

## EXPLORING GAPS IN YOUNG TOURISTS' TRAVEL EXPERIENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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## Abstract

Although it has gained significant popularity in the literature, there is limited information on the behaviour of young tourists. This study addresses this gap by exploring how young tourists' perceptions of their experiences are shaped and identifying the factors that influence their holidays. Furthermore, insights into youth tourism can inform the development of successful strategies by tourism destinations and managers. In this context, a phenomenological study was conducted to examine the relationship between planning, executing, and reflecting on a tourist trip. Qualitative data were obtained through document analysis, focus groups, and interviews. The results show that technology cannot be ignored when considering young people's perceptions of tourism experiences. Technology and social media exert a dominant influence over all phases of young people's travel planning and beyond. Moreover, different characteristics of young people, such as lifestyle, interests, expectations, and tourism behavior, are shaped by them. This inference necessitates a reevaluation of the approach to creating memorable tourism experiences proposed by Kim et al. (2012). This is because the factors in the expectation and perception process for young tourists are viewed differently from those of previous groups. As a result, tourism practitioners should shift their focus from experience quality to demographically based product and service design.

**Keywords:** Youth Tourism; Young Tourists; Tourism Experience; Youth Behaviours; Gen Z.

## EXPLORANDO AS LACUNAS NAS EXPERIÊNCIAS DE VIAGEM DE JOVENS TURISTAS: UMA ABORDAGEM FENOMENOLÓGICA

## Resumo

Embora tenha ganho popularidade significativa na literatura, há informações limitadas sobre o comportamento dos turistas jovens. Este estudo aborda esta lacuna, explorando como as percepções dos jovens turistas sobre as suas experiências são moldadas e identificando os fatores que influenciam as suas férias. Além disso, os insights sobre o turismo jovem podem orientar o desenvolvimento de estratégias bem-sucedidas por destinos e gestores turísticos. Neste contexto, realizou-se um estudo fenomenológico para examinar a relação entre planeamento, execução e reflexão em uma viagem turística. Os dados qualitativos foram obtidos por meio da análise de documentos e das técnicas de grupo de foco e de entrevista. Os resultados mostram que a tecnologia não pode ser ignorada ao considerarmos as percepções dos jovens sobre as experiências turísticas. A tecnologia e as redes sociais exercem uma influência dominante em todas as fases do planeamento de viagens dos jovens e não só. Além disso, diferentes características dos jovens, como o estilo de vida, os interesses, as expectativas e o comportamento turístico, são moldadas por eles. Esta inferência exige uma reavaliação da abordagem às experiências turísticas memoráveis proposta por Kim et al. (2012). Isto porque os factores no processo de expectativa e de percepção dos jovens turistas são vistos de forma diferente dos grupos anteriores. Como resultado, os profissionais do turismo devem mudar o foco da qualidade da experiência para o design de produtos e serviços com base demográfica.

**Palavras-chave:** Turismo Juvenil; Jovens Turistas; Experiência Turística; Comportamentos Juvenis; Geração Z.

## EXPLORANDO LAS BRECHAS EN LAS EXPERIENCIAS DE VIAJE DE LOS JÓVENES TURISTAS: UN ENFOQUE FENOMENOLÓGICO

## Resumen

Si bien ha ganado gran popularidad en la literatura, existe información limitada sobre el comportamiento de los turistas jóvenes. Este estudio aborda esta brecha explorando cómo se configuran las percepciones de los jóvenes turistas sobre sus experiencias e identificando los factores que influyen en sus vacaciones. Además, el conocimiento del turismo juvenil puede orientar el desarrollo de estrategias exitosas por parte de los destinos turísticos y sus gestores. En este contexto, se realizó un estudio fenomenológico para examinar la relación entre la planificación, la ejecución y la reflexión en un viaje turístico. Se obtuvieron datos cualitativos mediante análisis documental y técnicas de grupos focales y entrevistas. Los resultados muestran que la tecnología no puede ignorarse al considerar las percepciones de los jóvenes sobre sus experiencias turísticas. La tecnología y las redes sociales ejercen una influencia dominante en todas las fases de la planificación de viajes de los jóvenes y más allá. Además, diferentes características de los jóvenes, como el estilo de vida, los intereses, las expectativas y el comportamiento turístico, se ven influidas por ellas. Esta inferencia exige una reevaluación del enfoque de las experiencias turísticas memorables propuesto por Kim et al. (2012). Esto se debe a que los factores en el proceso de expectativas y percepciones de los turistas jóvenes se perciben de manera distinta a los de los grupos anteriores. Como resultado, los profesionales del turismo deberían cambiar su enfoque de la calidad de la experiencia a un diseño de productos y servicios basado en la demografía.

**Palabras clave:** Turismo Juvenil; Jóvenes Turistas; Experiencia Turística; Comportamiento Juvenil; Generación Z.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Compared to previous tourism markets, young people differ in terms of motivation, behavior and experience. People between the ages of 15 and 29 who travel with various motivations, such as getting to know different cultures, acquiring knowledge, learning, seeking excitement, and innovation, are referred to as youth tourists (UNWTO & WYSE, 2011). Young people base their tourism trips on learning and getting to know the destination culture closely, rather than just having an ordinary experience.

In this context, they spend more accommodation and expenses than other tourist markets (UNWTO & WYSE, 2016). Despite these features, young people have not yet received the desired attention in global tourism (Yacout & Zoweil, 2020). The tourism industry is relatively weak in designing and delivering tourist experiences for the emerging youth tourism market. Young people, who were previously perceived as a part of mass tourism, were exposed to classical tourism products and experiences. However, the fact that 23% of global tourism mobility in 2015 consisted of young people has shown that this attitude needs to change (UNWTO & WYSE, 2016). In addition, in many tourism destinations, the share of young tourists in the total has increased during the new normal period (Atasoy & Türkay, 2024). Tourism regions and businesses are now reviewing their strategies to understand young tourists and attract their attention.

On the other hand, there are significant changes in the attitudes and behaviours of young tourists towards tourism. Technology is increasingly a determinant of searching, questioning, interacting, providing information, and sharing experiences within travel behaviour in general (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Current advances in technology have transformed the physically participatory nature of tourism experiences, enabling an experiential content that transcends the limitations of time and space (Dickinson et al., 2014). It is reasonable to assume that this is most true for young people are among the tourist groups that use these technologies most intensively (Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013).

Upon examining the literature, it becomes apparent that very few scientific studies directly address the experiences of young tourists (Mura & Khoo-Lattimore, 2011). Existing studies also show that interaction, especially in digital social networks, is the focal point of young people's travel experience. In general, it has already been found that young people prefer to spend their holidays with friends, build new relationships, and share their experiences, and women are more likely to do so (Heimtun & Abelsen, 2012).

Furthermore, it is evident that the use of photographic images and sharing during travel is related to the self-presentation of Generation Z tourists (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). It has also been found that millennials use technology at every stage of their tourist trips and use social media to share content during their holiday experiences (Pencarelli et al., 2020). Therefore, it should be discussed in detail which dimensions of young tourists' tourism experiences include and/or which dimensions gain weight within the scope of this experience.

Scientific studies can be a helpful resource for tourism practitioners to design unique tourism experiences by providing the needed information about young people. In addition, research can also contribute to improving the service quality and presentation of tourism regions and businesses by providing detailed insights into the wishes, expectations, and consumption habits of young people during their travels for tourism. From this perspective, examining and interpreting young people's perceptions of their tourist experiences has been considered a meaningful research area. We also took into account Cavagnaro et al. (2018)'s call to examine all aspects of young people's tourist travel. In this regard, it was discussed what young tourists care about when planning travels, what determines their experiences during their travels, and how they make sense of their relationships with local people and tourism businesses. The specific question that the research seeks to answer is as follows:

*Q1: How does young people's tourism behavior occur? What are the factors that play a role in the perception of tourist experience?*

## 2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

### 2.1 Tourism Experience: Concepts and Approaches

Tourism regions and businesses are looking for ways to keep tourists loyal, and scientists are analyzing human behavior to support tourism sustainability. In discussing both scopes, the tourist experience stands out as the critical phenomenon. Tourist experience is the cognitive, emotional and behavioral traces left on the individual by the relationships established as a result of all kinds of wishes and expectations, starting from the decision to travel until returning to the place of residence.

Kim and Chen (2019) refer to the interactions that people have during their holidays and that remain in their autobiographical memories for a long time as tourism experiences.

It includes the general evaluations of tourists resulting from their visits to tourism regions and consumption of tourism products in these regions (Mossberg, 2007). Compared to previous generations, modern individuals seek more intense interaction and experiences from any product, service, brand, or organization (Rageh et al., 2013). Tourists, on the other hand, are associated not only with the pursuit of tourism products but also with the consumer of a place or culture (Page et al., 2018).

In this respect, the tourism experience is now recognized as a multifaceted phenomenon, diverging from a traditional focus on enjoyment or satisfaction (Rageh et al., 2013). Given the multifaceted and complex nature of the experience and the fact that the tourist experience is determined by a large number of variables, these concepts are difficult to define and there is no consensus on existing definitions (Hussein et al., 2018).

### 2.2 Memorable Tourism Experiences

The ability of tourism regions to offer products that are attractive to different types of tourists is seen as an important

problem. Kim et al. (2012) made a significant contribution to solving this problem by proposing the dimensions of memorable experiences that people consider when recalling their tourism trips.

Accordingly, tourism regions and businesses can stand out against their competitors if they design unique and interesting experiences for their target tourist markets. In the competitive environment, sustainable superiority for tourism organizations may be achieved through the creation of memorable experiences. Similarly, Marschall (2012) states that the most crucial source tourists refer to when revisiting tourism regions is their own memories.

Therefore, understanding the elements that contribute to memorable tourism experiences and developing tourism products and services accordingly is a vital strategy for tourism practitioners (Hosseini et al., 2023). Kim et al., (2012) developed the memorable tourism experience scale by using Churchill's (1979) marketing measurement structures and Hinkins' (1995) scale development principles to understand the phenomenon of tourist experience better. The structure of the scale consists of seven dimensions (hedonism, meaningfulness, novelty, knowledge, involvement, local culture, refreshing), twenty-four items.

#### 2.2.1 Hedonism

Hedonism refers to a person's excessive passion for worldly objects and the pursuit of pleasure (Güven, 2009). Philosophically, it explains obtaining as much benefit as possible from products or services. It emphasizes the concept of surplus and pluralistic consumption (Akkılıç & Çetintaş, 2015). There are some hedonistic desires behind people's tendency towards tourism activities. These motivations start before the tourism trip and continue after (Lee & Kim, 2021). Experiencing tourism products and services makes people feel pleasure/enjoyment. Therefore, although people have different motivations, there is a close connection between tourism behaviors and hedonistic feelings of people (Kim & Ritchie, 2014). Because the most basic expectation of participation in tourism experiences is to evoke different emotions from the routine (Yu et al., 2019). Tourism products and attractions offer rich content for people's hedonistic emotions. For this reason, people often visit tourists, satisfying their hedonistic aspects by participating in activities.

#### 2.2.2 Meaningfulness

Contemporary tourists care about intangible benefits as well as tangible outcomes from the tourism activities in which they participate. After travels, people expect emotional benefits such as satisfaction, pleasure, entertainment, relaxation, renewal, freedom, escape and meaningfulness (Demir & Demirel, 2019). Because the environments in which tourism behavior is exhibited are independent of people's routine atmospheres. They always take place and participate. They are not actions taken. They are structurally unique and inimitable. In all these aspects, tourism experiences are memorable and meaningful moments for people (Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

#### 2.2.4 Novelty

Tourists seek new experiences by participating in these activities during their travels (Bello & Etzel, 1985). In this context, the novelty aspect of tourism experiences explains the breakaway from the patterns and social systems that people are accustomed to. Regardless of the motivation (seeing different attractions, getting away from the familiar atmosphere, etc.), the basic expectation in tourism is to follow in the footsteps of new things. For example, for tourists, experiencing unique natural environments, seeking solitude, or engaging in various trips represent a search for novelty (Rageh et al., 2013). Additionally, for a tourist growing up on a tropical island, the snowy mountain view may be a novel tourism experience compared to those living in mountainous cities (Kirillova et al., 2014).

#### 2.2.5 Knowledge

The tourist experiences learning and personal development during his/her travelling. The knowledge gained from tourism mobility supports people's educational life. This learning strengthens the tourist's satisfaction with travelling (Pearce & Foster, 2007). Tourists acquire extensive knowledge about the local people, culture, lifestyles, natural beauty, spoken language, and religious beliefs of the community during their visits to tourism destinations. For this reason, tourist's travel is considered to be the most fun and enjoyable form of learning (Tung & Ritchie, 2011)

#### 2.2.6 Involvement

Involvement is participating in a particular experience or consumption in real time (Zatori et al., 2018). In terms of tourism experience, involvement defines the current problem for which a solution is sought or the object to be reached. It refers to individuals' immersion in tourism products and attractions. In plain terms, it refers to the person's direct and on-site interaction with the tourism object (Yu et al., 2019). Factors such as individuals' personal needs, purchasing power, purchasing time and risks affect and determine the process of participation in tourism (Huang et al., 2010).

#### 2.2.7 Local Culture

Another factor that determines tourism experiences is the local culture and resources of destinations. Local culture enables local people and tourists to mingle. It plays a role in making the interaction warmer and more sincere (Kastenholz et al., 2016). For tourists, experiencing local culture enriches the satisfaction of tourist travel (Kim & Ritchie, 2014) and satisfies the desire to learn, spend time, and experience different cultures, societies, and geographies. One of the factors behind the development of tourism is people's curiosity about local culture.

#### 2.2.8 Refreshing

Refreshing is the renewal of one's mind. People want to get rid of the feeling of depression and mental fatigue

caused by their ongoing lifestyle by participating in tourism. Travelling for tourism allows individuals to mentally purify and renew. Tourism experiences are not only interesting and entertaining, but also enhance mental rejuvenation. E. Cohen (1979) considers going beyond daily life and participating in a lifestyle that is ignored and does not take into account savings as tourism behavior. In essence, the primary purpose of participating in tourism is to escape from daily life and promote mental well-being (Uriely, 2005).

The most distinctive feature of tourism experiences is the feeling of relief and renewal it leaves on the person (Kim & Ritchie, 2014). The fact that tourism behavior is not ordinary or routine but involves different groups of people, geographies and times strengthens this feeling of renewal (Sthapit, 2018).

### 2.3 Youth Tourism

Tourism travels of less than one year, carried out individually or with friends by people between the ages of 15-29, are referred to as youth tourism (UNWTO & WYSE, 2016). While this classification of the WTO represents a group, young people are often separated from their families when they reach the age of 15 and typically complete their education by the age of 26. Therefore, people between the ages of 15 and 26 who travel for various motivations can be referred to as young tourists (Horak & Weber, 2000). According to Karataş and Altun (2020), individuals between the ages of 15 and 25 who allocate high budgets for travel are considered young tourists. On the other hand, Kale et al. (1987) define young tourists as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 who participate in tourism activities with various motivations.

Youth tourism has been perceived as a niche market of international tourism for many years (Dionysopoulou & Mylonakis, 2013). However, current research reveals that young people are one of the key actors in global tourism. When 2015 global tourism data is examined, approximately one quarter of international tourists constitute young tourists (UNWTO & WYSE, 2016). This indicates that young people are the fastest growing audience among global tourism markets (Saikia & Goswami, 2019). From Turkey's perspective, 8.5 million young travelers visited the country in 2013 and the average spending amount is around 500 € (TÜRSAB, 2015). The high average spending and accommodation duration of young people attracts the attention of tourism practitioners (Richards & Wilson, 2006).

## 3 METHODOLOGY

This scientific study was carried out based on qualitative research technique. Qualitative research is scientific methods that allow detailed understanding and interpretation of events and facts by using qualitative data collection techniques such as observation, interview and document review (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011).

Qualitative research is an approach that encompasses various designs to obtain in-depth information and develop comprehensive interpretations of events, phenomena, or people (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Phenomenological research, among other techniques, is a scientific method

used to explain people's perceptions and interpretations of events, phenomena, or objects (Baş & Akturan, 2008). In this context, the phenomenological technique, which suggests that the world can be interpreted or explained through experience and intuition, was employed in the research. Thus, it was assumed that detailed and generalizing information about the experiences of young tourists would be obtained.

### 3.1 Data Collecting

The data of this research were obtained in different time periods (in July - November 2021) and from different samples. Due to the psychological and sociological effects of the pandemic, people avoided person-to-person communication and therefore research data was collected online. A triangulation strategy was employed to enrich the research findings, derive comprehensive interpretations, and mitigate concerns regarding validity and reliability. The study population consist of young tourists visiting or residing in Istanbul. With its rich historical, cultural and natural heritage, as well as its geographical location, Istanbul is among the cities frequently visited by young tourists (Karataş & Altun, 2020).

In all stages of data collection for the study, the age range (15-29) of the participants (Horak & Weber, 2000) and their prior participation in tourism were considered. In this context, tourism video blogs, in which young people document nearly every moment of their travel experiences, have been evaluated as sources that will make the greatest contribution to scientific study. A search was made on YouTube with the keyword "Istanbul vlog" and the six tourist travel video blogs in English with the highest number of views were included in the research. Subsequently, a focus group meeting was held with eleven Turkish young tourists, accompanied by a moderator and a reporter.

In terms of gender, the majority of the participants are women (82%) and in terms of educational background, they have a bachelor's degree (55%). Finally, unstructured interviews were conducted with eleven young foreign tourists for various reasons such as increasing the depth of research inferences and seeing overlap or differentiation. Interview participants were relatively female (54%) and had a bachelor's degree (100%).

### 3.2 Analytical Approach and Coding

In this research, all interviews were recorded in digital files, and analysis began after transcription. Each technique was analyzed separately and themes and categories were determined by multiple re-readings. The data were transferred to MAXQDA, a mixed-methods analysis software, for content analysis. A deductive approach was adopted in the coding process of the research. This technique is used when guide codes are needed to test an existing theory, knowledge set or to transfer it to different fields (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Bradley et al., 2007).

At the beginning of the coding process, data listening, monitoring and reading were performed. Based on previous knowledge and theories, it was determined what the participant opinions were related to. The data were then

reviewed again and the identified descriptive themes were checked. From these, explanations were developed by reworking interpretive codes that developed meaningful relationships and overlapped with existing themes. Detailed aspects of existing themes and categories were revealed by looking at their level of support. In the final stage, the emergence and association of descriptive and interpretive codes with the data were evaluated. Thus, pattern codes that address the research question and offer additional inferences were derived. Explanatory and meaningful themes were determined by focusing on the similarities and differences of participant opinions.

### 3.3 Validity and Reliability

Researchers examine and support the logical consistency of research results by differentiating sampling and data techniques. Within the scope of this scientific study, the scientific principles put forward by (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) were taken into account in order to avoid concerns about validity and reliability. In this context, different data sources and collection methods were preferred to enrich the findings. Member checks were conducted with three participants in the sample to ensure the accuracy of themes and sub-codes. To control and monitor all phases of the research process, a professor in the field of tourism contributed as an independent auditor.

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Evaluation of Document Review

According to the research findings, young tourists seek knowledge (n=42) while making tourism plans (Figure 1). Some previous studies have highlighted that people's tourism expectations, such as learning about what is different and supporting personal growth, influence the decision-making process (Yu et al., 2019). It can be thought that young people's search for information is behind some tourism behaviors such as having an idea about the local culture and getting to know tourism activities closely.

It was also concluded that young tourists observed tourist products, local people and the behavior of other tourist groups during their holidays (n=39). This behavior may be explained by the fact that young individuals are unfamiliar with the tourism region and want to be informed about all tourism products. However, the curious and investigative character of the young population also plays a role in their observations of the environment. In the light of these comments, observation can be mentioned as a vital component of the new generation tourist experience, unlike the existing literature.

In the research, it was observed that young people had an enterprising tourist profile and preferred activities that required active involvement (n = 31). Tourism is a social experience that involves participation. The curious and eager nature of young people also contributes to them pursuing these social experiences. Therefore, both the structure of tourism experiences and the characteristics of young people reveal the importance of the participation element. Tourism products contain aesthetics and visual richness (n = 30). It

was concluded that this element of attractiveness affected young people's perception of the experience. The view of Oh et al., (2007) and Wu and Liang (2009) that the aesthetic values of tourism enrich tourist experiences is supported within the scope of the research. While examining tourist video blogs, it was determined that young people are interested in the aesthetic values, atmosphere and originality of tourism centers.

Meaningfulness, one of the dimensions of experience accepted in the literature, has been evaluated as a search for the self of young people (n=30). Meaningfulness is associated with the psychological satisfaction a person obtains after travel (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Yu et al., 2019). It has been determined that young people expect meaning and value from the tourism activities they participate in. They are not just looking for physical relief. It can be interpreted that their abstract expectations themselves produce a significant impact on the perception of the experience. For example, the atmosphere prevailing in tourism regions and businesses can shape the experiences of young tourists (n=26). Young individuals convey to their audience the current atmosphere of a historical museum, building, structure, business or region they visit and the impressions it leaves on them.

The research concluded that young tourists enjoy interacting, making friends, or acting together with foreign people, regardless of the stage of their travels. Togetherness (n=23) refers to young tourists having fun and spending time with friends or other people at almost all stages of their travels. While examining tourism vlogs, it was observed that young people came together with local people, tourism businesses and other tourist groups, chatted, shared their experiences and engaged in joint consumption. It has also been discovered that young individuals are happy to make new friends and spend some of their holidays with others.

Young travelers desire to experience and consume local culture (n=22) during their holidays. Issues such as young tourists frequently consuming local delicacies during their holidays, visiting the streets and houses where local culture is prevalent, and continuing their trips by gathering information from local people played a role in the construction of this theme. At this point, the research coincides with the views of Cetin and Bilgihan (2016). The search for novelty is also one of the factors behind the tourism behavior of young people (n=22). It has been concluded that young people expect physical and psychological revitalization during their travels and therefore visit different regions than they do in their routine.

However, it was determined that their hedonistic attitudes were among the reasons why they traveled frequently (n=21). Even though they have experienced it before, young people may show excessive purchasing or consuming behavior. In addition, the fact that young individuals share their experiences with others by going on tourism trips can be associated with hedonistic aspects. Therefore, tourism travels are a phenomenon that satisfies the hedonistic aspects of young people. Knox et al., (2014) opinions are supported within the scope of the research.

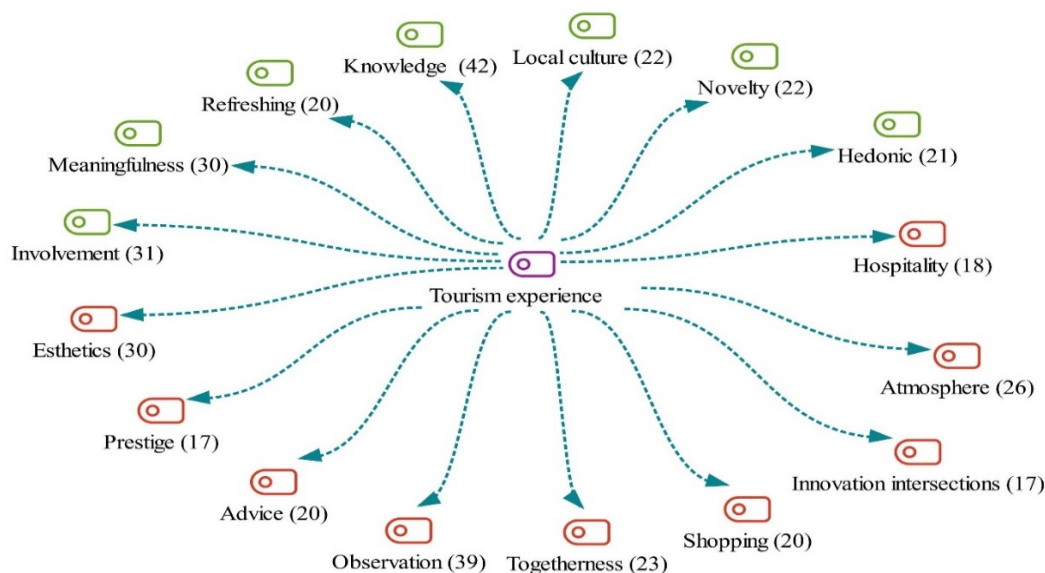
It was noted that young tourists frequently shopped during their travels (n=20). It has been found that tourists demand major local products such as clothing, food and beverage, souvenirs and jewellery. However, vloggers stated

that shopping during tourism experiences prolongs the felt pleasure of the trip. In this context, the hedonistic consumption aspect of young individuals plays a role in the emergence of the shopping theme.

This qualitative research, unlike many previous studies, suggests that young individuals spend money on their travels and presents it to the literature as an experience dimension of shopping in terms of tourism experience. Khoshpakyants and Vidishcheva (2010) view that young tourists spend more than older age groups, which constitute mass tourism, may also support this inference. On the other hand, young people share their experiences with others about both physical products and services and give advice (n=20). It has been observed that young tourists convey to their audience the tourism activities they participated in, the tastes they consumed, the information they acquired and the atmospheres they observed.

They often give information about their experiences, purchasing or not purchasing. Based on the vloggers who advise their viewers on whether to visit or not, the advice given to others has been taken into account as an essential part of the tourism experience for young ecology. The main reason for this situation is the widespread transfer of information about tourism experience among young people. In other words, young people transfer their feelings and thoughts to others and these experiences It may be considered necessary by others. The perception of refreshing existing in the literature (n = 20) is also applicable to young people. The refresh dimension of the tourism experience explains the mental and physical renewal of young people as a result of their travels. The motivation of young individuals to go beyond routine life and get away from the anxiety of the outside world when traveling is related to the renewal aspect of the tourism experience.

Figure 1. Findings of travel vlogs.



Source: own elaboration.

## 4.2 Evaluation Focus Group

The prominent tourism experience dimension within the scope of focus group discussions is local culture (n=17). It has been observed that young individuals desire to know, consume, and learn about local culture while both designing and experiencing their tourism (Figure 2). It has been determined that young people exhibit behaviors such as learning, understanding and comparing the unique food and beverages, local characteristics, cultural elements, beliefs and values of the tourism destinations they visit.

Contrary to popular belief, young individuals often stay in places such as camping tents, bungalows, hostels, village houses, and guesthouses, and prefer local food and beverage establishments over famous restaurants. In the light of all this information, local culture; It can be said that young tourists shape the perception of tourism experience at all stages of the travel process. These findings coincide with the study of Van den Beemt et al., (2011).

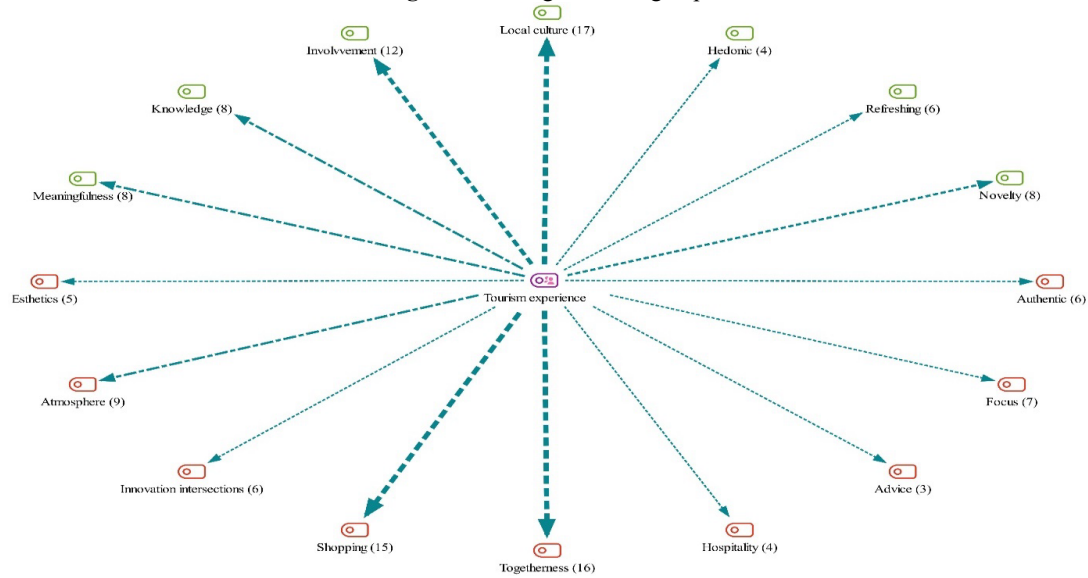
The dimension of togetherness (n = 16), mentioned previously, is also a finding obtained from the focus group

interviews. It has been found that young tourists prefer to associate with different people during their holidays because the travel atmosphere is more different and fun. It is stated that spending time with local people or other tourists enriches the young tourist experience. During the interview process, the participants stated that their closeness to the local culture was the basis for establishing unity. Young people meet local people, spend time with them and behave like them in order to fully experience the local culture. Additionally, travelers may desire more pleasure and excitement by sharing experiences with other tourists rather than a solitary experience (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015).

Analyses support the view that young individuals shop (n=15) to experience elements of the regions they visit deeply. Participants emphasize that young people purchase food and beverages, cultural items, jewelry, clothes, and other local products. Although the main purpose is not to travel for shopping, it has been observed that young people consider shopping as an essential experience dimension, especially due to their interest in culture.



**Figure 2.** Findings of focus group.



Source: own elaboration.

It can be said that young tourists are not only interested in physical elements when visiting tourist products or businesses. This research argues that involvement ( $n = 12$ ) is among the elements that contribute to the tourism experience of young people. Accordingly, active and passive participation in the tourism region and tourism products is an important factor in the youth tourism experience.

Youth tourism exhibits an attitude of researching, questioning and consuming tourism products before, during and after travel. In addition to consuming food and beverages in tourist areas, watching the sunset, visiting museums, going to historical places, examining art activities, researching local food preparation methods, etc. behaviors highlight the participation aspect of young tourist behavior. Buffa's (2015) view that tourists seek participation and interaction to discover the unique features of a destination and gain new information is supported in this respect.

In particular, the prevailing atmosphere of local destinations and businesses ( $n = 9$ ) is identified as an element that enhances the tourism experience. It has been concluded that, depending on the region visited by young people, various issues such as local people, unique values, beliefs, customs, traditions, clothing, tastes, presentation styles, architectural patterns, and structures are taken into consideration. In this context, the atmosphere side of the experience can be considered as a determining factor for young people both in building their expectations before travel and during their holidays. Wei and Lihua (2023) view that creative atmospheres increase people's place addiction and intensify the tourism experience is supported within the scope of the research.

Meaningfulness, knowledge and novelty tourist experience dimensions ( $n=8$ ) included in the literature were also revealed in the focus group discussions of this research. It can be said that young individuals carry out activities that add value to themselves both before and during their travels. However, an important step of young tourists' experiences is to seek and consume what is different. Thus, it is thought that young tourists who travel prefer to enhance their knowledge

as a result of the tourism activities they participate in and to go beyond their routine lives, engaging in innovation. In this context, the emergence of relevant dimensions may be considered crucial in supporting existing knowledge of the tourist experience.

It has been determined that young individuals have the desire to go beyond accommodation establishments and experience all the tourism products offered by tourism regions during their holidays. This dimension, considered as focus ( $n=7$ ), reveals a difference between young tourists and other tourist groups. The young generation has a questioning and investigative character. They desire to have in-depth knowledge of the regions they visit. Thus, it provides a focused performance to experience all tourism activities. Especially authentic ( $n = 6$ ) tourism experiences are a remarkable approach to tourism for young people. The younger generation tends to prefer places where they feel like local people and businesses where they behave like them. It has been discovered that having an authentic experience helps them remember their travels long-term and feel more satisfied.

Another tourism experience dimension that the research uniquely reveals is innovation intersections ( $n=6$ ). The service quality dimension highlighted in a quantitative study by Wu and Liang (2009), It is similar to innovation intersections among the original experience dimensions of the research. It is among the findings that young tourists evaluate and compare the quality of all kinds of services offered in the tourism regions they visit. It has been discovered that young individuals are impressed by the quality of service displayed in various aspects, including food and beverages, accommodations, tourism products, local people, and hospitality, and share their opinions with others. Because young tourists can convey their satisfaction or complaints about any issue to various audiences in a short time through social media.

It can be said that the theme of refreshing ( $n=6$ ) expresses the psychological recovery of young individuals in the light of previous literature. It has been discovered that

young participants also desire individual healing when traveling and during their holidays. Young individuals stated that especially during nature and cultural trips, there is a renewed experience that takes precedence over routine life. Even though they do not fully engage in life, it has been observed that young people want to get rid of the stress and depression caused by anxiety about the future and responsibility. In this context, it can be considered an essential issue that travel creates a feeling of mental revitalization for young tourists.

It has been determined that young tourists take into consideration the natural structures, architectural patterns, artistic figures and street images of tourism destinations before and during the trip. In this direction, the esthetics (n=5) dimension was developed. Issues such as the visual elements of any restaurant, the presentation of food and beverages, the architectural design of the hotel, the structure of the destination, or the originality of the tourism product can be considered aesthetic elements that affect the experiences of young people.

### 4.3 Evaluation of Unstructured Interviews

When the experience perceptions of young foreign tourists are examined, it is seen that the element of local culture (n=15) stands out (Figure 3). Young people consider tourism an important leisure activity, as it allows them to search for traces of the past and learn about different cultures. It has also been stated that participation in local products or events enriches feelings towards tourism experiences. Similar information was also obtained in focus group interviews. Therefore, depending on the overlap of relevant findings, locality should be mentioned as one of the most important components of young people's tourism experiences.

One of the elements influencing young people's perception of experience is togetherness (n=15). According to the analysis, young tourists' travel is not an individual behavior. Being part of any group or interacting with others has been identified as a common view. Participants stated that these behaviors strengthened their social relationships and accumulated unique memories. It can be said that young people spend time with other tourist groups because of factors such as recognizing cultural diversity, making new friendships and developing different perspectives. In this context, the phenomenon of togetherness makes them open to interaction in the formation and development process of youth tourism experience. As in the interaction approach of Tung and Ritchie (2011), togetherness is not a single element, but it is a supporter of social development.

Young people consider shopping (n=14), especially with local vendors, as an important behavior during their travels. This attitude is regarded as an interaction opportunity that supports the versatility of tourism rather than an exchange. In addition, young tourists buy jewelry, souvenirs, food, beverages, ornaments, clothes, etc. as part of the tourism destination. It has been determined that vehicles such as these evoke new travel experiences when they return to their place of residence.

Tourism regions and businesses have many elements that are important to young people. The most striking factor

among these is the atmosphere of tourism centers (n=13). The atmosphere of the tourism experience, which enhances the originality of the research, can be considered a crucial component of young people's travel experiences. Young people mention that many elements such as city parks, lights, the liveliness of the coast, the blue of the sea, the warmth of the beach, ancient cities, architecture, historical buildings, museums and works of art intensify the tourism experience. However, it has been determined that the mass of people, vehicles, infrastructure and superstructure facilities in tourism regions also play a negative role on the felt atmosphere.

The technology-loving young generation is constantly interacting with the outside world and with one another. It provides fast and deep information flow. These behaviors of young people are also exhibited during their tourism trips. Young tourists do research before traveling to get information about the tourism regions, businesses and products they will visit. During their holidays, they observe other tourists and local people (n=10). Because young foreign tourists do not want to ignore any tourism activity and product by looking at the environment. It also monitors other people's behavior to maintain respect for the local culture. In this context, observation can be considered an important component of the tourism experience.

Esthetics and visuality (n=9) are elements that increase the attractiveness of tourism businesses or destinations. For example, it has been found that young tourists care about the aesthetic value in many areas such as historical buildings such as churches, mosques, palaces, underground cities and cellars, as well as architectural structures and patterns, street figures and museums of modern tourism regions. Additionally, food and beverage, hotels, restaurants, bars, beaches, city streets, parks, etc. It has been determined that the visuality of the areas enriches the experience (Joaquim, 2023). In this context, the aesthetic values of the environment can be considered a significant issue for young individuals, regardless of their location.

As stated before, the areas that young people care about in tourism centers are multifaceted. One factor among these is the authenticity of tourism products or regions (n=9). Young tourists are drawn to the unique values of the local people. It has been found that young tourists who want to experience or consume local culture tend to prefer tourism areas with authentic experiences, as opposed to modernized structures, because they offer them an escape and the opportunity to act and feel like a local. The reason for this was expressed as protecting and sustaining the original values of local culture. Another issue taken into consideration in the young tourist experience is innovation intersections (n=8). Young foreign tourists prioritize service quality as a key aspect of their tourism experience.

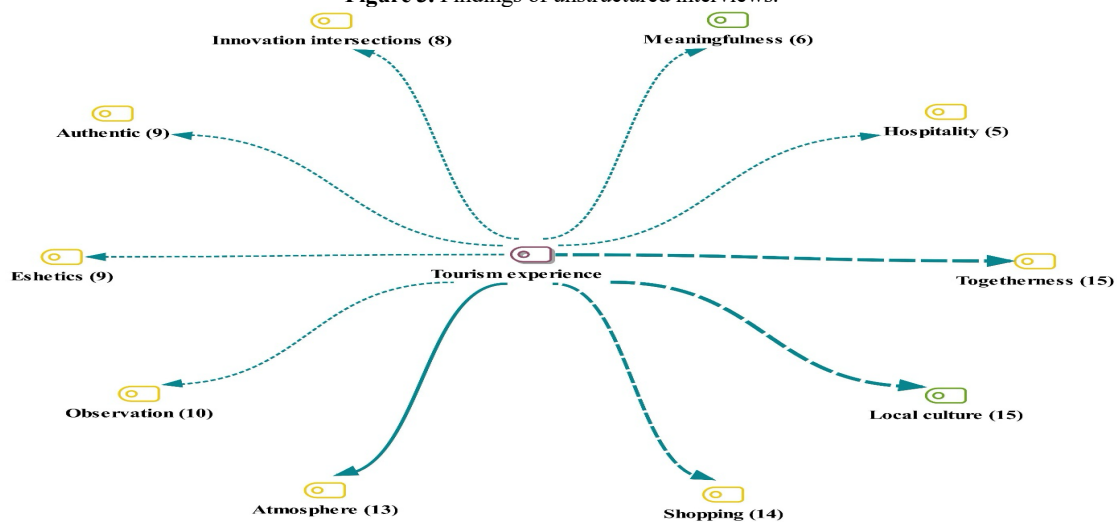
It has been determined that participants, who declared that they are especially sensitive about price, perceive the quality of the service they receive in return for the amount they spend during their holidays is an important determinant of their holidays. Undoubtedly the price-performance comparison is valid for many people. However, young tourists tend to prioritize the relationship between the price they must bear and the perceived tourism experience over the financial quality of the tourism product or service. To put it plainly, while the tourism product offered may be ordinary,



the service provided by various external factors can make the tourism experience unique. In this context, considering the unique behavior of the young tourist, the issue is; have been

treated as innovation intersections rather than service quality.

**Figure 3.** Findings of unstructured interviews.



Source: own elaboration.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

Hosany et al., (2022) examined scientific studies on memorable tourism experience dimensions and pointed out some gaps in the literature. These studies largely adopted the approach of Kim et al., (2012) and quantitative methods. However, despite being tourist-centered, quantitative approaches have difficulty providing an inclusive and broad perspective on tourist experiences.

Moreover, perceiving tourist experiences as a fixed phenomenon is not a reasonable approach in a context where the world and its people are constantly changing. Because time and generation differences clearly reveal the transformation of the premises of tourist experience. The results show that Coudounaris and Sthapit's (2017) memorable experience dimensions may vary depending on the type of destination, tourism activity, past memories and cultural structure, as well as tourist self and psychological perception.

This is based on the idea that the characters and behaviors of young people differ significantly from other tourist groups. Because young people grew up as a technology generation. All stages and planning of travel behavior are technology-based (Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013). It designs tourism plans on intense and semantic interactions.

The awareness of responsibility towards the social world and the passion for individuality are high (Fenitra et al., 2021). That's why young people design their own tourist routes by turning to less-known destinations. Since these self-constructs affect young people's affective and cognitive perceptions, they can also transform their perceptions of tourism experiences. Therefore, tourism practitioners need to consider these implications when developing their strategies.

The research confirms that Kim et al.'s (2012) approach is an essential explainer of tourist experiences. On

the other hand, it is presented in a perspective that develops the tourist experience dimensions (atmosphere, togetherness, observation, esthetics, innovation intersections, hospitality, shopping, authentic, focus). This perspective is clearly different from Kim et al.'s (2012) approach that limits tourists' immersion in the experience. Moreover, this approach responds to the call by Kutlu and Ayyildiz (2023) to expand the dimensions of memorable tourism experiences by examining the experiences of tourists from different countries and age groups.

When visiting destinations, tourists are only associated with interaction and observation with the local culture (See also Sthapit, 2018). However, young tourists exhibit intense and deep interactions with employees, residents, and other tourist groups, and this interaction continues at every stage of the tourism experience. This inference draws attention to the role not only of contact with the local culture but also of the tourist's interaction with the entire environment on the experience. Considering the dominant role that experience plays on behavioral intention, explaining the determinants of experience may be vital for tourism practitioners (Chen et al., 2020). Therefore, future research efforts to determine the antecedents of tourism experiences will contribute to the development of the literature.

### 5.2 Practical and Social Implications

This scientific research argues that young people are different from previous generations in terms of tourism behaviors and that this change essentially stems from young people's perception of tourism experiences. The results show that young people have a self that questions, investigates and compares during their travels. The young generation, characterized by an adventurous, innovative, learning, and social tourist profile, is seeking ways to enrich and diversify its tourism experiences.

As Ghete (2015) stated, people do not hesitate to travel

to distant destinations or spend too much in their tourism plans. In this context, considering the research results and the service structure of tourism products, experience stands out as the key element for tourism professionals to achieve success. Because the tourist's experience as interaction with tourism products develops an emotional and cognitive perception. We find Haddouche and Salomone's (2018) approach justified that tourism practitioners should use emotional levers to mobilize and influence young people.

Considering that young people care about their tastes, feelings and emotions and are immersed in tourism products accordingly, one of the conditions for attracting them is emotional awareness. Tourism managers and decision-makers should focus on tourism product design and presentation using this approach. Because the sustainability of tourism is about ensuring that tourists benefit as much as local communities (Singh, 20024). They need to think not only about the tourist experience, but also about distribution and marketing channels to reach youth tourism markets.

The results show that young individuals design every stage of their travels themselves. Therefore, tourism practitioners must understand young people's life and consumption habits in order to convince them. The most effective reach to this generation growing up with technology seems possible through web and social media channels. Pencarelli et al., (2020) reveals that generation Y actively uses digital technologies in tourism planning, indicating that this strategy is meaningful. In addition, Dhama and Anil (2024) note that the impact of digitalization has increased significantly, and even sustainable tourism approaches now depend on it.

Another issue emphasized in terms of the results of the research is that the tourism experience for young people occurs in three stages and these are perceived, realized and extended experiences. The phenomenon of tourism experience, which is often considered as two phases (Flower et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2014), can make a meaningful contribution to the literature and researchers with this expanded perspective. The experience that the tourist has previously designed in their mind indicates the perceived one; the interaction and consumption during the tourism process indicate the actual one; and the continuation of the pleasure felt after the holiday indicates the extended experience.

The quantity and quality of the relationship between these stages can determine the cognitive and emotional aspects of the tourist experience. This framework can serve as a helpful resource for both academics and tourism practitioners in examining and designing the tourist experience phenomenon. Considering the factors that make tourist experiences unique of (affect, expectations, consequentiality, and recollection) Tung and Ritchie (2011), each stage of tourism experiences should be evaluated and examined on its own.

### 5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study aimed to identify the perceptions and interactions of young tourists. Although it makes a significant contribution to the literature in terms of its results, the research has some limitations. The first limitation to mention

is that the sample size is relatively limited. Although many qualitative data techniques are employed, participants from diverse nationalities and age groups are necessary to make more inclusive generalizations in the research.

In addition, while scientific data was being collected, people avoided face-to-face communication due to the impact of the pandemic. This situation limited field work and virtual meetings were held with participants. Another issue addressed within the limitations of the research is the analysis technique. The researcher carried out the research analyzes in a transparent manner and by observing scientific principles. However, qualitative analyzes are inherently based on subjective judgments and the results may be interpreted differently by other researchers. Recognizing these limitations may provide an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the research and shed light on future studies.

The research aims to fill a gap by focusing on young tourists, who are often overlooked in the field of tourism experiences or are perceived as a homogeneous group. In this respect, it has been observed that there is no consensus on the concept of tourist experience and its dimensions are mostly discussed in quantitative research. However, considering the versatility of the experience, the scope of work is quite broad. For this reason, qualitative research should be conducted using a variety of methods to gather in-depth information, particularly for young people. Quantitative research is not flexible in explaining naturally occurring events or phenomena (Punch, 2005), so it is thought that qualitative approaches will be beneficial when dealing with complex issues such as tourist experience

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**CRedit author statement**

Term	Definition	Author 1	A2
Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims	x	
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models	x	
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components	x	x
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/ reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs	x	x
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data	x	x
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection	x	x
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools	x	x
Data Curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later reuse	x	
Writing - Original Draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation)	x	
Writing - Review & Editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision – including pre-or post-publication stages	x	x
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/ data presentation	x	x
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team	x	x
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution	x	x
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication	x	x

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