



## A Thematic Analysis of Visitor Experience at the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery Based on Online Reviews

Ahlat Selçuklu Meydan Mezarlığı'nda Ziyaretçi Deneyiminin Çevrimiçi Yorumlar Üzerinden Tematik Analizi

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### Abstract

This study examines online visitor reviews of the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery to identify the main dimensions shaping the visitor experience. The study is based on the assumption that visitor perceptions in cultural heritage sites provide an important source of feedback for sustainable site management. Accordingly, it focuses on visitor opinions shared on online platforms. The data were analyzed using a qualitative research design and a thematic analysis approach. The findings show that visitor evaluations cluster around five main themes: Historical Character, Aesthetic and Architectural Qualities, Environmental Cleanliness, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Guiding Services. The results indicate that visitors primarily assess the cemetery through its historical significance and aesthetic value, which form the core of the visitor experience. In contrast, comments on transportation, infrastructure, and guiding services are mostly critical, suggesting that these factors limit the overall experience. Positive feedback on environmental cleanliness and site order indicates that basic service standards are largely met by site management. Overall, the study demonstrates that online visitor reviews offer a functional data source for the evaluation and management of cultural heritage sites.

**Keywords:** Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery, cultural heritage, visitor experience, thematic analysis

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Ahlat Selçuklu Meydan Mezarlığı'na ilişkin çevrimiçi ziyaretçi yorumlarını inceleyerek ziyaretçi deneyimini şekillendiren temel boyutları ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, kültürel miras alanlarında ziyaretçi algılarının sürdürülebilir alan yönetimi açısından önemli bir geri bildirim kaynağı olduğu varsayımına dayanmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda çevrimiçi platformlarda paylaşılan ziyaretçi görüşlerine odaklanılmıştır. Veriler, nitel araştırma deseni kapsamında tematik analiz yöntemi kullanılarak incelenmiştir. Bulgular, ziyaretçi değerlendirmelerinin Tarihi Doku, Estetik ve Mimari, Çevre Temizliği, Ulaşım ve Altyapı ile Rehberlik Hizmetleri olmak üzere beş ana tema etrafında yoğunlaştığını göstermektedir. Sonuçlar, ziyaretçilerin mezarlığı ağırlıklı olarak tarihsel anlamı ve estetik değeri üzerinden değerlendirdiklerini ve bu unsurların ziyaretçi deneyiminin merkezinde yer aldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Buna karşılık, ulaşım, altyapı ve rehberlik hizmetlerine ilişkin yorumlar çoğunlukla eleştirel nitelikte olup, bu alanların deneyimi sınırlayan faktörler olduğunu göstermektedir. Çevre temizliği ve alan düzenine yönelik olumlu değerlendirmeler ise temel hizmet standartlarının büyük ölçüde karşılandığını göstermektedir. Genel olarak çalışma, çevrimiçi ziyaretçi yorumlarının kültürel miras alanlarının değerlendirilmesi ve yönetimi açısından işlevsel bir veri kaynağı sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ahlat Selçuklu Mezarlığı, kültürel miras, ziyaretçi deneyimi, tematik analiz

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## Introduction

Cultural heritage sites are important spaces that embody the historical accumulation of societies in a tangible form and enable this legacy to be passed on across generations. However, the value of these sites is not limited to their physical preservation. Cultural heritage is continuously reinterpreted and experienced through interaction with visitors. For this reason, the sustainability of cultural heritage depends both on conservation practices and directly on how visitors perceive and experience these sites (Dümcke & Gnedovsky, 2013:141; Deniz, 2022:1204; Kodaş, 2024:2103). UNESCO likewise emphasizes the importance of visitor-oriented approaches in the management of cultural heritage sites (UNESCO et al., 2022:6).

Within this context, the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery stands out as a distinctive site in Türkiye for examining the relationship between cultural heritage and visitor experience. Located in the province of Bitlis and included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 2010, the cemetery covers an area of approximately 210,000 square meters and is notable for its hundreds of monumental gravestones and original stone craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2000; Turkish Museums, 2024). Due to its architectural features and historical depth, the site functions as an open-air museum and offers visitors a strong historical narrative (Arslan, 2018:3).

In recent years, data obtained from online platforms have been increasingly used to examine visitor perceptions of cultural heritage sites. Visitor reviews shared on platforms such as Google Maps and TripAdvisor constitute natural texts in which individuals express their experiences without researcher intervention. These reviews provide rich data on visitor satisfaction, expectations, and criticisms, and they also play an important role in shaping destination image and management decisions within the scope of electronic word-of-mouth communication (Gretzel, 2006:9-10; Mendoza et al., 2023:1-3; Sarıışık & Özbay, 2012:1-10).

In Türkiye, the number of studies analyzing online visitor reviews of cultural heritage sites has increased in recent years. Research focusing on sites such as Çatalhöyük, Göbeklitepe, İvriz, and various museums shows that visitor opinions make both experiential dimensions and management-related problem areas visible (Ateş & Sunar, 2019:335-338; Halaç, Ulaş & Karaçor, 2021:1506-1517; Kuzu & Sürme, 2023:393-405; Nguyen, Ağbay, Çakar, 2024:2310). In contrast, studies focusing specifically on the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery remain limited. Although Ağbay's (2022:38) study based on TripAdvisor reviews provides an important starting point, the site remains open to further research in terms of data volume and platform diversity.

Based on this gap, the present study analyzes 500 visitor reviews shared on the Google Maps platform regarding the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery using thematic analysis. The aim of the study is to identify the perceived characteristics of the cemetery through visitor reviews and to discuss the implications of the findings for the management and sustainability of cultural heritage sites. Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (i) Through which themes do visitors evaluate the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery?
- (ii) What do these themes indicate in terms of visitor experience and satisfaction?
- (iii) How can the findings contribute to the sustainable management of cultural heritage sites?

The study makes three main contributions to the literature on cultural heritage and visitor experience. First, methodologically, it provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of visitor experience at the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery by examining a high-volume

dataset of 500 Google Maps reviews, thereby extending previous studies that relied on smaller samples or single platforms. Second, empirically, it reveals how visitor experience at the site is structured through the interaction of historical meaning, aesthetic perception, and management related factors, offering a holistic thematic framework grounded in naturally generated online data. Third, practically, the study translates visitor evaluations into concrete implications for sustainable cultural heritage management by identifying priority areas such as transportation, infrastructure, and guiding services. In this respect, the study contributes to the academic literature and supports the practical planning and management of cultural heritage sites.

## 1. Conceptual Background and Literature Review

Cultural heritage sites were long approached primarily as physical assets in need of protection. Within this perspective, priority was given to restoration works, the preservation of spatial integrity, and the conservation of historical fabric. In recent years, however, cultural heritage studies have increasingly emphasized how these sites are perceived and experienced by visitors. Current literature highlights that cultural heritage is not defined solely by its physical features but represents a dynamic construct whose meaning is shaped through interaction with visitors (Dümcke & Gnedovsky, 2013:15; Deniz, 2022:1217).

From this perspective, visitor experience is considered a key element in the sustainability of cultural heritage sites. How visitors describe a site, which attributes they value, and which aspects they criticize directly reflect both the perceived quality of the experience and the effectiveness of existing management approaches. In the literature, visitor experience is commonly examined through dimensions such as historical value, aesthetic perception, interpretive facilities, environmental order, and service quality. However, the relationships of balance or imbalance among these dimensions are often addressed only in a limited manner (Kunt, 2023: 57-58).

Online visitor reviews have emerged as an important data source for examining visitor experience within the framework of electronic word of mouth communication. Electronic word of mouth refers to the process through which individuals share their opinions about destinations they have experienced via digital platforms, playing a significant role in destination image formation and visitor decision making (Kodaş, 2025:177; Sarıışık & Özbay, 2012:1-10). Platforms such as Google Maps and TripAdvisor provide spaces where visitors express their experiences without external guidance, thereby generating natural and information rich datasets for researchers (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015:152; Gretzel, 2006:9-10).

Studies conducted in Türkiye that analyze online visitor reviews of cultural heritage sites demonstrate the usefulness of such data in understanding visitor experience. Research on archaeological sites such as Çatalhöyük and Göbeklitepe shows that visitor comments tend to cluster around themes including historical value, aesthetic perception, interpretive opportunities, and environmental organization (Halaç et al., 2020:1506-1517; Kuzu & Sürme, 2023:393-405; Nguyen, Ağbay, Çakar, 2024:2310). Similarly, studies focusing on the İvriz Cultural Landscape and various museum settings emphasize that visitor opinions offer valuable insights into site management and experience quality (Ateş & Sunar, 2019:335; Eklemezler & Adiloğlu, 2022:128).

Research specifically addressing the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery remains limited. Ağbay (2022:38) examined visitor reviews posted on the TripAdvisor platform and analyzed the cemetery experience through sensory, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. While the study demonstrated that historical and architectural features play a central role in shaping visitor experience, its reliance on a single platform and a relatively small dataset limits the

generalizability of its findings. This situation points to the need for renewed analysis of visitor perceptions of the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery based on broader, more current, and higher volume datasets.

The importance of visitor opinions for sustainable heritage and destination management is clearly emphasized in the literature. Management approaches that fail to consider visitor satisfaction, perceptions, and expectations are widely regarded as unsustainable in the long term (Başaran & Somuncu, 2021:42-43). Analysis of online visitor reviews provides site managers with concrete feedback on issues such as service quality, accessibility, interpretive provision, and environmental arrangements, thereby offering data driven support for planning processes (Göktüğ & Kurkut, 2015:120-127; Okuyucu & Somuncu, 2012:134-144; Serçek, 2018:474-475).

Building on this body of literature, the present study treats online visitor reviews not merely as descriptive accounts of experience but as a source that reveals where visitor perceptions concentrate and where they become problematic within cultural heritage sites. Reviews obtained from a high participation and up to date platform such as Google Maps allow for a simultaneous evaluation of the site's perceived strengths and shortcomings. In this sense, the study aims to address visitor experience in a holistic manner by examining the relationship between historical and aesthetic dimensions and managerial factors such as transportation, infrastructure, and guiding services.

Accordingly, this research goes beyond identifying the themes through which visitor experience at the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery is structured. It seeks to discuss what these themes imply for site management practices. Approaching online visitor reviews from this perspective contributes to the more systematic and effective use of visitor feedback in the planning and management of cultural heritage sites.

Although previous studies have examined visitor experiences at cultural heritage sites through online reviews, the existing literature remains fragmented in terms of data sources, analytical scope, and contextual focus. Studies conducted in Türkiye largely rely on limited datasets or focus on well-known archaeological sites, while research specifically addressing the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery remains scarce. By combining Google Maps dataset with a systematic thematic analysis, this study positions itself at the intersection of heritage studies, visitor experience research, and digital review analysis, thereby addressing an overlooked empirical and contextual gap in the literature.

## **2. Method**

This study is designed within a qualitative research framework and is based on the thematic analysis of online visitor reviews. The research rests on the assumption that visitor perceptions and experiences related to cultural heritage sites can be examined through texts produced on digital platforms. In this respect, the study combines a netnographic perspective with content based qualitative data analysis. Netnography is defined as a method that allows the examination of content naturally produced by individuals in online environments without researcher intervention (O'Donohoe, 2010:328-330).

The data source of the study consists of visitor reviews shared on the Google Maps platform about the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery. Google Maps was selected because it is a high participation and up to date platform where users freely express their experiences. This feature enables the observation of visitor experiences in an everyday and non intrusive manner (Mendoza et al., 2023:1-3).

The dataset includes reviews written in Turkish between 2020 and 2024 that directly refer to the experience of visiting the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery. Promotional content, advertisements, and comments not directly related to the site were excluded from the dataset. In line with these criteria, a total of 500 visitor reviews were selected through random sampling and included in the analysis. This approach aimed to ensure that the dataset was both current and sufficiently representative.

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006:77-101). Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative approach that seeks to systematically identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative data. It is widely used in the analysis of unstructured texts such as online visitor reviews.

The analysis followed six stages. In the first stage, all reviews were read repeatedly by the researchers to achieve familiarity with the data. In the second stage, visitor statements were coded through open coding by identifying meaningful units. During this process, no predefined thematic framework was applied, and coding remained closely grounded in the content of the reviews. In the third stage, codes with similar meanings were grouped to form subthemes. In the fourth stage, these subthemes were organized under broader conceptual themes. In the fifth stage, the themes were reviewed, checked for consistency with the dataset, and overlapping elements were refined. In the final stage, the themes were clearly defined and reported (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 77-101).

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, the coding process was conducted independently by two researchers. The resulting codes were compared, and agreement was reached through discussion. Inter-coder agreement was calculated as 90 percent, which is considered an acceptable level for qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 2002:162-163). Coding discrepancies were re-examined through joint evaluation.

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the study. All data were obtained from a publicly accessible platform, and no personal information related to review authors was included in the analysis. Reviews were anonymized, and no information that could enable the identification of individual users was reported. This approach is consistent with ethical standards concerning the use of online data (O'Donohoe, 2010:328-330).

### **3. Findings**

In this study, 500 visitor reviews shared on Google Maps between 2020 and 2024 were examined through thematic analysis. The analysis shows that visitor evaluations cluster around five main themes. Online reviews function as natural data sources that make visitor experience and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the site visible. Such data generate direct feedback that can be used in the management and improvement of heritage sites (Brando et al., 2025:669-690; Gretzel, 2006:9-10). Previous research similarly demonstrates that analyses of online reviews related to cultural and archaeological heritage sites are effective in identifying experience quality, satisfaction components, and management related issues.

The frequency distribution indicates that visitors place greater emphasis on dimensions related to meaning and value, particularly historical character and aesthetic or architectural qualities. In contrast, service and operational dimensions, such as transportation, infrastructure, and guiding services, appear less frequently but contain a higher proportion of critical comments.

The frequency distribution of themes is presented below.

**Table 1.** Frequency Distribution of Themes Identified Through Thematic Analysis

Theme	Number of Reviews	Percentage (%)
Historical Character	150	30
Aesthetic and Architecture	125	25
Environmental Cleanliness	100	20
Transportation and Infrastructure	75	15
Guiding Services	50	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>

This distribution follows a pattern frequently observed in studies based on online visitor reviews. Visitors tend to foreground elements related to attraction and uniqueness, and then turn their attention to managerial components such as accessibility, information provision, and site organization. The literature also clearly recognizes visitor feedback as a critical input for sustainable destination and heritage management.

### 3.1. Historical Character

Analysis of the visitor reviews shows that the theme of Historical Character is more prominent than all other themes ( $n = 150$ ; 30 percent). This finding indicates that the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery is primarily evaluated by visitors through its historical meaning. In the reviews, the cemetery is described as more than a physical setting. It is presented as a place where visitors feel a strong connection with the past and experience a heightened sense of time. Many visitors portray being in the site as an experience that encourages reflection and conveys a sense of historical continuity.

**Table 2.** Codes and Representative Statements Related to the Historical Character Theme

Subtheme	Code	Representative Visitor Statement
Historical depth	Sense of the past	“Walking here feels like going back centuries.”
Cultural value	Historical importance	“It is not an ordinary cemetery, it feels like a history lesson.”
Atmosphere	Spiritual impact	“The silence and the atmosphere are very impressive.”
Uniqueness	Unique place	“There is no other place like this.”

The frequent use of expressions such as “past,” “history,” “atmosphere,” and “depth” in visitor narratives indicates that the cognitive dimension of the experience is particularly strong. This suggests that online reviews reveal more than satisfaction levels. They also make visible the meaning relationship that visitors establish with the site. Previous studies emphasize that heritage sites often generate powerful narratives through perceived authenticity and a strong sense of historical connection (Ağbay, 2022:38).

Research based on online visitor reviews similarly notes that historical context and a sense of place strengthen the cognitive dimension of visitor experience (Gretzel, 2006:9-10). Studies conducted at archaeological and cultural heritage sites also show that visitors tend to position historical depth at the center of their experience (Ateş & Sunar, 2019:335-338; Halaç et al., 2020:1506 -1517).

The findings of this study indicate that the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery produces a strong historical narrative in the eyes of visitors, and that the perceived value of the site is largely shaped through this narrative. The literature further suggests that sites where historical identity is clearly perceived tend to enhance visitor satisfaction and memorability (Okuyucu & Somuncu, 2012:134-144; Göktüğ & Kurkut, 2015:120-127).

### 3.2. Aesthetic and Architectural Qualities

Another prominent dimension shaping visitor experience concerns aesthetic and architectural features. The theme of Aesthetic and Architectural Qualities (n = 125; 25 percent) indicates that visitors largely describe their experience through visual appreciation and stone craftsmanship. Reviews frequently highlight the form of the gravestones, the quality of carving, and the overall spatial order of the site. These elements occupy a visible place in visitor narratives.

Visitor statements suggest that aesthetic features function together with historical character in shaping the overall experience. Detailed and distinctive stone workmanship, the monumental presence of the gravestones, and the visual coherence of the site play a key role in visitors describing the cemetery as striking and impressive. Studies based on analyses of online reviews similarly show that aesthetic and local characteristics are closely linked to perceived experience quality and satisfaction. Such features are often treated by visitors as defining attributes of a destination. In the case of Ahlat, aesthetic emphasis appears as a component that complements historical character and reinforces the perceived value of the site.

**Table 3.** Codes and Representative Statements Related to the Aesthetic and Architectural Theme

Subtheme	Code	Representative Visitor Statement
Stone craftsmanship	Artistic detail	“The workmanship on the stones is incredible.”
Visual impact	Aesthetic appeal	“A place worth photographing from every angle.”
Architectural order	Monumentality	“The gravestones look very imposing.”
Unique design	Distinctiveness	“It does not resemble any other cemetery.”

In cultural heritage settings, architectural aesthetics play a significant role in how visitors perceive and evaluate a site. Previous studies indicate that aesthetic elements support emotional engagement with place and contribute to a stronger experience (Eklemezler & Adiloğlu, 2022:128; Kuzu & Sürme, 2023:393-405). In this context, the aesthetic and architectural features of the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery can be seen as reinforcing and deepening the historical dimension of visitor experience (Aydın, 2016:13).

### 3.3. Environmental Cleanliness

The theme of Environmental Cleanliness accounts for 20 percent of all evaluations (n = 100) and represents a key dimension reflecting how site management is perceived by visitors. Reviews focus on the general cleanliness, order, and maintenance of the cemetery. These aspects function as a supporting layer of the visitor experience and tend to remain unnoticed unless they are absent. Many visitors treat cleanliness and maintenance as a basic service level that is expected in cultural heritage sites.

Analysis of visitor statements shows that environmental cleanliness is rarely framed as a point of strong praise. Instead, it is often described as meeting expected standards. This suggests that cleanliness and spatial order are generally viewed as secondary elements, while their absence would likely have a negative impact on the overall experience. In heritage settings, cleanliness and maintenance are often perceived as problematic only when they fall short, while their presence signals effective management.

**Table 4.** Codes and Representative Statements Related to the Environmental Cleanliness Theme

Subtheme	Code	Representative Visitor Statement
General cleanliness	Well maintained site	“The cemetery is quite clean and orderly.”
Spatial order	Tidy environment	“The surroundings are well kept and easy to walk around.”
Perception of care	Good preservation	“It is very well preserved for such an old place.”
Management quality	Regular upkeep	“It is clear that the authorities take care of it.”

In this sense, online visitor reviews provide site managers with direct and concrete feedback on operational issues such as cleanliness, maintenance, and spatial organization. The literature similarly emphasizes that online reviews can make such functional aspects visible (Ye et al., 2025:14). In the case of the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery, positive assessments related to environmental cleanliness indicate that current management practices largely align with visitor expectations.

These findings suggest that environmental order does not directly shape visitor experience on its own, but supports the smooth progression of the visit. Perceiving the site as clean and well organized allows visitors to engage more comfortably with the place and to evaluate their experience within a generally positive frame. Previous studies likewise note that cleanliness and maintenance are core components of sustainable visitor management in cultural heritage sites (Göktüg & Kurkut, 2015:124; Okuyucu & Somuncu, 2012:134-144).

### 3.4. Transportation and Infrastructure

The theme of Transportation and Infrastructure accounts for 15 percent of visitor reviews ( $n = 75$ ) and reflects the access related and physical organization dimensions of visitor experience. Comments grouped under this theme focus on difficulties in reaching the cemetery, limited public transportation options, and shortcomings in on site infrastructure, particularly directional signage. Visitors who are unfamiliar with the region or who do not have access to a private vehicle frequently describe transportation as a factor that complicates the visit.

Evaluations related to transportation and infrastructure are generally framed in a critical manner. Reviews suggest that although the cemetery has strong historical and aesthetic appeal, problems related to accessibility can negatively affect the overall flow of the experience. The large size of the site, insufficient directional signs, and limited walking path arrangements can make movement within the area more demanding and time consuming for visitors.

**Table 5.** Codes and Representative Statements Related to the Transportation and Infrastructure Theme

Subtheme	Code	Representative Visitor Statement
Accessibility	Transportation difficulty	“It is a bit difficult to get here without a car.”
Public transport	Limited connections	“Public transportation options are very limited.”
On site layout	Lack of signage	“There are not enough directional signs inside.”
Logistical issues	Physical access	“The area is very large, but walking paths could be better.”

These findings align with accessibility related problems frequently highlighted in cultural heritage and destination studies. The literature emphasizes that transportation and infrastructure conditions directly influence visitor experience and that deficiencies in these areas can reduce the perceived value of a site (Göktüğ & Kurkut, 2015:120-127; Hu, 2025:1). A similar pattern is observed in the case of the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery.

The results indicate that improvements in transportation and infrastructure could significantly enhance visitor experience despite the site's strong historical and aesthetic potential. Measures aimed at improving accessibility may allow a wider range of visitors to experience the site more comfortably. In this sense, visitor feedback related to transportation and infrastructure points to priority areas for intervention within the framework of sustainable cultural heritage management (Okuyucu & Somuncu, 2012:134-144).

### 3.5. Guiding Services

The theme of Guiding Services represents 10 percent of visitor reviews (n = 50). Although it appears last in terms of frequency, it directly affects how visitors interpret and understand the site. Comments within this theme focus on access to historical information, the adequacy of explanatory materials, and the limited availability of guiding services. Visitors frequently note that while the site has strong historical and aesthetic potential, this potential is not sufficiently explained or presented in a structured way.

Visitor narratives show that shortcomings in guiding and information provision directly influence the quality of the experience. Insufficient information panels, limited professional guiding services, and the absence of clear interpretive narratives weaken visitors' cognitive engagement with the site. As a result, visitors often report difficulty in understanding what they see, which restricts the depth of the experience. Online visitor reviews thus clearly reveal visitors' needs related to access to information and interpretation (Jia et al., 2025:1).

**Table 6.** Codes and Representative Statements Related to the Guiding Services Theme

Subtheme	Code	Representative Visitor Statement
Lack of information	Insufficient explanation	"We cannot learn what the stones represent."
Need for guides	Absence of guides	"Visiting with a guide would be much more meaningful."
Orientation	Lack of information panels	"There are no detailed information boards."
Experience depth	Meaning making	"With more information, it would be more impressive."

Findings related to guiding services indicate that strong visitor perceptions of the historical and aesthetic value of the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery are not adequately supported by interpretive infrastructure. The lack of information expressed by visitors suggests that the historical content of the site is not fully translated into the visitor experience. The literature consistently highlights guiding services and interpretive narratives as key elements that deepen visitor experience and enhance satisfaction in cultural heritage settings (Okuyucu & Somuncu, 2012:134-144; Sunar, 2021:46).

In this context, visitor feedback on guiding services provides important insights into how the site's existing strengths could be transformed into a more coherent and meaningful experience. The findings indicate that improving guiding and information mechanisms should be treated as a priority area for enhancing the overall quality of visitor experience.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that visitor experience at the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery is shaped mainly by historical and aesthetic values. Visitors tend to evaluate the site primarily through its historical meaning and visual qualities, while managerial elements such as transportation, infrastructure, and guiding services are addressed in a more secondary yet critical manner. When the frequency distribution and content of the themes are considered together, this pattern is largely consistent with earlier studies that examined online visitor reviews of cultural heritage sites (Ateş & Sunar, 2019:335-338; Halaç et al., 2020:1506-1517; Kuzu & Sürme, 2023:393-405).

The prominence of the Historical Character theme shows that visitors perceive the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery as a place where connections with the past are established and meaning is produced, rather than as a purely physical setting. Frequent references to historical depth, atmosphere, and spiritual impact point to a strong cognitive dimension of the experience. The literature similarly emphasizes that historical narratives play a central role in deepening visitor experience at cultural and archaeological heritage sites (Okuyucu & Somuncu, 2012:134-144; Gretzel, 2006:9-10). Comparable findings from studies conducted at sites such as Çatalhöyük and Göbeklitepe suggest that the Ahlat case reflects a broader and recurring pattern (Ateş & Sunar, 2019:335-338; Halaç et al., 2020:1506-1517).

The position of the Aesthetic and Architectural theme as the second most frequent category indicates that historical meaning is reinforced by visual and formal qualities. Stone craftsmanship, monumentality, and spatial order appear as key factors influencing positive visitor evaluations. Previous research has similarly highlighted the role of aesthetic perception in shaping visitor satisfaction and destination image in cultural heritage contexts (Aydm, 2016:13; Eklemezler & Adiloğlu, 2022:128). In the case of the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery, aesthetic features function as a complementary dimension that strengthens the historical experience.

Positive evaluations related to the Environmental Cleanliness theme suggest that the site largely meets visitor expectations in terms of basic service and maintenance standards. Cleanliness and order are typically noticed when they fall below expectations, while their presence is interpreted as a sign of effective management. The clear presence of positive feedback in this study indicates that the site provides an adequate baseline level of maintenance. The literature likewise notes that environmental order influences visitor satisfaction indirectly yet consistently (Göktüğ & Kurkut, 2015:120-127; Okuyucu & Somuncu, 2012:134-144).

In contrast, the Transportation and Infrastructure theme contains mainly critical evaluations, pointing to limitations in accessibility despite the site's strong historical and aesthetic appeal. Visitors frequently refer to insufficient public transportation and a lack of internal directional signage. Studies on cultural heritage and tourism destinations consistently identify transportation and infrastructure deficiencies as major factors that negatively affect visitor experience (Hu, 2025:1; Göktüğ & Kurkut, 2015:120-127). These findings underline that site attractiveness alone does not ensure a positive experience and that accessibility directly shapes experience quality.

The Guiding Services theme, while less prominent in terms of frequency, represents an important dimension for the quality of visitor experience. Visitor comments reveal that the historical and aesthetic value of the cemetery is not adequately explained or interpreted. The literature clearly indicates that guiding services and interpretive narratives deepen visitor experience and that a lack of information reduces satisfaction levels (Gretzel, 2006:9-10; Sunar, 2021:46). In this context, strengthening guiding and information mechanisms at the

Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery could help transform existing positive perceptions into a more coherent and meaningful experience.

Overall, the findings show that visitor experience is strong in terms of meaning and value dimensions, while it remains more fragile in managerial and functional aspects. This pattern demonstrates that online visitor reviews reveal more than satisfaction levels. They also point to priority areas that require attention in cultural heritage management.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study aimed to identify the main dimensions shaping visitor experience at the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery through a thematic analysis of online visitor reviews. Based on the analysis of 500 Turkish language reviews shared on Google Maps between 2020 and 2024, visitor evaluations were grouped under five main themes: Historical Character, Aesthetic and Architectural Qualities, Environmental Cleanliness, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Guiding Services.

The findings show that visitors primarily assess the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery through its historical meaning and aesthetic features. Historical character and architectural qualities stand at the center of the visitor experience and emerge as the main components shaping the perceived attractiveness of the site. This pattern aligns with earlier research indicating that visitor experience in cultural heritage settings is largely shaped through dimensions of meaning and value.

At the same time, criticisms related to transportation, infrastructure, and guiding services stand out as key factors that limit visitor experience. Accessibility problems and insufficient information prevent the site's strong historical and aesthetic potential from being fully reflected in the visitor experience. Positive feedback related to environmental cleanliness and spatial order indicates that the cemetery largely meets basic service standards, although these elements mainly play a supportive role rather than a defining one.

In this respect, the study demonstrates that online visitor reviews constitute a functional data source for the planning and management of cultural heritage sites. Visitor opinions make the strengths of the site visible while providing direct and concrete feedback on areas that require improvement. This supports the practical relevance of visitor oriented approaches in heritage management.

Overall, this study demonstrates that online visitor reviews are not merely expressions of satisfaction or dissatisfaction but constitute a strategic data source for understanding experiential strengths and management-related weaknesses in cultural heritage sites. By focusing on the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery, the study extends the empirical scope of visitor experience research in Türkiye and provides a replicable analytical framework that can be applied to other cultural heritage contexts.

The study has several limitations. It is restricted to Turkish language reviews posted on the Google Maps platform within a specific time frame. As a result, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Future research could compare data from different online platforms, include reviews written in multiple languages, and combine qualitative findings with quantitative methods to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of visitor experience.

In conclusion, the Ahlat Seljuk Cemetery represents a cultural heritage site with strong historical and aesthetic value. The sustainable use of this potential depends on more than preservation and visual qualities. Improvements in transportation, infrastructure, and guiding services are essential. The regular and systematic analysis of visitor reviews can contribute to

higher visitor satisfaction and to a more balanced and effective management of cultural heritage sites.

**Evaluation/ Değerlendirme:** Çift Taraflı Kör Hakemlik Sistemi / *Double Blind Refereeing System.*

**Etik Beyan Metni/ Ethics Declaration Text:** Çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur. Bu çalışma, kamuya açık Google yorumlarının tematik analizine dayalı olup etik kurul izni kapsamı dışındadır. / *It is hereby declared that scientific and ethical principles were adhered to during the preparation of this study and that all studies used are cited in the references. This study is based on the thematic analysis of publicly available Google reviews and falls outside the scope of ethical committee approval.*

**Ethics Notification / Etik Bildirim:** info@esosder.org

**Declaration of the contribution rate of the researchers/ Araştırmacıların Katkı Oranı Beyanı:** Birinci yazar %50, ikinci yazar %50 oranında katkı sağlamıştır. / *The first author contributed 50%, the second author 50%.*

**Use of Artificial Intelligence/ Yapay Zekâ Kullanımı:** Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde, Yükseköğretim Kurulu'nun üretken yapay zekânın etik kullanımına ilişkin rehberi çerçevesinde, yapay zekâ tabanlı bir araç dil düzeltme, akademik anlatımın iyileştirilmesi, metnin düzenlenmesi ve İngilizce çeviri amacıyla kullanılmıştır. / *During the preparation of this study, within the framework of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) Guidelines on the Ethical Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence, an artificial intelligence-based tool was used for language editing, improving academic clarity, text organization, and translation into English.*

**Declaration of conflict of interest/ Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı:** Bu çalışmada herhangi bir potansiyel çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır. / *There is no potential conflict of interest in this study.*

**Note/ Not:** Bu çalışma, Second International Mesopotamia Faith and Culture Tourism Congress'te özet bildiri olarak sunulmuştur. / *This study was presented as an abstract at the Second International Mesopotamia Faith and Culture Tourism Congress.*

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