



Research Paper

## Italy's Historic Grandeur and Its Cultural Dilemma

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### Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the effect of tourism and modern development on the culture of Italy. The country has a reputation for conserving its historic monuments; however, the study argues that conserving physical heritage does not equal conserving culture as lived experience. Using literary references and alienation as theoretical frameworks, this paper analyses how cultural behaviours are being designed for consumption by tourists rather than continuing to be culturally significant to local populations, leading to alienation from their surroundings. In addition, the research highlights how some areas receive greater focus than others, resulting in an imbalance in cultural visibility. Finally, this research argues that when a culture is commodified, there is a risk of losing its integrity, resulting in a cultural conflict between preservation and evolution.

### Keywords

Culture, Commodification, Tourism, Alienation, Selective Preservation

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### I. Introduction

When a society attempts to hold on to all of its traditional values and adapt to the demands placed on it by the current realities of how society functions and interacts with others in the world, this creates a cultural dilemma. A culture is made up of many components, including history, common places, daily habits, and individual experiences; therefore, when the following components of a culture are impacted by the driving forces of urban society that surround us, that is, urbanisation, globalisation, and changes in lifestyles, these components begin to be altered incrementally over time. The issue surrounding the cultural dilemma is not that culture has disappeared from existence, but rather that it has changed and continues to change from its original essence, resulting in a dilemma in regards to what it actually means to be a member of one's own cultural community.

The cultural dilemma becomes further complicated when a culture is expected to fulfil multiple roles simultaneously. Culture has a role in preserving one's identity and in preserving one's connection to one's history, as well as in connecting people from the past to people today; however, at the same time, culture is being marketed and consumed outside the culture itself, often targeted at individuals not part of the original community. Thus, the culture goes from being an intimate, lived experience to being something that can be viewed, acted out, consumed or marketed. This transition reflects an alteration of the ways people are connected to their heritage, resulting in a detachment from what was familiar before. The disparity between the culture that is living and a presentation of cultural artefacts provides us with interpersonal and social insights into the current cultural challenge.

The cultural conflict speaks of the differences between the generation of continuity through past occurrences and the way in which we share culture now. Culture can continue to exist and be identifiable, yet may lose the emotional value of lived experience when not actively participating or engaging in the everyday transfer of knowledge. Thus, individuals may resonate with cultural symbols, but the lack of engagement means that less emotional connection exists. This lack of connection does not stem from conscious rejection; rather, it is generated through the repetition of such items without the opportunity to engage. Through this examination of subtler nuances of such changes, the study views culture as a living entity that is constructed based on the combination of time, utilisation, and recollection as opposed to being something that is handed to an individual based purely on an ability to remember their family history. Thus, by analysing how the cultural identity develops, evolves,

and slowly modifies through the development of Italian society at this time, more insight can be given into how Italian people are developing their societal identities.

As a result of the influences described above, my interest in the subject stems from my current relationship with Italy, both as a cultural notion and as a physical location. Many people refer to Italy when identifying those qualities of their culture that are tied to food, local environment, customs, etc. People have an impression that Italian Culture was experienced in the context of living; i.e. people in Italy were not necessarily trying to preserve their culture when they were living in their culture. This view caused me to explore whether or not the close association continues to represent Italian Culture. The increase in Foreign Tourism and Global Interest in Italian Cities led me to question whether the day-to-day use of cultural practices is still influenced by the closeness of a culture to its people in Italy or if there is a greater level of significance to the cultural charming, image or appeal for visitors to Italian Cities. For me, these paradoxes of what should and does appear, visually and aesthetically, represent the close association of Italian Culture with Italy, which led me to begin to conduct my research.

As I see it, Italian Culture is a Paradox: It showcases a strong desire to maintain tradition throughout time while adapting to the modern lifestyles. Traditions can be seen in the various types of food Italians cook and consume, as well as in festivals and ceremonial Events, the construction of Cities, and the types of shared space that exists between individuals. As such, tradition provides an important connection to Italian history; therefore, Italians have always exhibited strong connections to their cultural heritage. However, how an individual experiences tradition is very different today than it used to be. Most cultural activities today are predominantly organised, scheduled, or commercialised, especially in larger cities and tourist areas, where traditional expressions of culture are highly visible but where the direct or immediate experience of culture and how individuals see themselves as part of that culture can be non-existent. As such, there is a disconnect between the way culture appears visually and the way individuals experience culture on a daily basis.

This cultural paradox depicts how people live daily in relation to their environment. For many, cultural customs are the everyday backdrop, while for others, the cultural customs are now an entity produced and maintained by community members. Local customs such as preparing food, maintaining community standards, and utilising public spaces are now both economically viable and performance-oriented systems. Culture provides income and a sense of identity, but also creates a disconnect by changing how individuals relate to their cultural traditions. As such, Italian culture continues to evolve, but these changes have subtle effects on the personal connection and sense of belonging that each individual has to their customs.

Italian culture has been shaped not only by the historical events that have occurred, but also by the evolution of the people who live there. The changes in Italian culture can be traced from the Renaissance period to the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century. How we live daily, how we prepare food, celebrate holidays, and maintain a connection to the land and to communities through the care of shared public spaces will also continue to be an integral part of the Italian cultural experience. These activities have always been a means of connecting people and helping them to preserve their history and connection to their local and national identity.

Italian daily life and Italian culture are also influenced by many changes that are caused by economic and social conditions. The increasing urbanisation, migration, and regionalisation of the world around have changed the types of food eaten, local rituals performed, and how one uses the shared public spaces. Therefore, there appears to be a constant balance between maintaining tradition and adapting to the modern lifestyle. As Italian culture is continually evolving and adapting, the way it is experienced will always be a dynamic interplay of continuity and change.

Many archaeological and cultural sites in Southern Italy are largely inaccessible, making it difficult for them to receive adequate financial support. Thus, while tourism tends to dominate other developed areas of Italy by focusing predominantly on a handful of world-class attractions, tourists generally visit well-known sites. As such, less-developed regions of Southern Italy and cities that are less developed but culturally significant do not benefit economically or socially from tourism as other parts of the country do. In addition to denying traditional practices to local populations, this lack of access also results in a disconnect between how many local people interact with their cultural heritage and those who reside outside of Southern Italy. Although Italy has been extensively documented as a cultural nation, its inhabitants may not always have the same level of access or the same great degree of satisfaction from their daily cultural experiences. The above circumstances illuminate a conflict between modes of continuity, the right to access cultural heritage and the right to engage in additional cultural experiences that may not exist for those who do not live near well-known historical or archaeological sites.

Even though Southern Italy has many remarkable archaeological sites, they often go unnoticed by tourists. Places like Paestum with its Greek temples, Selinunte and Segesta in Sicily, and Metapontum in Basilicata reveal incredible history, but few visitors actually go there. Unlike Rome, Florence, or Venice, which attract large crowds and constant attention, these sites are harder to reach and see much less tourism. As a result, the advantages of tourism, such as economic support and community involvement, seldom reach the towns near these ruins. Many

smaller towns find it difficult to preserve their traditions and cultural spaces because most visitors focus on the well-known, easily accessible attractions. This demonstrates that while Italian heritage is visible, it is not always equally experienced by locals. Some areas feel left out of the benefits that tourism provides.

In this research, I seek to examine how the continuously changing Italian culture affects people's connection to their own traditions and spaces, looking at the ways in which mass tourism, urbanisation, and modern living affect people's connection to their cultural heritage. My focus is on more than just the physical structures; conducting the study by examining everyday experiences, memories of past events, and other forms of cultural expression that make up culture through the outlook of Calvino's imaginative lens in *Invisible Cities*. Although the country on the surface level seems to be a fascinating tourist destination spot popularised through social media, but from a closer look it seems to be constantly juggling and adapting to new ways of life.

Technology and work together shape the daily routines of our lives and the way in which the human race contributes and participates in its communities. As a spectator and a user of digital media platforms myself, this generation focuses on trending updates and recreating them. And when any location or spots get popularised, it attracts several tourists around about the world. The main issue of cultural dilemma arises when a specific community keeps its focus on only accommodating the needs of the visitors with the sole intention to make profits, but it somehow inadvertently creates an image of serving a cultural experience on a platter for the tourist to consume. People may feel or experience their communities as performative rather than meaningful. Although these new experiences do not remove an individual's cultural identity but they transform an individual's experience of that identity from being lived to being seen from a distance. It allows for a greater understanding of how contemporary pressures continue to affect how individuals perceive, understand and preserve their cultural heritage.

I don't only consider monumental and historical preservation of a culture, but also on the tourist spots, traditions and locals' alienation in these spaces, which is both internal and external. This study will also simultaneously highlight how cultures navigate through the dehumanising effects of urbanisation. The contemporary implications of this research are based on the examination of the issues society faces, which have been discussed by the writers of the twentieth century. By deeply studying and deeply analysing the various impacts of tourism, globalisation, and urbanisation on how cultures remain connected to their traditions, I seek to demonstrate how cultural identity formed in today's world is a constant struggle while underscoring the significance of maintaining the importance and relevance of the traditions to the members of the culture.

I have utilised one foundational text and an essay as sources of primary readings to gain insight into Italian culture, its tradition and the concepts of alienation, dilemma and transformation. The first foundational text, "*Invisible Cities*," by Italo Calvino, provides a unique outlook on the ways in which people interact with their environment, also describing how employing the imagination, memories and relationships with others to experience a place. The second primary source, "Marx's Theory of Alienation," by Asher Horowitz, provides an overview of the idea of alienation. Taken together, these three sources set a firm foundation for the investigation into how culture interacts with the present problem of alienation in society today. A significant gap in historical and literary studies exists in terms of the relationship between culture, tradition, alienation, and the everyday lives of contemporary people; therefore, while the foundational texts and essays consider culture, tradition, alienation from historical and literary perspectives, they do not directly illustrate the global issues such as mass tourism, urbanisation, globalisation, and digital culture and the impacts of them which individuals face today.

The topic discusses the ways that alienation manifests itself in people's daily lives, and how it creates a gap between individuals, our environment, and our connection to one another. The topic illustrates the progression from individual experiences of alienation to the commodification of the entirety of cultural experience, and in doing so, also illustrate the connection between cultural identity and a feeling of belonging to a specific region.

## **II. Literature review**

The analysis and arguments of this study are based on the close reading of two foundational texts and one essay, and the ways in which they provide support for the concept of alienation, cultural significance and the flexibility of a culture undergoing multiple changes throughout centuries. These primary text offers critical analysis and perspectives for the study. These include Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, which presents a metaphorical lens on urban sense life, and Horowitz's "Marx's Theory of Alienation" presents a philosophical lens crucial for understanding how capitalism and labour create estrangement.

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* serves to develop an understanding of urban life as both psychological and spatial. The text will provide the basis for the dissertation. By incorporating Calvino's text as evidence to support my argument in the study that there really is no "physical" identity of a place, here directly referring to the monuments, but rather, it is the collection of invisible places through memories, stories, and connections among people. Through this, I try to connect this research to current trends in tourism, where cities strip away these layers, presenting only a superficial experience to tourists. This work with Calvino shows that the lack of context (on behalf of the Tourists) diminishes the experience of living in a city for those who live there, as their

connection to their homes becomes an emotional and social void when cities focus only on physical beauty for a global audience.

Asher Horowitz, "Marx's Theory of Alienation", provides a theoretical basis for cultural alienation in modern Italy. This essay looks into how the theory of alienation espoused by Karl Marx has been applied in researching the cultural alienation issue experienced by those who live in modern-day Italy. Horowitz uses Marx's concept of alienation (traditionally related to the idea of labour) and expands upon this theory to include cultural identity. Such cultural spaces and practices continue to be mechanised and commodified for tourism, and therefore, the people who live there are separated from their heritage as a result. Horowitz also provides a means of explaining why this process of alienation appears normal and quiet in the life of Italians, and how they often feel like they are mere passive bystanders or service providers in their local communities rather than actively participating in their own culture.

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#### Alienation through Calvino's perspective

Italy, a nation with deep historical roots which possesses a rich cultural heritage linking back to the legacy left behind by Rome and the Renaissance. The many changes that the country has undergone over the centuries serve as a prime example of how a region-specific cultural and artistic evolution can impact tourism, with millions of people travelling to visit Southern Europe, making it one of the best tourist destinations globally. Each year, to see and experience its vast array of UNESCO World Heritage sites, which showcase Italy's incredible natural beauty and historical landmarks. Therefore, as tourism continues to expand rapidly through globalisation, there have been many instances resulting in the commodification and dilution of its culture as traditions, crafts, and festivals have been strategically staged for the tourists for economic profits, which contributes to the diminishing of the genuine experience of the Italian culture and craftsmanship. In addition, as the main focus is on making profits and fulfilling the tourism-driven demands, it eventually leads to the weakening of the authenticity of the Italian experience through tourism.

There exists multiple interpretations to describe the term alienation. It was first discussed in the early nineteenth century by a German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "In Hegel's philosophy, alienation is part of the process of self-creativity and self-discovery. According to Hegel, initially, our consciousness is alienated from itself. It cannot understand its own true nature. In order to realise its own true nature, consciousness needs to develop absolute knowledge. The development of consciousness's absolute knowledge is possible through the overcoming of self-alienation of consciousness" (Debnath). This somehow correlates given to the present-day scenario of the Italian culture in dilemma from a philosophical point of view. As the country accommodates millions of tourists each year, it has adopted a selective preservation pattern by taking care of specific parts of cities that include monuments, libraries, and towns that are popularised and recognised for their "aesthetic" worldwide, to make it tourist-friendly and cater to their needs. The sense of alienation arises in an individual regarding the context of this situation when one finds it difficult to sustain themselves in their own cultural spaces, caught between preserving the culture and balancing mass tourism.

Italy presents a different scenario with respect to alienation as being disconnected from work, unemployment or economic poverty. Alienation has evolved with the development of the way that people consume and connect with the world. The production of handmade goods, craftsmanship, and food-making skills has declined as they are replaced by machines, which are considered to be more time-efficient and a better option to save labour costs. To accommodate the increased consumerism, it also plays a big role in creating distance in the daily lives of each individual. The feeling of alienation has shifted to be more like an "outside" feeling (as it were) to the internal perception or the feeling of being alienated daily. With the way that the commercialisation of everyday spaces, such as markets, streets, and cultural festivals, has changed the way that social interactions take place. When cultural practices and public spaces shift their focus to how the tourists consume, their transactions become of a commercial nature and therefore, create a sense of distance of sorts in relation to the way that one perceives the other person(s) involved in the transaction. In essence, cultural practices and public spaces that focus solely on the aspect of fulfilling consumerism visibly create a sense of subtle and ongoing distance among the people who no longer do and also feel subsided by their own surroundings. Thus, alienation is both an external and internal force that continues to reinforce changes and emotions.

According to Asher Horowitz, "The only way to get rid of alienation would be to get rid of the basic structure of separation of the producers from the means of production. So, alienation has both its objective and subjective sides" (Horowitz). Alienation is the process through which individuals find themselves estranged, it could be physically or mentally, or both at the same time. from oneself or social relations. The depth of estrangement cannot be measured just by looking; it is to be felt. For some, it is a part of everyday life; experiences of alienation are influenced by the systems in which people live and are typically not able to escape from those systems. There is awareness about the sense of alienation, but a lack of action to make changes; similarly, the lack of action does not guarantee that it will resist the alienation. A person may develop an awareness regarding alienation; however, the familiarity that one may have developed with losing a sense of self and not belonging to society allows an individual to accept that alienation will continue quietly. The continuity of this experience of alienation is not necessarily due to weaknesses on the part of the person. The sources of this experience of alienation are derived from the normative cultural and social structures that allow them to be passive. When one considers that alienation is still a present reality in our society today, it reflects a fundamental contradiction in that while individuals are living in the context of such sociocultural structures, the actual conditions that produce alienation are still present. Hence, structural change is required to address the contradiction that the system of preservation does not allow for individuals to preserve their actual cultural heritage; but, preserving one's cultural heritage merely by protecting what is established as historical and as representative of their culture, will not, of course, preserve that individual's authentic cultural experience and sense of belonging. By merely preserving what appears to be their heritage, people continue to live in an experience that is removed and disconnected from the realities of actual experience. In this situation, preservation succumbs to the idea of preserving the materialistic aspects of a culture, which are considered to be the symbols of a rich heritage and not shared history and emotions, thus resulting in the preservation of ancient ruins and not the living people and their traditions.

"On the one hand, psychoanalysis started to investigate alienation as a constitutive characteristic of subjectivity rather than as an ailment to be cured." (*The Years of Alienation in Italy*). The change indicates a growing acceptance of alienation as a normal personal and existential experience, rather than a problem that needs to be addressed and solved. Thus, people nowadays find it difficult to build and form meaningful relationships and experiences; instead, they are transitioned back to a false sense of normalcy where they may feel comfortable but remain disconnected from the root of their alienation. In this way, the process mimics the current consumer culture, whereby the discomfort is managed through quick and easy solutions that allow individuals to return to their routines, but conceal deeper disconnects in the form of underlying structural shifts.

Additionally, the current state of culture as an object of commerce reinforces alienation as something that is to be consumed and experienced in material terms without any trials and tribulations. Traditions and

customs change from something which is to be experienced to being packaged as a consumable good for the consumer, turning an experience to feel the real cultural essence into a commodity to be consumed.

By taking a look at Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the evolution of culture/tradition is addressed through the feelings of uncertainty and loss that are experienced by many in the present day, worldwide. When describing cities, Italo not only provides a set of descriptive readings about monuments but also determines the idea of interpreting cities, stating that they are shaped not just by the existence of the historic ruins but through the memories, imagination and shared experiences of the people residing in the specific region.

According to Calvino, "The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of the past" (*Invisible Cities*). An exploration of the cities is conducted in the text where Calvino asserts that authentic cultural essence lies in the shared memories, experiences of its residents and not in its lifeless objective structures. When viewed solely through the lens of physicality or architecture, the identity of a particular city may be recognised for its physical parameters, but the real culture is lived by ones who embrace it and carry it forward. Thus, it becomes essential to acknowledge the relationship between culture and oneself, as it will only strengthen it. It is evident how Italy celebrates and shares its culture with people globally, but in order to be able to keep sharing it, one must indulge and strengthen their ties with it. The real significance of a culture lies in its people, and when this significance fades, the people are the ones caught in a dilemma. Today, the living traditions that many cultures heavily rely upon to represent their cultural and familial heritage increasingly adapt themselves to cater to external forces. As such, a culture is more likely to be displayed as a performance than experienced as a true part of one's life. Authenticity then simply becomes just a mere illusion, making the participating audience feel at home, creating a uniform comfort zone for all of those who would otherwise experience the same culture in their own unique manner, with all of the accompanying uniqueness associated with that culture.

According to Bajçinovci, "cities are open, urban integrated systems and huge organisms with specific and complex metabolisms that transform vast amounts of energy, generate huge amounts of waste and emanate several specific environmental activities" (Bajçinovci, Bajçinovci). The cities here can be conceptualised as a ground that consists of both the consumption needs and wastes, where individual agency is lost in the midst of the never-ending cycle of consumption. This urban way of living results in a place to be fast paced, where interactions are limited and often shallow. Those living in such environments are either consumers or workers, as opposed to being actively engaged in their own community. Urban spaces are both unified and separate, resulting in a feeling of estrangement, even with the person being physically present within the city. Urban style of living has a dual nature; the prolonged sense of alienation takes over both the personal and collective identities of individuals, which are distinct from those of the past. With this logic, the cities become significantly more efficient, but at the cost of the workers forfeiting their own needs to accommodate the consumers.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has looked at how tourism, commodification and alienation impact Italian culture through the experience of non-visible Cities and thus argues that we can understand cities as spaces of memory, relationship and lived experience according to what Calvino has said. It has been established that culture is not only about its visible or architectural representations. Italy has many monuments and historical sites, but they tend to be maintained and preserved according to what is aesthetically pleasing to view or sell rather than what has been experienced as meaningful by local people.

This research paper demonstrates that both globalisation and tourism have radically changed the practice of culture into something designed to be bought and consumed; therefore, many of the ways people express culture in their everyday life is now influenced more by others than by themselves. This shift has created a growing number of residents in local communities who feel disconnected from their own culture and do not identify with it. In addition, the paper shows the disparity created through the selective preservation of a place with unequal cultural visibility (a particular place or region receiving more attention than another). This disparity ultimately creates an imbalance in not only how culture is distributed but also how culture is experienced, remembered, and valued across the different areas. In relation to this, Calvino offers a valuable insight about cities in that he notes it is not the physical characteristics of a city, but rather the intangible relationships between people, places, memories and buildings which determine the quality or characteristics of a particular city.

The thesis of this paper is that the cultural crisis created in Italy is driven by a dichotomy between the value associated with preservation versus that associated with transformation. Change is an inevitable reality of our lives, but by making culture something that can be consumed as goods will threaten the authenticity and richness of the cultural product. Therefore, we must view culture as an evolving process that requires active participation rather than mere passive observation; this is the only way that we can keep culture meaningful to people who live in it, rather than being a fallen spectacle to those who are not part of it.

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