



## Digital Narratives of Heritage Tourism Experience: A Netnographic Approach

### Miras Turizmi Deneyiminin Dijital Anlatımı: Netnografik Bir Yaklaşım

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*Abstract: This study explores the factors shaping tourist experiences at heritage sites, focusing on the Temple of Apollo in Didyma, Turkey. Using a netnographic approach to analyze 1,631 TripAdvisor reviews, the research identifies both positive and negative dimensions influencing visitor experiences. Aesthetic features, accessibility, supporting amenities, cost-effectiveness and learning opportunities were the main contributors to positive experiences. Conversely, preservation issues, accessibility challenges for diverse visitors, limited interpretive materials, and inadequate facilities were sources of dissatisfaction. By highlighting the value of user-generated content (UGC) in understanding and enhancing cultural heritage tourism, this research contributes to literature on heritage tourism experiences and offers actionable insights for stakeholders to enhance site management and visitor satisfaction.*

*Keywords: Heritage Tourism, Netnography, Tourist Experience, Online Reviews*

*JEL Classification: M31, Z19, Z32*

*Öz: Bu çalışma, Didim Apollon Tapınağı ziyaretçilere odaklanarak kültürel miras alanlarındaki turist deneyimlerini şekillendiren faktörleri incelemektedir. Araştırma kapsamında 1.631 TripAdvisor incelemesi netnografik bir yaklaşımla analiz edilmiş ve ziyaretçi deneyimlerini etkileyen olumlu ve olumsuz boyutlar belirlenmiştir. Olumlu deneyimlere en büyük katkıyı sağlayan unsurlar arasında estetik özellikler, erişilebilirlik, destekleyici hizmetler, fiyat ve öğrenme yer almaktadır. Öte yandan, koruma sorunları, farklı ziyaretçiler için erişim zorlukları, bilgi veren materyallerin eksikliği ve tapınak çevresinde yer alan işletmelerin yetersizliği memnuniyetsizliğe yol açan etkenler arasında bulunmaktadır. Bu araştırma, ziyaretçiler tarafından yapılan çevrimiçi yorumların kültürel miras turizminin anlaşılması ve geliştirilmesindeki önemini vurgulamıyla ilgili alan yazına katkıda bulunmakta ve paydaşlara alan yönetimi ile ziyaretçi memnuniyetinin artırılması için uygulanabilir öneriler sunmaktadır.*

*Anahtar Kelimeler: Miras Turizmi, Netnografi, Turist Deneyimi, Çevrimiçi Yorumlar*

*JEL Siniflendirme: M31, Z19, Z32*

### 1. Introduction

The digital transformation of the tourism industry has redefined how travelers plan, experience, and share their journeys. Social media platforms and travel review websites have become indispensable tools for tourists, providing not only practical information but also a means to express and document their experiences (Cheng et al., 2019). Among the review sites, TripAdvisor stands as a leading platform, offering a vast repository of user-generated content (UGC) that reflects the diverse perspectives and emotions of travelers worldwide (Quang et al., 2023). For tourism stakeholders, such content serves as a critical resource for

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understanding visitor preferences, enhancing service delivery, and promoting destinations in increasingly competitive markets (Vo-Thanh and Kirova, 2018).

Today's tourists want to experience unforgettable moments that are meaningful to them and where interaction with the local is very strong, instead of traditional tourism experiences such as sea, sand and sun (Gursoy et al., 2022; Kamaci, 2024). In culturally based tourism, which enables tourists to have a unique and unforgettable experience, all kinds of assets that can be considered within the scope of cultural heritage, such as ancient cities, castles, monuments, civil architecture examples, are important touristic products (Ditoiu and Caruntu, 2014). Tourists also create a perception on the possible experiences of other tourists by sharing their experiences with others. Since the touristic experience starts from the moment when it is decided to go on holiday, it can be said that sharing memories has an impact on the touristic experience (Bruner, 1986). As a result, with the intensive use of social networking platforms and cultural heritage sites becoming a more important touristic product, there is an increase in the online sharing of cultural tourism experience.

Significant studies have been conducted on cultural tourism experience, especially with the effect of the fact that participants in cultural-based tourism expect their experience to be extraordinary (Hosany and Witham, 2009; Kim et al., 2010; Puczko, 2013; Agapito et al., 2014; Ujang and Muslim, 2014). Many economic, social, political and technological factors affect the cultural tourism experience. Among these, the impact of technology has increased in recent years (Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999; Huang et al., 2017). On the other hand, the sphere of influence of sharing platforms in social media, has expanded in this way. Therefore, although there are many studies on social media and cultural tourism experience in the literature (Nguyen et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2020; Cuomo et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021), the number of studies on social media and heritage tourism experience has remained limited (Qiu and Zhang, 2021; Gursoy et al., 2022; Han and Bae, 2022; Lin and Rasoolimanesh, 2023). The main reason for the distinction between cultural tourism and heritage tourism is that heritage tourism is more place-centered, while cultural tourism is more people-centered and learning-oriented (Piramanayagam et al., 2020).

While traditional research often focuses on site preservation and economic impacts, there is a growing need to understand how visitors perceive and evaluate these sites, especially in the context of experiential and emotional dimensions (Hosany and Witham, 2009). This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the Temple of Apollo in Didyma, Turkiye, a historically significant yet understudied heritage site. As an ancient oracle center linked to the city of Miletus, the temple represents a rich cultural and architectural legacy. However, like many

similar sites, it faces issues such as inconsistent preservation efforts, inadequate accessibility for diverse visitor groups, and limited interpretive resources. The originality of this study lies in its dual contribution to academic literature and practical site management. First, it enriches the heritage tourism discourse by exploring a lesser-studied site and leveraging UGC to provide a granular understanding of visitor experiences. While much of the existing literature focuses on quantitative measures such as visitor numbers or economic impact, this study adopts a qualitative perspective, emphasizing the emotional and sensory aspects of heritage tourism. Second, it demonstrates the application of netnography as a powerful tool for analyzing large-scale UGC datasets, offering a methodological framework that can be replicated for other heritage sites. By centering on the Temple of Apollo, this study not only fills a gap in the literature but also offers actionable insights for stakeholders in the tourism and heritage sectors. The findings provide a foundation for improving visitor satisfaction, addressing accessibility challenges, and enhancing the interpretive resources available at heritage sites. Furthermore, this research highlights the potential of UGC to inform sustainable tourism practices, ensuring that heritage sites remain engaging and accessible for future generations while preserving their historical integrity.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Heritage Tourism: A Multifaceted Experience***

Heritage is the cultural values inherited from the past and utilised today (Graham, et al., 2000). Heritage tourism, a specialized branch of cultural tourism, focuses on the exploration of historical and cultural assets, offering visitors a direct connection to the past through tangible and intangible elements. These elements include ancient ruins, monuments, traditions, and rituals that reflect the identity and legacy of a region (McKercher, et al., 2005). When all these elements come together, a more niche tourism type called heritage tourism emerges under the umbrella of cultural tourism.

The regions that use tourism as an economic development tool see the cultural past as a touristic product. For those who participate in cultural tourism, visiting museums and historical sites, participating in artistic activities and seeing living cultures on site are important touristic activities (Timothy, 2011; Kalkan, 2016; Kamacı, 2025). Heritage tourism can be hierarchically divided into four categories: world heritage, national heritage, local heritage and personal heritage (Timothy, 1997). Among these products, archaeological sites are among the important attraction centres for the tourism industry as heritage sites (Pacifico and Vogel, 2012). The tourist experience in heritage settings is complex and

multidimensional, shaped by sensory engagement, emotional resonance, and the interplay between personal expectations and the site's characteristics (Agapito et al., 2014). Beyond the mere act of visiting, the experience involves learning, emotional attachment, and the creation of memorable moments, often leading to a deep sense of connection with the site (Hosany & Witham, 2009). As a result, heritage tourism has gained prominence in recent years, driven by travelers seeking meaningful and authentic experiences that go beyond traditional leisure activities.

Despite the growing interest in heritage tourism, the field faces several research challenges. One critical gap lies in understanding how visitors perceive and evaluate their experiences. Traditional studies often emphasize economic impacts or preservation efforts, overlooking the experiential and emotional dimensions of heritage tourism (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). Furthermore, most research is concentrated on iconic global sites, leaving mid-sized and lesser-known sites underrepresented in the literature. Another significant challenge is balancing the dual objectives of heritage tourism: preserving the authenticity and integrity of cultural sites while ensuring visitor satisfaction. This balance becomes particularly challenging when addressing the needs of diverse visitor groups, including those with mobility impairments or differing cultural expectations (McKercher et al., 2005).

## ***2.2. Tourist Experience at Heritage Sites***

Touristic experience can be defined as the participation of individuals in a kind of learning activity by getting out of their routine lives and exploring an environment that they are not very familiar with. In this framework, tourist experience refers to a long process that starts with planning according to expectations and wishes, continues with the process of reaching the destination and activities such as sightseeing, eating and drinking, and shopping in the destination, and is shaped by the process of returning home after the holiday and finally the memories of the holiday (Li, 2000).

Destinations host many tangible and intangible cultural assets (Hosany and Witham, 2009). Especially places that stand out with their architectural features such as ancient settlements, monuments, castles, which are tangible cultural assets that cannot be transported, are important attraction areas for tourists (Ditou and Caruntu, 2014; Agapito et al., 2014). Heritage sites, which are an important part of cultural tourism, provide tourists with this opportunity and help them feel a deep sense of belonging (Yang, 2017).

The experience obtained by tourists consists of the sum of all the products consumed in the destination (Richie and Crouch, 2003). Therefore, the quality of services offered in

heritage sites has a direct impact on the experience (Glatzer, 2000; Al-Ababneh, 2013). Heritage tourists also endeavour to share all kinds of experiences they have had. In other words, sharing memories has a direct impact on the experience in heritage sites (Bruner, 1986). Another factor affecting the heritage tourism experience is the image of the destination. Because destination image positively affects tourists' experience, satisfaction level and motivation in heritage tourism as in all types of tourism (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020). In heritage tourism, participants want to have an unforgettable experience by interacting culturally with heritage sites and local elements around them (Jelinčić, 2006; Chen and Rahman, 2018). The visual attractiveness of the old buildings in heritage sites, significantly increases the level of satisfaction (Ujang and Muslim, 2014).

### ***2.3. The Role of User-Generated Content in Tourism Research***

In addition to the entire decision-making process of tourists, all stages, including pre-travel, during travel and post-travel, are affected by UGC (Nezakati et al., 2015). One of the most important reasons for this is the change in the travelling habits of tourists. Because today's tourist has started to prefer travelling individually or in small groups rather than mass (Amatulli et al., 2019). On the other hand, UGC significantly affects not only tourists but also touristic businesses as service providers. Because while the content on social media affects the decision-making process of tourists, it is also effective in the production and management activities of touristic enterprises (Xu, et al., 2023).

Comments on the strengths and weaknesses of each product in the destination are made by tourists on online platforms, so that product-based competition can be understood (Marchiori and Cantoni, 2011). Online reviews also provide important data for researchers (Kozinets, 2010). The main reason for the high data density is that today's tourists have started to use technology more and want to share their experiences in the places they visit quickly and easily (Hausmann and Weuster, 2018). Tourist reviews are believed to be free from prejudices and therefore all these reviews are considered to be a reliable source (Stringam et al., 2010). In his study, Zhang et al. (2010) showed that consumers care more about the comments made by other consumers than editorial opinions when they intend to visit a restaurant's website. Similarly, Sparks et al. (2013) concluded that consumers' online reviews are more useful and reliable. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) mention that 75% of tourists consider online customer reviews as the most important tool in choosing a hotel.

UGC has emerged as a transformative resource in tourism research, offering a real-time, democratized perspective on tourist experiences. Platforms like TripAdvisor, Google Maps,

and Lonely Planet allow travelers to document their journeys, providing candid feedback on various aspects of their visits. Unlike traditional surveys or interviews, UGC captures spontaneous and unfiltered reflections, making it a reliable source for understanding visitor perceptions (Stringam et al., 2010). The increasing reliance on UGC stems from its ability to reflect authentic visitor experiences, free from the biases often associated with marketing materials or official reports. Studies have shown that tourists trust peer-generated reviews more than promotional content, using them to make informed decisions about destinations and services (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). For researchers, UGC provides a rich dataset that enables the exploration of themes such as visitor satisfaction, cultural engagement, and site management (Kozinets, 2010).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Site: *Temple of Apollo in Didyma***

The Temple of Apollo, situated in Didyma (modern-day Didim), Turkey, is one of the most historically and architecturally significant heritage sites in the region. Renowned as an ancient oracle center, the temple was a focal point of religious and cultural activity in the Hellenic world. Connected to the nearby ancient city of Miletus by a sacred road, the temple's historical prominence lies in its role as a site of divination, where priests interpreted the will of Apollo through elaborate rituals. This cultural significance, combined with its monumental architecture, positions the Temple of Apollo as a key attraction for both domestic and international heritage tourism (Toker, 2022). Constructed over several centuries, the temple reflects the architectural advancements of its time. It features massive Ionic columns, intricate carvings, and an imposing layout designed to inspire awe and reverence. Despite being partially incomplete—likely due to interruptions in its construction—its scale and craftsmanship remain a testament to the artistic and engineering capabilities of the ancient world. From a tourism perspective, the Temple of Apollo holds a dual appeal. Its tangible heritage, represented by the physical structures, provides a direct link to ancient history, while its intangible heritage, rooted in the myths and rituals associated with Apollo, adds layers of cultural and symbolic significance. As such, it attracts a diverse visitor demographic, ranging from casual tourists to history enthusiasts and spiritual seekers.

This research focuses on the Temple of Apollo for several reasons:

- The temple's role as an ancient oracle center and its connection to broader Mediterranean cultural networks make it an invaluable site for studying heritage tourism.

- Located in the heart of Didim, the temple is easily accessible by public and private transport, making it a popular destination for both international and local tourists. This accessibility allows for the collection of diverse perspectives, enriching the dataset.
- While globally recognized sites such as the Acropolis or Ephesus have been extensively studied, the Temple of Apollo remains relatively underrepresented in academic literature. This research aims to address this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of visitor experiences.
- The researcher, as a professional tourist guide with firsthand experience of the site, observed patterns in visitor behavior and feedback that warranted further scientific investigation. These observations form the basis for the study's focus on visitor experiences and the factors influencing them

### **3.2. Data Collection**

This research aims to reveal the experiences of tourists visiting the Temple of Apollo in Didyma and the factors affecting these experiences by analysing the online content created by visitors. For this purpose, the data related to the research topic were obtained from TripAdvisor, an online review platform that is accepted to provide reliable results in previous studies (Taecharungroj and Mathayomchan, 2019) and has been proven to provide holidaymakers with the correct information they need in the selection of touristic products such as accommodation, food and beverage, and transportation (O'Connor, 2010). To ensure the relevance and quality of the dataset, three criterias were applied: 1- Only English-language reviews were included to maintain consistency in the analysis, 2- Reviews posted between January 2010 and April 2024 were considered, ensuring both temporal relevance and sufficient data volume, 3- Reviews that were excessively brief or lacked descriptive content were excluded to focus on narratives that offered meaningful insights.

It was observed that a total of 1631 comments were posted about the Temple of Apollo on the TripAdvisor website and the last comment was dated September 2023 as of 1 April 2024. Of the 1631 reviews, 1071 were rated as excellent, 435 as very good, 94 as average, 15 as poor and 16 as terrible. Although it seems possible to draw a general conclusion from here, the presence of opposing expressions in the content of the comments (such as the presence of some negative expressions in the content of a review evaluated as excellent) revealed the necessity to examine all reviews individually. Therefore, taking into consideration that the

touristic experience consists of both positive and negative memorable elements (Quinlan Cutler and Carmichael, 2010), all 1631 reviews were included in the study.

### **3.3. *Netnographic Approach***

In this research, a qualitative research method was preferred from a netnographic perspective, as it was aimed to bring subjective and interpretive suggestions (Seale, 1999) to the meanings that heritage tourists attribute to their individual experiences. The study adopts a netnographic approach, a qualitative research method that extends ethnography to online communities (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is particularly well-suited for this research due to its ability to capture the authentic voices of visitors as expressed in digital environments. This method allows for the exploration of subjective experiences, emotional responses, and shared narratives within the context of heritage tourism (Nelson and Otnes, 2005). The advantage of this method is the ease of explaining complex social phenomena (Wu and Pearce, 2014). Bartl et al. (2016) state that computer-based data collection by netnography method is faster and easier than standard ethnographic data collection methods due to the direct downloading of data. Compared to traditional ethnography, obtaining data quickly, easily and in a natural environment is also less costly (Rageh et al., 2013) and gives more objective results than focus groups and face-to-face interviews (Vo-Thanh and Kirova, 2018).

To ensure methodological clarity and alignment with contemporary qualitative research standards, this study explicitly employs the “observational netnography approach”, as conceptualized by Kozinets and Gretzel (2024). Observational netnography is a subtype of netnographic inquiry characterized by non-participatory, unobtrusive data collection, where the researcher assumes the role of a passive observer rather than an active participant within the digital community. This method is particularly well-suited for contexts where the data in question, such as user-generated content (UGC), is already publicly accessible, ethically usable, and produced independently of the researcher’s presence or intervention (Costello et al., 2017).

### **3.4. *Data Analysis***

When data are transformed into findings in qualitative analyses, there is no definite rule about how this transformation should be done. For this reason, different suggestions can be made. Because due to the nature of qualitative research, each researcher focuses on the subject differently and therefore a standard method cannot be developed (Patton, 2015). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data analysis has three stages: reducing the data, visualising the data and verifying the data result. Accordingly, first of all, the ones that can

answer the research question are selected from the data obtained by different methods. The main purpose here is to reduce the intensive data according to the need. Afterwards, visualising the data with graphs, tables and figures makes the analysis more compact and understandable. Finally, with an inductive approach, answers to the research questions are sought by revealing the hidden meanings in the data. Corbin and Strauss (1990) based qualitative data analyses on coding. Accordingly, the data obtained are compared according to similarities and differences. The main purpose here is to reveal what the data symbolise. Afterwards, the similar ones are labelled and conceptualised by combining them under the same heading. Concepts are similarly compared with each other and categorised. The data analysis process created for the study is shown in Fig 1.

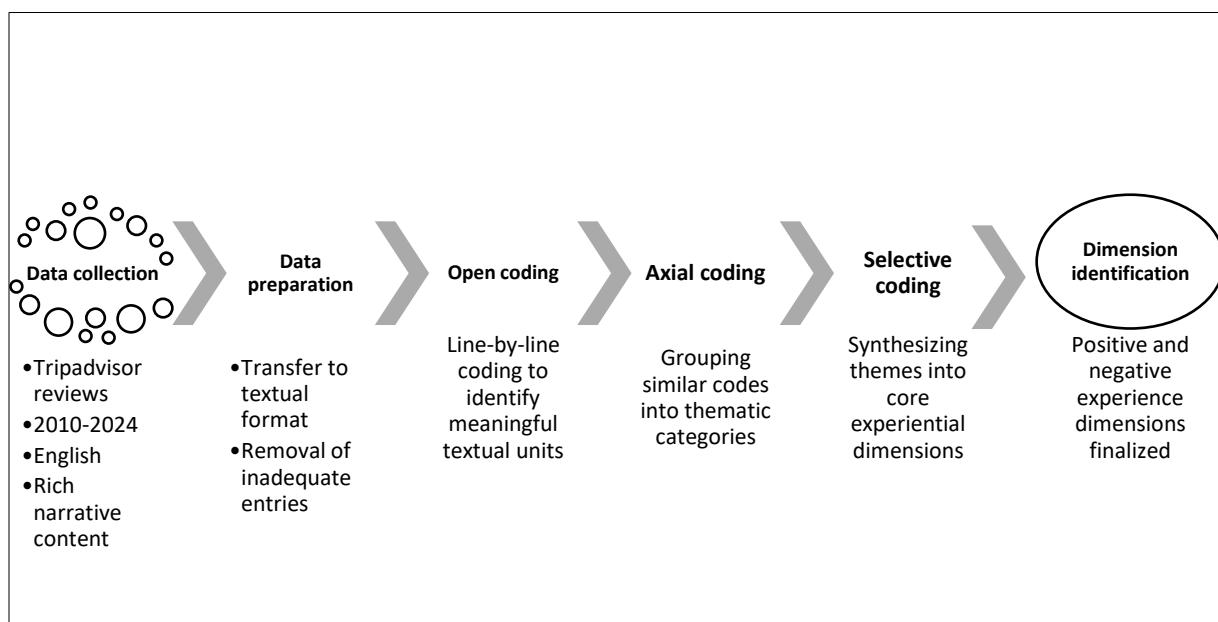


Figure 1. Data Analysis Process

A total of 1631 reviews written by tourists visiting the Temple of Apollo in Didyma on TripAdvisor were first transferred to Microsoft Word programme and as shown on Table 1, line by line open coding was applied to simplify the data. Manual coding was preferred for data reduction. Because manual coding gives more creative and reliable results than software programmes (Krippendorff, 2022).

Table 1. Example of open coding practice

Online reviews (from TripAdvisor)	Open coding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Absolutely stunning place to visit to absorb some of the ancient culture of the country. The size and scale of the ruins cannot fail to impress when you read the information boards and realise the walls were originally 3 times higher. Very exposed so wear a hat and strong footwear. Plenty of cafes outside for much needed refreshments"</li> <li>- "Fascinating view into the Hellenic age. The scale of this site is impressive. As its so open it can be melting hot on some warmer days. Nice selection of shops nearby to get refreshments"</li> <li>- "An amazing structure! Although a lot of the large pillars have fallen due to earthquake damage a vast majority of it is well preserved and looked after"</li> <li>- "Entry fee was next to nothing with as much time as you want to spend inside and take in the structure"</li> </ul>	<p>Stunning place, size and scale of the temple, information boards, very exposed, plenty of cafes outside, fascinating view, its so open, nice selection of shops nearby, an amazing structure, a lot of large pillars have fallen down, well preserved, entry fee was next to nothing</p>

In the initial phase of open coding, conducted through a word-by-word analysis, the textual data were segmented into meaningful units (see Table 2). This process aimed to construct an interpretive perspective aligned with the research question, grounded in user reviews (Ryan & Bernard, 1994; Merriam, 2009). Following the open coding phase, axial coding was conducted to group data with similar meanings into broader thematic categories. To enhance the reliability of the emerging themes, consultations were held with researchers experienced in heritage tourism experiences. This process yielded 11 themes associated with positive experiences and 14 themes related to negative experiences. Subsequently, selective coding was employed to refine and consolidate these themes, aiming to identify the core dimensions that address the research question. As a result, five overarching dimensions pertaining to tourists' positive experiences (*aesthetic features, learning opportunities, accessibility, supporting amenities, and cost effectiveness*) and four dimensions reflecting negative experiences (*preservation issues, accessibility challenges, interpretive materials, and inadequate facilities*) were identified.

Table 2. Example of coding processing practice

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding (creating dimensions)
<p>Stunning place, size and scale of the temple, an amazing structure, fascinating view, marvellous design, a glorious entrance to a temple, amazing columns</p>	<p>espectacular place and amazing structure, much to see in well preserved building</p>	<p>aesthetic features</p>

plenty of cafes outside, nice selection of shops nearby, wonderful shops outside	many shops and cafes outside the temple for shopping and refreshment	supporting products
entry fee was next to nothing	reasonable prices	cost effectiveness

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Reviewers Profiles

As shown in Fig. 2, the heritage tourists who visited the Temple of Apollo in Didyma and commented on TripAdvisor, came from different parts of the world. 74% of the international tourists are from the Europe. The main reason for this is that Didim district, where the temple is located, is frequently visited by British tourists. Following European tourists, the Temple of Apollo is mostly visited by Asian (14%), North American (7%) and Australian (3%) tourists respectively. African, South American and Middle Eastern tourists visit the temple the least with a rate of 2%. When we look at the travel type of tourists who comment on TripAdvisor, it is seen that they mostly travel with their families (39%). This result is not surprising. Because as pointed out by Schänzel and Yeoman (2014), family holidays have an important place in mass tourism destinations such as Didim. Apart from the families, 36% of the travellers visiting the temple are couples, 18% travel with a group of friends and 7% are travelling alone.

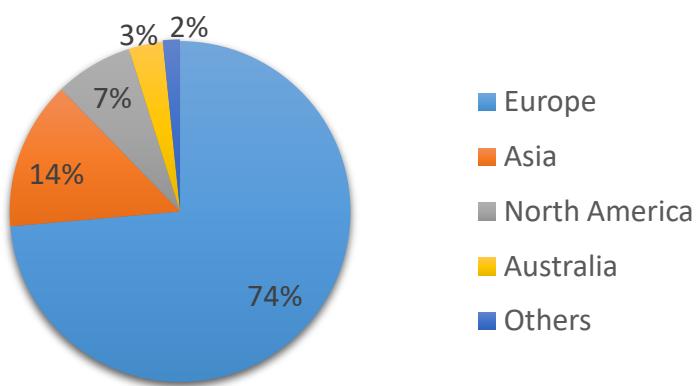


Figure 2. Reviewers by continents

While a significant portion of the reviews show that the visitors had a positive experience, there are some negative expressions in some of the reviews. Therefore, this situation was taken into consideration during the analyses and the heritage tourism experience of the

visitors was handled under two headings as positive and negative. As a result of the analysis of the reviews, a total of 9 dimensions explaining the heritage tourism experience were determined and shown in Fig 3. While 5 of the dimensions are related to positive experiences, 4 of them are related to negative experiences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that raw data should be quoted in order to obtain verifiable results in qualitative research. Therefore, in the analysis of the dimensions of both positive and negative experiences, direct quotations from user reviews were employed to support and illustrate the findings

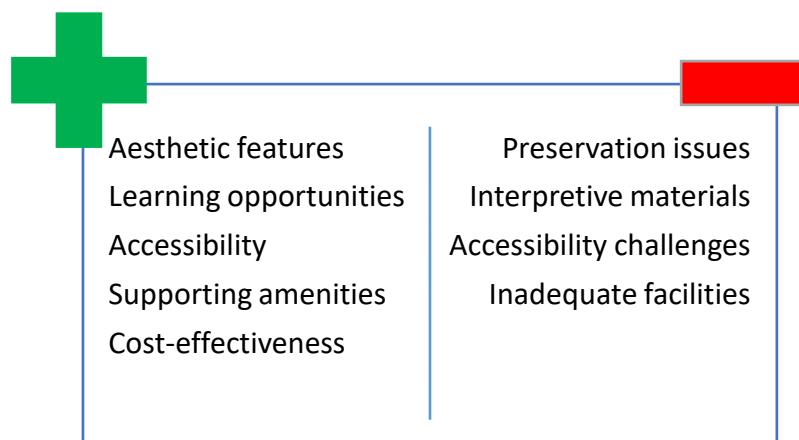


Figure 3. Dimensions of positive and negative heritage tourism experiences in Temple of Apollo

#### **4.2. Positive Experiences of Visitors**

According to the findings in the TripAdvisor reviews of the tourists who visited the Temple of Apollo, it was determined that the majority of them had positive experiences and these were explained in a total of 5 dimensions as seen in Fig 4. Findings regarding all dimensions are explained in detail below and some comments are directly quoted as examples.

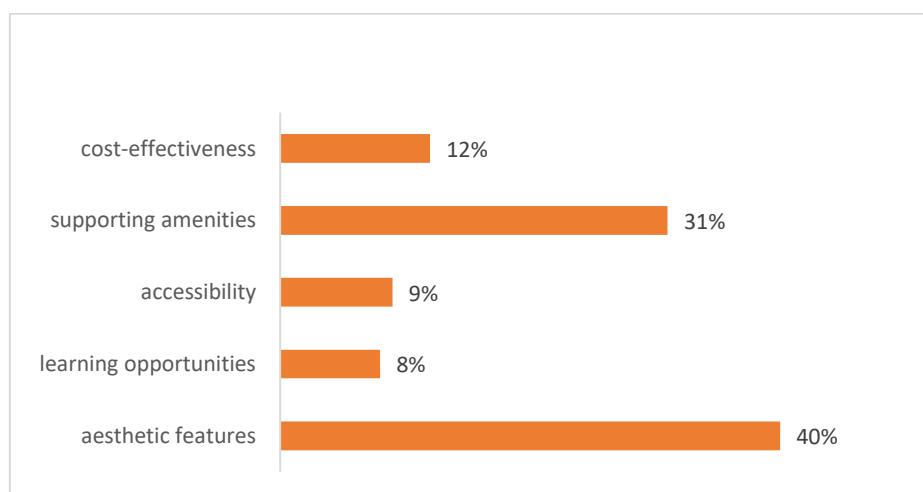


Figure 4. Percentage of positive dimensions of reviews

### *Aesthetic features*

Aesthetics, which is a philosophical approach to beauty, is the common feature of all objects that provide positive experiences to visitors (Tekel, 2015). The concept of beauty in the study was used to express the physical characteristics of the tangible objects in the Temple of Apollo. Research findings show that visitors were captivated by the towering columns, intricate carvings, and the overall grandeur of the site, which often evoked feelings of awe and admiration:

...The site was bigger than I thought it would be and I was surprised to see so many of the larger columns still standing and intact. Make sure you get close to the columns and other stone structures to view the carvings, since they contain much intricate detail... (Reviewer\_005)

...The design is quite marvellous for its time, and walking around, it does make you admire what humanity can build and achieve when they set their minds to it.... (Reviewer\_022)

### *Supporting amenities*

In the tourism industry, a product can be defined as everything that a tourist needs and consumes during his/her travelling. Therefore, physical objects, services, people and various places can be considered within this scope (Kotler, 1984). Due to its structure, touristic products should not be considered alone. In the touristic experience, each element used directly or indirectly in the process of consuming the main product is in the position of supporting product and shows a great variety. These include service groups such as recreational activities, guidance services, transport, souvenir shops, food and beverage, car hire (Smith, 1994). Because being able to meet the needs of tourists also increases the rate of positive experiences. Within the scope of the study, the availability of cafes, souvenir shops, and nearby restaurants added to the overall experience. These amenities provided visitors with opportunities to relax, enjoy refreshments, and purchase local crafts around the Temple of Apollo:

...You can walk around the little village which has quite a few bars, cafes and restaurants but is not commercialised and has a certain charm about it... (Reviewer\_134)

... With cafes, restaurants and souvenir shops nearby it is worth a visit. Recommended... (Reviewer\_232)

### *Cost-effectiveness*

The price of touristic products plays a key role in consumers' decision-making about whether or not to purchase these products (Forsyth and Dwyer, 2009). Since touristic products are mostly similar to each other, the financial value of the products becomes important in terms of economic attractiveness when making a purchase decision. In terms of consumer psychology, cheap products are always attractive (Masiero & Nicolau, 2012). The affordability of the

entrance fee and the reasonable prices of nearby services were repeatedly highlighted. Visitors often expressed surprise at the low cost of such a high-value experience:

...Entry fee was next to nothing with as much time as you want to spend inside and take in the structure...  
(Reviewer\_112)

...The price of entry is 15 lira which is nothing when you stand in the ruins... (Reviewer\_065)

...Some gift shops outside the temple walls and carpet shop and cafes which are very cheap... (Reviewer\_131)

### *Accessibility*

The site's proximity to Didim's town center and its accessibility via public and private transportation received consistent praise. Visitors found the journey to the temple convenient, with many mentioning the ease of parking and short walking distances. The location of cultural elements such as ancient settlements at the centre of heritage tourism and the high number of transportation alternatives accordingly positively affect the heritage experience (Li et al., 2020). Below are the reviews showing that the location of the Temple of Apollo positively affects the tourist experience:

...Unlike many similar places, this is very easy to get to by car or public transportation as it is located inside town of Didim... (Reviewer\_084)

... The drive into the town was very easy, parking was a similar experience too. There was no rush and it was beautiful... (Reviewer\_235)

### *Learning opportunities*

Learning is defined as the acquisition of all kinds of knowledge, skills and actions that people need in order to keep up with their environment (Yilmaz, 2009). Mutlu and Mutlu (2017) mention that experience has an important contribution to the learning process. Educational resources, such as multilingual information boards and audio guides, enriched the visitor experience by providing valuable insights into the temple's historical and cultural context (Masberg and Silverman, 1996). When the reviews made within the scope of the research are analysed, as can be seen from the examples below, the ability of visitors to obtain information in their own language and in various ways has positively affected the experience:

...Combining history & culture, this is a great place to visit to learn more about the area. Well cared for & with signs in English, the site is informative & easy to get around... (Reviewer\_055)

...If you like history it's worth paying to get the headphones. All the information is told and you can choose your language... (Reviewer\_198)

### **4.3. Negative Experiences of Visitors**

Larsen (2007) defines tourist experience as a personal phenomenon that is strong enough to be remembered for a long time in relation to past travels. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) also

mention that there are many factors that directly or indirectly affect the touristic experience and as a result of these factors, the experience may be positive or negative. In the research, although it was reflected in the comments that visitors to the Temple of Apollo had a mostly positive experience, there were also statements about some negative experiences related to the temple and its surroundings. A total of 4 dimensions for negative experiences emerged and are shown in Fig 5.

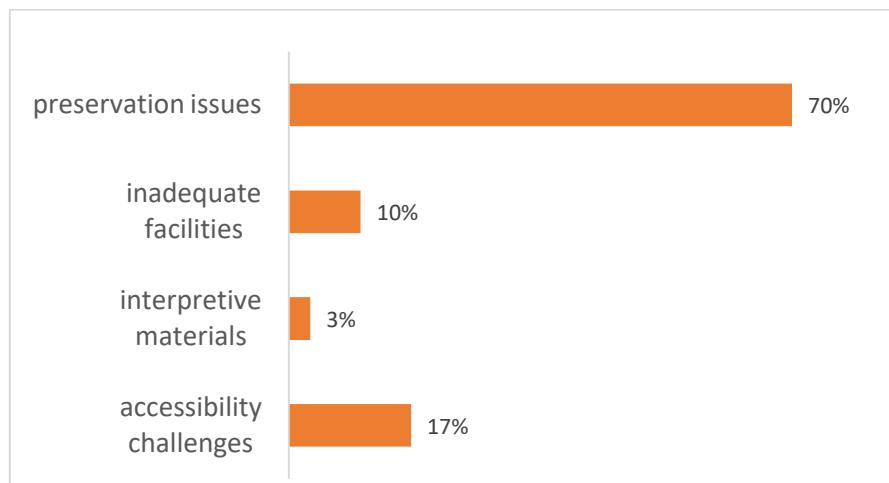


Figure 5. Percentage of negative dimensions of reviews

#### *Preservation issues*

Despite its historical grandeur, concerns about inadequate restoration and visible neglect were among the most commonly cited complaints. Visitors felt that poorly executed repairs detracted from the authenticity of the site as seen in the review below:

...However, as authorities in the country always do, they cement/plaster up certain sections, which is their understanding of “restoration... (Reviewer\_078)

On the other hand, the lack of precautions against approaches that would directly damage the structure and indirectly the visitors in the ancient temple was evaluated by comparing with different countries:

...And Turkey seems to be less strict with rules about behavior at its ruins than other countries. Meaning you can go up, climb, touch, etc. on the ruins in a way you can't in, say, Greece.. (Reviewer\_139)

#### *Accessibility challenges*

In the Temple of Apollo, which the researcher has visited many times during his professional career, it has been observed that there are some situations that restrict the visit of handicapped individuals. Physical barriers, such as steep stairs and uneven paths, posed significant challenges for visitors with mobility impairments. These issues were frequently mentioned as

a source of frustration. These difficulties caused a negative experience for some visitors and were reflected in their reviews as follows:

... Not good for wheelchair access as it Was all steps and we were not told this so we had to find something else to do whilst waiting for the rest of the group to come back ... (Reviewer\_365)

.... Not the ideal place to go when raining as under feet is very slippery. We had 2 young ladies in wheel chairs who could not go down to the temple as they where not told there where steps at the enterance not good planning! shame... (Reviewer\_035)

### *Inadequate facilities*

Pine and Gilmour (1999) mention the effect of the unforgettable structure of the goods and services created by businesses in the formation of the experience. The lack of basic amenities, such as restrooms and shaded seating areas, was a recurring source of dissatisfaction, particularly during peak tourist seasons (Mendes et al., 2010). In the study, not fulfilling an important physiological need was interpreted as a negative experience:

...There were no toilet facilities. It was unacceptable... (Reviewer\_069)

On the other hand, from an anthropological perspective, tourists visit an attraction located in a different cultural environment, which causes them to see themselves as guests (Gonul, 2023). Therefore, it is understood from the following review that the disinterested behavior of the staff, whom they see as hosts, negatively affects the experience:

... the staff at the ticket office is not motivated and careless and the monument is ok but not worth going out of one's way for it. It is an unfinished monument...(Reviewer\_202)

### *Interpretive materials*

Since heritage tourists do not have enough information and visit a place where they are unfamiliar, they need to obtain satisfactory information in order to make their experience positive. The more adequate the level of information obtained, the more positive the experience is. However, in the opposite case, the perception of negative experience will be dominant (Quinlan Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). Some of the reviews analysed within the scope of the research show that insufficient information or information that will cause misunderstanding have negative effects on the experience:

...I drove to the Temple anticipating a massive structure with 22 columns - as the guide book said "the second biggest temple of the ancient world". True, the columns were massive - but they don't tell you there are only 3 of them still standing! I felt a little let down... (Reviewer\_379)

...The vast majority of masonry items were there spread around the site, it would be of far greater interest if some of these items had been reassembled with more historical information available... (Reviewer\_150)

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the dimensions of visitor experiences at the Temple of Apollo in Didyma, Turkey, using a netnographic analysis of 1,631 TripAdvisor reviews. By analyzing both positive and negative dimensions, the research not only revealed significant insights into heritage tourism but also highlighted theoretical and practical contributions that address existing gaps in the literature. The findings emphasized the dominance of positive visitor experiences, driven primarily by the temple's aesthetic features, accessibility, supporting amenities, affordability, and educational value. However, the study also identified critical gaps related to preservation, accessibility, facilities, and interpretive resources, which detract from the overall visitor experience. These findings align with prior research emphasizing the multidimensional nature of heritage tourism experiences. For instance, the study corroborates Timothy's (2011) perspective on the place-centered focus of heritage tourism and Agapito et al.'s (2014) observations on the sensory and emotional engagement that define memorable tourist experiences. Furthermore, the analysis builds on Kozinets' (2010) methodological contributions to netnography, demonstrating its applicability in analyzing UGC within the heritage tourism context.

The results of the research show that the magnificent appearance of the Temple of Apollo, the mastery of stonemasonry and the details in other architectural elements positively affect the experience. Dufrenne (1973) states that the architectural features of the buildings in heritage sites create a perception of beauty in the human mind and this creates a source for aesthetic experience. Levinson (2011) mentions that when a person encounters an object with aesthetic appeal, he is happy and endeavours to maintain it. In his study, Breiby (2014) revealed that the harmony between the natural environment of cultural heritage sites and their tangible attraction elements positively affects the tourist experience. Similarly, many studies in the tourism literature have revealed that the architectural features of cultural heritage sites have a positive impact on the experience of tourists (Wilson and McIntosh, 2007; Ung and Vong, 2010; Scerri et al., 2019). Thus, it can be considered that this result of the research is consistent with the results of previous studies.

Research findings revealed that learning has a positive impact on the experience, while limited ways of obtaining information have a negative impact on it. The main motivation of tourists in heritage tourism is to fulfil the need to discover, learn, experience and consume tangible and intangible cultural values (Richards, 2018). Similar to this study, Hosany and Witham (2009) found that satisfaction increases as one gains knowledge about the culture and heritage of a destination.

Reachability is one of the key factors that increase the attractiveness of tourism destinations (Medlik, 2003). This research revealed that the location of the Temple of Apollo in the very centre of the modern city of Didim and its short and effortless access by public transport, private vehicle or on foot had a positive impact on the visitor experience. This result is similar to the result obtained by Quang et al. (2023) in their research in which they tried to find out the experiences of tourists visiting war heritage sites in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. According to the findings obtained within the scope of the research, the location of the heritage site alone is not sufficient for a positive tourist experience. In addition, the heritage tourist should also have access to some standardised facilities in the place they visit (Johanson & Olsen, 2010). According to the research findings, the presence of businesses such as cafes, restaurants and souvenir shops around the Temple of Apollo, which can add value to the tourists' experience, has led to an increase in the pleasure received from the main product. According to Johanson and Olsen (2010), in tourism, which is a service provided sector where the experience is formed in a short period of time, intangible products such as smiling, helping, problem solving by the service personnel directly affect the experience. This study reveals that the inability to fully meet the physiological needs of visitors such as toilets and the cultural interaction they want to establish with the employees has a negative impact on the experience.

According to the research findings, many factors affecting the heritage tourism experience have emerged. The main reason for this is the complex structure of heritage tourism. The phenomenon called culture is multidimensional and therefore heritage tourism, which is a type of culturally based tourism, also has its share from this multidimensionality. However, increasing the level of satisfaction can be achieved by all elements doing their part in a structure where many stakeholders are involved in the process due to its complex structure. The heritage tourism experience emerges as a result of considering all the products as a single piece and reveals the success of the destination. Unlike seasonal touristic activities such as mass tourism, heritage tourism can be applied at any time of the year.

While existing literature often focuses on globally renowned heritage sites, such as the Acropolis or the Great Wall of China, this study addresses the underrepresentation of mid-sized heritage sites, particularly those like the Temple of Apollo. By applying netnography to a relatively understudied site, this research complements the work of scholars like Quang et al. (2023), who advocate for the integration of UGC in understanding visitor experiences. The use of a netnographic approach to analyze UGC introduces a novel perspective to heritage tourism research. This study extends the work of Kozinets (2010) and Bartl et al. (2016),

illustrating how digital ethnography can reveal the nuanced interplay of sensory, logistical, and cultural factors shaping visitor satisfaction.

The Temple of Apollo exemplifies the intricate dynamics of heritage tourism, where aesthetic, logistical, and cultural factors converge to shape visitor experiences. By integrating findings from existing literature with original insights from UGC, this study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and enhancing heritage tourism practices. As scholars like Hosany and Witham (2009) have noted, creating memorable tourist experiences requires a nuanced balance between preserving historical authenticity and meeting the evolving expectations of a global audience. This research affirms that heritage sites like the Temple of Apollo are not merely static relics of the past but dynamic spaces where history, culture, and modern tourism intersect.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this study provides practical, evidence-based insights for heritage tourism stakeholders, particularly those involved in the management, interpretation, and promotion of the Temple of Apollo in Didyma. By systematically analyzing a large corpus of user-generated reviews, the research identifies key areas of visitor satisfaction such as aesthetic appreciation, ease of access, and learning opportunities as well as recurring sources of dissatisfaction, including inadequate facilities, preservation concerns, and accessibility barriers. These findings can directly inform site management strategies, helping decision-makers prioritize resource allocation and improve infrastructure, signage, interpretive materials, and visitor services. Furthermore, by understanding tourists' lived experiences and expectations, stakeholders can develop more inclusive, informative, and emotionally resonant heritage encounters. In this way, the study moves beyond abstract theorizing and offers concrete recommendations that support both the enhancement of visitor satisfaction and the long-term sustainability of the site.

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