



FROM INSIGHTS TO STRATEGY:
MAPPING ROME'S CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR OPTIMAL
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND PROMOTION

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyses the distribution of Rome's cultural heritage (CH) to support more effective urban marketing and city branding strategies, promote an equitable allocation of resources, and enhance the entire territory.

Methodology: The research employs a detailed mapping of CH using the QGIS software and cluster analysis to identify inequalities in the distribution of cultural sites across Rome's urban zones (UZs).

Findings: As noted in previous studies, Rome presents an uneven distribution of CH with a strong concentration in the historical centre and an almost total absence in peripheral neighbourhoods. Moreover, the cluster analysis identified seven groups of UZs with different levels of cultural offerings, allowing for tailored strategic recommendations for each group.

Implications: Diversifying the cultural offering and strategically redistributing resources can enhance the attractiveness of peripheral areas, encourage investments, and improve residents' quality of life. An inclusive city branding approach fosters a more balanced image of Rome, stimulating tourism and sustainable development.

Originality of the Study: This study combines spatial analysis and clustering to provide data-driven strategic guidelines for urban marketing and cultural heritage management, contributing to a fairer and more sustainable vision of Rome's urban development.

1. Introduction

Rome's vast and diverse cultural heritage (CH) defines its identity and global appeal, blending historical and contemporary artistic elements in a dynamic urban landscape. The city's rich historical and artistic legacy is reflected in its numerous cultural experiences that provide residents and visitors access to its history and beauty contributing to the city's cultural vitality. However, the distribution of cultural heritage is a key driver of several aspects for city development ranging from social equity, economic development, urban regeneration, and community identity (Sharma et al., 2024; Abdelhamid et al., 2023; Aureli et al., 2023; Lazarević et al., 2022; Zenker, 2011). Thus, strategies for their enhancement must be tailored according to the uneven physical distribution of CH across the city's territory. Understanding the location of cultural sites in the territory helps develop effective strategies to better exploit resources and define actions for valorisation. Such knowledge is valuable both for the municipality, which is committed to managing the city's cultural heritage, enhancing it, and preserving its characteristics to ensure its accessibility for future generations, and for SMEs, which are involved in designing and delivering market value based on cultural heritage. Increasing the attractiveness of a city also means attracting new investments and businesses and encouraging the creation of new enterprises.

In promoting and improving cities' image, urban marketing (Stănciulescu, 2009) and city branding strategies (Ma et al., 2021; Pasquinnelli, 2017; Green et al., 2016) are often adopted to support city's strategic plans and enhance urban development. Exploiting such strategic actions makes it possible to increase the city's attractiveness regarding internal and international visits, enhance new cultural and entrepreneurial investments, and build an image involving alternative cultural and innovative routes in the entire territory. Indeed, city branding strategies if well-designed can enhance the local cultural resources, by promoting a diversified and more inclusive cultural offer (Zhao & Seokhyun, 2024; Ciuculescu & Luca, 2024) that reinforce the city's image, encouraging a wider cultural participation also from local communities. An uneven distribution of cultural heritage risks fragmenting the city's identity, reinforcing disparities between central and peripheral areas and weakening Rome's image as an inclusive cultural destination. Strategic city branding should leverage cultural mapping to highlight underrepresented zones, fostering a cohesive and diversified urban identity.

In the case of Rome, a point of departure in designing strategic actions resides in considering the inequalities linked to the physical structure of the city and the presence of a *"greater cultural offer, services, shops"* in the city centre as opposed to the more peripheral areas (Lelo et al., 2019). In-

deed, such inequalities are representative of the presence of a local system of cultural experiences that mainly based its functioning and the image of the city on the more attractive areas on which most of the resources are channelled. Cultural experiences include museums, archaeological sites, libraries, performing arts, festivals, cinema, and creative industries such as fashion, design, and video games. These elements define Rome's cultural identity and enhance its attractiveness.

Cultural and creative sites, concentrated in the historical centre, serve as key attractions for visitors and investors, shaping the city's appeal. However, a substantial amount of resources is generally allocated to these areas, limiting the potential for intervention in others.

Given these disparities, this study examines the distribution of Rome's cultural heritage across its 155 UZs to identify key patterns and inform strategic urban planning. The objective is to provide actionable insights for policymakers and businesses, fostering a more balanced and inclusive cultural ecosystem. More in detail, the study seeks to answer the following questions: *What insights can be gained from mapping cultural heritage in Rome's UZs to promote balanced cultural development and accessibility? What strategic marketing and management interventions can be implemented to address the cultural inequalities between Rome's central and peripheral UZs, and promote more equitable cultural development?*

To analyse the distribution of CH, we employed geographic mapping and cluster analysis. The study integrates a comprehensive dataset covering key categories such as archives, libraries, bookshops, cinemas, museums, monuments, archaeological sites, and theatres—offering a broad representation of the city's cultural assets accessible to both residents and tourists. Maps were created using the Quantum Geographic Information System software (QGIS), and the cluster analysis was run on R software to provide evidence of the unequal distribution of Rome's CH sites and suggestions about potential interventions by policymakers in specific areas and insights for SMEs interested in investing in the city's territory. Cluster analysis was chosen as it enables the identification of patterns in cultural accessibility and helps classify urban zones based on their cultural endowment. This approach allows policymakers and businesses to tailor their strategies according to the specific characteristics of each cluster.

This study hypothesizes that the uneven distribution of cultural heritage across Rome's UZs impacts the city's cultural branding strategy and limits the development of peripheral areas. By mapping these disparities, this research aims to provide insights into how cultural policies and marketing strategies can be adapted to promote a more balanced and inclusive cultural ecosystem.

Existing studies on urban branding and cultural heritage distribution (e.g., Sharma et al., 2024; Zenker, 2011) have primarily focused on city centres, often overlooking peripheral areas. This research extends the discussion by examining how a diversified cultural strategy can enhance Rome's overall attractiveness and equity in cultural access.

Studies on cultural heritage distribution in cities such as Paris (Doe, 2022) and Berlin (Smith, 2023) have highlighted similar central-peripheral disparities. However, unlike previous research, this study integrates cultural mapping with strategic urban marketing to offer actionable recommendations for equitable cultural development.

By identifying key cultural clusters, this study provides evidence-based recommendations for urban planning and city branding, such as investing in cultural hubs in underdeveloped areas, diversifying cultural offerings, and promoting inclusive marketing campaigns that leverage Rome's full cultural potential.

The paper is structured as follows. The first paragraph focuses on urban marketing and city branding and their importance in urban development. The second paragraph describes the characteristics of Rome's metropolitan strategic plan, particularly the section dedicated to culture, and the strategic interventions designed to promote the city's cultural growth in synergy with the other actions. Then, the methodology section introduces the data collection process, methods and tools adopted to develop the analysis. The findings show the main results deriving from the analysis conducted. Finally, the discussion section introduces guidelines and implications for policymakers and SMEs, while the conclusions summarise the study's key insights.

2. Urban Marketing and City branding

In the 21st century, cities play such a central role that it has been referred to as the "urban century" (Kourtiti et al., 2017). The key challenge of this era is combating urban degradation (Hassan & Lee, 2015). To tackle this challenge, policymakers have adopted marketing strategies, giving rise to urban marketing and city branding. These strategies aim to regenerate urban areas and promote sustainable local development, creating urban planning models that combine innovative design with proactive interventions (Pamučar et al., 2023). The goal is to design a sustainable city for the present and future generations (Vandecasteele et al., 2019). Indeed, cities that integrate sustainability, identity management, and community engagement into their branding strategies are more likely to build resilient urban economies and achieve a competitive advantage in the global market (Rehan, 2014). Integrating sustainability principles into city branding strategies can enhance long-term economic and social development,

ensuring that cities remain attractive not only for tourists and investors but also for residents, thereby improving their quality of life (Rehan, 2014). However, these strategies often concentrate resources on the wealthiest areas, enhancing their cultural and touristic appeal but widening disparities between the centre and periphery (Ciuculescu and Luca, 2024; Bonet et al., 2011). That leads to the excessive tourist flows in the historical centres and a low satisfaction of residents' quality of life and well-being (Zhao et al. 2024; Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020; Cleave & Arku, 2020).

Integrating city branding with urban policies fosters long-term sustainability and prevents fragmented strategies that reduce overall effectiveness (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020). Indeed, today cities face an increasingly competitive environment, which requires effective differentiation strategies that build their unique selling propositions, a well-known concept in marketing. A well-defined unique selling proposition strengthens global positioning and brand identity. Beyond marketing, city branding serves as a strategic tool for urban development. It ensures that cultural heritage, infrastructure, and services contribute to a cohesive and attractive city identity. Highlighting their distinctive qualities enables cities to attract more visitors and investments while enhancing residents' quality of life (Kotler et al., 1993) transforming them into key differentiators that enhance their positioning at a global level (Ali et al., 2022). This approach requires cities to differentiate their images and improve service quality (Richards, 2005 Fyall et al., 2003; Buhalis, 2000). Despite the need for differentiation, many cities adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' branding approach, diluting their competitive edge and failing to highlight their most distinctive attributes (Heeley, 2016). Conversely, a well-defined brand positioning helps cities tackle the competitive challenges of global markets (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Lau & Leung, 2005; Kavaratzis, 2004). Indeed, building a unique image attracts external audiences and fosters residents' sense of belonging and pride (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006; Lau & Leung, 2005).

Leveraging cultural products, architecture, and craftsmanship enhances city branding, reinforcing reputation and economic value (Lau & Leung, 2005; Hankinson, 2001). Emphasizing cultural elements shapes the city's unique image and fosters an emotional connection with residents and visitors, strengthening brand recognition and long-term attractiveness (Bayraktar & Uslay, 2018).

As Kavaratzis (2004) argues, successful city branding evolves from simple marketing into identity management, integrating economic, cultural, and social development goals. City branding highlights the positive aspects of a city by developing a brand that reflects its history and uniqueness, shaping public perception, and attracting both visitors and residents with an authentic, compelling message (Dinnie, 2010). Accordingly, cities need to structure a communication strategy that ensures consistency

and engagement across multiple channels by leveraging strategic efforts that can enhance global reputation and build an image that resonate with diverse audiences (Wang & Mustafa, 2024). City branding is most effective when it fosters emotional engagement. A strong place identity is built through shared cultural experiences, participatory planning, and social interactions that create a deep connection between residents and their city. Cities that successfully integrate cultural experiences into their branding create deeper emotional connections with residents and visitors. By emphasizing immersive experiences—such as festivals, heritage tours, and interactive public spaces—cities can foster engagement, making their brand identity more vibrant and enduring.

Moreover, city branding shows a special feature, which is the need for a participatory approach. Stakeholders belonging to the same urban ecosystem must cooperate in designing an effective strategy: only a holistic competitive strategy can build the competitive advantage of the entire territory (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Kotler et al., 1993). Indeed, collaboration between urban policies and local governance is critical (General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, 2021), as it is the collaboration among visitors, residents, and businesses to meet their diverse expectations (Beck & Storopoli, 2021). The interdisciplinary cooperation among municipal authorities, local communities, and academic institutions ensures the city's identity is co-created with its residents. Adopting a multifaceted approach is critical to maintaining brand consistency across stakeholder groups.

Thus, the entire territorial ecosystem needs an urban marketing strategy to attract international investments, stimulate economic activity, and enhance the city's overall appeal (Asprogerakas, 2006). The outputs are critical for cities' present and future: cities perceived as attractive destinations for tourists, businesses, and investors can reach urban growth and long-term economic sustainability (Stănciulescu, 2009).

Building a unique, long-lasting image of a city is achieved through urban marketing initiatives which develop new infrastructures, organise culturally attractive events, including those related to sports, and promote local features that can differentiate each city from others (Green et al., 2016). To transform cities into ideal places to live and work, effective strategic management tools that combine city resources to meet demand are crucial (Pasquinelli, 2017).

First, a customisation strategy is essential. Effective branding strategies must address the needs of residents, tourists, and businesses, each with distinct expectations. By engaging multiple stakeholders, cities create a positive external image (Addis et al., 2023). In this context, segmentation and targeting decisions are fundamental for effective urban marketing in industrialising cities. For example, research on São Paulo illustrates how cities can tailor their offerings to different social classes by understanding

their shopping behaviours and consumption patterns (Cunningham et al., 1974). Over time, these strategic decisions have evolved to involve target groups directly in decision-making processes. This is how participatory planning, which involves local populations in the design and development of urban spaces, has become vital in creating a more authentic and inclusive brand identity (Rebar, 2010). This co-creation strengthens the connection between residents and their city, making the brand more genuine and powerful (Styvén, 2010). For instance, the “Think of a Place – Think of Macedonia” initiative demonstrates how collaboration can reinforce local identity while enhancing the city’s global appeal (Hristova, 2019).

Second, communication is mandatory. Communication policies greatly support the perception of these unique attributes if a consistent message is spread across all channels (Rizzi & Dioli, 2010). However, consistent messages are not enough to build a city brand; they must be engaging. Indeed, engagement plays a crucial role in both city branding and urban marketing, as it does in all branding efforts (Addis, 2020). Engagement and place attachment emerge from social atmospheres shaped by collective experiences and shared emotions. Events, public spaces, and social interactions within cities generate emotional energy reinforcing place attachment (Collins, 2004). Urban marketing, therefore, must focus on creating environments that foster collective effervescence—public gatherings, festivals, and sporting events that help shape the city’s brand identity (Hill et al., 2022).

Indeed, a city’s ability to create emotional bonds with its stakeholders is essential. Cities are increasingly seen as products, much like consumer goods. As such, cities must develop emotional connections with their target audiences through their cultural heritage, design, and events (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Parkerson & Saunders, 2005). These emotional bonds are key to fostering loyalty and attachment to the city, making it more attractive to both residents and visitors (Kavaratzis, 2004; Lau & Leung, 2005).

The emotional value of cities thrives on the careful management of cultural experiences. Cultural experiences evoke emotions and leave lasting impressions, making cities memorable to those who experience them. International events can play a significant role in this regard (Ma et al., 2021), becoming integral to urban planning and governance as they provide platforms to promote and communicate a city’s image to diverse audiences (Ye & Bjorner, 2018).

The critical relevance of cultural experiences is particularly high due to their impact on economic growth, cultural preservation, and sustainability. Cultural sustainability is pivotal in city branding, reinforcing the city’s identity and enhancing its long-term appeal. Architecture and cultural heritage, as emphasised by Hristova (2019), are central to building an attractive and competitive brand. For instance, Bitola’s architectural landscape has become a key pillar of its city branding, demonstrating how preserving and promoting cultural heritage enhances identity and competitive-

ness (Hristova, 2019). While cultural experiences significantly contribute to audience engagement (Addis, 2020), landscapes also become an essential architectural reference point through ecological urbanism (Mostafavi & Doherty, 2016). Integrating a city's unique and valuable resources allows sustainable urban design development and strengthens the city's long-term growth and branding efforts.

3. Rome's Metropolitan Strategic Plan and the role of culture

A city's strategic plan defines a long-term vision for urban development, setting objectives and actions that prioritize economic growth, environmental sustainability, cultural promotion, and citizens' quality of life. It concerns the reshaping of urban development patterns and increasing competition to improve the local system (Rizzi & Dioli, 2010).

The Metropolitan Strategic Plan of Rome (Città Metropolitana di Roma Capitale, 2022) is conceived as an essential tool to promote the metropolitan area's development towards greater sustainability, innovation, and inclusion, which represent the three main thematic axes of its development. Innovation focuses on digitalisation, cultural development, research, and economic growth to modernise the economic and social fabric and support growth in strategic sectors such as technology, culture, and entrepreneurship. Sustainability focuses on responsible management of natural resources, promoting the circular economy, energy transition, and urban regeneration to make the metropolitan area more resilient to climate change and environmental challenges. Finally, inclusion aims to reduce social and economic inequalities through active labour policies, the regeneration of peripheral areas, and the strengthening of social, cultural, and educational infrastructures, ensuring greater access to services and improving living conditions across all city areas, with particular attention to the most marginalised zones.

Around the three thematic axes, twelve strategic guidelines for sustainable urban development have been identified to guide the implementation of development policies in the metropolitan area. These guidelines have integrated each other to promote a holistic approach that combines economic growth, environmental protection, and social cohesion. Among these, culture stands out as a strategic pillar, recognized not only for its role in heritage conservation but also for its dynamic potential in shaping contemporary urban life. It is interpreted as *"original and varied"* based on *"new ways of creating and enjoying cultural heritage"* (Città Metropolitana di Roma Capitale, 2022, pag. 94), becoming part of a dynamic and continuously evolving process fuelled by innovation and the participation of the local community.

Culture is considered a means of artistic expression and essential for strengthening collective identity and promoting cohesion and inclusion. This approach underscores the importance of valuing the identity of places and promoting an open culture that integrates both traditional and innovative cultural expressions. The plan includes initiatives that encourage the customisation of cultural communication channels and facilitate the co-creation of cultural activities in collaboration with local communities, respecting and valuing their unique characteristics. It foresees a coordinated management of cultural infrastructures, including the most significant historical and artistic sites and those less known or located in peripheral areas, to expand accessibility and enjoyment of CH.

Additionally, digital technologies are leveraged to enhance cultural accessibility, enabling the restoration, promotion, and innovation of cultural services. The plan envisions a digital approach to cultural heritage that facilitates engagement and inclusion. Thus, culture is conceived as a driver of urban transformation, capable of stimulating social innovation, strengthening local identity, and promoting social cohesion. It also becomes a factor of economic development, encouraging sustainable and distributed tourism that values the most famous sites and the lesser-known ones, contributing to a fairer distribution of tourist flows.

The inequalities characterising the city of Rome are well-acknowledged when discussing the need for strategic intervention. As underlined by Lelo et al., (2019; p. 8) the central areas of the city *"offer highly diversified economic activities and services, as well as artistic, spiritual and cultural amenities, and better transportation choices, if compared to the rest of the city."* Therefore, considering the inequalities in the territory and the fundamental role played by culture in increasing individuals' well-being and the effectiveness of city branding strategies, this study focuses on Rome's CH distribution among the city's UZs with the intent to provide guidelines for new strategic actions for policymakers and SMEs' investments.

The UZs represent key instruments for integrating Rome's spatial planning and balancing development. Analysing CH distribution among UZs provides valuable insights for designing strategic marketing and management interventions. These guidelines not only strengthen city branding but also help mitigate inequalities in peripheral areas, fostering a more balanced urban development.

4. Methodology

This study considers CH as comprising 1981 sites that offer cultural experiences, classified into five categories: archives and libraries (1155), bookshops (347), cinemas and arenas (106), museums, monuments, and archaeological sites (176), and theatres (196)¹. Although these categories represent key drivers of Rome's attractiveness and long-term sustainability, their actual distribution across the UZs remains unclear due to the fragmented nature of the census of historical and cultural sites and their geographical locations. To construct an integrated database, we gathered the most extensive datasets available, sourced from both public and private stakeholders. However, these datasets varied in structure (some included the full address, others only the geographical coordinates or incomplete positions) and accessibility (some were open access, while others were restricted). Therefore, the initial step of our empirical analysis focused on collecting, cleaning, and integrating the data. The result is a comprehensive list of all CH sites, including their category, geographic location, and corresponding UZ. Using this dataset, we derived another database, listing Rome's UZs and reporting the number of CH sites for each zone in the five categories. The UZs dataset has been used as input to create maps illustrating the categories' distribution across Rome's territory, showing their aggregation level. We used the QGIS (qgis.org) software to develop the maps, which is generally adopted for visualising, editing, and analysing spatial data (Chavoya et al., 2022; Moyroud & Portet, 2018; Westra, 2014). This software supports various formats, such as raster and vector data and is highly valuable for urban planning activities and natural resource management (Graser & Olaya, 2015). Specifically, it guarantees integration with other open-source tools and academic research and visualises and analyses geospatial data (Hugentobler, 2008). Therefore, we created maps for each category, displaying varying colour intensities as the number of sites increased within each urban area. The maps serve as a visual tool to identify areas with a significant concentration of CH and those with fewer, showing the cultural vocation of each urban area².

Subsequently, we performed a cluster analysis using the open-source R software to identify similarities and differences among UZs based on CH

¹ The archives and libraries' databases were retrieved from the website of the Central Institute for the Union Catalogue of Italian Libraries and Bibliographic Information (<https://www.iccu.sbn.it/en/>). The museums, monuments and archeological sites' databases were retrieved from the national institute of statistics' website (<https://www.istat.it/en/>) and the Rome's municipality website (<https://www.comune.roma.it>). In addition, the category of bookshops includes the book sections in large retail stores.

² To identify the UZs, we used the map from Lelo, K., Monni, S., Tomassi, F. (2021) "Le Sette Rome. La capitale delle disuguaglianze raccontata in 29 mappe". Donzelli Editore, Rome. <https://www.donzelli.it/libro/9788855222563>.

distribution. Such an approach allowed us to group UZs with similar characteristics regarding the presence of CH sites facilitating the identification of spatial patterns in the distribution of cultural sites, supporting informed decisions for urban planning and cultural resource management. The relevance of this technique in the urban context has been demonstrated by several studies that have revealed regional differences and provided guidance for more balanced urban planning (Akar & Uymaz, 2022), examined the distribution of CH assets and derived useful data for the development of strategies for the conservation and sustainable use of cultural resources (Shi et al., 2024). Since arts and culture play a crucial role in city branding (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2024), our cluster analysis provides a framework for grouping urban areas based on CH similarities. This classification enables the identification of local cultural characteristics, offering a solid foundation for strategic interventions that foster balanced and sustainable cultural development while enhancing the city's attractiveness through an effective branding strategy.

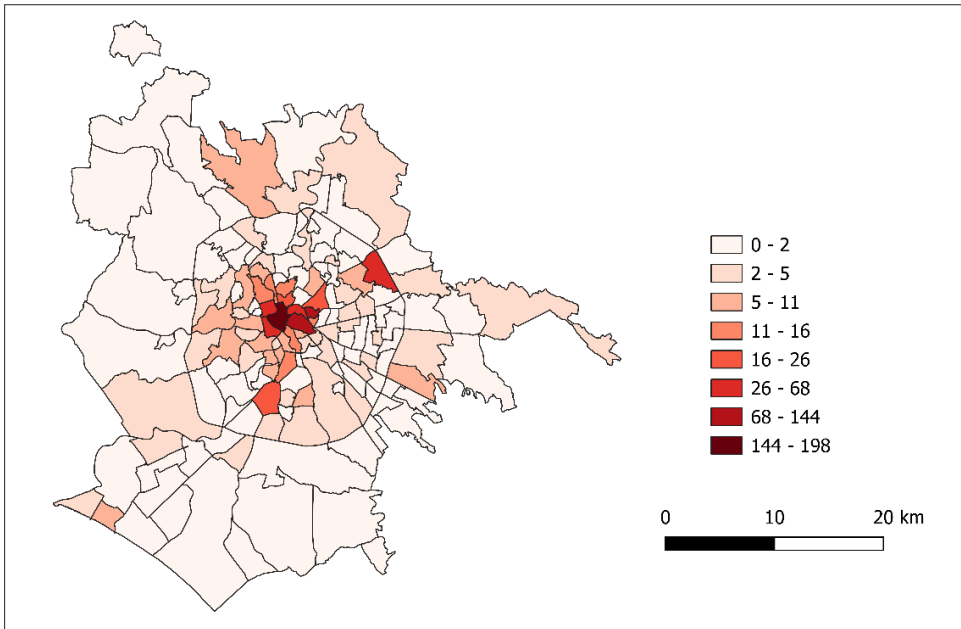
5. Rome's CH distribution analysis

The analysis process started with the map's development, which showed the distribution of the five categories of CH.

The first map (Figure 1) illustrates archives and libraries' distribution across Rome's UZs. Findings show the highest concentration of archives and libraries in "Centro Storico" (198) – the historical centre - and "Università" (144) UZs.

The high density of cultural spaces in the above-mentioned areas can be mainly linked to the presence of important academic, cultural and religious institutions, which are generally the main founders of these spaces. For instance, the "Università" UZ hosts the city's main university campus with the highest number of academic buildings and libraries and is well-supported by commercial and catering activities and services.

Figure 1 - Archives and Libraries Distribution

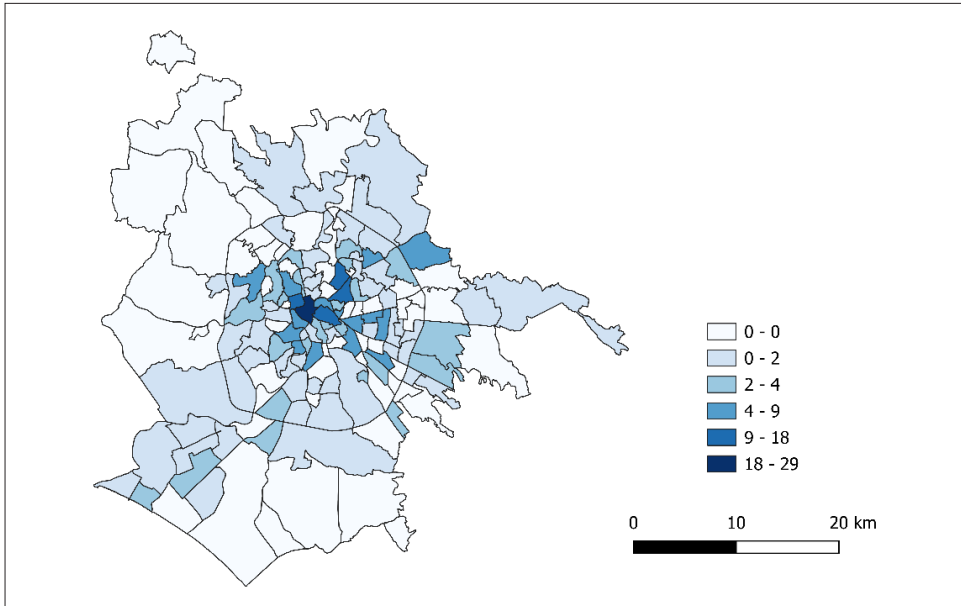


Source: authors elaboration by using QGIS software

Other zones showing a consistent number of libraries and archives are “Esquilino” and “XX Settembre” with respectively 89 and 68 between libraries and archives; “Trastevere” (46), “Prati” (43) and “San Basilio” (42). This latter is not close to the city’s core compared to the others. However, it still stays inside the “Grande Raccordo Anulare” (GRA), the 68 kilometres’ motorway that encircles the entire city of Rome, forming a ring around the capital (which is visible in the map) demarcating the separation between the more densely populated areas of the centre and the suburbs. On the contrary, it is possible to identify 37 UZs among the areas with the lowest concentrations of libraries and archives. Some of them are located inside the GRA and not so far from the city centre, such as “Salario”, “Villa Phampili” and “Eroi”.

Figure 2 displays the bookshops’ distribution. Bookshops are fundamental cultural access points due to their variety of books and literary resources. Although access to literary culture is more market-oriented in this case, it is essential for the cultural and intellectual growth of the community, especially for the younger generation. The highest concentration of bookshops in Rome is identifiable mainly in the “Centro Storico”, where 29 libraries appear.

Figure 2 – Bookshops' distribution



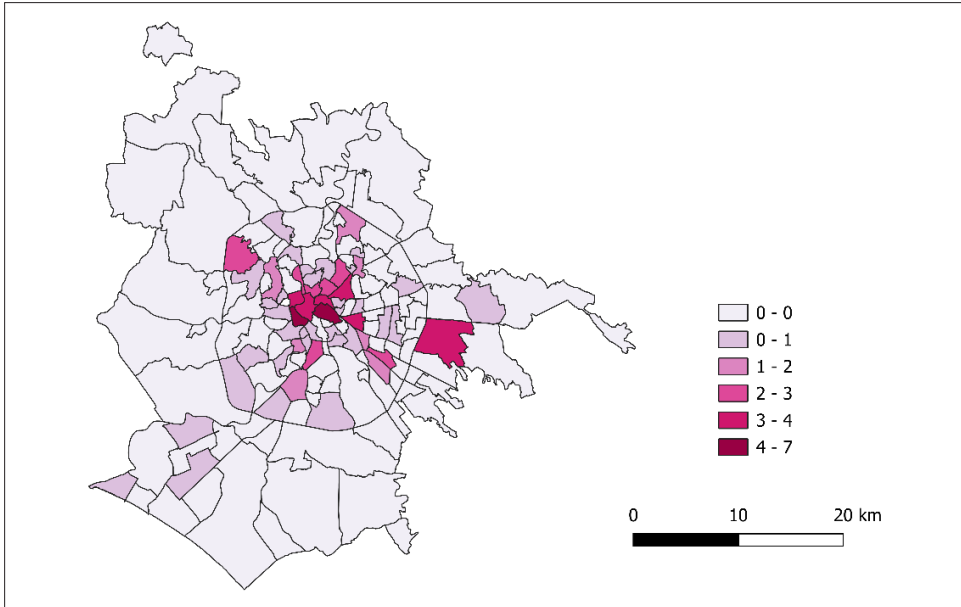
Source: authors elaboration by using QGIS software

Other areas such as “Nomentano” (18), “Esquilino” (18), “Trieste” (16) and “Prati” (14) can be considered UZs with a high distribution of bookshops (9-18), even if lower compared to the “Centro Storico”. In addition, while 26 UZs include four to nine bookshops, 56 have no libraries in their territory (white areas). Such a picture highlights these areas’ lack of access to literacy culture. This is a risk factor, especially for younger generations.

Focusing on cinemas and arenas distribution, the map displays the highest concentration of these sites in two main UZs, namely “Esquilino” (7) and “Trastevere” (7) (Figure 3). These zones are, therefore, two reference points for cinema lovers, and they host open-air arenas and smaller venues than the multiplex chains. For instance, “Trastevere” hosts the Troisi cinema, which is well-known as an art-house cinema and offers an alternative experience to commercial multiplexes.

Other areas, such as the “Centro Storico”, have a concentration that varies from one to four cinemas and arenas. In contrast, a considerable number of UZs show a total absence (white areas). More in detail, 100 out of 150 UZs do not have arenas and cinemas in their territory, thus indicating the critical lack of access to film culture.

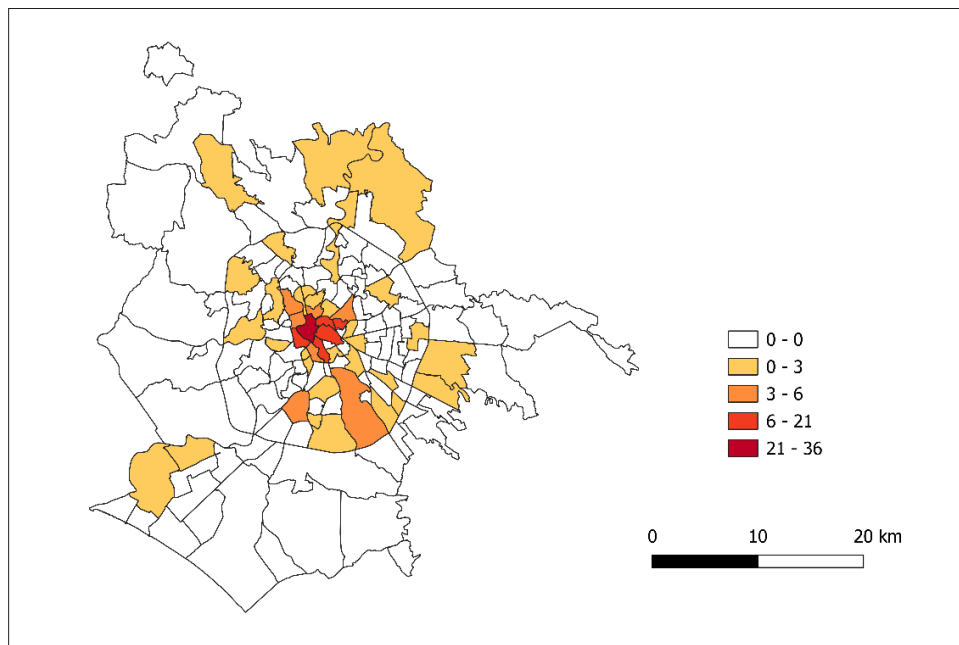
Figure 3 – Distribution of cinemas and arenas



Source: authors elaboration by using QGIS software

A similar concentration level also appears in the distribution of museums, monuments, and archaeological sites across UZs (Figure 4). The highest concentration of these sites is mainly detected in the “Centro Storico” (36), representing the heart of Rome’s culture and art and, consequently, an essential destination for visitors who want to learn more about the city’s cultural and artistic heritage. The other richest areas are “Esquilino” (21), which houses, albeit to a lesser extent than the “Centro Storico”, important museum collections, followed by “Università” (14) and “XX Settembre” (10) UZs. On the contrary, by focusing on those with the lowest concentrations, also in this case, the number of white areas on the map is high: 110 UZs do not have museums, monuments and archaeological sites.

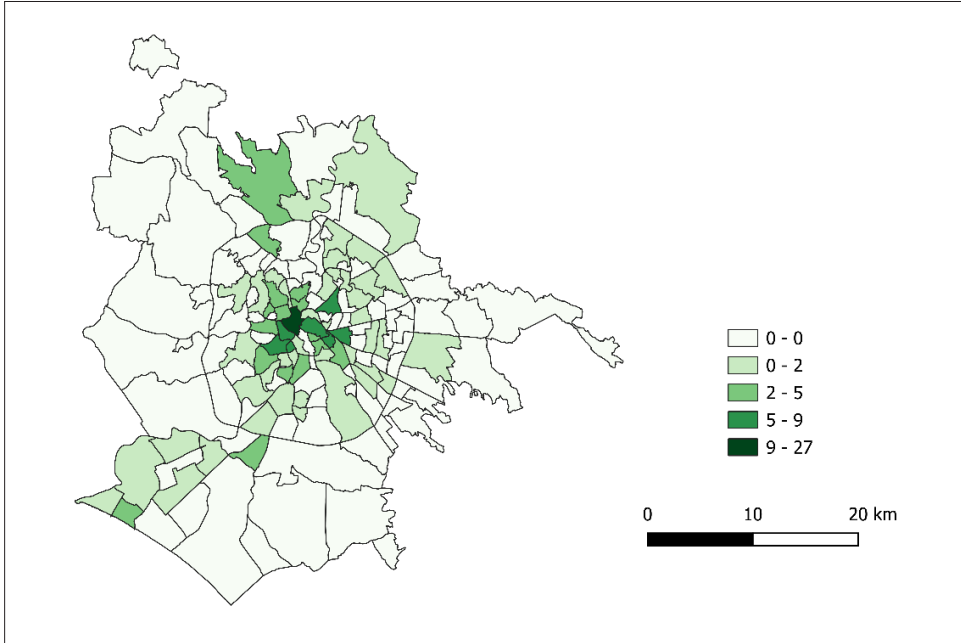
Figure 4 – Distribution of museums and archaeological sites



Source: authors elaboration by using QGIS software

The last category considered is the one of theatres (Figure 5), whose distribution shows the highest concentration in the “Centro Storico” (27). Indeed, this area hosts the city’s historical theatres, which offer a variety of performances and attract not only locals but also visitors from abroad. In addition, theatres’ visibility is further enhanced by their collocation in an area with high touristic flows, thus facilitating accessibility. However, it emerges that a considerable part of the UZs lacks the presence of theatres (89 white areas), highlighting the limited public access to these cultural spaces and, once again, highlighting that Rome is a territory with high inequalities.

Figure 5 – Distribution of theatres



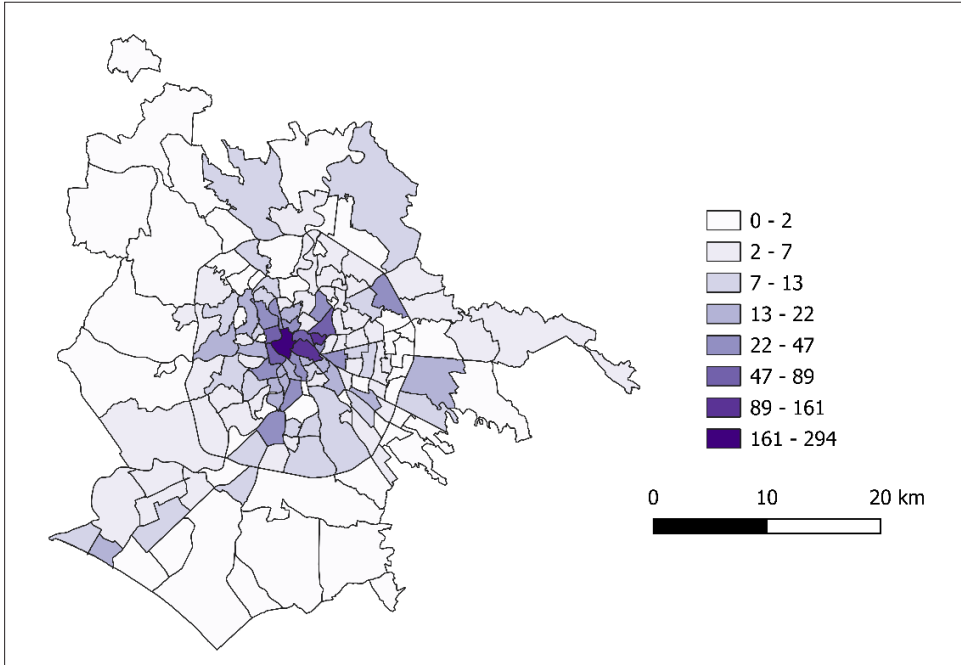
Source: authors elaboration by using QGIS software

After analysing the distribution of every category considered in this study, looking at a map encompassing all of them is essential. Accordingly, Figure 6 shows the overall distribution of these CH sites by identifying the heart of the city as the hub of Rome's cultural life with a wide range of attractions. More in detail, the UZs with the highest concentration of CH are "Centro Storico" (294), "Università" (161), "Esquilino" (144), "XX Settembre" (89) and "Trastevere" which are highly populated by almost all the categories analysed. On the contrary, as visible in the map, the UZs showing a very low presence or total absence of cultural spaces can be mainly identified in the peripheral regions of the city located outside the GRA (marked in white or with a less intense colour) and only a few of them not far from the central areas – and they are "Salario", "Villa Ada", "Tor di Quinto", and "Villaggio Olimpico".

Our findings are in line with the study of Lelo et al. (2019) that underlines the significant disparity of a wide range of activities, services and facilities including the cultural and creative ones among the UZs. Similar findings have been observed in other major European capitals, such as Paris (Doe, 2022) and Berlin (Smith, 2023), where cultural infrastructure is heavily concentrated in historical city centres, leading to accessibility chal-

lenges in suburban areas. Indeed, the concentration of CH sites in central UZs is in line with the presence of a high availability of services in these areas compared to the peripheral ones located beyond the GRA that exhibit a deficiency not only in terms of cultural offer but also regarding the presence of other essential services for residents.

Figure 6 – Overall overview of categories' distribution



Source: authors elaboration by using QGIS software

The spatial concentration of cultural assets in central UZs confirms existing theories on cultural clustering in historical city centres (Zenker, 2011). However, this pattern also suggests that peripheral areas may require targeted policies to foster cultural participation, leveraging local identity and urban regeneration strategies (Richards, 2017).

Acknowledging the presence of these disparities in cultural goods and services between central and peripheral areas and taking action to mitigate their impact can help create a more balanced and inclusive urban identity, improving Rome's attractiveness for tourists, quality of life for residents and opportunities for investors. Indeed, intervening to create a more homogeneous distribution of cultural offer exploiting local peculiarities, and the presence of services where it is lacking, could strengthen the city's brand, showing the dynamism and variety of the Roman urban landscape that does not focus only on the traditional and most renowned historical

core to which tourists are strongly attracted but that promote the entire territory. For example, initiatives such as mobile cultural units, temporary art exhibitions, or public-private partnerships for cultural infrastructure development in underrepresented areas could serve as effective strategies to bridge these disparities.

However, it is extremely difficult to make such interventions by addressing each of the 155 UZs. Therefore, to provide guidelines to develop more effective strategic interventions, we opted for developing a cluster analysis which is better discussed in the following paragraph.

This uneven distribution does not only impact residents' accessibility to cultural spaces but also affects Rome's city branding, reinforcing an image of a city that heavily relies on its historical core while neglecting its suburban potential. This highlights the need for a more inclusive cultural strategy that balances the promotion of the historical core with investments in underrepresented areas, reinforcing Rome's identity as a dynamic and culturally diverse city.

6. Cluster Analysis results

To enhance the usefulness of our suggestions in terms of strategic interventions for developing effective urban marketing and city branding actions, we run a cluster analysis on the five categories of CH considered in this study by applying the Euclidean distance and the Ward method. Such an approach made it possible to identify seven clusters represented by similar UZs in terms of presence or absence of cultural heritage, whose characteristics are summarised in Table 1 which shows the mean values of the different categories within each identified cluster.

The seven clusters are identified as follows: low CH offer (very poor) cluster, limited CH offer (poor) cluster, sufficient CH offer cluster, strong CH offer (very rich) cluster, high CH offer (rich) cluster, good CH supply cluster and prominent book-centric focus cluster. More in detail, the poorest areas in terms of cultural assets are represented by the low CH offer (very poor) and the limited CH offer (poor) clusters, including a high number of UZs with a very low number of CH sites.

Table 1 - Categories of access to culture: overall mean values and mean values within each cluster

Cluster	No. of UZs	Archives and Libraries	Bookshops	Cinemas and Arenas	Museums, Monuments and archaeological sites	Theatres
1 - low CH offer (very poor)	92	1.15	0.67	0.29	0.28	0.21
2 - limited CH offer (poor)	42	5.02	3.02	0.69	0.36	2.12
3 - sufficient CH offer	14	14.86	5.64	1.64	3.07	2.57
4 - strong CH offer (very rich)	1	198	29	4	36	27
5 - high CH offer (rich)	2	78.5	11.5	5.5	15.5	5.5
6 - good CH supply	3	43.67	8	3.67	4	4.67
7 - prominent book-centric focus	1	144	3	1	13	0
Overall	155	7.45	2.24	0.68	1.13	1.26

Moreover, the cluster with sufficient CH offer, which groups 14 UZs, is characterised by a considerable amount of CH, even if to a lesser extent than the clusters with high and good CH offer. The cluster with a high CH offer (rich) represents “Esquilino” and “XX Settembre” UZs, and it is particularly rich in archives and libraries, cinemas and theatres. Instead, the cluster with a good CH offer includes 3 UZs, which are “Prati”, “San Basilio”, and “Trastevere”, presenting a discrete range of cultural experiences due to its CH’s heterogeneity.

The richest cluster, which has a strong CH offer, refers to a single UZ, “Centro Storico,” and is the richest in terms of CH sites that guarantee cultural access for different purposes. Similarly, the cluster with a prominent book-centric focus refers to the “Università” UZ, where the presence of libraries and archives is highly marked compared to the other categories.

These findings highlight the significant disparities in cultural access across Rome’s UZs. The identified clusters provide a basis for targeted interventions, allowing policymakers and urban planners to tailor city branding and marketing strategies to the specific needs of each area. The next section explores how these results can inform effective strategic recommendations.

7. Discussion

This study makes a significant contribution to the academic literature on urban marketing, city branding, and cultural heritage management by addressing the issue of the uneven distribution of tangible CH across Rome's UZs as well as on a managerial side.

The findings of our study contribute to the literature on urban marketing and city branding by reinforcing the idea that strategic and non-fragmented interventions should not be limited to the central areas of the city but should instead aim to ensure widespread attractiveness. Moreover, the results highlight how the cultural heritage elements of a territory represent key elements not only for promoting a city image but also for fostering social cohesion and economic development.

The results obtained through the implementation of the mapping process are in line with previous studies underlining the higher concentration of services as well as cultural offer in the central areas of the city, and the lack of their presence in the peripheral ones (Lelo et al., 2019). Such inequalities are representative of the different peculiarities of the UZs, and the different efforts and resources employed in the areas with the highest concentration of CH that as recognised by Zhao et al. (2024) strengthen the disparities between the centre and the periphery of a city.

The mapping process has served as a visual tool to show clear evidence of the areas in which the interventions of policymakers are required to enhance their appealing and making them more attractive for visitors, residents and investors who can find space due to the cultural nature/peculiarities of the UZs. Indeed, by adopting a more inclusive urban marketing strategy it could be possible to emphasize the uniqueness of these areas transforming them in new cultural poles aiming at ensuring equal access to opportunities and resources (Liu et al., 2020). Moreover, by adopting policies to improve cultural activities and services in peripheral areas represent a step ahead to mitigate inequalities in Rome since according to Pocock and Jones (2017; pag. 99) *"moving between the centre and the periphery, innovations in heritage emerge"* as the periphery can act as catalyst for change.

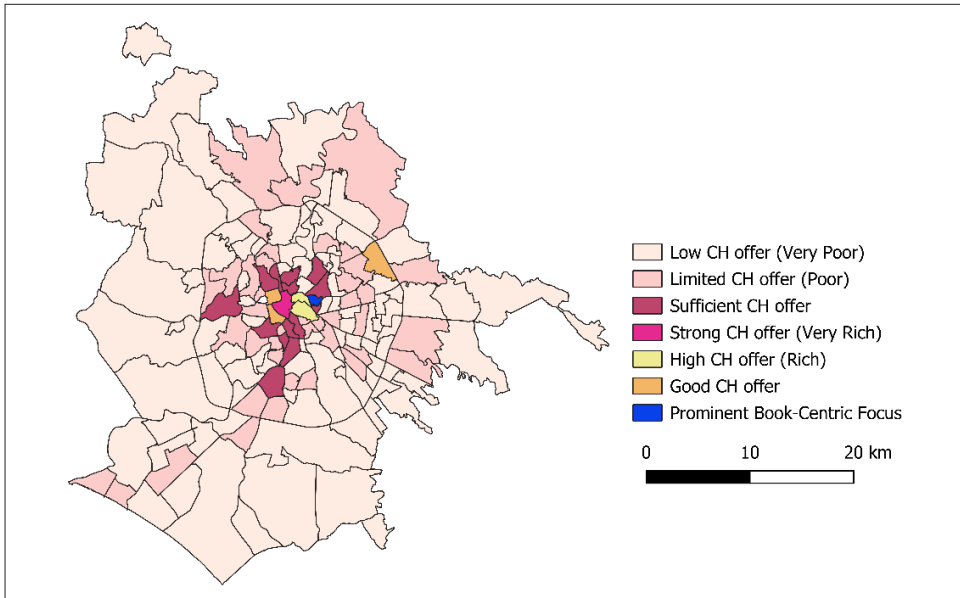
However, to suggest strategic marketing and management interventions that can address cultural disparities between Rome's central and peripheral UZs and promote more equitable cultural development, we identified seven clusters representing the point of departure for a deeper reflection on useful action to be implemented. From the cluster analysis, it has emerged that in Rome, the strong CH offer corresponds to the only "Centro Storico" UZ (Figure 7) which involves different CH sites (strong CH offer – very rich). Indeed, in the past, this area has been the subject of several interventions by policymakers who increasingly invested by making the city highly attractive. Such interventions significantly transformed the city

favouring the growth of cultural tourism in central areas which became a point of reference for tourists (Staniscia, 2020) and encouraging the development of several other services and activities such as shops, restaurants supporting the cultural offer of this area (Lelo et al., 2019).

The other well-positioned clusters are those presenting a high CH offer and a good CH offer, which are rich and heterogeneous, albeit with differences. The cluster with a high CH offer (rich) focuses on the performing arts connected to the numerous theatres and cinemas in its territory. However, it has less than half the number of museums, monuments and archaeological sites identified in the strong CH offer (very rich) cluster. Despite this aspect, the endowment of CH is remarkable.

Investing in the “Centro Storico” and the other profitable areas could be fruitful for continuing exploiting the consolidated image of the city also at an international level. SMEs interested in cultural activities can expect obtaining a reasonable profit, but they have to deal with a high competition. In addition, continuing to channel considerable resources into the central areas while neglecting the more peripheral ones reduces the possibility for policymakers to develop an inclusive city branding strategy including the more marginalised areas. On the contrary, aiming at diversifying the cultural offer and reduce inequalities helps in offering a more inclusive image of the city. For instance, promoting new cultural hubs, by transforming alternative spaces into cultural centres that enhance the characteristics of peripheral areas and leveraging digital platforms and social media to spread a more equitable narrative of the city, could be an effective approach to restoring balance and mitigating disparities.

Figure 7 – Clusters identification



Source: authors elaboration by using QGIS software

In general terms, the richest clusters in CH can exploit city branding strategies to further highlight their uniqueness, enhancing their appeal to residents and visitors and strengthening their market positioning but they must be able to create connections with the surrounding areas with alternative routes that connect the rich activities of the more central and wealthy areas with the suburbs. Concretely, the connection with the cluster with the prominent book-centric focus, which is representative of one UZ, namely “Università” with many archives and libraries, could be proficient for developing collaboration that can encourage people to get closer to culture in various ways. Indeed, it could be effective developing alternative cultural path related to reading activities and events or workshops as a continuation and deepening of the activities developed in the city centre that can stimulate residents to participate in the cultural life of their area increasing their quality of life and well-being (Zhao et al. 2024; Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020). Moreover, encouraging SMEs to invest in offering services and goods for archives and libraries, encouraging publishing initiatives, the opening of independent bookshops and the development of digital archives can transform these areas as fertile ground for further investments.

Furthermore, a heterogeneous allocation of CH characterises the cluster with a good CH offer and the one with sufficient CH offer. The former groups historical urban areas with a long tradition connected with culture

and art and areas under policymakers' attention due to their potential. Among these areas there is the "San Basilio" UZ which is characterised by a good presence of libraries and archives, a low number of bookstores and theatres and a total absence of museums and cinemas. San Basilio" UZ is object of strategic intervention since 2021 to improve citizens' lives through cultural enrichment, socio-economic fabric development, and social cohesion (Comune di Roma, n.d.). Instead, the sufficient CH offer of the latter is represented by a very heterogeneous CH endowment, which does not show a specific cultural orientation but rather a balance of CH across all categories which makes it interesting especially for investors. These clusters grouped areas with an interesting potential for SMEs' investments. Thus, policymakers should intervene to attract visitors and widespread access to culture for residents as well as stimulate SMEs interested in offering cultural good and services to invest in these areas.

Considering now the clusters with a low CH offer (very poor) and a limited CH offer (poor), they represent a high number of UZs that are not profitable for SMEs in the cultural sector at the current state. Urban marketing strategies are fundamental in these areas to make them more attractive and to bridge the gap with the more attractive ones. Therefore, these areas require greater attention and commitment from policymakers to generate equity and social well-being, strengthening communities' sense of belonging (Lau & Leung, 2005) and focusing on inclusivity and strategic axes as highlighted in the strategic plan designed for Rome. Accordingly, policymakers could intervene to promote the cultural vitality of these areas by exploiting their peculiarities (Rosenstein, 2009) as well as by operating the decentralisation of events and the valorisation of local cultural identities for rebalancing the cultural distribution of activities (Riza, 2015). In this way, they can give greater visibility to the periphery and attract audiences also from the central areas of the city. For instance, the development of festivals and events to valorise the local specificities of these areas as well as the creation of meeting points for artists create opportunities for investors, especially for SMEs interested in offering cultural goods and services. However, investments in cultural services into the more barren areas of the city, in order for them to flourish, must be stimulated. Therefore, providing entrepreneurship incentives and funding to start-ups and creative SMEs to encourage investments should be included in the strategy (Wang and Richardson 2024).

Our findings reinforce the importance of integrating city branding into urban development strategies. A well-designed city branding approach can not only enhance the visibility of Rome's CH but also help rebalance cultural disparities. Peripheral areas could benefit from branding narratives that highlight their unique cultural assets, moving beyond the dominant image of the historic centre. For example, thematic branding initiatives fo-

cusing on contemporary art, street culture, or community-driven heritage initiatives can increase the attractiveness of these underrepresented areas (Richards, 2017; Zenker, 2011). Furthermore, digital branding efforts leveraging social media and immersive technologies (e.g., virtual tours of lesser-known sites) can help distribute tourist flows more evenly across the city.

In addition, redesigning unused urban spaces, creating new ones to host exhibitions, workshops or cultural laboratories by directly involving local communities, represent a transformation that, as underlined by Shi and Huang (2025), can foster the creation of a flourishing cultural and creative ecosystem embracing the needs of residents. However, such transformation requires effective narratives able to better describe the emerging changes avoiding recalling only the peculiarities of the historical centre. To do this, the use of digital channels is essential to convey targeted content to attract a wide audience. Moreover, as suggested by Consoli et al. (2023) digital tools such as interactive maps can valorise less-known areas helping to revitalise them culturally and economically. Therefore, the creation of dynamic maps showing Rome's cultural offer and particularly the alternative cultural itineraries and events that allow peripheries to emerge are essential to foster the image of a city in constant evolution.

To address these disparities, a combined approach involving public and private investments is necessary. Public authorities could promote 'Cultural Districts' in peripheral areas, replicating successful international models like the 'Quartier des Spectacles' in Montreal or the 'East London Cultural Quarter' in the UK. These initiatives involve multi-stakeholder collaborations that encourage cultural entrepreneurship and community engagement. On the private side, SMEs can be incentivized through tax breaks and micro-funding schemes to develop local creative industries, including independent bookstores, art studios, and live performance spaces. Additionally, pop-up cultural hubs and temporary exhibition spaces in vacant urban areas can serve as pilot initiatives to test demand before implementing permanent infrastructures.

All these interventions, represents strengths for promoting a more inclusive and differentiated image the city. Thus, developing a city branding strategy of Rome by showing evidence of such transformation based on a more equitable and differentiated cultural offer which embrace social cohesion and sustainable development for the entire city is extremely important.

By developing a city branding strategy that acknowledges cultural diversity, fosters inclusivity, and embraces sustainable urban growth, Rome can strengthen its global positioning while ensuring a more balanced cultural ecosystem that benefits all residents and stakeholders.

8. Conclusion and Future research directions

Urban marketing and city branding strategies stimulate the economic development of a city attracting tourism and investments. However, these strategies often prioritize the most prosperous areas, neglecting the cultural potential of peripheral ones.

The results of this study highlight how the uneven distribution of Rome's CH has contributed to significant disparities, limiting access to cultural resources and reducing opportunities for alternative cultural itineraries that could revitalize marginalized UZs. Indeed, while the central UZs continue benefit from the high concentration of CH and strong investments enhancing their cultural vitality, the more peripheral ones remain underdeveloped in terms of cultural infrastructure and services. This imbalance affects cultural accessibility and impacts Rome's present and future social sustainability and economic growth. By constantly concentrating investments in the central areas of the city, policymakers risk missing the opportunity to create a more inclusive and dynamic urban identity. On the contrary, by strategically redistributing cultural investments through infrastructural development, the creation of new cultural hubs and a better connectivity between areas less rich in CH and the richest ones, could stimulate the emergence of new economic opportunities able to reshape the city's image.

This study contributes to the theoretical debate on city branding and cultural policy by demonstrating that an uneven cultural heritage distribution can hinder the effectiveness of branding strategies. Unlike previous studies that focus on the economic impact of cultural heritage (e.g., cultural tourism and local development), our research highlights the role of CH accessibility in shaping a city's brand identity. By integrating mapping techniques and cluster analysis, we provide a methodological framework that urban scholars and policymakers can use to identify cultural gaps and design inclusive branding interventions (Lelo et al., 2019; Pocock & Jones, 2017).

Accordingly, this study suggests rethinking Rome's marketing interventions by implementing a more balanced and inclusive approach that could enhance the city's appeal while ensuring equitable access to culture also residents. Moreover, leveraging digital tools and interactive maps to promote alternative cultural itineraries contribute to redefine Rome as a city in constant evolution, fostering social cohesion and embracing diversity.

According to this, future interventions should focus on bridging the gap between central and peripheral areas and not only by reinforcing the already established cultural hubs but also creating new routes that integrate less-known neighbourhoods into the existing wider cultural ecosystem. This vision is in line with the need to embrace a more sustainable and cohesive urban development model where all areas can actively contribute and

benefit from the city cultural wealth. However, this requires the construction of a lasting strategy for the development of a project that integrates culture and creativity with urban development.

Moreover, future research should explore how digital branding strategies can support cultural tourism beyond traditional landmarks. Virtual reality (VR) experiences, gamification, and AI-driven cultural itineraries could enhance visitors' engagement with peripheral areas, making them integral parts of Rome's identity. Such digital interventions can also improve residents' cultural participation, fostering a sense of belonging and redefining the perception of urban heritage.

To conclude, future research should pay attention to the role played by digital technologies as opportunities to enhance cultural fruition in areas with limited access to culture. Moreover, due to the fact that the concentration of heritage in the historical centre contributes to tourist congestion, future research could focus on inclusive branding strategies to better understand and strengthen the idea that such strategies can encourage visitors to explore lesser-known areas of a territory.

While this study focuses on a quantitative approach, future research could integrate qualitative methods—such as interviews or surveys—to further explore the experiential dimension of cultural heritage and its perceived value among residents and tourists.

Ultimately, fostering a more balanced cultural strategy can transform Rome into a city that not only preserves its historical heritage but also embraces innovation, inclusivity, and sustainable urban growth—ensuring that all areas actively contribute to and benefit from its rich cultural ecosystem.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

This study is the result of a collaborative effort by all the authors. The individual contributions are detailed as following.

Giorgia Masili: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Software (QGIS); Visualisation; Validation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Supervision; Project administration. Caterina Conigliani: Software (R); Formal analysis; Validation; Writing – original draft.

Michela Addis: Conceptualization; Methodology; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

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