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Understanding the heritage experience: a content analysis of online reviews of World Heritage Sites in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

This study explores dimensions of heritage tourism experiences utilizing the user-generated content (UGC) on a travel sharing website and offers insight for understanding the factors that can affect the heritage tourists' evaluation of travel experiences at a destination. For this purpose, a content analysis of 5212 heritage experience reviews posted for heritage sites on a UGC travel website, TripAdvisor, is conducted. An analysis of reviews revealed 59 items forming six dimensions that include authenticity, the importance of guides, cultural values, sense of heritage, local hospitality and awe. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed as well as limitations. Suggestions for further research are provided.

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1. Introduction

Tourists have been increasingly demanding meaningful, memorable and engaging travel experiences rather than traditional experiences that focus on sun, sea and sand. In response to this increasing demand, destinations have been developing and offering a variety of new tourism offerings that focus on providing different, interesting and intellectual experiences (Wang, Liu, Wei, & Zhang, 2020). Since tourists' interactions with a destination's history, culture, recreation and heritage have been viewed as some of the most critical components of tourism experiences (Brent Ritchie, Wing Sun Tung, & JB Ritchie, 2011), cultural heritage elements play an important role in the formation of those experiences (Ezenagu & Geraghty, 2020; Prentice, Witt, & Hamer, 1998). Furthermore, heritage tourism has been considered as one of the most popular forms of tourism experiences because of its ability to provide intensive interaction opportunities with a destination's historical and cultural elements (Timothy, 2018).

Both cultural tourism and heritage tourism and their importance for tourism development have received significant attention from scholar. Scholars agree that cultural and heritage resources and attractions in a destination play critical roles in the success of tourism development in that destination (Li, Lau, & Su, 2020). Thus, a number of studies have emphasized the importance of cultural and heritage tourism experiences

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on the sustainable development of destinations (Baniya, Dogru-Dastan, & Thapa, 2020; Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016; Ebejer, Smith, Stevenson, & Maitland, 2020; Kempiak, Hollywood, Bolan, & McMahon-Beattie, 2017; Mgxekwa, Scholtz, & Saayman, 2019; Seyfi, Hall, & Rasoolimanesh, 2020; Smørvik, 2021; Ung & Vong, 2010). However, most of these studies mainly focused on cultural experiences rather than heritage experiences.

In the extant literature, cultural tourism and heritage tourism terms are sometimes used interchangeably without paying much attention to their meanings or definitions (Richards, 2000). While cultural tourism and heritage tourism share some similarities, there are also critical differences between them (Richards, 2002). First, heritage tourism is place-oriented, and thus, its attractions are specific to a destination and those attractions are nonrenewable and irreplaceable, whereas cultural tourism is people-based and offers opportunities for learning about and/or experiencing a tradition on-site such as participating in a local ritual (Piramanayagam, Rathore, & Seal, 2020). Second, cultural tourism can include a wide range of events, activities and tangible or intangible attractions. However, heritage tourism tends to be smaller scale, and every heritage attraction offers something unique and special to visitors (Albayrak, 2013). Third, while cultural tourism attractions evolve over time, heritage tourism attractions are static. The preservation of heritage tourism resources for future generations is a critical component of this form of tourism (Garrod & Fyall, 2000). Fourth, according to Richards (2000), while cultural tourism focuses on the past and present, thus enable cultural tourists to experience a culture, heritage tourism focuses on only the past. Fifth, while the primary cultural focus of cultural tourism is high culture or popular culture, heritage tourism's main focus is the folk culture. Thus, the primary form of consumption of cultural tourism is product- and process-based, while heritage tourism consumption is mainly process-based (Richards, 2000). Even though destination planners and managers use both forms of tourism in their tourism planning and development process since a number of tourist segments value both types of attractions at varying degrees, it is important to understand the components of both heritage and cultural tourism experiences. This study specifically investigates the components of heritage tourism experiences.

Studies that have examined heritage tourism experiences have mainly utilized a product-centric or a tourist-centric approach (Massara & Severino, 2013). While the tourist-centric approach paid some attention to heritage tourists' needs, motivations and experiences (Alazaizeh, Hallo, Backman, Norman, & Vogel, 2018; Kempiak et al., 2017; Su, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Tran, 2020), a comprehensive investigation of heritage tourism experiences from tourist perspective is still needed. Understanding the nature, determinants and dimensions of heritage tourism experiences can enable destination managers to improve their offerings and/or create new offerings and strategies for effective destination management.

While there is an increasing demand for destinations that offer memorable cultural and heritage experiences, a number of factors, including political, economic, social and technological, can influence travelers' decision-making and destination selection process (Swarbrooke & Horner, 1999). Among these, technological factors have become one of the most important factors in recent years (Huang, Goo, Nam, & Yoo, 2017) due to travelers' heavy utilization of online and mobile technologies during their decision-making process and also while visiting destinations (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Kempiak et al., 2017). The rapid development of these technologies over the last decade has also provided

opportunities for travelers to share their travel experiences and learn about others' experiences. As a result, user-generated content (UGC) has become one of the most frequently used information sources in the travel decision-making process (Huang et al., 2017). Tourists use these UGC websites to learn more about destinations, experiences offered in destinations, attractions, lodging facilities, and dining and entertainment options (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Simeon, Buonincontri, Cinquegrani, & Martone, 2017).

Reviews posted on social media platforms can have significant impacts on all phases of the travel decision-making process including pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip evaluations (Choe, Kim, & Fesenmaier, 2017; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Also, those comments and reviews can help service providers and destination managers better understand travel patterns, expectations, feelings, destination image perceptions, satisfiers and dissatisfiers that can influence tourist behaviors and intentions. Despite the importance of those comments for service providers and destination managers, most of the studies that examined consumer comments have mainly focused on tourists' use of social media and the adoption of social media by tourism businesses (Simeon et al., 2017).

Since the study of online review comments posted about heritage sites and heritage experiences can provide invaluable opportunities for exploring and understanding the heritage tourism experience evaluations and perceptions of tourists, this study aims to examine tourists' perceptions of heritage tourism experiences in order to identify the dimensions of heritage tourist experiences utilizing the UGC on a peer-to-peer information sharing platform and offer insight for understanding the factors that can affect the heritage tourists' evaluation of travel experiences at a destination.

2. Literature review

2.1. Heritage attractions

Heritage tourism has been receiving an increasing scholarly attention in recent decades. This interest has led to a proliferation of studies that examine heritage tourism experiences (Kempiak et al., 2017). Since heritage tourism is considered as a form of cultural tourism, some of those studies used cultural tourism and heritage tourism terms interchangeably even though heritage tourism is significantly different than cultural tourism as discussed earlier. As one of the fastest-growing tourism segments, heritage tourism relies on the availability and presentation of heritage resources, and interactions with locals in their everyday life setting (Timothy, 2011). Heritage resources of a destination include 'tangible assets, such as natural and cultural environments, encompassing ... landscapes, historic places, sites and built environments as well as intangible assets such as collections, past and continuing cultural practices, knowledge and living experiences' (McKercher, Ho, & Du Cros, 2005, p. 541). Studies suggest that heritage tourism attractions can be categorized into four hierarchical groups: world heritage, national heritage, local heritage and personal heritage attractions (Timothy, 1997). These heritage resources are often some of the most important reasons for visiting a destination (Su et al., 2020) and account for a majority of tourist arrivals (World Tourism Organization, 2018) since heritage experiences provide opportunities to strengthen tourists' sense of belonging and feeling toward a heritage destination (Fonseca & Ramos, 2012; Yang, 2017). Furthermore, as Nuryanti (1996) suggests, the interaction of the visitor with the

heritage attractions is one of the most critical determinants of tourism experiences. Thus, these heritage resources contribute to the formation of memorable tourist experiences (Seyfi et al., 2020) that can result in the formation of a much desirable destination image and increase tourists' revisit and positive WOM behaviors.

2.2. UGC and its role in heritage tourism experience

Recent advances in social media have dramatically changed travelers' information search and travel planning behavior (Ayeh et al., 2013), and the nature and timing of traveler preferences (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). Advances in information and communication technologies (Buhalis & Law, 2008) and UGC (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008) enabled travelers to easily access to information related to a destination's attributes and share their experiences with specific attractions in a destination and/or with the destination (Roque & Raposo, 2016). Furthermore, UGC provided by social media users has revolutionized how people search, organize, share, annotate, decide and contribute in a collaborative way (Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2011). Sharing opportunities provided by social media platforms transformed travelers from being passive information recipients to active information creators (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016) by enabling them to communicate, interact and build a relationship with destinations, tourism businesses and with other travelers (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Hudson & Thal, 2013).

UGC platforms have been identified as a crucial source for researchers who aim to define and explore tourist experiences and behaviors (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). For example, Thanh and Kirova (2018) concluded that the analysis of online reviews posted by tourists on social media plays an important role in understanding and exploring experiences. Past experiences in a destination can also play important roles in how travelers express their emotional and behavioral responses to a destination on social media platforms (Gross & John, 2003). Furthermore, Kim and Fesenmaier (2017) argue that information shared on social media platforms can influence the formation of post-trip experience evaluations. Findings of these studies suggest that tourists' perceptions of their experiences are not only formed based on their experiences in a destination but also based on the memories, experiences and information shared on social media platforms after a visit (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). Thus, UGC can provide critical operational information to managers (Öz, 2015). For this reason, the examination of UGC posted to social media platforms can provide opportunities for hotels, restaurants and destinations to improve their customers' experiences.

Destinations promote a wide range of heritage attractions and encourage visitors to share their experiences with those attractions on social media sites. Since information shared on social media sites enables potential visitors to gain information about heritage sites such as accessibility, historical information and availability of tangible and intangible assets (Lunchaprasith & Pasupa, 2019), most potential visitors to heritage sites heavily rely on the information shared by visitors in their trip planning process (Antonio, Correia, & Ribeiro, 2020). Thus, these platforms have drastically changed the way tourists perceive and engage with heritage attractions (Europeana, 2019).

The interaction and collaboration of heritage tourists through UGC platforms have been examined by several scholars (Baniya et al., 2020; Ebejer et al., 2020; Irimiás &

Volo, 2018). Those studies suggest that before the trip, tourists heavily utilize social media platforms that provide UGC to gather information about the heritage attractions they consider visiting. During their travels, tourists continue to utilize those platforms to decide what to do and what to visit, which play significant roles in their experiences with a destination. After their trip, they express and share their feelings and experiences through UGC platforms.

An enormous amount of data is generated by tourists visiting heritage attractions on social media since an increasing number of heritage tourists utilize novel technologies to continually share their experiences and impressions as they go (Hausmann & Weuster, 2018). Thus, online data are continuously produced by heritage tourists. Even though analyzing this qualitative data can provide significant insight about heritage tourists' motivations, needs, wants and expectations, a very limited body of tourism research has investigated this content generated by heritage tourists (Baniya et al., 2020).

2.3. Components of heritage tourists' experiences in destinations

Tourism experience in a destination refers to 'a unique, pleasurable and memorable experience, reflected as cumulative of attitudes, perceptions, feelings and emotions, which result as a series of interaction with people, process, objects and environment during entire stages of tourist phenomenon' (Bagdare, 2016, p. 719). Since all destinations aim to offer visitors memorable and pleasurable experiences by satisfying their needs through exceptional service and satisfactory experiences (Kim, 2014), their success heavily relies on identifying what kind of experiences tourists seek in a destination and the factors that can affect the formation of satisfactory tourism experience perceptions (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). An abundance of cultural and heritage resources is one of the most essential determinants of success in many destinations. Thus, several studies have investigated the importance of heritage resources on visitors' tourism experiences.

Some studies conducted on World Heritage Sites approached the visitor experience. Cetin and Bilgihan (2016) examined components of tourists' experiences in a World Heritage Site and proposed a five-dimensional experience construct: social interaction, local authentic clues, service, culture/heritage and challenge. Seyfi et al. (2020) investigated memorable tourism experiences in a heritage site and highlighted six components of it: 'prior perceived significance of the experience', 'authenticity', 'engagement', 'cultural exchange', 'culinary attraction' and 'quality of service'.

Ebejer et al. (2020) discussed the experiences of Valletta heritage urban visitors from three perspectives: interactions with heritage attractions, interactions with locals and other tourists and interactions with self/meaning. A research conducted in Angkor Wat, Cambodia heritage site, investigated tourist experiences through a sentiment and a topic analysis (Baniya et al., 2020). According to the findings of this study, sunset and sunrise experience, attraction structure, guided tours and temple experience resulted in positive sentiments, whereas crowding, persistent push from retailers, dress code requirements and expenses occurred resulted in negative sentiments. Smørvik (2021) attempted to understand the experiences of tourists visiting the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere by interviewing 15 visitors. Their interview questions included questions like which factors

motivate visitors to visit the Basilica of Santa Maria, what the Basilica of Santa Maria means for visitors, and their opinions and perceptions about their visit. Apart from these qualitative studies, a quantitative study was conducted on visitors to the 'Historic Center of Macau' (Ung & Vong, 2010). Visitors to the 'Historic Center of Macau' rated six dimensions such as site attributes, facilities and service at heritage sites, heritage interpretation and heritage attractiveness as critical elements of a heritage site. As evidenced in these studies, many scholars have investigated visitors' experiences in cultural and heritage sites. Even though some of these studies have examined heritage tourism experiences and their dimensions, they mainly interpreted and discussed visitors' overall experiences. Since heritage tourism experiences and their dimensions are likely to vary based on the heritage destination attributes and offerings, it is important to identify heritage tourism experiences and their dimensions in specific destinations since destination's history, culture and other characteristics can play significant roles in the experience formation process. Thus, this study aims to develop a comprehensive conceptualization of heritage tourism experiences of tourists who visit Istanbul and then identify dimensions of those experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research site: Istanbul

This study utilized online reviews of heritage sites posted by travelers who visited heritage attractions in Istanbul, Turkey. Istanbul was chosen as the research site because tourists and local communities consider cultural and heritage resources in Istanbul to be some of the most important world heritage resources (Altunel & Erkut, 2015). Many of Istanbul's historical areas and sites, such as 'Sultanahmet Archaeological Park', 'Suleymaniye Conservation Area', 'Zeyrek Conservation Area' and 'Land Walls Conservation Area', are inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2018). Furthermore, Istanbul is one of the most important cultural and historical tourist destinations in Turkey. Istanbul, the former capital of the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, is one of the oldest cities in the world, as the archaeological findings show that its first settlement dates back to at least 8,500 years. Thus, Istanbul has rich tangible and intangible heritage resources.

3.2. Research design

The purpose of this study is to determine the dimensions of heritage tourism experiences utilizing UGC and to offer insight for understanding the factors that can affect the heritage tourists' evaluation of travel experiences in a destination. To achieve this goal, the review comments posted to the largest travel social media platform, i.e. the TripAdvisor (O'Connor, 2010), have been analyzed within the scope of heritage experiences. This study adopted a qualitative case study approach since this approach is considered to be one of the best methods for understanding individuals' feelings and ideas (Creswell, 2003). A number of scholars have utilized UGC to explore and identify tourists' feelings and behaviors (Thanh & Kirova, 2018) due to its dependability and credibility (Zeng & Geritsen, 2014).

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Tripadvisor is the most frequently used peer-to-peer social media platform, where users share their experiences, memories, feelings and emotions about a destination and specific features of a destination such as local people, attractions, traffic, hospitality, restaurants, accommodations, flights, historical and cultural sites, architecture, and other travel products and services. Thus, Tripadvisor was chosen for data collection due to the availability of a diverse pool of reviews.

There are thousands of reviews about many historical areas and heritage sites in Istanbul on the TripAdvisor. The authors carefully selected heritage sites of Istanbul inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List, 'Sultanahmet Archaeological Park', 'Suleymaniye Conservation Area', 'Zeyrek Conservation Area' and 'Land Walls Conservation Area' based on the number of visitors each site receives. Only the comments posted about the heritage attractions in these inscribed areas were included in the analysis, such as Sultan Ahmed Mosque (Blue Mosque), Zeyrek Mosque, Süleymaniye Mosque, Hagia Sophia, Walls of Constantinople, Hagia Irene, The Hippodrome of Constantinople and Little Hagia Sophia.

Only reviews about the heritage tourism experiences in selected sites that were posted between January and December 31, 2019 were chosen due to major events that had taken place in the study site in the previous year and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. For example, there were terror attacks around attractions investigated in this study in 2018, and this impacted tourism experiences negatively. Furthermore, 2019 was the year with the most tourists visiting heritage attractions (approximately 15 million) according to Istanbul Provincial Culture and Tourism Directorate. The number of reviews was distributed as approximately equal to all months of 2019. Only reviews commented in English were included, which resulted in the identification of 5212 reviews about tourist's experiences in heritage sites inscribed by the UNESCO.

Data were analyzed utilizing a conventional content analysis, which can be defined as 'an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications' (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, p. 243). The conventional content analysis is usually used in social sciences such as human communication, including permutations of written documents, photographs, motion pictures or videotapes and audiotapes (Berg, 2001). In tourism research, content analysis has been frequently used to extract and examine words and expressions from online reviews (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; Taucharungroj & Mathayomchan, 2019). Content analysis enables researchers to properly organize a large amount of text and identify a concise summary of main themes that may exist in the data (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Reviews included in this study were first entered into Microsoft Word. Data were analyzed utilizing a data reduction strategy (i.e. line-by-line coding or open coding, axial coding and selective coding) suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Data reduction and coding were performed manually by authors instead of using qualitative content analysis programs such as Nvivo and MAXQDA. Despite the development of computer-aided programs for data reduction and coding, manual coding is considered to be more reliable; thus, it has been used by various researchers in tourism experience studies because of its effectiveness (Simeon et al., 2017; Sterchele, 2020). Furthermore, manual coding tends to result in creative and unique solutions in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). As argued by Krippendorff (2004), the manual coding can produce a

better organized and more efficient coding than the coding generated by qualitative content analysis software programs.

First, a line-by-line coding or open coding was performed in order to organize the research data and classify them into meaningful categories (Kyngäs, 2020; Singh, 2007). All review comments selected for the study were read by authors independently. In this stage, the authors identified, categorized and created a list of propositions from the data set. This first coding process was consisting of a close inspection of the research data. The independent coders analyzed the data as word-for-word, line-by-line and phrase-by-phrase (Douglas, 2003). The main purpose of this phase was to divide large parts of body of text into smaller slices to be examined in detail. Table 1 demonstrates how coders performed the open coding. In Table 2, the first column presents the actual data taken from the reviews posted on heritage sites, the second one presents the outcome of the first coding process extracted from the reviews. Every initial code was carefully examined to extract the intended meaning of the comment in order to provide reviewers' perspective. The process of identified codes led to the axial coding stage. This second phase helped researcher to reduce the database into smaller categories, which were considered subthemes of main components or dimensions. The coders, then regrouped the data into indicators of main components. Finally, the selective coding was applied after axial coding. The objective of this last stage was to select focal core codes that were generated by individual coders. The main and core codes were identified as a result of this stage. Table 2 shows how the author performed the axial and selective coding processes.

After all coding processes are completed, authors categorized each review into specific categories. After individual coding, coders compared the categorization of the reviews. Miscategorized reviews were further discussed until a consensus was reached. Afterward, the list of categories was narrowed down by combining similar categories into more inclusive categories (McCain, 1988). The purpose of this process was to reduce the number of categories by collapsing those that were similar or dissimilar into a more

Table 1. An illustrative example of open coding.

Online review (extracted from the TripAdvisor)	Open coding
<p>... After the treatment, you sit in the entrance area on soft cushions surrounded by wooden staircases and wood panels sipping Turkish tea while you get ready to face the real world again ...</p> <p>... The old church certainly has character! It's absolutely amazing inside from the architecture, to the painted ceilings & documented history. I learnt quite a bit ...</p> <p>... It is famous for its massive dome, impressive ceilings & vast collection of holy relics. It stands as a restatement to the sophistication of a 6th century Byzantine capital & epitome of Byzantine architecture. A c ...</p> <p>... The mosque lived up to my expectation and the lighting that comes with the azan was great too (see pictures) ...</p> <p>... The Hagia Sophia is a very interesting place. One of the oldest churches in the world, and the blueprint of many of the mosques in Istanbul. However there is not a lot of information about the church inside of it, so it is worth shelling out a few more to get a guide. Just make sure you get a fully accredited one, they have licenses.</p>	<p>Drinking Turkish tea in a local way; a sense of real; old building; architecture; painted ceilings and documented history; massive dome; impressive ceilings and vast collection; impressive ceilings and vast collection; the azan was great; interesting place; get a licensed guide.</p>

Table 2. The coding processes.

Open coding (line-by-line coding)	Axial coding	Main themes (selective coding)
... Extraordinary, magnificent, wonderful, admiring, impressive, amazing, excellent, pride, smartness, mesmerizing, breathtaking, fascinating, incredible, stunning, marvelous, superb, fabulous, overwhelming, spectacular, gorgeous, great, perfect and mystical features of heritage resources ...	The awe concept, the admiring of a heritage attraction.	The awe that enhances the formation of heritage tourism experiences of visitors.
... Craftsmanship, local atmosphere, Bosphorus (the strait of Istanbul), Golden Horn, Turkish Baths, the azan (call to prayer for Muslims), streets, Ramadan, Turkish tea, coffee, delight and local shops (spice, carpet and souvenirs) ...	Authentic clues of visitors perceived as unique and pristine experience toward the heritage attractions	Authenticity is a theme that comprises the opinions, ideas and feelings of heritage tourists against the culture of the destination.

extensive and inclusive category (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). After several iterations, authors were able to reach a consensus on the categories and the reviews to be included in each category. After determining the categories, authors consulted a group of researchers who had extensive experience in studying cultural heritage tourism and tourist experiences. This process resulted in the identification of 59 categories (codes). Afterward, authors further discussed the categories in order to determine the six themes, which resulted in the identification of themes: authenticity, the importance of guide, cultural values, sense of heritage, local hospitality and awe.

4. Results and discussion

As presented in Table 3, the majority of the reviews analyzed were written by couples (39.1%). While reviewers from over 20 nations shared their experiences, most of them were from Europe. A large portion of reviewers posted 50–100 reviews, while 482 reviewers posted over 501 comments, which provided strong evidence for the credibility and trustworthiness of reviews posted (Amaral, Tiago, & Tiago, 2014).

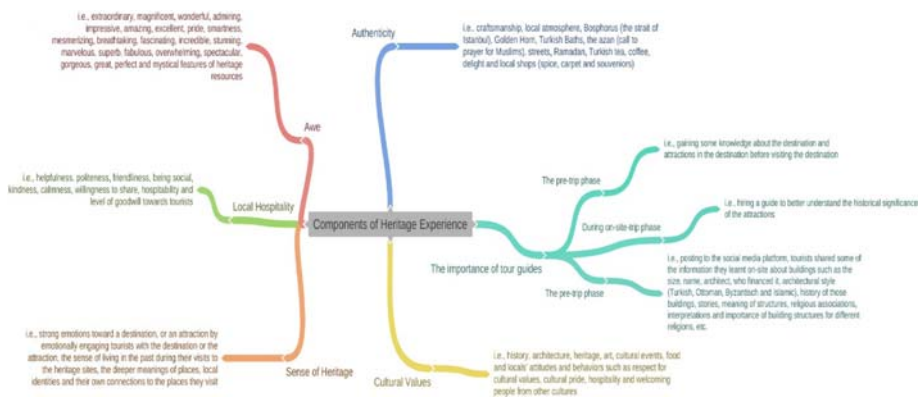


Figure 1. Components of heritage tourism experiences in Istanbul.

Table 3. Reviewers' characteristics.

	N	%
<i>Trip type</i>		
Family	1257	24,2
Couple	2036	39,1
Solo	810	15,5
Friends	1021	19,6
Business	88	1,7
<i>Nationality</i>		
America	744	18,9
Europe	1701	43,1
Africa	149	3,8
Asia	120	21,4
Australia	248	6,3
Unspecified	1270	
<i>Total review</i>		
0–100	3608	68,6
101–200	607	11,6
201–300	297	5,7
301–400	153	2,9
401–500	95	1,8
501+	482	9,2
<i>Rating</i>		
1	51	1,0
2	147	2,8
3	478	9,2
4	952	18,3
5	3584	68,8
Total	5212	

This study identified six dimensions as key components affecting heritage tourism experiences in Istanbul as shown in Figure 1. While most reviews analyzed in this study were positive, many of them included some unpleasant challenges with their experience. Despite these challenges, most reviewers recommended the destination to others and indicated that they will revisit Istanbul. For example, C498 mentioned that

During our recent visit, due to renovations, there was only small amount of water with puddles formed in certain parts of the cistern. The reduced amount of water steals from the ambiance and allure of this amazing place. I hope they complete their renovations soon enough to give the visitors the atmospheric feel they come here for ... I would definitely recommend a visit.

Findings clearly indicated that the uniqueness of heritage resources results in satisfaction and loyalty toward the destination. Findings further suggested that most reviewers' (3584) satisfaction levels were 5 and 952 of them were 4. The average of satisfaction score was 4.51. Considering the fact that satisfaction level was measured on a five-point Likert type scale, an average satisfaction score of 4.51 clearly indicated a very high overall satisfaction level with their heritage tourism experiences in Istanbul.

4.1. Authenticity

Findings of this study suggest that authenticity plays a key role in tourists' cultural heritage experience formation process. Tourists associated authenticity with craftsmanship, local atmosphere, Bosphorus (the strait of Istanbul), Golden Horn, Turkish Baths, the azan (call to prayer for Muslims), streets, Ramadan, Turkish tea, coffee, delight and local

shops (spice, carpet and souvenirs). Reviews conceptualized the authenticity as being genuine, real or true. All clues related to authenticity were seen as unique and original. As argued in prior studies (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016; Seyfi et al., 2020), authenticity can be regarded as one of the most important dimensions of tourist experience, especially in cultural heritage destinations. Findings of this study also indicate that that authenticity is one of the most important dimensions of tourist experience in heritage tourism. C1304, C2361, C1055 and C2967 who shared their experiences about heritage sites commented that:

- C1304: 'The architecture is very well preserved even today. The walls are still strong with marbles in walls so preserved that no one can believe it is nearly 1500 years old.'
- C361: 'The arts and unique tiles together with the magnificent view of Istanbul ...'
- C1055: 'Both outside and in, this small building holds great appeal - now augmented by the nearby square holding small workshops of a variety of traditional craftsmen.'
- C2967: 'I would recommend sitting in the square with a coffee or tea and absorbing the beauty of the Hagia Sophia and the Blue mosque around you.'

As suggested in previous studies, authenticity is an important component of heritage tourism experience (Park, Choi, & Lee, 2019) and is a basic component in terms of heritage tourism development (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003). In a destination, heritage elements are evaluated based on the perception of authenticity felt by cultural tourists (Cohen, 1988). Authenticity, in a sense, embraces the traditional culture and origin of local people and genuinely reflects the true nature of local culture (MacCannell, 1973). Thus, a quest for authentic experiences is the main reason for visiting historic and heritage destinations, and it is a critical determinant of tourist experience quality perceptions (Domínguez-Quintero, González-Rodríguez, & Roldán, 2019). For heritage tourists, the authenticity of local customs, traditions, arts, history, attractions and culture are critical (Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 2010). An analysis of the comments indicated that 'genuineness' of the experiences plays a critical role in the authenticity perception formation process.

Studies that investigated heritage tourism experiences reported that the authenticity is one of the most important motivating factors for heritage tourists (Park et al., 2019). Authenticity in tourism studies is often associated with unique and pristine tourism objects, destinations and tourist experiences (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). A study by Chen and Chen (2010) concluded that authenticity increases the perceived value and satisfaction of heritage tourists. In addition, authenticity has been viewed as a crucial pull factor that impacts tourists' overall perceptions that can have a significant impact on destination image (Frost, 2006; Naoi, 2004).

4.2. The importance of tour guides

During all phases of a trip, pre-trip, on-site and post-trip, tourists utilize various information sources to gain knowledge about various aspects of the destination they visit. Findings indicate that knowledge gained during the pre-trip phase about the destination and attractions is critical. Most commenters suggested that a person who is planning on visiting heritage areas should gain some knowledge about the destination and attractions in the destination before visiting the destination. C1737 has commented that 'One of the biggest early Christian church. It's really impressive. Also, the mosaic inside, each one has its own history and meaning, read about them before.' In their postings to the social

media platform, tourists shared some of the information they learned on-site about buildings such as the size, name, architect, who financed it, architectural style (Turkish, Ottoman, Byzantine and Islamic), history of those buildings, stories, meaning of structures, religious associations, interpretations and importance of building structures for different religions. Commenters strongly recommended to hire a guide or use audio guides and to bring a guidebook that explains the attraction in detail. For instance, C3719, C3835 and C416 emphasized the importance of hiring a guide to better understand the historical significance of the attractions as follows:

C3719:

'The architecture of the building felt unique and the interior of the mosque was stunning and the history was rich and felt the presence of unity. If you are there, do get a guide to understand and enjoy your visit.'

C3835 'A guide is a must as there is so much to explore and collect knowledge about the past of the country.'

C416:

'Take a guided tour. It's good to have that to appreciate the history/myth/stories past thru generations.'

Knowledge, as a cognitive component of tourism experiences, consists of learning and enlightening. Traveling results in experiential learning, which can help us better understand places and people (Li, 2000). Gaining knowledge and better understanding is the most important part of the heritage tourism experiences. Most studies have reported that tourism experiences in heritage sites provide an opportunity to learn new things about local culture, history, language and geography and enable visitors to gain new insights and skills (Poria, Reichel, & Brian, 2006; Richards, 2002). Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) argue that having enough knowledge about the destination and the local culture is important for the creation of memorable tourism experiences. Also, Tung and Ritchie (2011) suggest that intellectual development and learning about the history, local culture, way-of-life, natural physiography and language of locals in a destination are some of the most significant memorable components of tourism experiences.

4.3. Cultural values

According to the findings of this study, the elements of cultural tourism experience include history, architecture, heritage, art, cultural events, food and locals' attitudes and behaviors such as respect for cultural values, cultural pride, hospitality and welcoming people from other cultures. C3719, C4051 and C508 express their experiences as follows:

C3719: 'When I was there it took my breath away when I was walking towards it from far, the architecture of the building felt unique, and the interior of the mosque was stunning and the history was rich and felt the presence of unity.'

C4051: 'Worth queuing to see the Holy room with prayers, swords, and hair of the prophet Muhammed.'

C1151: 'A very beautiful mixture of two different religions ... Excellent artworks, hand painted ceramic tiles, colourful windows, huge marble slabs.'

Cultural experiences play a pivotal role in the development of heritage destinations all around the world (Dredge, 2004) because it is a key component of tourism experience (Artal-Tur, Villena-Navarro, & Alamá-Sabater, 2018). Satisfactory cultural experiences

offered by destinations are also viewed as a catalyst for economic growth in destinations and a tool for creating a competitive advantage in the marketplace (OECD, 2009). A comprehensive understanding of cultural experience expectations of tourists is vital for a destination's long-term success. Thus, it is critical for destination managers to truly understand the components of cultural tourism experiences.

4.4. Sense of heritage

Generation of a sense is a key tool used in experience development because a sense can result in the generation of strong emotions toward a destination or an attraction by emotionally engaging tourists with the destination or the attraction. Great heritage attractions stimulate and stir emotions, which is an important phase in the process of experience creation. Many reviews mentioned the sense of living in the past during their visits to the heritage sites. Many of the reviews analyzed in this study emphasized that the heritage sites they visited created a sense the heritage.

For example, C1471 state that 'The Byzantium era building and still standing as a heritage to the current societies to review the era of historic development.'

C339 and C397 expressed their experience as follows:

C3167: 'It is a very fulfilling experience to be offering prayers in such a historical mosque with such unique architectural and cultural heritage.'

C443: 'it looked for me as one of the last embodiments of all ages, a town that survived a millennia.'

Timothy (2018, p.178) defines the sense of heritage as

that which we inherit from the past, use today and pass on to future generations, potential heritage resources are vast and widespread, and they include many objects, places, events, people and phenomena not heretofore considered to be traditional heritage tourism products. By the same token, people are becoming more sophisticated in their travel tastes and desires; many are showing more interest in the deeper meanings of places, local identities and their own connections to the places they visit.

Smith (2006) argues that a sense of heritage is not only related to possession but also related to passing on and receiving memories and knowledge. The sense of heritage helps us understand who we 'are' and who we want to be (Smith, 2006).

4.5. Local hospitality

Social interactions that take place in tourism settings mostly take place between travelers participating in different tourism activities and locals. Hospitality attitudes of locals, such as helpfulness, politeness, friendliness, being social, kindness, calmness, willingness to share, hospitability and level of goodwill towards tourists, play an important role in how tourists view their experiences. Local hospitality, in reviews posted to the TripAdvisor, is mostly described by the following adjectives: friendly, nice, social hospitable, generous, helpful, wonderful, welcoming, respectful, welcoming, knowledgeable, beautiful and perfectly peaceful. Reviewers have indicated that local hospitality is an important component of heritage experience, which is consistent with the finding of studies that the level of local hospitality affects tourists' overall assessment of their travel experiences

(Mansour & Ariffin, 2017). For example, three reviewers (C84, C2831 and C1523) shared their experience on the site as such:

- C84: 'For such a revered house of worship, the mosque's staff surely hosted every tourist well and respectfully.'
- C2831: 'This was my first visit to a mosque, and I was not sure of my reception. It turned out to be a very warm welcome with friendly and helpful staff.'
- C1523: 'Locals (Staff) were very friendly, polite and professional, we enjoyed the experience'.

Tourists and hosts encounter occur in three main contexts: while buying goods or services offered by the local host, interacting with locals while visiting historical and cultural heritage attractions, and sharing information and ideas with each other (de Kadt, 1979). In these contexts, not only the cultural heritage products and services but also the interactions with locals help shape tourists' heritage experiences (Zgolli & Zaiem, 2017). The perceived friendliness, helpfulness and hospitableness of local people are very crucial for providing a memorable heritage tourism experience. Positive interactions with and a warm reception from locals can make tourists feel welcome in a destination (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Kim, 2014). Positive interactions with locals can result in the creation of unforgettable moments in tourists' cultural heritage experiences (Cetin & Okumus, 2018). Many of the reviews specifically emphasized local hospitality as 'Turkish Hospitality'. A study by Cetin and Okumus (2018) identified the elements of the Turkish Hospitality as sociability, care, helpfulness and generosity, which are similar to the local hospitality elements of heritage tourism experience identified in the current study. Local hospitality plays an important role in the creation of positive tourism experiences in a heritage destination because it can result in high tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty, which are very important for any destinations' success.

4.6. Awe

Another dimension of heritage tourism experience identified in this study is the awe, which refers to a feeling of being impressed with heritage resources of a destination. According to the finding of this study, the elements of awe include extraordinary, magnificent, wonderful, admiring, impressive, amazing, excellent, pride, smartness, mesmerizing, breathtaking, fascinating, incredible, stunning, marvelous, superb, fabulous, overwhelming, spectacular, gorgeous, great, perfect and mystical features of heritage resources. While heritage resources can arouse excitement, emotional appreciation of those resources can result in positive behavioral intentions (Hosany, Prayag, Deesilatham, Caušević, & Odeh, 2015). Accordingly, findings about the dimension of awe indicate that reviewers who express their experiences with awe strongly recommend others to visit the destination and the attraction.

For instance, C20 stated as, 'These magnificent mosques show the taste of Muslim emperors towards buildings. The carvings on the walls are awesome.'

C1071 mentioned as, 'Great place with magnificent view of the Historical Mosque. I've visited with my friends, and it's a truly incredible mosque.'

The dimension of awe describes what makes tourists be impressed by exceeding their highest expectations. It is an emotional response to highly satisfactory cultural heritage

experiences (Simeon et al., 2017). Hosany et al. (2015) identify joy, love and positive surprise as the three key components of emotional experience with a destination. These can create a sense of cheerfulness, delight, enthusiasm, joy, pleasure and amazement. C1567 expresses his/her awe and emotional experience with visiting the site as,

The building is glorious from the outside, but the interiors are even more stunning. Among a backdrop is some of the most iconic pieces of giant Islamic calligraphy. There are frescos of the Virgin Mary with Jesus, beautiful quranic calligraphy and extraordinary dome roof interiors. Remnants of its life as a mosque remain in the form of a magnificent ornate Minbar steps and Mihrab. (niche that points the way to Makkah)

The generation of awe is the most desirable outcome for destination planners because they desire tourists to be delighted with the destination attributes and services (Coghlan, Buckley, & Weaver, 2012). Awe also influences behavioral intentions and attitudes of tourists toward services (Faullant, Matzler, & Mooradian, 2011). However, awe and its effects on experience have received little attention in tourism literature (Wang & Lyu, 2019). Thus, this study makes a critical contribution to the tourism literature.

5. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

Heritage resources play a major role in tourism experiences by enabling tourists to experience the traditions and cultures of a destination. This study explores the dimensions of heritage tourism experiences utilizing UGC and offers insight for understanding the factors that can affect the heritage tourists' evaluation of travel experiences in heritage destinations. This study identified six dimensions of heritage tourism experience. These dimensions include authenticity, local hospitality, the importance of guide, cultural value, a sense of cultural heritage and awe. These dimensions are mostly consistent with the findings of previous studies on tourism experiences. While the importance of guide (Kim & Ritchie, 2014) and hospitality (Kim, 2014) dimensions is similar to dimensions identified in studies that investigated the dimensions of the memorable tourist experiences in a destination, authenticity (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016; Park et al., 2019; Simeon et al., 2017), the importance of guide (Simeon et al., 2017) and local hospitality (Cetin & Okumus, 2018) components are similar to the dimensions reported in studies that examined tourist experiences in cultural destinations. Three dimensions identified in this study, awe, cultural value and a sense of cultural heritage, are unique to this study since no other studies have identified these as critical dimensions of heritage tourism experiences.

This research found that authenticity is one of the most important factors that represent the heritage experience. Findings of this study further suggest that authentic, unique and distinctive attributes of a destination play a major role in cultural tourist experience (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016; Seyfi et al., 2020). These findings are consistent with the findings of previous studies that reported authenticity to be an important and strong predictor of heritage tourists' revisit intentions (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016; Park et al., 2019; Seyfi et al., 2020; Simeon et al., 2017). Furthermore, these authentic heritage resources pull tourists to visit a destination by significantly increasing tourists' desire to visit and experience those resources (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013; Frisvoll, 2013).

As argued by Pine and Gilmore (1999), the education dimension of an experience is another specific determinant of tourists' experiences. Some studies on tourist experience demonstrated that learning about the culture and heritage of a destination influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Hosany & Witham, 2009; Mahdzar et al., 2017; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Furthermore, learning about the cultural heritage of a destination leads to better recollection of travel experiences later (Kim et al., 2012; Kim & Chen, 2021).

Findings also suggest that cultural values allow tourists to create their own experiences in a destination and these values are regarded as important components of travel experiences (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). Huh and Uysal (2004) examined the role of cultural and heritage attributes on tourist satisfaction. They reported a significant relationship between these attributes and tourist satisfaction. Thus, it is important for destination planners to take into account these cultural values of destinations to attract and satisfy tourist needs (Seyfi et al., 2020).

Another key component of heritage tourism experience is the awe that reflects a feeling of being overwhelmed with cultural values and heritage attractions of a destination. Reviewers stated that history, architecture, heritage, art, cultural events, food and locals' attitudes and behaviors are the most remarkable heritage values of the destination. Furthermore, reviewers described these values and attractions as extraordinary, magnificent, wonderful, admiring, impressive, amazing, excellent, smart, mesmerizing, breathtaking, graceful and mystical that may lead to the formation of awe and tourist loyalty (Hosany et al., 2015). These values result in the formation of a sense of heritage feelings and awe while visiting those heritage attractions. This sense of heritage feeling and awe can actually connect visitors to a destination and create a memorable experience for heritage tourists (Seyfi et al., 2020; Timothy, 2018). Moreover, as discussed by Smith (2006), a sense of heritage and awe enables tourists to disseminate and retrieve memories and knowledge about their heritage experiences.

Dwyer and Kim (2003) view the concept of hospitality as 'the perceived friendliness of the local population and community attitudes towards tourists. It includes: warmth of reception by local population; willingness of residents to provide information to tourists; attitudes towards tourists and the tourism industry.' Positive social interactions with locals or employees in a destination lead to higher satisfaction, loyalty and recommendation intentions (Cetin & Dincer, 2014). The same is true for heritage destinations, where local and commercial hospitality are pivotal intangible elements of heritage experiences and local hospitality can have a strong impact on the creation of positive destination experiences for tourists. As a result of positive interactions, tourists are likely to recommend the destination and post positive comments about their experiences (Mansour & Ariffin, 2017).

Heritage destinations differ from other destinations because a large number of factors can influence the heritage tourism experience perception formation process in a destination. Furthermore, the interpretation of heritage resources by individuals from different cultural backgrounds and their ties to various cultures and religions around the world further complicates the issue. In addition, the expectations and sociodemographic characteristics of those who visit heritage destinations significantly differ from those who visit other destinations such as mass tourism destinations. Thus, it is not surprising for heritage tourism experience to have some dimensions that are specific to heritage tourism experiences. The dimensions identified in this study give us insight into what tourists experience

while visiting a heritage site and how it affects their overall heritage experience perceptions. Finding suggests that monitoring the peer-to-peer social media platforms and examining the posts can provide significant and reliable information about the operational strengths and weaknesses of a heritage attraction or a destination.

From a theoretical perspective, findings of this study enhance the tourism experience literature by exploring and understanding the dimensions of heritage tourism experiences and distinguishing the heritage tourism experiences from other tourism experiences such as food, culinary, adventure, rural and natural. In addition, findings of this study reveal that the dimensions of heritage tourism experiences vary from a destination to destination because of unique features and characteristics of each destination.

5.2. Managerial implications

Findings clearly suggest that heritage tourism experience is a complex and a multi-dimensional phenomenon. This study has identified the dimensions of heritage tourism experiences, which can help managers of heritage sites and attractions to develop strategies to ensure that all visitors are satisfied with their heritage tourism experiences while visiting their attractions or destinations. Thus, findings yield important managerial insights for destination stakeholders. The magnitude and the direction of the effect of each dimension on tourists' overall heritage tourism experience are likely to vary. It is also important for local tourism authorities in heritage sites to understand that tourists' satisfaction level with their heritage tourism experiences affects their attitudes and behaviors. Thus, it is important for managers to identify the dimensions that can have the largest effect on heritage tourism experiences and develop operational strategies and action plans to exceed tourists' expectations in those areas. Furthermore, destinations can develop appropriate heritage tourism products and policies for the sustainable development of their destinations by enabling the delivery of satisfactory services related to heritage tourism experiences by all stakeholders that exceed tourists' expectations.

Satisfaction with cultural and heritage experiences is critical for destination managers and tourism business owners. Thus, providing satisfactory heritage experiences that meet tourists' multidimensional expectations, needs and demands are important for the success of any heritage destination (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Destination managers should take each dimension of heritage tourism experiences into consideration while building their sustainable cultural tourism policies and strategies. Findings of this study suggest that authenticity, cultural values, cultural heritage and local hospitality are important components of heritage experiences (Akova & Atsız, 2019). These components can enable tourists to experience unique and original heritage values in a destination. Destination marketers can promote these components to attract more cultural and heritage tourists. Since these components are important for developing a creative and sustainable heritage destination, heritage destination managers should collaborate closely with other stakeholders in a destination to develop and preserve unique heritage values.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Like other studies, this study is not free from limitations. First, this study examined the dimensions of heritage tourism experience utilizing UGC for heritage tourism experiences

in Istanbul, Turkey. Thus, the findings are likely to be destination-specific and cannot be generalized across all destinations. Future research should be conducted in other destinations in order to validate the heritage experience dimensions reported in this study. Secondly, this study investigated only the heritage experience dimensions utilizing UGC. Since only a small portion of travelers share their experiences online, findings may only reflect the heritage experience of that group. Thus, it may be necessary to investigate the dimensions of heritage tourism experiences utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Since other factors such as the heritage experience quality and perceived experience value can also have a significant impact on traveler's overall experience perception, future studies should identify other critical factors that may influence experience perceptions and investigate the magnitude and direction of their effects on overall experience perceptions. Further to this, this study was mainly focused on online narratives posted by international travelers about heritage attractions that were in World Heritage Sites. We think that they experienced such areas under the world heritage perception. Further research could inspect another aspect of heritage such as local, national or personal. This will be provided us to capture the main picture of heritage experience. Finally, COVID-19 has impacted a wide range of industries including the tourism industry and the movement of tourists. Since tourists are not able to visit attractions physically due to the pandemic, several heritage sites and museums have started offering virtual tours utilizing virtual reality technology (Atsız, 2021). Since virtual tours are becoming an important part of the new normal in tourism, future studies should investigate the role of virtual heritage experience on heritage tourists' attitudes and behaviors.

Disclosure statement

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