomy and inter-city relationships.

As a result of continued insecurity, fortified walls were constructed around the city, shaping both its physical and symbolic structure. The defensive system contributed to the recognizable urban form of Reggio Emilia, often described as having a hexagonal layout, traces of which remain visible in the contemporary city center. Beyond their military function, these fortifications helped define spatial boundaries and reinforce a strong sense of local identity, which continues to influence perceptions of the city today (Settis, 2010).

2.4 Cooperative Traditions and Local Economic Structure

This section will analyze the importance of cooperatives as an ethical business model used throughout Italy. The cooperative movement represents one of the most distinctive institutional features of the Emilia-Romagna region and particularly of Reggio Emilia. The strong presence of cooperatives has shaped the city's economic structure, social services, and community identity, contributing to a culture of collaboration and civic engagement.

2.4.1 Historical Development of Cooperatives

Cooperatives became a popular middle business model for Reggio Emilia. Flourishing during the 19th century. Funded publicly and functioned for the betterment of citizens' lives. The cooperative movement has long been central to Reggio Emilia's economic and social life. From early twentieth century production and building consortia to contemporary consumer and social service cooperatives, local co-ops have shaped employment, urban reconstruction, welfare provision, and local food systems (Urbed Urbanism commentary on Reggio Emilia, 2025).

CCPL Consorzio Cooperative di Produzione e Lavoro

The Consorzio Cooperative di Produzione e Lavoro, commonly known as CCPL, was originally established on October 16, 1904, as the *Consorzio delle Società Cooperative di Lavoro e Produzione della Provincia di Reggio Emilia*. It united local production cooperatives to strengthen their capacity for large-scale public works such as regional rail construction. Over the years, CCPL evolved into a multi-sector cooperative group active in construction, packaging, energy, and facility management. It played a vital role in the reconstruction of post-World War I reconstruction and maintained continuity despite periods of state intervention during the fascist era. Today, CCPL remains a key example of an industrial cooperative rooted in Reggio Emilia's economic fabric (CCPL, n.d.; Consorzio Cooperative di Produzione e Lavoro CCPL, n.d.).

Consumer Cooperatives: Coop Alleanza 3.0

Consumer cooperatives have also contributed significantly to Reggio Emilia's economy and community development. Coop Alleanza 3.0 operates as one of the largest consumer cooperative

networks in the region, managing supermarkets and member programs across the city and province. These cooperatives combine economic activity with social responsibility, providing member benefits, local employment, and community support initiatives. Their business model reflects the cooperative ethos of shared benefit and civic engagement that defines much of Emilia Romagna's economic success (Coop Alleanza 3.0, n.d.).

Social Service Consortia: Consorzio Cooperative Sociali “Quarantacinque” and Consorzio Oscar Romero

From the 1990s onward, social cooperatives in Reggio Emilia consolidated into consortia to improve efficiency and expand public service capacity. The Consorzio Cooperative Sociali “Quarantacinque,” founded in 1994 and named after Article 45 of the Italian Constitution, brings together several dozen cooperatives engaged in health, education, and social inclusion. Its mission focuses on integrating disadvantaged individuals into the labor market and coordinating public welfare contracts (Consorzio Cooperative Sociali “Quarantacinque,” n.d.). Similarly, the Consorzio Oscar Romero provides a network of social and educational services while promoting cooperative development and local employment. Both consortia illustrate how Reggio Emilia's cooperative tradition extends beyond economics to encompass social solidarity and inclusive growth (Consorzio Oscar Romero, n.d.).

2.4.2 Economic Role of Cooperatives

Building and Agricultural Cooperatives

Building cooperatives have played an important historical role in the province, particularly through the Cooperativa Muratori associations that emerged in the early twentieth century. These organizations were instrumental in local construction, urban development, and employment generation, particularly during post-war reconstruction periods. In parallel, agricultural and dairy cooperatives, such as *Latteria La Grande*, have been integral to the Parmigiano Reggiano production system. They unite small farmers under shared management and marketing structures, reinforcing local identity while ensuring fair distribution of profits and maintaining product quality standards (Latteria La Grande, n.d.).

2.4.3 Social and Community Impact

Contemporary Role and Implications

Today, Reggio Emilia's cooperative ecosystem remains highly diversified. Historical industrial cooperatives like CCPL, retail consumer co-ops such as Coop Alleanza 3.0, social service networks including Quarantacinque and Oscar Romero, as well as agricultural and building cooperatives, all contribute to a balanced local economy. This system promotes civic participation, employment stability, and welfare innovation. Scholars and urban researchers continue to highlight Reggio Emilia's cooperative model as a key factor in its sustained social and economic resilience (Urbed Urbanism commentary on Reggio Emilia, 2025).

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

3.1 Tourism and Economic Development

3.1.1 Economic Impacts of Tourism

Tourism has long been recognized as a significant contributor to economic development at both national and regional levels. The economic impacts of tourism are typically categorized into three main forms: direct, indirect, and induced effects. Direct impacts include revenues generated by tourism-related industries such as accommodation, restaurants, transportation, and cultural attractions. Indirect effects occur when tourism businesses purchase goods and services from local suppliers, thereby stimulating other sectors of the economy. Induced effects arise when employees working in tourism-related industries spend their income within the local economy (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025).

In many countries, tourism represents a substantial share of gross domestic product (GDP). In Italy, tourism contributes significantly to national economic performance, accounting for a considerable share of employment and economic output (OECD, 2011). The economic benefits of tourism extend beyond revenue generation, as tourism development can stimulate infrastructure improvements, encourage investment in public spaces, and enhance cultural preservation initiatives.

Tourism development also contributes to diversification of local economies. Particularly in regions where traditional industries such as manufacturing or agriculture are dominant, tourism can provide alternative sources of income and employment. This diversification is especially relevant for regions with strong cultural and historical heritage, where tourism can be developed in ways that preserve local identity while generating economic opportunities.

3.1.2 Tourism in Small and Medium Cities

While major metropolitan destinations attract large numbers of international visitors, small and medium-sized cities have increasingly recognized tourism as a viable strategy for economic development. These cities often rely on niche tourism markets such as cultural tourism, heritage tourism, and gastronomic tourism to attract visitors seeking authentic experiences.

Scholars have noted that smaller destinations can benefit from tourism strategies that emphasize uniqueness, authenticity, and local culture (Richards, 2018). Unlike mass tourism destinations, which often face challenges related to overcrowding and environmental pressure, smaller cities have the opportunity to develop sustainable tourism models that focus on quality experiences and longer visitor stays.

Examples from various European regions demonstrate how smaller towns have successfully developed tourism by highlighting distinctive local characteristics. Cultural heritage sites, regional food traditions, and community-based events can serve as central elements of tourism development strategies in these locations. As a result, tourism in small and medium cities is often closely linked to broader initiatives related to cultural preservation and place branding.

3.2 Cultural Tourism

3.2.1 Definitions of Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is widely recognized as one of the most significant forms of tourism in contemporary travel markets. The concept encompasses travel motivated by a desire to experience the cultural heritage, traditions, arts, and lifestyles of a destination. The World

Tourism Organization defines cultural tourism as travel motivated by the desire to learn, discover, experience, and consume the cultural attractions of a destination (UNWTO, 2017).

Scholars have proposed various frameworks for understanding cultural tourism. McKercher and du Cros (2002) identify four key components of cultural tourism: tourism itself, cultural heritage assets, visitor experiences, and the interaction between tourists and local culture. These elements emphasize that cultural tourism is not limited to the observation of heritage sites but also involves active participation in cultural experiences.

Over time, the scope of cultural tourism has expanded significantly. Earlier conceptualizations focused primarily on museums, monuments, and historical architecture. Contemporary interpretations recognize a much broader range of cultural experiences, including festivals, local traditions, gastronomy, and creative industries (Richards, 2018). This evolution reflects changing tourist preferences, with many travelers seeking immersive experiences that allow them to engage more deeply with local communities and cultural practices.

3.2.2 Cultural Heritage and Tourism Development

Cultural heritage plays a central role in tourism development strategies. Heritage sites, historical landmarks, and cultural institutions serve as key attractions that draw visitors to a destination. At the same time, tourism can provide financial resources necessary for the preservation and maintenance of cultural heritage assets.

Heritage-based tourism strategies often aim to balance economic development with conservation objectives. Sustainable tourism frameworks emphasize the importance of protecting historical sites while ensuring that tourism activities do not negatively impact local communities or cultural resources (UNWTO, 2019).

Cultural festivals, exhibitions, and artistic events also contribute to the attractiveness of destinations by providing opportunities for visitors to experience local culture in dynamic and interactive ways. These activities can help extend tourism beyond traditional sightseeing by encouraging visitors to engage in and experience local traditions and cultural practices.

3.3 Place Branding

3.3.1 Concept of Place Branding

Place branding refers to the strategic process of shaping and communicating a destination's identity in order to attract visitors, investment, and talent. Unlike traditional marketing approaches, place branding focuses on representing the unique cultural, historical, and social characteristics of a location (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). According to Anholt (2010), successful place branding involves creating a coherent narrative that reflects a location's identity while differentiating it from competing destinations. Effective place branding strategies combine elements such as cultural heritage, economic strengths, lifestyle attributes, and local traditions to create a recognizable and appealing image.

Place branding has become increasingly important in the global tourism market, where destinations compete for attention among international travelers. Cities and regions often develop branding strategies that highlight distinctive characteristics in order to establish a recognizable identity and strengthen their position in tourism markets (Kavaratzis, 2005). Recent developments in place branding research emphasize the importance of co-creation and stakeholder engagement, where local communities actively contribute to shaping and communicating place identity rather than passively receiving top-down branding strategies (Zenker & Erfgen, 2014; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). This perspective is particularly relevant for cities such as Reggio Emilia, where strong local identity and civic culture can serve as foundational elements for participatory branding approaches.

3.3.2 Branding Strategies for Cities

Urban branding strategies often focus on specific themes or identity markers that distinguish a city from others. These themes may include cultural heritage, creative industries, gastronomy, innovation, or lifestyle attributes. By emphasizing particular characteristics, cities can create a strong and consistent image that resonates with potential visitors.

Successful city branding initiatives often involve collaboration between local governments, tourism organizations, businesses, and cultural institutions. This collaborative approach ensures

that branding strategies reflect the broader identity of the community rather than relying solely on marketing campaigns (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Moreover, place branding is closely linked to urban development and cultural policy. Investments in cultural infrastructure, public spaces, and events can reinforce branding narratives and contribute to the overall attractiveness of a destination.

In the case of Reggio Emilia, recent efforts to improve digital visibility demonstrate an awareness of the importance of place branding in contemporary tourism. The development of the official “Reggio Emilia Welcome” platform represents a shift toward a more structured and accessible digital presence, offering multilingual content, event promotion, and practical visitor information. Digital platforms play a central role in shaping destination image, as they are often the first point of interaction between potential visitors and a place (Govers & Go, 2009).

However, while the platform improves accessibility and organization, it does not yet fully articulate a distinctive and competitive brand identity. This reflects a broader challenge identified in place branding literature, where destinations may possess strong cultural assets but struggle to translate them into a clear and differentiated narrative (Kavaratzis, 2004; Zenker & Braun, 2017). Strengthening digital storytelling and aligning online communication with a cohesive brand strategy will therefore be essential for increasing Reggio Emilia’s visibility and competitiveness.

3.3.3 Comparative Branding: Parma, Modena, and Reggio Emilia

Within the Emilia-Romagna region, several cities have developed distinct tourism identities based on their cultural and economic characteristics. Parma has established itself as an international center for gastronomy, recognized as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy and associated with iconic products such as Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano Reggiano. Similarly, Modena has developed a strong brand identity linked to its automotive heritage, luxury sports cars, and culinary traditions. Attractions such as Ferrari and Maserati museums contribute to Modena’s international recognition.

In contrast, Reggio Emilia has historically been less visible in tourism branding despite possessing significant cultural assets. The city is known for its educational philosophy, cultural

institutions, and cooperative economic model. These characteristics present opportunities for developing a distinctive tourism narrative that emphasizes community values, cultural heritage, and sustainable tourism experiences.

3.4 Gastronomic Tourism

3.4.1 Food Tourism as a Destination Strategy

Gastronomic tourism, also known as food tourism, refers to travel motivated by the desire to experience local food traditions and culinary culture. Culinary experiences allow visitors to engage with local heritage while supporting regional economies through restaurants, food markets, and agricultural producers (Hall & Sharples, 2003).

Food tourism has become an increasingly important component of destination marketing strategies. Culinary experiences often serve as a gateway for visitors to explore broader aspects of local culture, including traditions, festivals, and agricultural practices.

3.4.2 Gastronomy in Emilia-Romagna

The Emilia-Romagna region is widely recognized as one of the most important gastronomic regions in Italy. Products such as Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, Parma ham, and Lambrusco wine have become internationally recognized symbols of Italian culinary excellence. These culinary traditions contribute to the region's reputation as a major destination for food tourism.

3.5 Slow Tourism

3.5.1 Origins of the Slow Food Movement

The Slow Food movement originated in Italy during the 1980s as a response to the growing presence of fast-food culture. Founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986, the movement emphasized the importance of preserving local food traditions, supporting sustainable agriculture, and promoting culinary heritage.

3.5.2 Slow Tourism and Sustainable Travel

Slow tourism emerged from the broader philosophy of the Slow Food movement. The concept emphasizes meaningful travel experiences, longer stays, and deeper engagement with local communities. Slow tourism encourages visitors to prioritize quality experiences over the quantity of attractions visited (Calzati & de Salvo, 2018).

3.5.3 Slow Tourism in Italy

Italy provides a particularly favorable environment for slow tourism due to its strong local traditions, regional food cultures, and emphasis on lifestyle and community. Many smaller Italian towns have adopted slow tourism strategies to attract visitors seeking authentic cultural experiences while avoiding the negative impacts associated with mass tourism.

3.6 Community-Based Tourism

3.6.1 Community Participation in Tourism

Community-based tourism emphasizes the active participation of local residents in tourism planning and development. Scholars highlight that community participation improves tourism outcomes by ensuring that development aligns with local values and priorities (Tosun & Timothy, 2003).

3.6.2 Tourism Governance and Local Development

Effective tourism governance requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including local governments, businesses, community organizations, and residents. When communities are actively involved in decision-making processes, tourism initiatives are more likely to generate equitable economic benefits and long-term sustainability (Moscardo, 2018). This is crucial in developing synergies between local governments, its citizens and private businesses.

3.7 Social Capital and Tourism Development

3.7.1 Concept of Social Capital

Social capital refers to networks of relationships, trust, and cooperation that facilitate collective action within communities. Putnam (2000) argues that social capital plays a crucial role in strengthening civic participation and institutional effectiveness.

3.7.2 Social Networks and Tourism Development

In tourism contexts, social capital can support collaboration between stakeholders, enhance community participation, and strengthen local governance structures. Strong social networks often enable communities to develop tourism initiatives that reflect local identity and cultural values while promoting sustainable development. Moreover, social capital contributes to adaptive capacity and resilience, enabling communities to manage tourism-related challenges such as overtourism or economic downturns (Pretty, 2003).

These theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant for Reggio Emilia, where strong civic engagement and cooperative traditions provide a foundation for tourism development based on social cohesion and community participation.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the tourism potential of Reggio Emilia and residents' perceptions of tourism development. The objective of the research is to understand how local populations perceive tourism, what opportunities exist for growth, and how the city can strengthen its position as a cultural and sustainable tourism destination.

The research integrates exploratory, descriptive, and interpretative elements. Quantitative data was collected through structured survey questions using Likert-scale and multiple-choice formats, while qualitative insights were gathered through open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their opinions, experiences, and suggestions. This approach enables a

comprehensive understanding of both measurable trends and subjective perceptions related to tourism in Reggio Emilia.

4.2 Survey Design

The primary research instrument used in this study was an online questionnaire designed to explore participants' perceptions of Reggio Emilia, its cultural and economic offerings, and its tourism potential. The survey aimed to capture opinions regarding the city's attractions, infrastructure, lifestyle, and opportunities for development, as well as to assess how the city compares to neighboring destinations such as Parma and Modena.

Questions were structured to evaluate multiple dimensions of the city, including monuments, gastronomy, cultural activities, nightlife, cost of living, and tourism services. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on how the city could be improved in terms of tourism offerings, infrastructure, and collaboration with surrounding cities.

The questionnaire included a combination of Likert-scale questions (ranging from 1 to 5), multiple-choice questions, and open-ended responses. This structure allowed for both statistical analysis and qualitative interpretation of participants' perspectives.

4.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through an online survey administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire was available between February 2021 and May 2022 and was distributed through social media platforms and community networks related to Reggio Emilia. The online format enabled broad accessibility and allowed participants to complete the survey remotely.

To ensure inclusivity and capture diverse perspectives, the survey was made available in both Italian and English. This approach enabled participation from both local residents and international respondents familiar with the city, thereby enriching the dataset with a range of viewpoints. Participants were able to complete the questionnaire only once, ensuring the reliability of responses. The use of an online platform facilitated efficient data collection and organization.

4.4 Sampling Method

The study employed a non-probability convenience sampling method based on voluntary participation. Respondents were recruited through online communication channels, including social media groups and networks associated with Reggio Emilia.

A total of 315 responses were collected, consisting of 277 responses from the Italian-language version and 38 responses from the English-language version of the survey. The sample includes individuals currently living in Reggio Emilia as well as those familiar with the city through work, study, or personal connections.

While this sampling method allowed for efficient data collection and access to a relevant population, it may also introduce certain limitations related to self-selection bias, as participants who chose to respond may have stronger opinions about tourism and the city.

4.5 Survey Structure

The questionnaire was organized into five main sections designed to capture a full and comprehensive view of participants' perceptions of the town and nearby areas.

4.5.1 Demographics

The first section collected demographic information, including age, nationality, and whether respondents resided in Reggio Emilia. Participants were also asked to indicate their reasons for living in the city, such as work, study, or family.

4.5.2 Opinion

The second section focused on participants' opinions of Reggio Emilia and its offerings. Respondents were asked to evaluate various aspects of the city, including monuments, food, shops, arts and culture, people, nightlife, countryside, cost of living, education, tourism options,

and weather. These questions were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (least favorable) to 5 (most favorable).

Additionally, participants were asked to compare Reggio Emilia with neighboring cities such as Parma and Modena in terms of overall preference and perceived quality of life.

4.5.3 Tourism

The third section examined participants' perceptions of tourism in Reggio Emilia. Questions explored the perceived importance of tourism to the city, whether participants would like to see an increase in tourism, and their awareness of tourism services available such as the local tourism office.

Open-ended questions were included to allow participants to express their views on why tourism is or is not important to the city, as well as to suggest activities or attractions for visitors.

4.5.4 Improvements to Reggio Emilia

The fourth section focused on potential improvements to the city. Participants were asked to evaluate how enhancements in areas such as restaurants, shops, nightlife, cultural events, and infrastructure could improve the city's attractiveness. Questions also explored the importance of collaboration with neighboring cities (Parma and Modena) and the role of local government in promoting tourism development.

4.5.5 COVID-19 Impact

The final section addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants' lives and behaviors. Questions explored changes in daily activities, travel habits, and social interactions, as well as participants' feelings about restrictions and reduced mobility. This section provided additional context for understanding how perceptions of tourism may have been influenced by the pandemic.

4.6 Data Analysis Methods

Survey data were analyzed using Google Forms, Google Sheets, and Microsoft Excel. Quantitative responses were processed using descriptive statistical methods to identify trends, distributions, and patterns within the data. Likert-scale responses were used to assess participants' levels of satisfaction and perception across various aspects of the city.

Comparative analysis was conducted between responses from the Italian-language and English-language surveys to identify potential differences in perception between local and international participants. Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring themes and patterns were identified, allowing for a deeper understanding of participants' opinions, suggestions, and concerns related to tourism development in Reggio Emilia. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis strengthens the validity of the findings by allowing for methodological triangulation, which enhances both reliability and depth of interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The use of thematic analysis for open-ended responses further enables the identification of patterns and meanings that may not be captured through quantitative measures alone (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study prior to completing the questionnaire. A privacy disclaimer was included at the beginning of the survey, stating that the data would be used solely for research purposes.

Responses were collected anonymously, and no personally identifiable information, such as email addresses, was recorded without the explicit knowledge of participants. The study was conducted in accordance with relevant data protection and privacy regulations of the European Union.

4.8 Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights into perceptions of tourism in Reggio Emilia, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings, as the sample may not fully represent the broader population. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias.

The survey was conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced participants' perceptions of travel, tourism, and social activities. Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful insights into local attitudes toward tourism and provides a foundation for future research regarding local tourism development and collaboration between cities and governments.

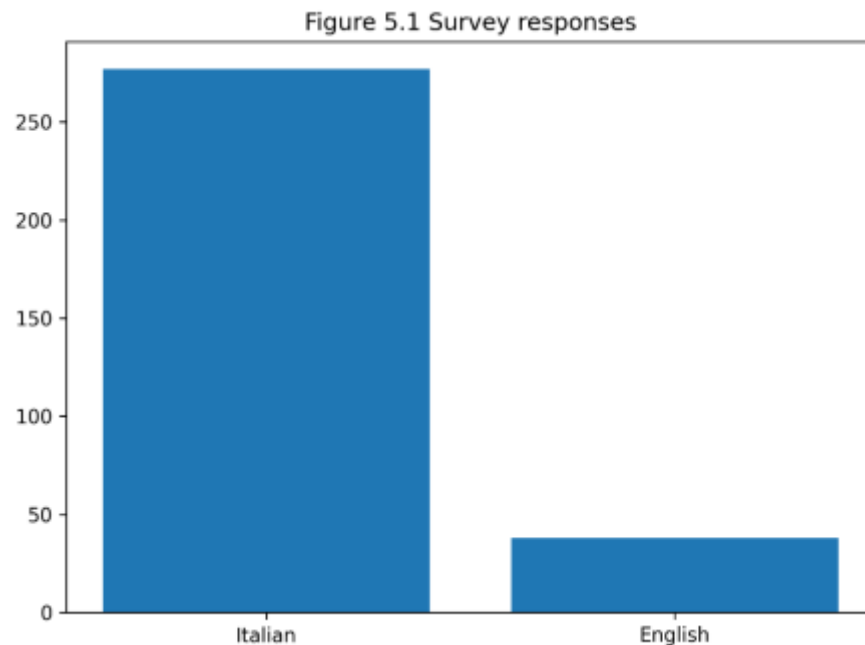
Chapter 5 – Results

5.1 Survey Overview

This chapter presents the results of the survey conducted to assess perceptions of tourism development in Reggio Emilia. A total of 315 responses were collected through an online questionnaire distributed between February 2021 and May 2022. Of these, 277 responses were obtained from the Italian-language survey and 38 from the English-language version.

The results are organized into demographic characteristics, perceptions of the city, tourism attitudes, comparisons with neighboring cities, and qualitative insights from open-ended responses.

Figure 5.1
Survey responses by questionnaire version



Note. The figure shows the number of responses collected from the Italian and English versions of the survey. Source: Author's survey (2022).

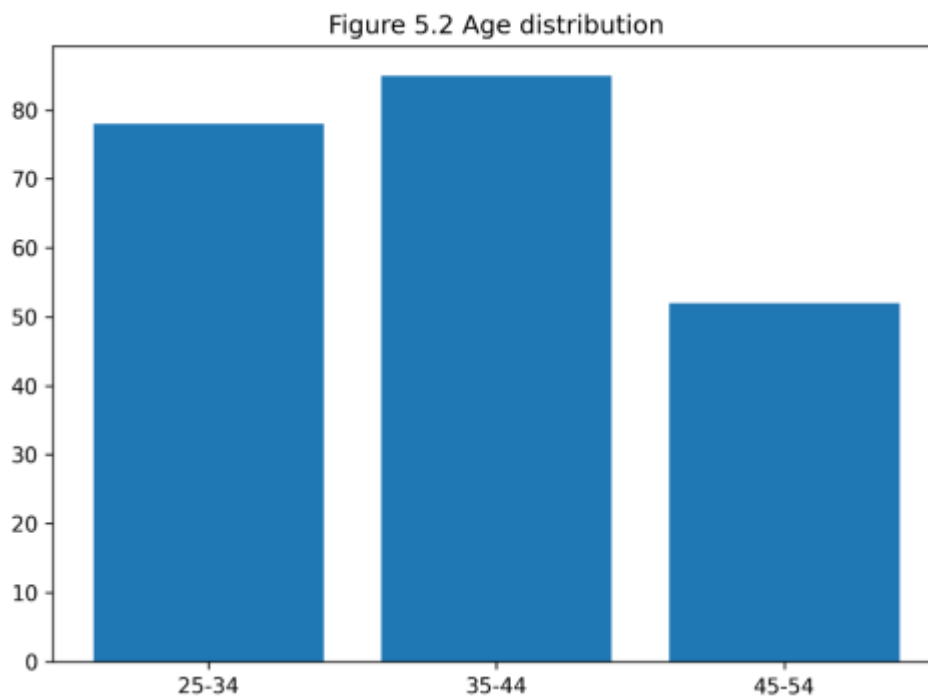
5.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

5.2.1 Age Distribution

Respondents were asked to indicate their age group. The largest proportion of participants fell within the 35–44 and 25–34 age groups, followed by the 45–54 category. Younger and older age groups were less represented.

Figure 5.2

Age distribution of respondents

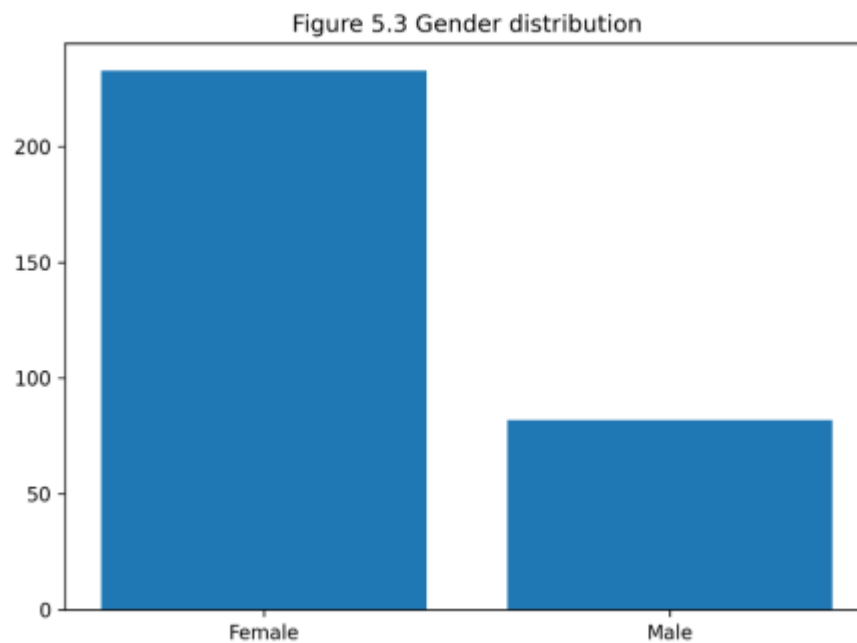


Note. The figure presents the distribution of respondents across age groups, highlighting the predominance of working-age participants. Source: Author’s survey (2022).

5.2.2 Gender Distribution

The majority of respondents identified as female in both the Italian and English surveys. In the Italian version, female respondents significantly outnumbered male respondents, while the English version showed a similar trend with a smaller sample size.

Figure 5.3
Gender distribution of respondents



Note. The figure illustrates the gender composition of the survey sample, with a higher proportion of female respondents. Source: Author’s survey (2022).

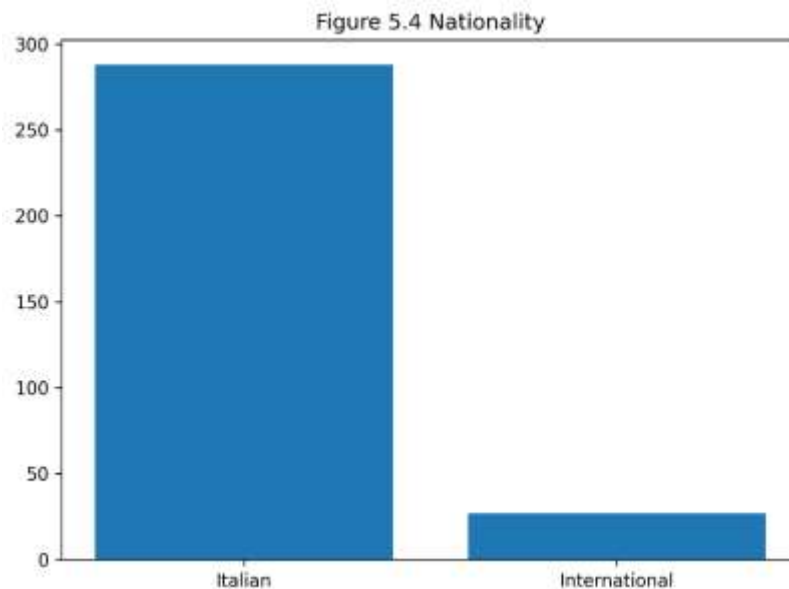
5.2.3 Nationality

The Italian-language survey was composed predominantly of Italian respondents (over 95%), while the English-language survey showed a more balanced distribution between Italian and international participants.

This distinction allows for comparison between local and non-local perceptions of the city. It is important to note that the classification of respondents as “international” is based on the language version of the survey and self-reported nationality. However, it is possible that some respondents who completed the English-language survey may be Italian residents or individuals familiar with the local context.

As a result, the distinction between local and international participants should be interpreted with caution, as it may not fully reflect a clear separation between external visitors and local residents.

Figure 5.4
Nationality of respondents



Note. The figure compares the nationality distribution between the Italian and English survey samples. Source: Author’s survey (2022).

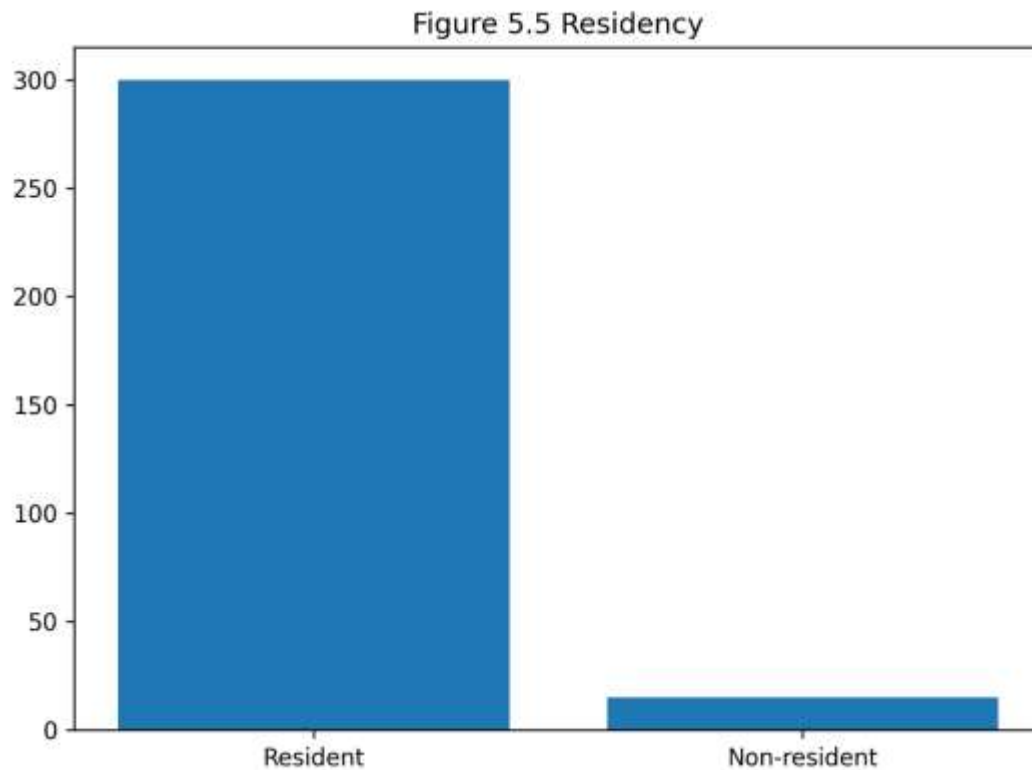
5.2.4 Residency in Reggio Emilia

The survey included a question regarding whether respondents currently reside in Reggio Emilia. The results indicate that the majority of participants are residents of the city, with a smaller proportion consisting of non-residents.

This finding is particularly relevant for the interpretation of results, as it suggests that the data primarily reflects the perceptions of individuals with direct experience of the city. At the same time, the inclusion of non-resident respondents provides additional perspectives, allowing for a broader understanding of how Reggio Emilia is perceived externally.

The distribution of respondents based on residency is presented in Figure 5.5.

Figure 5.5
Residency in Reggio Emilia



Note. The figure shows whether respondents reside in Reggio Emilia, indicating that the majority of participants are local residents. Source: Author’s survey (2022).

5.3 Perceptions of Reggio Emilia

5.3.1 Satisfaction with the City

A strong majority of respondents (over 90%) indicated that they liked Reggio Emilia. This suggests a generally positive perception of the city among residents and individuals familiar with it.

5.3.2 Evaluation of City Attributes

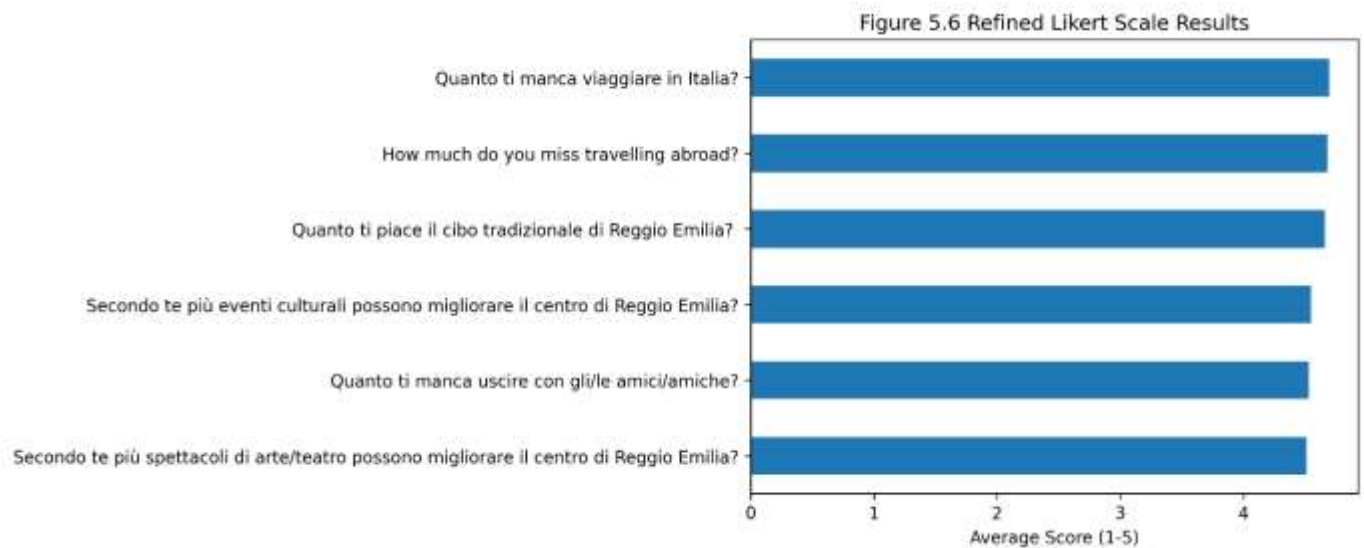
Participants evaluated several aspects of the city using a Likert scale (1–5). The results indicate:

- **Food** received the highest ratings, with the majority of respondents rating it 4 or 5
- **Countryside** was also highly rated
- **Arts and culture** and **shops** received moderate ratings

- **Nightlife** and **weather** received lower ratings

These results highlight the city’s strengths in gastronomy and environment, while suggesting areas for improvement in entertainment and climate perception. To provide a clearer overview of respondents’ evaluations, the average Likert-scale scores for key city attributes were calculated and are presented in Figure 5.6.

Figure 5.6
Evaluation of key city attributes (Likert scale)



Note. The figure presents the average scores of selected attributes based on a Likert scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), calculated from both survey datasets. Source: Author’s survey (2022).

5.3.3 Lifestyle Factors

Respondents expressed generally positive opinions regarding:

- cost of living
- educational opportunities
- quality of life

However, tourism product offerings were rated more moderately, indicating perceived potential for development for new touristic products and services.

5.4 Tourism Perceptions

5.4.1 Importance of Tourism

Respondents were also asked to evaluate the importance of tourism for Reggio Emilia. The results indicate mixed perceptions, with many respondents selecting moderate values, while a smaller proportion considered tourism to be highly important.

5.4.2 Desire for Increased Tourism

Despite mixed perceptions of tourism importance, a strong majority of respondents expressed a desire to see more tourists in the city. This indicates openness toward tourism development, even if its current role is perceived as limited.

5.4.3 Awareness of Tourism Services

A significant finding is that nearly half of respondents were unaware of the location of the city's tourism office in Reggio Emilia. This suggests a gap in communication and visibility of tourism infrastructure.

5.5 Comparison Between Cities

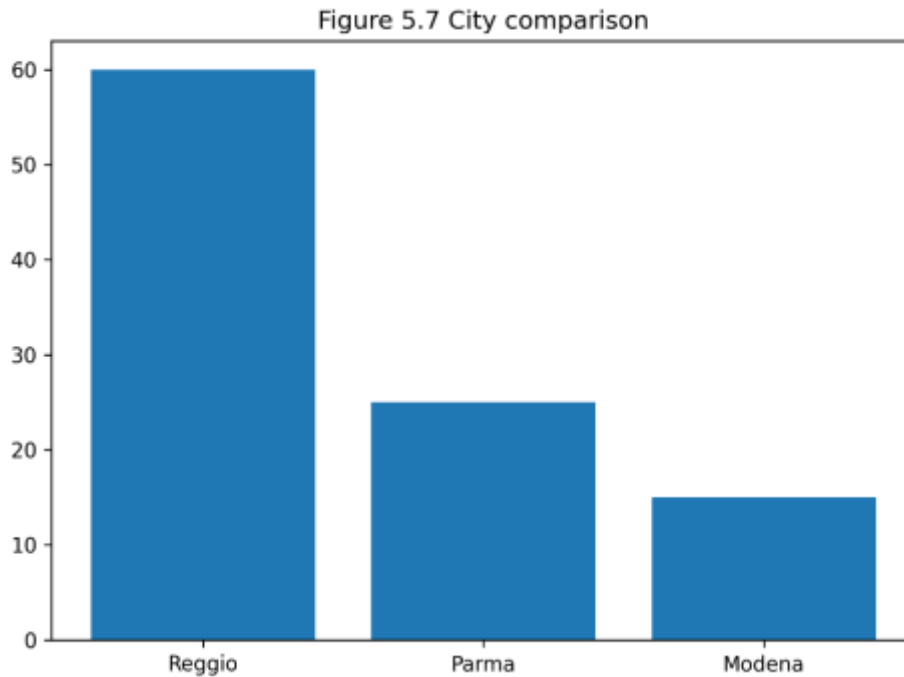
5.5.1 Reggio Emilia vs Parma vs Modena

Participants were asked to compare Reggio Emilia with neighboring cities. The results show:

- Reggio Emilia ranked highest overall among respondents
- Parma ranked second, particularly valued for gastronomy
- Modena ranked third

Figure 5.7

Preferred city comparison: Reggio Emilia, Parma, and Modena



Note. The figure shows respondents' preferences when comparing Reggio Emilia with neighboring cities. Source: Author's survey (2022).

5.5.2 Comparison Between Local and International Participants

To further explore differences in perception, responses from local (Italian) and international participants were compared across selected variables related to the evaluation of Reggio Emilia. The results are presented in Figure 5.8.

The comparison reveals both similarities and notable differences in how the city is perceived. Food emerged as the highest-rated attribute among both groups; however, local respondents assigned a slightly higher average score compared to international participants. This suggests a stronger appreciation among residents for the city's gastronomic identity, likely reflecting familiarity with local culinary traditions and products.

In contrast, international respondents tended to evaluate several aspects of the city more positively than local participants. In particular, higher average scores were observed for tourism options, tourism importance, and art and culture. These findings suggest that non-local

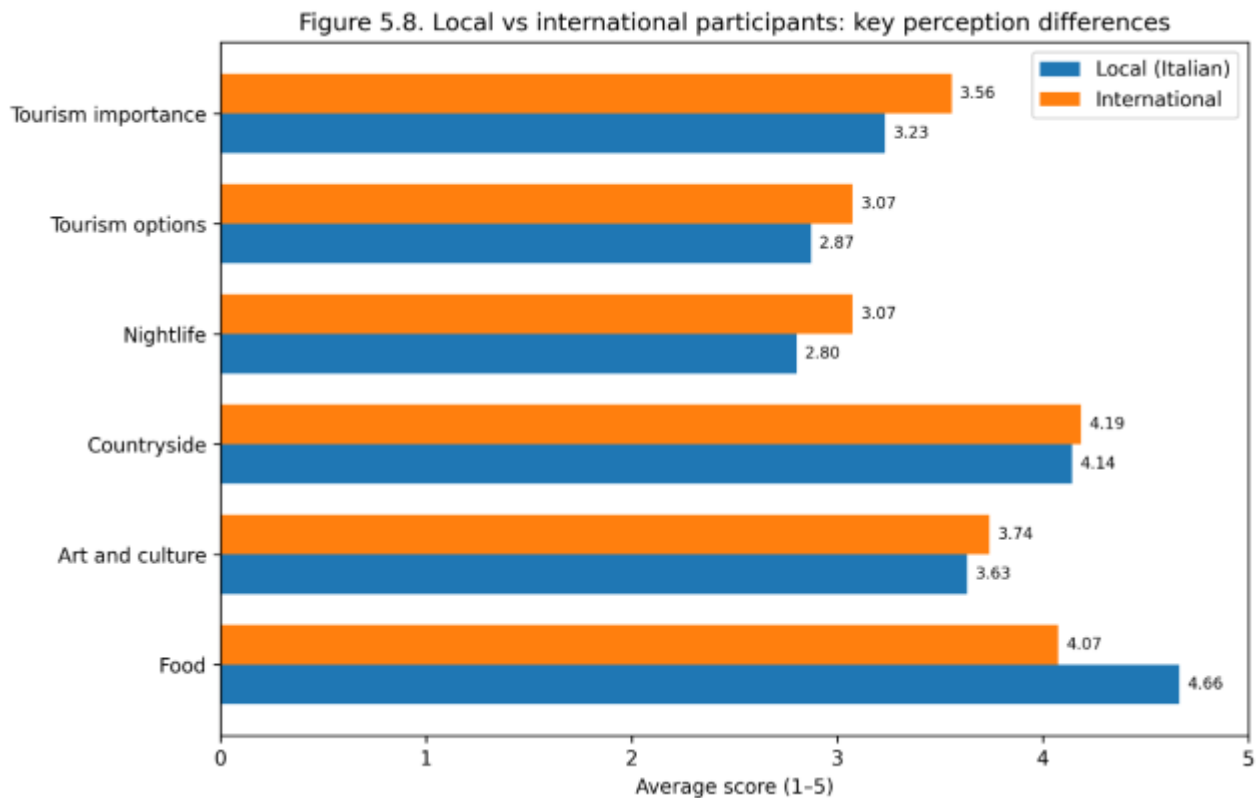
respondents may perceive Reggio Emilia as having greater tourism potential than residents themselves.

Nightlife received relatively low evaluations from both groups, confirming earlier findings from the Likert-scale analysis and reinforcing the identification of this attribute as a key weakness of the city.

Overall, the results indicate that while local respondents provide more grounded evaluations based on everyday experience, international participants tend to adopt a more favorable perspective, particularly in relation to tourism and cultural attractiveness. This difference highlights the importance of considering both internal and external perceptions when developing tourism and place branding strategies.

Figure 5.8

Local vs international participants: key perception differences



Note. The figure compares average Likert-scale responses from local (Italian) and international participants across selected perception variables. Scores range from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). Source: Author's survey (2022).

5.6 Open-Ended Survey Responses

The survey included several open-ended questions that allowed respondents to provide detailed opinions regarding Reggio Emilia, its tourism potential, and possible improvements. These responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across both the Italian and English surveys. Despite linguistic differences, responses from both groups revealed consistent themes regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the city.

5.6.1 Thematic Analysis of Open Responses

Strong Gastronomic Identity

Across both surveys, respondents consistently identified food as one of Reggio Emilia's greatest strengths. Italian respondents frequently emphasized traditional cuisine and local products, while international respondents highlighted the uniqueness and quality of regional food.

Typical responses included references to Parmigiano Reggiano, local restaurants, and traditional Italian culinary culture. This finding aligns with the quantitative results presented earlier and confirms the central role of gastronomy as a potential driver of tourism development.

High Quality of Life

A second recurring theme was the high quality of life associated with the city. Respondents described Reggio Emilia as calm, livable, safe, and community-oriented. Italian responses often focused on everyday life and family environment, while international participants emphasized the balance between urban and rural experiences.

These findings suggest that the city's lifestyle appeal represents a strong but underutilized tourism asset.

Limited Tourism Visibility

A major concern expressed by respondents was the limited visibility of Reggio Emilia as a tourist destination. Participants frequently noted a lack of international recognition, insufficient

tourism promotion, and the absence of a clear city brand. Several respondents explicitly stated that the city is not well-known or not marketed effectively.

This finding supports the quantitative results regarding tourism perception and highlights the importance of strengthening place branding strategies.

Weak Nightlife and Entertainment Offerings

Both Italian and English respondents identified nightlife and entertainment as key weaknesses. Common observations included a lack of evening activities, limited entertainment options, and reduced attractiveness for younger visitors.

These perceptions are consistent with the lower ratings assigned to nightlife in the Likert-scale analysis, reinforcing this as a critical area for improvement.

Need for More Events and Cultural Activities

Respondents frequently suggested increasing the number of cultural events, festivals, exhibitions, and public activities. This was one of the most common recommendations across both language groups, indicating a strong demand for more dynamic and engaging experiences within the city.

Importance of Regional Collaboration

An important theme emerging from the responses was the role of regional collaboration with nearby cities. Participants mentioned that Reggio Emilia should be more actively integrated into regional tourism routes and increase partnership efforts with Modena and Parma.

This reflects an awareness of tourism as a networked system and highlights opportunities for collaborative heritage tourism development.

Post-COVID Shift in Travel Perceptions

Some responses of the survey reflected changes in behavior and attitudes following the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants from both versions expressed an increased appreciation for local travel, a preference for outdoor activities, and a growing interest in slower and more sustainable travel experiences.

These insights suggest potential alignment with emerging tourism trends such as slow tourism and sustainable travel.

These qualitative findings complement the quantitative results and provide a deeper understanding of local residents' perceptions, forming the basis for the discussion presented in the following chapter.

5.6.2 Recommended Activities in Reggio Emilia

An open-ended question asked respondents what they would recommend a friend to do when visiting Reggio Emilia. The responses from both the Italian and English survey versions were combined and analyzed using thematic categorization in order to identify the most frequently suggested activities.

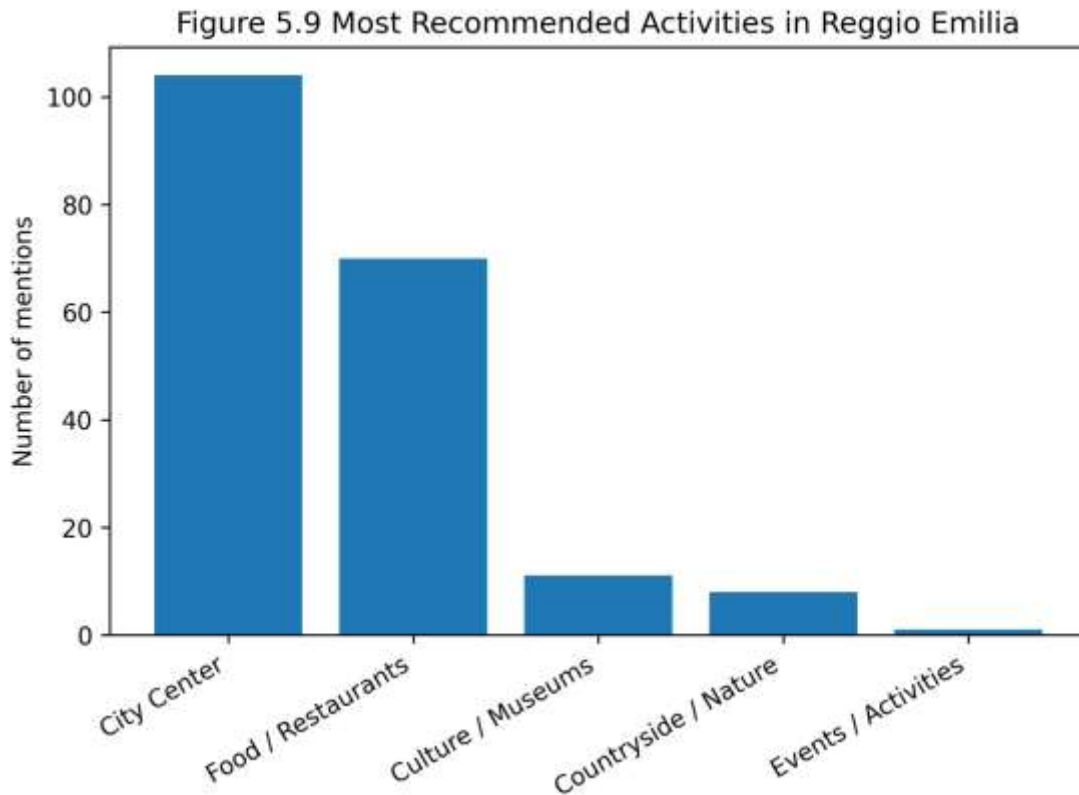
The results indicate that the most common recommendation was visiting the historic city center, followed by experiencing local gastronomy. A large number of respondents suggested walking through the city center, visiting main squares, and exploring local landmarks. Food-related activities were also highly prominent, with many participants recommending restaurants, traditional cuisine, and regional products such as Parmigiano Reggiano.

In contrast, significantly fewer responses mentioned cultural institutions such as museums, as well as countryside or nature-based activities. Very few respondents referred to organized events or structured tourism experiences.

These findings reinforce earlier themes identified in the analysis, particularly the central role of gastronomy and the limited presence of structured tourism offerings. The analysis presented in Figure 5.9 is based on the combined responses from both the Italian-language and English-language versions of the survey. Responses were grouped into thematic categories to ensure comparability across datasets.

Figure 5.9

Most recommended activities in Reggio Emilia



Note. The figure shows the frequency of activities recommended by respondents, grouped into thematic categories based on open-ended responses. Source: Author's survey (2022).

These findings highlight a concentration of recommendations around informal and self-guided experiences, suggesting a lack of structured tourism offerings within the city and need for more development.

In addition to structural and perception-based findings, it is also important to consider how external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced respondents' attitudes toward tourism and mobility.

5.7 Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism Perceptions

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced respondents' lifestyles and perceptions of travel.

Key findings include:

- over 50% of respondents missed social activities such as dining and gatherings
- approximately 70% reported missing travel
- restrictions increased awareness of the value of tourism and mobility

These findings suggest that the pandemic may have heightened interest in tourism development and local experiences.

Chapter 6 – Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 5 in relation to the research objectives and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3. The aim is to assess the tourism potential of Reggio Emilia and identify key opportunities and challenges for its development as a destination. The discussion integrates empirical results with key concepts from place branding, cultural tourism, gastronomic tourism, slow tourism, heritage tourism, and community-based tourism. The findings indicate that Reggio Emilia possesses a strong base of cultural and social assets, but that these assets are not yet fully organized into a coherent tourism strategy or effectively communicated to wider audiences.

6.1 Overview of Key Findings

The results of the study reveal a clear contrast between the strengths of Reggio Emilia and its current positioning as a tourist destination. On the one hand, respondents consistently identified strong assets, particularly gastronomy, quality of life, cultural identity, and the appeal of the historic center. On the other hand, the city was perceived as lacking visibility, structured tourism offerings, nightlife, and a clearly defined brand. The survey also showed broad support for improving tourism and for strengthening collaboration with neighboring cities such as Parma and Modena.

This contrast reflects what place branding scholars describe as a gap between place identity and place image. A destination may possess a rich identity internally while failing to project a clear image externally (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2004). In the case of Reggio Emilia, the findings suggest that the city does not suffer from a lack of assets, but rather from a lack of integration, packaging, and strategic communication. These findings suggest that Reggio Emilia's main challenge is not the absence of tourism resources, but the limited strategic coordination of those resources into a coherent, recognizable, and competitive destination offer.

6.2 Gastronomy as a Core Tourism Asset

One of the most consistent findings across both quantitative and qualitative data is the central role of gastronomy in shaping the identity of Reggio Emilia. Food was the highest-rated attribute in the Likert-scale analysis (Figure 5.6), and it was also one of the most frequently mentioned elements in open-ended responses, particularly in relation to recommendations for visitors (Section 5.6.2).

These findings align with the literature on gastronomic tourism, which emphasizes the importance of food as a key driver of destination attractiveness and cultural experience (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Richards, 2015). In regions such as Emilia-Romagna, culinary heritage plays a fundamental role in shaping both local identity and visitor experience.

Moreover, food tourism is often linked to authenticity and place differentiation, as it allows destinations to communicate unique cultural narratives (Bessi re, 1998). In this sense, products such as Parmigiano Reggiano and Lambrusco wine represent not only economic assets but also symbolic elements of regional identity.

However, the findings suggest that this potential is not fully leveraged within a structured tourism strategy. This highlights the need to transform existing assets into organized experiences, such as food trails, culinary festivals, and experiential tourism products. From a strategic perspective, gastronomy offers Reggio Emilia one of its clearest opportunities for destination differentiation. Contemporary tourism increasingly depends on memorable and participatory experiences rather than passive consumption alone (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In this sense, culinary workshops, tasting routes, seasonal food events, and collaborations with local producers

could transform gastronomy from a valued local asset into a structured tourism product with stronger economic and branding impact.

6.3 Quality of Life, Slow Tourism, and Sustainable Development

Another important finding is the strong emphasis on quality of life. Respondents described Reggio Emilia as calm, livable, safe, and community-oriented, highlighting its balance between urban and rural environments. This aligns closely with the principles of slow tourism, which emphasize sustainability, authenticity, and meaningful engagement with local culture (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010; Fullagar et al., 2012). Slow tourism encourages visitors to experience destinations at a deeper level, prioritizing quality over quantity. As demand for authentic and less standardized travel experiences continues to grow, Reggio Emilia is well positioned to develop tourism products based on rural experiences, local gastronomy, low-impact mobility, and everyday cultural life.

Slow tourism is particularly relevant for medium-sized cities because it allows them to compete through atmosphere, identity, and quality of experience rather than through volume alone (Conway & Timms, 2010; Calzati & de Salvo, 2018).

Furthermore, the post-COVID shift in travel preferences observed in Section 5.7 reinforces the relevance of this approach. Studies have shown that the pandemic has increased demand for less crowded, more sustainable, and locally oriented travel experiences (Gössling et al., 2021).

Despite this alignment, Reggio Emilia does not appear to actively position itself within the slow tourism market. This represents a strategic opportunity, as the city already possesses many of the characteristics associated with this form of tourism. In this context, the city's perceived quality of life should not be understood merely as a residential advantage, but as a strategic tourism asset that can be positioned within contemporary demand for meaningful, low-impact, and experience-based travel.

6.4 Weak Place Branding and Strategic Positioning

A central issue emerging from the findings is the limited visibility of Reggio Emilia as a tourist destination. Respondents in both the English and Italian version of the survey frequently noted

that the city lacks international recognition and a clear identity. Many mentioned not knowing where the main tourism office is located within the city center.

This finding is consistent with place branding theory, which highlights the importance of developing a coherent and strategic destination image (Kavaratzis, 2004; Anholt, 2007).

Effective place branding involves not only marketing communication but also the alignment of physical infrastructure, cultural assets, and stakeholder engagement (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2010).

In the case of Reggio Emilia, the results suggest that while strong individual assets exist, they are not integrated into a unified narrative. This fragmentation may limit the city's ability to compete with neighboring destinations such as Parma and Modena, which have more clearly defined tourism identities.

Additionally, the lack of awareness of tourism services identified in Chapter 5 further indicates weaknesses in communication and accessibility, which are critical components of destination management. A useful way to interpret this issue is through destination image theory, which suggests that places compete not only through physical assets but also through the meanings and expectations associated with them in the minds of visitors (Gartner, 1993; Govers & Go, 2009).

Reggio Emilia appears to possess a stronger internal identity than external image, which indicates a need for clearer narrative construction and more consistent communication across tourism services, digital media, and public space.

The findings suggest that Reggio Emilia would benefit from a more structured branding approach in which its heritage, quality of life, educational identity, and gastronomic culture are translated into a recognizable and marketable destination image (Zenker & Braun, 2017). This does not mean simplifying the city's identity but rather selecting and organizing its strongest elements into a coherent tourism narrative.

6.5 Cultural and Heritage Tourism Potential

The results of the survey also highlight the importance of cultural and heritage tourism.

Respondents frequently mentioned the historic city center, local traditions, and cultural identity as important elements of the city's attractiveness.

Cultural tourism is widely recognized as a major driver of urban tourism, as it allows visitors to engage with the history, identity, and traditions of a destination (Richards, 2001). Heritage tourism, in particular, emphasizes the preservation and interpretation of historical assets as part of the visitor experience (Timothy & Boyd, 2003), highlighting the importance of heritage management and cultural representation in shaping tourism development. Reggio Emilia's historical development along the Via Emilia, its importance in the story of the Italian tricolor flag, and its distinctive civic identity provide a strong foundation for heritage-based tourism. However, the limited mention of museums and structured cultural attractions in the survey suggests that these assets are not fully developed or effectively promoted.

This indicates a need to enhance interpretation, accessibility, and storytelling in order to transform cultural resources into engaging tourism experiences. This is particularly important because the survey results suggest that respondents value the city's heritage atmosphere, but do not strongly associate it with structured cultural experiences. This gap indicates that heritage in Reggio Emilia is present and appreciated yet not fully interpreted or packaged in ways that maximize tourism appeal.

An additional dimension that emerges as a potential area of development is educational tourism. Reggio Emilia is internationally recognized for the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education, which attracts educators, researchers, and institutions from around the world. This represents a unique form of cultural capital that extends beyond traditional tourism assets and positions the city within global educational networks. Educational tourism has been identified as a growing niche within cultural tourism, particularly in destinations that combine knowledge exchange with place-based experience (Richards, 2018). Integrating educational visits, workshops, and institutional partnerships into the tourism strategy could further differentiate Reggio Emilia from neighboring cities.

Cultural tourism literature also emphasizes that visitors are increasingly motivated not only by monuments and museums, but by immersive experiences that connect them to local traditions, narratives, and ways of life (McKercher & du Cros, 2002; Richards, 2018). This broader

understanding is especially relevant for Reggio Emilia, where the value of heritage lies not only in individual landmarks but in the wider urban fabric and local civic culture.

6.6 Perception Gap Between Local and International Respondents

The comparison between local (Italian) and international respondents reveals an important perception gap. International participants tended to evaluate several tourism-related aspects more positively than local respondents, particularly in relation to tourism options, tourism importance, and cultural attractiveness, while local respondents rated food more strongly.

This difference can be interpreted through the lens of destination image theory, which distinguishes between internal and external perceptions of a place (Gartner, 1993). While residents often base their evaluations on everyday experiences, tourists or non-local respondents may perceive the same destination as more attractive due to novelty and cultural interest.

This finding highlights the importance of managing both internal and external perceptions in tourism development. Strengthening local engagement and awareness may be as important as attracting external visitors.

However, it is important to interpret these findings with caution. The classification of respondents as “international” is based on survey language and self-reported information, and it is possible that some participants who completed the English-language survey may in fact be Italian residents or individuals with prior familiarity with the local context.

This potential overlap may partially reduce the distinction between local and international perspectives. Nevertheless, the observed differences still provide useful insight into how Reggio Emilia may be perceived by audiences beyond the immediate local population, particularly those engaging with the city through an international lens.

6.7 Lack of Structured Tourism Offerings

The analysis of open-ended responses, markedly those related to recommended activities (Section 5.6.2), reveals that tourism experiences in Reggio Emilia are largely informal and self-directed. The most common recommendations were visiting the city center and experiencing

local food, while very few respondents mentioned organized events or structured attractions and offerings.

This suggests that, although the city has valuable resources, these are not translated into clearly defined tourism products. According to tourism development literature, the presence of structured experiences is essential for enhancing visitor engagement and increasing destination competitiveness.

The absence of such offerings may limit the city's ability to attract and retain visitors, particularly in comparison to nearby cities such as Parma and Modena, which have more established tourism identities. This finding can also be interpreted through the lens of the experience economy, which emphasizes that visitors increasingly seek curated, memorable, and interactive experiences rather than simply access to places (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). For Reggio Emilia, this means that existing assets such as the historic center, gastronomy, countryside, and educational identity should be translated into experiences that are easier to access, understand, and remember.

The limited reference to organized activities also has implications for length of stay. If the city is perceived as pleasant but not especially programmed, it may struggle to move from day-trip appeal to longer visits. Developing thematic routes, heritage walks, culinary workshops, educational experiences, and seasonal events could help address this structural weakness.

6.8 Regional Collaboration and Destination Networks

Another key finding is the importance of regional collaboration. Participants frequently suggested integrating Reggio Emilia into broader tourism routes involving Parma and Modena. This aligns with the concept of destination networks, where multiple locations collaborate to create a more comprehensive tourism offer (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Regional cooperation can enhance visibility, diversify experiences, and increase competitiveness. Given the historical, cultural, and gastronomic connections between these cities, a networked approach to tourism development could be particularly effective. Such a networked approach

would allow Reggio Emilia to strengthen its own identity while also benefiting from the visibility of the wider Emilia tourism system. Rather than competing only on its own, the city could position itself as an essential component of a broader regional itinerary rooted in gastronomy, heritage, and quality of life. This would also help address one of the most important barriers identified in the findings: visibility. Regional collaboration does not require Reggio Emilia to abandon its distinctiveness; instead, it can provide a stronger platform through which that distinctiveness becomes more visible.

6.9 Governance, Community, and Strategic Implications

Based on the findings, several key implications emerge:

- Reggio Emilia should leverage its strong gastronomic identity as a central element of its tourism strategy.
- The city has significant potential to position itself as a slow tourism destination, emphasizing quality of life, authenticity, and sustainable mobility.
- A clearer and more cohesive place branding strategy is needed to improve visibility and strengthen destination image.
- The development of structured tourism products, such as events, guided experiences, and thematic itineraries, is essential.
- Cultural and heritage assets should be better interpreted and integrated into tourism experiences.
- Regional collaboration with Parma and Modena should be strengthened.

These implications also suggest that tourism development in Reggio Emilia should be understood as a governance issue rather than simply a promotional one. Effective tourism strategy will require collaboration between local government, cultural institutions, cooperatives, private operators, and residents in order to ensure that tourism growth remains aligned with local identity and long-term sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Moscardo, 2008). In this sense, the city's strong civic and cooperative traditions may represent an important advantage in building a participatory and resilient tourism model.

The findings reinforce the importance of community participation in tourism development, particularly in destinations seeking sustainable and identity-based growth. Tourism strategies are

more likely to succeed when local residents are included in planning and when development reflects community values and priorities (Moscardo, 2008; Tosun & Timothy, 2003). This is especially relevant in Reggio Emilia, where civic culture, cooperative traditions, and social capital form a strong foundation for participatory and community-based tourism development (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001).

Thus, tourism development in medium-sized cities requires more than attraction-based promotion; it also depends on governance, stakeholder coordination, and the creation of integrated visitor experiences that increase both visibility and length of stay (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Reggio Emilia's challenge is therefore not simply to attract more visitors, but to define what kind of destination it wants to become and how tourism can develop in a way that remains consistent with local values. In addition, these findings suggest that Reggio Emilia should adopt an integrated destination management approach, where branding, product development, governance, and community engagement are aligned within a long-term vision. Contemporary tourism strategies increasingly emphasize the need for holistic destination management models that combine economic objectives with cultural preservation and social sustainability (UNWTO, 2019; Dredge & Jenkins, 2007).

6.10 Conclusion to the Discussion

Overall, the discussion confirms that Reggio Emilia has substantial but underutilized tourism potential. The city's strongest assets, including gastronomy, cultural identity, quality of life, and heritage, are already recognized by respondents, yet they are not fully integrated into a coherent tourism strategy. The most important challenge is therefore not resource creation, but resource coordination.

Reggio Emilia's opportunity lies in transforming its existing strengths into a sustainable tourism model that is clearly differentiated from neighboring destinations while also benefiting from regional collaboration. This way, Reggio Emilia represents a compelling case of a destination with strong endogenous potential, where future success depends not on the creation of new resources, but on the strategic coordination, interpretation, and communication of existing assets.

By aligning governance, community participation, and place branding within a coherent long-term vision, the city can position itself as a distinctive and sustainable cultural destination within both the national and international tourism landscape.

The following chapter builds on these findings by presenting policy recommendations and practical strategies for strengthening tourism development in Reggio Emilia.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the final conclusions of the thesis and outlines strategic policy recommendations for the development of tourism in Reggio Emilia. Building on the findings discussed in Chapter 6, this section aims to translate theoretical insights and empirical results into practical strategies that can support sustainable tourism development, strengthen place branding, and enhance the city's overall visibility.

The results of this research indicate that Reggio Emilia possesses strong cultural, social, and economic assets, but these remain underutilized due to a lack of strategic coordination, structured tourism products, and effective communication.

7.2 Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal a clear contrast between the strengths of Reggio Emilia and its current position as a tourism destination.

On one hand, the city demonstrates significant assets:

- A strong gastronomic identity rooted in regional excellence
- A high quality of life characterized by safety, community, and livability
- A rich cultural and historical heritage
- A unique cooperative and civic culture
- Strong potential for slow and sustainable tourism

On the other hand, several critical challenges emerged:

- Limited visibility and weak place branding
- Lack of structured and curated tourism experiences
- Insufficient promotion of cultural and heritage assets
- Weak nightlife and limited entertainment offerings
- Low awareness of tourism infrastructure
- Fragmented collaboration between stakeholders

The survey findings also highlight an important perception gap between local and international respondents. While local participants provide more grounded evaluations, international respondents tend to perceive greater tourism potential, suggesting that the city may be undervalued internally while holding untapped appeal externally.

Overall, the research confirms that Reggio Emilia's main limitation is not a lack of resources, but rather a lack of integration, organization, and strategic positioning.

7.3 Policy Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, several key policy recommendations are proposed to support the development of a more competitive, sustainable, and recognizable tourism model for Reggio Emilia.

7.3.1 Strengthen Place Branding and Identity

Reggio Emilia should develop a clearer and more cohesive tourism identity that reflects its unique characteristics. This includes aligning its cultural heritage, gastronomic excellence, educational identity, and quality of life into a unified narrative.

A stronger digital presence is essential. The city should invest in improving its online visibility through multilingual platforms, storytelling, and social media strategies that communicate a clear and consistent image.

7.3.2 Develop Gastronomy as a Flagship Tourism Product

Gastronomy represents one of the strongest and most recognizable assets of Reggio Emilia. However, this potential should be further developed into structured tourism products.

Local stakeholders should promote:

- Food tours and tasting routes
- Culinary workshops and cooking classes
- Partnerships with local producers
- Seasonal food festivals and events

Transforming gastronomy into experiential tourism will increase visitor engagement and strengthen the city's brand identity.

7.3.3 Position Reggio Emilia as a Slow Tourism Destination

Reggio Emilia is naturally aligned with the principles of slow tourism, which emphasize authenticity, sustainability, and meaningful experiences.

The city should promote and continue to develop:

- Cycling and walking routes
- Rural and countryside experiences
- Local markets and traditional lifestyles
- Low-impact and eco-friendly tourism initiatives

This positioning would allow Reggio Emilia to differentiate itself from mass tourism destinations while aligning with current global travel trends.

7.3.4 Enhance Cultural and Heritage Tourism

Although Reggio Emilia has a strong historical identity, its cultural assets are not fully translated into accessible tourism experiences.

Efforts should focus on:

- Improving museum visibility and accessibility
- Creating interpretive storytelling across the city
- Developing guided tours and heritage routes
- Promoting the history of the Via Emilia and the Italian tricolor

Cultural heritage should be presented not only as static assets, but as engaging and immersive experiences.

7.3.5 Create More Structured and Memorable Experiences

The survey findings indicate that Reggio Emilia is still experienced largely through informal and self-guided visits. This suggests the need to create more curated and memorable tourism experiences.

Local government and tourism stakeholders should support the development of:

- Heritage walks
- Themed city-center itineraries
- Educational tourism experiences
- Culinary workshops
- Countryside packages
- Creative residencies
- Cultural event calendars

These products should be designed in ways that connect the city's different strengths rather than treating them individually. Creating structured experiences is essential to increasing visitor engagement, strengthening destination identity, and encouraging longer stays.

7.3.6 Strengthen Regional Collaboration

Reggio Emilia should strengthen collaboration with nearby cities such as Parma and Modena in order to create a more integrated tourism network.

This may include:

- Joint tourism routes

- Shared marketing campaigns
- Regional cultural itineraries
- Gastronomic tourism circuits

Rather than competing directly, a collaborative approach can enhance visibility and attract a broader range of visitors to the area.

7.3.7 Improve Governance and Stakeholder Coordination

Tourism development should be approached as a governance issue involving multiple stakeholders.

This includes:

- Local government
- Tourism agencies
- Cultural institutions
- Private businesses
- Community organizations

Reggio Emilia's strong cooperative tradition represents a key advantage in fostering collaboration and participatory development.

7.4 Reggio Emilia Tourism Projects and Local Initiatives

Recent local initiatives demonstrate that Reggio Emilia is already moving toward a more participatory and innovative approach to tourism development.

During 2020–2021, the municipality of Reggio Emilia, together with local citizens, developed ideas to promote the city and support economic recovery. These discussions were part of the project “Culture Doesn’t Stay in Its Place” (*La cultura non starà al suo posto*), coordinated by the Director of Tourism, Annalisa Rabitti.

Over a 15-month period, a series of roundtable meetings identified key areas of development, including:

- Strengthening relationships between institutions and associations

- Encouraging dialogue and shared spaces
- Improving accessibility and democratization
- Promoting territorial marketing and tourism
- Supporting youth culture
- Creating networks and shared communication systems

One of the most innovative proposals emerging from these discussions is the concept of a “Road of Culture.” This initiative envisions a network of interconnected cultural spaces across the city, designed to create interactive and immersive experiences for both residents and visitors.

The proposed route would connect key cultural landmarks, including:

- Tricolor Museum
- Palazzo Magnani
- Panizzi Library
- The city’s theaters
- Chiostrì di San Pietro
- Malaguzzi Center
- Technopolo area
- Train station district

These interconnected spaces would form a narrative path that reflects the identity of Reggio Emilia while encouraging movement, interaction, and engagement.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city has also explored the use of open-air events and underutilized spaces. Initiatives such as outdoor exhibitions and cultural events demonstrate the potential for flexible and innovative tourism development.

Furthermore, local social centers (*centri sociali*), traditionally used by elderly populations and children, represent an opportunity for revitalization. These spaces could be transformed into neighborhood cultural hubs, fostering micro-economies and increasing community participation, particularly among younger generations, locals, and foreigners.

These initiatives reflect a shift toward a more inclusive, decentralized, and community-based tourism model, aligning closely with the theoretical frameworks discussed in this thesis.

7.5 Final Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how Reggio Emilia can leverage its cultural heritage, community identity, and local assets to strengthen tourism development and place branding. The findings demonstrate that Reggio Emilia possesses a strong foundation for tourism development, built on gastronomy, cultural heritage, quality of life, and social capital. However, these assets remain fragmented and insufficiently translated into structured and marketable tourism experiences.

The research confirms that the city's primary challenge is not the absence of resources, but the lack of strategic coordination, integration, and communication. From a strategic perspective, Reggio Emilia has the opportunity to position itself as a destination focused on slow tourism, cultural experiences, and authenticity. By aligning its identity with contemporary tourism trends, the city can differentiate itself while preserving its local character and way of life.

More broadly, this study contributes to the understanding of tourism development in medium-sized cities. It highlights that competitiveness does not depend on scale, but on identity, coherence, and the ability to create meaningful experiences. Reggio Emilia therefore represents not only a case study, but also a potential model for other cities seeking to balance economic development, cultural preservation, and community engagement.

Ultimately, the future of tourism in Reggio Emilia will depend on its ability to transform its existing strengths into a clear vision supported by collaboration, governance, and innovation.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Survey Questionnaire: Reggio Emilia Tourism Study

Note: This questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms. All responses were anonymous and used for academic research purposes.

This survey is ANONYMOUS and will discuss the following topics: the city of Reggio Emilia, the Emilia-Romagna region and tourism. Your responses will be used for my thesis and potential future projects in accordance to privacy laws. The survey takes around 7 minutes. Click "Yes" to begin.

Section 1: Demographics

1. Do you agree to participate?

Yes

No

2. Age

Under 18

18–24

25–34

35–44

45–54

55–64

65–74

75+

3. Gender

Female

Male

Non-binary

4. Nationality

Italian

Other

5. Do you live in Reggio Emilia?

Yes

No

6. Why are you in Reggio Emilia? (Select all that apply)

Family

Work

Study

Section 2: Opinions

7. Do you like the city of Reggio Emilia?

Yes

No

8. How much do you like the monuments (squares, statues, churches)?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

9. How much do you like the traditional food?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

10. How much do you like the shops?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

11. How much do you like the art and culture?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

12. How much do you like the people?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

13. How much do you like the nightlife?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

14. How much do you like the countryside?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

15. How much do you like the cost of living?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

16. How much do you like the school options?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

17. How much do you like the tourism options?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

18. How much do you like the weather?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

Section 3: Tourism

19. Which city do you like best?

Reggio Emilia

Modena

Parma

20. How much do you like Reggio Emilia?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

21. How much do you like Modena?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

22. How much do you like Parma?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

23. How important is tourism for Reggio Emilia?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

24. Why or why not is tourism important?

Response: _____

25. Would you like to see more tourists?

Yes

No

26. Did you know that the tourist information office is located on Via Farini 1?

Yes

No

Section 4: Improvements

27. Scenario: A friend visits Reggio Emilia for one day. What do you recommend they do?

Response: _____

28. How much would more shops improve Reggio Emilia?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

29. How much would more restaurants and bars improve Reggio Emilia?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

30. How much would more clubs and lounges improve Reggio Emilia?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

31. How much would more live music concerts improve Reggio Emilia?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

32. How much would more theatre/art shows improve Reggio Emilia?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

33. How much would more cultural events improve Reggio Emilia?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

34. Should there be more tourism collaboration between Reggio Emilia, Modena, and Parma?

Yes

No

Section 5: COVID-19 Impact

42. How much do you miss going out with friends?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

43. How much do you miss seeing relatives?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

44. How much do you miss going out to eat?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

45. How much do you miss attending school/university in person?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

46. How much do you miss going to the gym or fitness classes?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

47. How much do you miss visiting the countryside?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

48. How much do you miss attending theatre or concerts?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

49. How much do you miss clubbing or partying?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

50. How much do you miss traveling abroad?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

51. How much do you miss traveling within Italy?

1 = Not at all 2 3 4 5 = Extremely

52. Do you think Reggio Emilia is well known in Italy and internationally? Explain.

Response: _____

APPENDIX B: Indagine su Reggio Emilia, Emilia-Romagna ed il turismo

Questa indagine è ANONIMA e parlerà sui diversi aspetti della città di Reggio Emilia, il territorio dell'Emilia-Romagna ed il turismo. Le tue risposte saranno usate per la mia tesi e futuri progetti con il rispetto della privacy. L'indagine durerà circa sette minuti. Clicca "Si" per iniziare.

Dati demografici

2. Età

sotto 18

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65-74

75+

3. Sesso

Femmina

Maschio

Non binario

4. Nazionalità

Italiana

Altro

5. Abiti a Reggio Emilia?

Sì

No

6. Perché sei a Reggio Emilia? *(puoi scegliere più opzioni) **

Famiglia

Lavoro

Studio

Altro

7. Ti piace la città di Reggio Emilia? *

Sì

No

8. Quanto ti piacciono i monumenti (piazze, chiese, statue) di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

9. Quanto ti piace il cibo tradizionale di Reggio Emilia??

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

10. Quanto ti piacciono i negozi di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

11. Quanto ti piacciono l'arte e la cultura di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

12. Quanto ti piace la gente di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

13. Quanto ti piace la vita notturna di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

14. Quanto ti piace la campagna di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

15. Quanto ti piace il costo della vita di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

16. Quanto ti piacciono le scuole (nidi, medie, superiori, università, ecc) di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

17. Quanto ti piace il turismo di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

18. Quanto ti piace il clima di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

19. Tra Reggio Emilia, Modena e Parma, quale città preferisci?

Reggio Emilia

Modena

Parma

20. Quanto ti piace Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

21. Quanto ti piace Modena?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

22. Quanto ti piace Parma?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

Il Turismo

23. Quanto è importante il turismo per Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

24. "Perché" o "perché non è" importante il turismo a RE:

Risposta: _____

25. Ti piacerebbe vedere più turisti a Reggio Emilia?

Sì

No

26. Sai che l'Ufficio del Turismo di Reggio Emilia è in Via Farini?

Sì

No

27. Situazione: Un amico/a vuole visitare Reggio Emilia per un giorno, cosa gli/le consigli di visitare?

Risposta: _____

Miglioramenti a Reggio Emilia

28. Secondo te più negozi possono migliorare il centro di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

29. Secondo te più ristoranti/bar/pub possono migliorare il centro di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

30. Secondo te più discoteche possono migliorare il centro di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

31. Secondo te più concerti dal vivo possono migliorare il centro di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

32. Secondo te più spettacoli di arte/teatro possono migliorare il centro di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

33. Secondo te più eventi culturali possono migliorare il centro di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

34. Pensi che dovrebbe esserci più collaborazione con le altre città intorno (come Modena e Parma) sul turismo?

Sì

No

35. Secondo te quale, tra le città indicate, è la più visitata dai turisti ogni anno?

Reggio Emilia

Modena

Parma

36. Secondo te, tra questi, quali sono i metodi migliori per promuovere il turismo di Reggio Emilia? *(puoi scegliere più opzioni)*

Più marketing online

Più collaborazione tra RE, MO, PR, BO

Più pubblicità su canali tradizionali (tv, radio, giornali)

Più concerti, eventi culturali Più sagre

37. Secondo te dovrebbero essere sfruttati meglio i paesi della provincia/montagna di Reggio Emilia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

38. Pensi che il turismo di Reggio Emilia debba essere migliorato?

Sì

No

39. In che modo, tra questi, può migliorare *(puoi scegliere più opzioni)*:

Potenziare e pubblicizzare meglio i prodotti tipici della provincia

- Potenziare e sfruttare meglio i paesini di montagna
- Potenziare e sfruttare i teatri/concerti/arte
- Fare più eventi di street food
- Fare più eventi multiculturali
- Fare più eventi durante l'inverno (tipo mercoledì rosa o fotografia europea)

COVID

40. Da quando è iniziato il COVID-19 pensi che ci sia meno gente in centro?

Sì

No

41. Da quando è iniziato il COVID-19 pensi che ci sia meno gente in giro in generale?

Sì

No

42. Quanto ti manca uscire con gli/le amici/amiche?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

43. Quanto ti manca vedere i tuoi parenti?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

44. Quanto ti manca andare fuori a mangiare?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

45. Quanto ti manca andare a scuola/università/corsi in presenza?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

46. Quanto ti manca andare in palestra?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

47. Quanto ti manca andare in campagna?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

48. Quanto ti manca andare al teatro/concerti?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

49. Quanto ti manca andare a feste/discoteche?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

50. Quanto ti manca viaggiare all'estero?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

51. Quanto ti manca viaggiare in Italia?

1 = per niente 2 3 4 5 = Tantissimo

Secondo te Reggio Emilia è famosa in Italia e nel mondo? Motiva la tua risposta

Risposta: _____