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Visitors' experiences of Deyrulzafaran Monastery through netnography approach

Netnografi yaklaşımıyla ziyaretçilerin Deyrulzafaran Manastırı deneyimleri

Serkan Yiğit^{1*}, Abidin Can Aktaş²

¹Mardin Artuklu University, Gastronomy and Culinary Arts, serkanyigit@artuklu.edu.tr, 0000-0003-1284-7236

²Mardin Artuklu University, Turism Guide, abidincanaktas@gmail.com, 0000-0002-6176-3728

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the experiences and perceptions of visitors to Deyrulzafaran Monastery using the netnography method. Netnography is a research method that aims to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives by examining content shared in online communities and social media platforms. By examining visitor comments on TripAdvisor, the study reveals how visitors perceive the touristic experiences of Deyrulzafaran Monastery. The content analysis revealed six components that characterize visitors' experiences at Deyrulzafaran Monastery. These components include unforgettable experience, satisfaction, intention to recommend and revisit, historical experience, cultural learning experience, gastronomic experience, and guide of attributes. This netnographic analysis aims to contribute to a better understanding of visitor experiences at cultural and historical sites, as well as the development of tourism management strategies. Especially in the digital age, analyzing visitor feedback provides important information on how tourism destinations can adapt to meet visitor expectations.

ÖZET

Bu makale, netnografi yöntemi kullanılarak Deyrulzafaran Manastırı'nı ziyaret eden ziyaretçilerin deneyimlerini ve algılarını analiz etmektedir. Netnografi, çevrimiçi topluluklar ve sosyal medya platformlarında paylaşılan içerikleri inceleyerek katılımcıların deneyimlerini ve bakış açılarını derinlemesine anlamayı amaçlayan bir araştırma metodudur. Çalışma, TripAdvisor'da yer alan ziyaretçi yorumlarını inceleyerek, Deyrulzafaran Manastırı'nın turistik deneyimlerinin nasıl algılandığını ortaya koymaktadır. İçerik analizi sonucunda Deyrulzafaran Manastırı'nı ziyaret eden ziyaretçilerin deneyimleri altı bileşen olarak belirlenmiştir. Bu bileşenler; unutulmaz deneyim, memnuniyet, tavsiye etme ve tekrar ziyaret etme niyeti, tarihsel deneyim, kültürel öğrenme deneyimi, gastronomik deneyim ve rehber özellikleri şeklindedir. Bu netnografik analiz, kültürel ve tarihi mekanların ziyaretçi deneyimlerinin daha iyi anlaşılmasına ve turizm yönetimi stratejilerinin geliştirilmesine katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Özellikle dijital çağda, ziyaretçi geri bildirimlerinin analiz edilmesi, turizm destinasyonlarının ziyaretçi beklentilerini karşılamak için nasıl adapte olabileceğine dair önemli bilgiler sunmaktadır.

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage tourism refers to the act of traveling with the purpose of seeing locations, events, and objects that symbolize the customs and narratives of previous generations. This tourist activity is said to have evolved as an alternative activity in the late 1970s (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation [ACHP], 2002; Du Cros & McKercher, 2014). The rise of cultural tourism has brought attention to tourist destinations' appealing local cultural aspects, including their historical, linguistic, scientific, managerial, agricultural, commercial, musical, artistic, industrial, artisanal, and culinary features. Furthermore, the appraisal also considers architectural works, the local population, and the architectural composition of the

destination. Cultural tourism is seen as a means of safeguarding local identity and uniqueness due to its reliance on these aspects (Doğanay, 1989; McKercher & Cros, 2002; Uslu & Kiper, 2006; Şenel & Çelik, 2023).

Visitors want to experience a comprehensive tourism offering that encompasses local goods and infrastructure in order to fulfill many requirements simultaneously. Therefore, a tourism product is considered to be an experiential product, where every encounter that visitors have throughout their trip is seen as a tourism product (Arsenault & Gale, 2004; Goldsmith & Tsotsou, 2012). Cultural tourists also see this encounter as a cultural immersion. The primary motivations for visitors seeking a cultural experience when visiting a destination include the opportunity to meet new people, learn

new skills, engage in various cultural events, and the willingness to spend money on travel (Chiang et al., 2015, Erdoğan, 2024).

Tourism has a crucial role in a nation like Türkiye, characterized by its distinctive history, youthful population, and many natural and cultural wonders. When engaging in tourism activities, it is crucial to have a comprehensive awareness of the expectations and desires of visitors, since this is just as significant as the activities themselves. Visitors' perceptions of tourist items may vary due to the abstract nature of these things. Therefore, it is crucial to assess the experience of both domestic and international visitors at the specific location they go to (Cavlak & Cop, 2019).

The Deyrulzafaran Monastery, which attracts thousands of visitors annually as a key destination on cultural tours, is widely regarded as one of the most significant treasures of Mardin. The service quality is also influenced by the feedback provided by visitors about these ideas, as well as their own experiences. The study aims to examine the visitors' experiences of Deyrulzafaran Monastery, a highly frequented attraction in Mardin. The findings may be crucial for the development of the region as a living museum and for enhancing service quality. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research in the realm of tourism about the Deyrulzafaran Monastery, a place that is often mentioned in literature and attracts regular visitors. Additionally, there is a dearth of studies examining the experiences of visitors at this location. This study will analyze tourist feedback on Deyrulzafaran Monastery and uncover their overall experience.

2. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Visitor Experience

The focus of tourism destinations has always been on visitor experiences (Seyfi, Hall, & Rasoolimanesh, 2020). The tourism industry provides visitors with a range of experiences including hospitality, entertainment, events, leisure activities, transportation, and sports. Visitors' vacation experiences might be characterized as profound and exceptional (Morgan et al., 2010; Quan & Wang, 2004; Walls et al., 2011). Hence, the visitor experience might be characterized as a multifaceted and intricate cognitive process. Given its intricate composition, formulating a singular description is very challenging (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Jennings, 2006; Selstad, 2007). Nevertheless, within this intricate framework, a tourism experience may be characterized as a subjective cognitive phenomenon experienced by the visitor while availing themselves of touristic services (Otto & Ritchie, 1996).

Tourism is primarily a phenomenon in which visitors acquire knowledge, observe, get pleasure from, visit, and engage with many ways of life (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). According to Oh et al. (2007), visitors perceive, behave, feel, or think based on every circumstance they encounter at the location. These sensations may also arise from events or actions (Smith, 2003). Despite it being a physical setting, the staff, management, and atmosphere may influence visitors' experiences (Uriely, 2005). Tung and Ritchie (2011) defined touristic experience as the visitor's assessment of tourist

events and activities before, during, and after the journey. When analyzing the tourist experience from a structural perspective, it is assessed as the combination of supporting experiences and peak experiences. Quan and Wang (2004) define the visitor's major travel motivations as examples of the most intense experiences, whilst experiences related to the visitor's basic needs when traveling are referred to as supplemental experiences.

According to Goeldner and Ritchie (2007), museums and ruins are regarded as significant cultural attractions in tourism destinations. Visiting museums and historical places is a significant component of a visitor's overall tourism experience (Harman & Akgündüz, 2014). According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), in the current economic system, buyers need memorable and distinctive experiences when acquiring a product, in addition to its quality and utility. There is a growing rivalry among museums and cultural heritage institutions to attract a portion of the tourist population. Thus, in this highly competitive setting, the level of uniqueness in the works shown to visitors, including those exhibited at museums and cultural heritage sites, significantly impacts the whole tourism experience based on how well they fulfill expectations (Harman & Akgündüz, 2014; Altürk et al., 2024).

The importance of visitor experience for the tourism industry has been mentioned above. Another importance of the visitor experience for the tourism industry is its analysis. Digital and online platforms and the data obtained from them offer great opportunities for analyzing visitor experiences (Riva & Agostino, 2022). In addition, these digital and online technologies positively affect the preferences of new visitors by sharing visitor experiences regarding satisfaction, recommendation, and desire to return (Soltani-Nejad et al., 2022).

1.2. Deyrulzafaran Monastery

The Anatolian region is often considered to have played a significant role in the history of Christianity. In the nascent phase of Christianity, the clergy and the esteemed disciples of Jesus played a crucial role in disseminating the faith. Therefore, Anatolian towns such as Şanlıurfa, Tarsus, Antakya, İznik, Cappadocia, Istanbul, and Mardin possess hallowed attributes (Başer & Başçı, 2012). Deyrulzafaran Monastery has considerable religious importance, especially for Christians. The Deyrulzafaran Monastery has considerable religious importance for the Assyrian people.

The monastery is situated in Eşikale, which is 5 kilometers from the town of Mardin. It is in an area that belongs to the Syriac Orthodox community. The precise date of construction is uncertain. Nevertheless, several accounts indicate that the monastery was constructed during the pre-Christian era. The basement level of the monastery is said to be the earliest sacred location of the Şemsi (Aydin, 2013). The monastery believed to have been constructed in the 5th century, is sometimes referred to as the Mor Hananyo Church due to restoration efforts conducted by the Assyrian Metropolitan of Mardin and Kefertüth, Mor Hananyo, in 793. The monastery had a period of decline in the 11th century and was governed by Yohanna the IV from 1125 to 1148. Yohanna is credited with the renewal. During the 14th century, several sections of the

monastery were demolished as a result of the assaults carried out by the Mongol leader Timur in the Mesopotamia area. Then, Patriarch Ignatius II. Abraham reconstructed the monastery. The exact origin of the name "Deyrulzafaran" for the monastery is uncertain. However, it is widely believed that during the construction and renovation of the monastery, saffron plants were acquired from a merchant specializing in saffron (zafaran). These saffron plants were then incorporated into the mortar used for building the monastery (Barsavm, 2006).

The monastery may be accessed by the entry gate, often referred to as the tourist welcome center, which was constructed in 1996. The main entry gate of the monastery is situated to the north and has the resemblance of a fortified fortress (see Image 1). The monastery also serves as the residence for the Metropolitan of Mardin. Every season, the Monastery attracts tourists from across the globe as well as Assyrians seeking to engage in prayer (Turkish Culture Portal, 2024).

3. Methods

The main purpose of this study is to determine "what kind of experiences Deyrulzafaran Monastery offers to visitors". In order to acquire a thorough comprehension of the experiences of visitors at Deyrulzafaran Monastery, we implement a qualitative research methodology. This approach is particularly well suited to the study of complex phenomena that require subtle and detailed descriptions and explanations. In this context, we chose to conduct the study using netnography analysis, a qualitative research method. Netnographic analysis relies on the methodical gathering of visitors' reviews posted online, which provide comprehensive insights into their experiences. Netnography stands out among other qualitative research methodologies because of its ability to construct narratives, understand intricate social phenomena, and assist researchers in deriving themes from visitors' viewpoints (Kozinets, 2002; Thanh & Kirova, 2018). We implemented the principal steps of the netnographic approach, following Kozinets's (2010) proposed framework: planning, entrée, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation.

3.1. Planning and Entrée

The initial phase involves identifying the most pertinent online forums where visitors can exchange and assess their experiences at Deyrulzafaran Monastery. According to

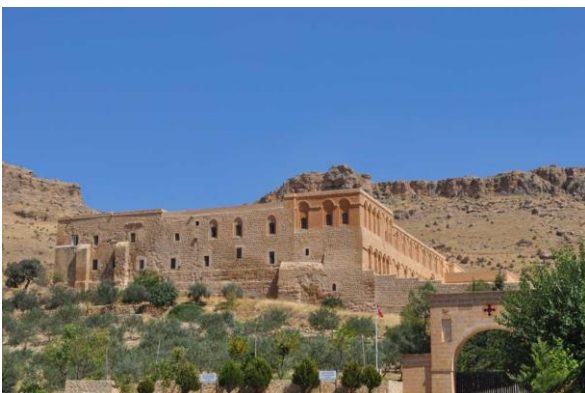


Image 1. Deyrulzafaran Monastery
Source: *Türkiye Kültür Portalı*, 2024

Kozinets (2010), it is crucial to consider the research objectives, active participants, a substantial follower base, and a diverse membership when selecting an online platform. This approach ensures that researchers have ample and varied access to data. As a result, TripAdvisor was chosen as the platform for the research. TripAdvisor is a well-established website known for enabling users to share their experiences and opinions (Jeacle & Carter, 2011). TripAdvisor is the tourism content site with the most users and comments worldwide (Göktaş & Dinçer, 2017). TripAdvisor is acknowledged as a dependable consumer-generated information medium, extensively trusted by visitors to evaluate hotels and attractions (O'Connor, 2010). It is also seen that TripAdvisor reviews are frequently used as a data source in tourism research (Taecharungroj & Mathayomchan, 2019; Vo-Thanh et al., 2024).

3.2. Data Collection

The data were gathered from TripAdvisor in June 2024, using verbatim extracts from computer-mediated conversations of online community members. The selection of visitor reviews was guided by specific criteria. Primarily, reviews that emphasized experiential aspects were chosen. Additionally, reviews written in languages not understood by the authors, such as French, German, and Russian, were excluded from the dataset. Consequently, a total of 672 Turkish and English reviews posted on TripAdvisor between May 2011 and May 2024 were compiled for analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Content analysis is a frequently used method of data analysis in netnography research, as emphasized by Tavakoli and Wijesinghe (2019). Therefore, Tavakoli and Wijesinghe (2019) emphasized content analysis as the primary strategy for data analysis in this research. This method, which is known as a sort of observational research, involves the analysis of symbolic information included in recorded conversations (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). In order to examine the components of the Deyrulzafaran Monastery experiences, the writers adhered to the qualitative data analysis and interpretation principles established by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

The authors started their study by using an open-coding technique, methodically scrutinizing reviews on a line-by-line basis to precisely segment and categorize the data. They subsequently employed axial coding to identify and categorize themes that exemplify the elements of the Deyrulzafaran Monastery experiences. The use of selective coding facilitated the development of a conceptual framework and the integration of diverse data segments, ultimately resulting in the identification of six primary themes. The authors concluded that they had reached theoretical saturation because the data no longer provided significant new insights into the monastic experiences, themes began to recur, and no new information was provided. Ultimately, the final dataset included a total of 622 reviews.

Researchers using content analysis must carefully evaluate the reliability of their findings. Graneheim and Lundman (2004), Hsieh and Shannon (2005), and Elo and Kyngas (2008) demonstrate that there are several ways to verify the reliability of content analysis. To ensure the validity of this study, it is

necessary to provide comprehensive and precise explanations of the research process, and the many stages involved. This study made major endeavors to provide lucid and all-encompassing information about the research methodologies and procedures. This high degree of openness enables readers to completely understand the procedures undertaken and the methodology used in the research, enhancing its credibility.

An alternative method to guarantee the reliability of content analysis is to include verbatim excerpts from the examined text, establishing a clear connection between the data and the conclusions. This research used actual quotations from participant ratings to substantiate each finding. Furthermore, Hall and Valentin (2005) recommend that a minimum of two autonomous coders carry out the coding procedure to ensure the dependability of the content analysis. Thus, in this study, the authors conducted the coding in collaboration with two independent specialists in qualitative research.

4. Results

As a result of the content analysis, the experiences of tourists visiting Deyrulzafaran Monastery were determined as six components: memorable experience, satisfaction, recommendation and revisit intention, historical experience, culture learning experience, gastronomic experience, and guide of attributes. This section presents a study of data derived from netnographic research on many aspects of the Deyrulzafaran Monastery experience.

4.1. Memorable Experience

A memorable tourism experience is one that remains vivid in a person's memory for years (Kim et al., 2010). Visitors often rely on their past experiences as trustworthy and significant sources of information, which greatly affect their future travel plans (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Hoch & Deighton, 1989). Such memorable experiences can shape tourists' decisions to revisit a destination and their likelihood of recommending it to others (Ali et al., 2016). Visitors often describe their memorable Deyrulzafaran Monastery experience as unforgettable, impressive, admirable, great, etc. Here are some relevant reviews from visitors:

"Our second visit. It's a place that leaves me incredibly impressed every time. There are many beautiful places in our country. Definitely a must see place" (C31).

"A perfectly preserved, well-maintained and admirably tidy monastery" (C145).

"A very impressive historical religious building. As someone who has visited many places at home and abroad, I did not think I would be so impressed" (C301).

4.2. Satisfaction, Recommendation and Revisit Intention

Satisfaction is often used in tourist literature as a means of assessing the coherence of an experience (Ryan, 2002). The findings of this research indicate that almost all visitors expressed their contentment, inclination to endorse, and want to return using words such as flawless, astonishing, strongly recommend, essential, would engage again, and enthusiastic about others having the same experience, as seen below.

"These are definitely must-see places in Mardin and I

recommend them to be visited especially in April and May" (C29).

"If you go to Mardin, never return without seeing Deyrulzafaran... I will come back again and again every time I visit" (C34).

"If you come to visit Mardin, it should be one of the places you should visit" (C344).

4.3. Historical Experience

Compelling stories told in places of historical value can connect people and places, touching them intellectually, physically and emotionally (Pera, 2017). This can attract visitors' attention and transport them to a special world or a threshold place (Williams, 2013), essentially 'bringing to life' the place visited and turning it into an important element of experience (Doyle & Kelliher, 2023). Here are some relevant reviews from visitors:

"It is a complex that will amaze you with the mathematical calculations of thousands of years ago with its sun temple, which has a history of approximately 2500 years..." (C13).

"We are in a place where you are illuminated by history as a moment. You should come and see it... don't forget to touch the walls that bear witness to history..." (C412).

"You will literally go on a journey in ancient times with the narration of a professional guide" (C610).

4.4. Culture Learning Experience

Visitors emphasized that their Deyrulzafaran Monastery experience allowed them to learn a lot about the local people, Assyrian beliefs, worship methods, and other rituals. Visitors especially emphasized that they had detailed information about the history and religious rituals of the Assyrian people. Examples of the visitor's comments related to the culture learning experience are given below:

"It is a must-see place to learn about the local people and their history... You can also learn anything you want to know about Assyrian and Orthodox Christianity" (C18).

"It provides detailed information about Assyrian beliefs, worship methods and other rituals. We learned very interesting things" (C190).

"While visiting the monastery, I learned that a number of the Syriac monks, along with quite a number of the folks from the churches they are affiliated with" (C214).

4.5. Gastronomic Experience

The gastronomic experience helps visitors leave the destination satisfied by offering them unique and memorable experiences that can only be seen in destinations. In general, gastronomic products in a region contribute significantly to the overall satisfaction level of visitors (Hendijani, 2016). Kivela and Crotts (2009) stated that the gastronomic experience not only adds value to the tourist experience but also offers a quality tourism experience for tourists looking for new experiences. Visitors who visited the Deyrulzafaran Monastery had a gastronomic experience with the food and drinks offered within the monastery. The following are some

instances of visitors' comments about gastronomic experience:

"There is a wine and souvenir shop inside, and a magnificent olive oil is sold. The wine from the grapes they grow and the olive oil from the olives are wonderful" (C11).

"It's a very beautiful monastery, you should go there. We bought pomegranate syrup from the cafe and liked it very much. I think there was also an Assyrian bun, I didn't see it but heard about it later. If you go, I think you should also try their spicy tea and pastries" (C37).

"While you are waiting for the tour time inside the monastery, be sure to taste the tea containing saffron (zefaran), cloves, ginger and different mixtures on the balcony overlooking the Pomegranate and Olive gardens near the entrance..." (C248).

4.6. Guide of Attributes

In the study, guide attributes are a major component of the visitors' Deyrulzafaran Monastery experience. Visitors underlined the following characteristics that are important for guides: knowledgeable, respectful, friendly, informative, and hospitable. Some of the visitors' comments on the subject are as follows:

"Such a nicely preserved Monastery, they also have a guide provided and he is really informative" (C19).

"The guide of the church, the Assyrian friend, is extremely respectful and it is impossible not to be impressed by his beautiful explanation" (C65).

"The friend on duty who was explaining to us had prepared a nice presentation... He was a friend who was assigned by the monastery and who loved his job" (C507).

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, analyzing the visits to Deyrulzafaran Monastery using netnography provided an in-depth understanding of the visitors' experiences. Research findings revealed that visitors viewed the monastery as a historical and cultural heritage and enjoyed a spiritual atmosphere. Comments shared by visitors show that satisfaction levels are high, and most would recommend this experience to others. Additionally, it is important to note that visitors are satisfied with, recommend, and experience the gastronomic elements of the monastery. These findings may contribute to the development of strategies to increase the tourism potential of Deyrulzafaran Monastery. Future research can provide a broader perspective and make important contributions to tourism literature by examining visitor experiences of similar historical and cultural sites.

The study offers significant insights on the management, preservation, and enhancement of visitor experiences at cultural heritage sites. It is essential to conduct comprehensive research on the locations to which visitors form emotional connections and ascribe significance, since this is crucial for the sustainability of these sites and their preservation for future generations. Consequently, analyzing the representations of cultural heritage places in digital contexts aids in formulating methods that enhance visitor experiences and enables these experiences to be approached from a multi-

dimensional viewpoint.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study expands on visitor experience and satisfaction theory and examines in depth the determinants of visitor satisfaction at cultural and religious sites. Six components were identified as the experiences of visitors who visited Deyrulzafaran Monastery as a consequence of the content analysis (memorable experience, satisfaction, recommendation and revisit intention, historical experience, culture learning experience, gastronomic experience, and guide of attributes (Figure 2). In the case of Deyrulzafaran Monastery, historical and spiritual elements were found to contribute to visitor satisfaction. The netnography method can be used as an effective tool to analyze visitor comments and experiences on online platforms. This study shows that netnographic analysis can provide rich and qualified data to the tourism literature.

The touristic appeal of cultural heritage sites such as Deyrulzafaran Monastery increases the cultural and historical awareness levels of visitors. This study contributes to theoretical approaches that emphasize the role of tourism in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. Visitors' tendencies to share their experiences online provide important data for tourism marketing strategies. This study theoretically reveals how positive visitor experiences shape future visitor behavior and marketing strategies. The significance of social media platforms in the sharing of visitor experiences and the effect of others' experiences is increasingly emphasized in tourism literature. This study provides theoretical findings that support the critical role of social media in the promotion and perception of tourist destinations.

5.2. Practical Implications

The historical and cultural assets of Deyrulzafaran Monastery are of considerable value in the context of tourism. An important center of the Syriac Orthodox community, this monastery offers visitors the opportunity to experience thousands of years of history. The monastery, which attracts the attention of tourists with its unique architecture and mystical atmosphere, also increases the tourism potential of the region by contributing to the local economy. Deyrulzafaran Monastery, a unique destination in terms of history, culture, and faith tourism, promises its visitors an unforgettable experience. In order to increase these experiences, some practical inferences within the scope of the study are given below.

Visitors' comments can raise awareness, especially about the preservation of the monastery's historical fabric and maintenance work. In line with this data, policymakers can update or strengthen the legal regulations necessary to protect the monastery's physical and cultural characteristics. New strategies can be developed to regulate the number of visitors or improve visitors' experiences in the monastery, which is subject to heavy visitor traffic during certain periods. Arrangements can be made in line with visitors' feedback on the circulation areas, information boards and directional signs within the monastery. In this way, visitors can have a more

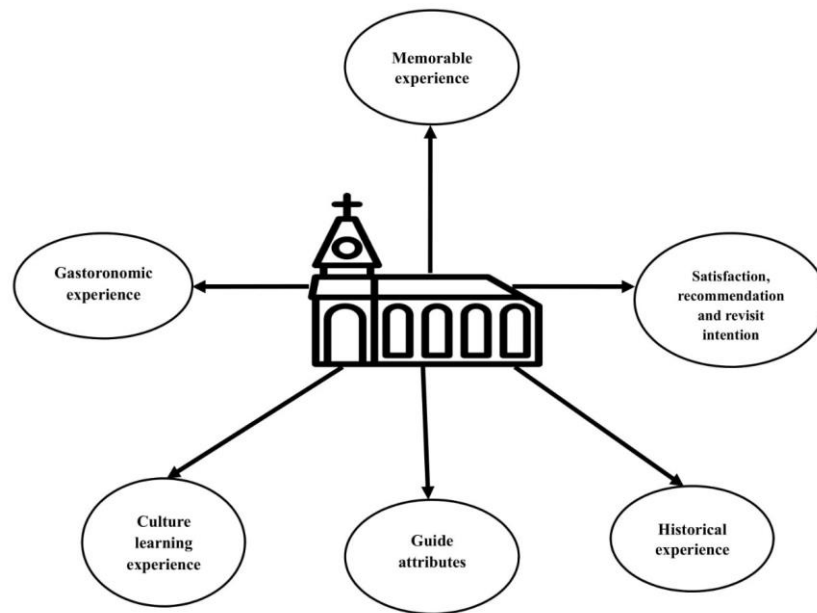


Figure 1. Components of the Deyrulzafaran Monastery experience

Source: Created by authors.

comfortable and informative experience within the area.

It is important that the physical and service infrastructure of the monastery is continually reviewed and improved to maintain and enhance visitors' positive experiences. Elements such as cleanliness, informative guides, and directional signs can directly affect visitor satisfaction. Informative brochures, guided tours, and multimedia presentations can be used to help visitors better understand the historical and cultural values of the monastery. This enriches visitors' experiences and makes them more meaningful. Visitors should be encouraged to share their positive experiences of the monastery on social media and other online platforms. This contributes to the promotion of the monastery and attracting the attention of potential visitors.

Various campaigns can be organized to increase visitors' awareness of the preservation of the monastery. Visitors should be encouraged to respect and contribute to the historical and cultural heritage of the monastery. Visitor feedback should be collected and analyzed regularly. This feedback provides valuable information to improve service quality and enhance visitor experiences. By cooperating with the local community around the monastery, it is possible to increase visitors' interest in the region and support the local economy. Elements such as handicrafts, local dishes, and cultural events can be offered to visitors. Especially visitors often mentioned in their comments that they liked the local food and drinks offered in the monastery. In this context, the scope of these foods and beverages can be expanded.

5.3. Limitations and Suggestions to Future Research

The netnographic data sources used in this study are limited to visitor comments on online platforms. This may mean that not every visitor's view is represented. In particular, the experiences of visitors who do not have internet access or who do not comment online may have been overlooked. Reviews on online platforms are highly subjective as they are based on

individual experiences. Therefore, there can be wide variation between reviews, and some reviews can be overly positive or negative, making it difficult to draw an overall trend. Future studies can obtain a more comprehensive understanding by combining netnographic analyses with qualitative methods such as on-site observations and in-depth interviews. For example, this could include longitudinal studies to observe changes over time or studies that combine visitor experiences with actual visit statistics for a more comprehensive picture. This can enable a more in-depth look at visitor experiences.

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