EXPERIENCING CULTURAL HERITAGE AT ANI

Hatice Güçlü Nergiz*

Abstract

This study investigates visitor experiences at the Ani Archaeological Site, a destination listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and analyzes how experiential dimensions and destination components shape visitor perceptions. Drawing on an expanded framework of Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy and Dickman's destination components framework, the study examines how these dimensions and attributes shape visitor perceptions. A total of 836 user-generated reviews from TripAdvisor were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. To ensure conceptual precision, the analysis was structured around two primary pillars: destination components and experience dimensions. The findings reveal that intellectual, emotional, and existential dimensions dominate visitor experiences, while physical and cognitive dimensions remain less prominent. In terms of destination components, accessibility, attractions, and amenities emerge as the most frequently mentioned themes. Visitors particularly highlight Ani's historical, architectural, and spiritual atmosphere, but also raise concerns regarding limited visitor facilities, inadequate accessibility, and insufficient preservation efforts. The study contributes to tourism literature by establishing a coherent analytical model linking management-led deficiencies to visitor experience quality, while also offering practical insights for destination managers to improve service quality, visitor satisfaction, and sustainable site management.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism**;** Experiential Tourism**;** Tourist Destination**;** Archaeological Site.

VIVENCIANDO O PATRIMÔNIO CULTURAL EM ANI

Resumo

Este estudo investiga as experiências dos visitantes no Sítio Arqueológico de Ani, um destino inscrito na Lista do Patrimônio Mundial da UNESCO, com o objetivo de compreender como as dimensões experienciais e os componentes do destino moldam as percepções dos visitantes. Com base no quadro expandido da Economia da Experiência de Pine e Gilmore e no modelo de componentes de destino de Scott Dickman, a pesquisa examina como essas dimensões e atributos moldam as percepções dos visitantes. Um total de 836 avaliações geradas por usuários no TripAdvisor foi analisado por meio de uma análise de conteúdo qualitativa. Para garantir a precisão conceitual, a análise foi estruturada em torno de dois pilares principais: os componentes do destino e as dimensões da experiência. Os resultados revelam que as dimensões intelectual, emocional e existencial dominam as experiências dos visitantes, enquanto as dimensões física e cognitiva são menos proeminentes. Em termos de componentes do destino, a acessibilidade, as atrações e as instalações emergem como os temas mais frequentes. Os visitantes destacam particularmente a atmosfera histórica, arquitetônica e espiritual de Ani, mas também levantam preocupações quanto às instalações limitadas, à acessibilidade inadequada e aos esforços de preservação insuficientes. O estudo contribui para a literatura de turismo ao estabelecer um modelo analítico coerente que vincula as deficiências de gestão à qualidade da experiência do visitante, oferecendo, simultaneamente, percepções práticas para que os gestores de destinos melhorem a qualidade do serviço, a satisfação do visitante e a gestão sustentável do sítio.

Palavras-chave: Turismo Cultural; Turismo de Experiência; Destino Turístico; Sítios Arqueológicos.

EXPERIENCIANDO EL PATRIMONIO CULTURAL EN ANI

Resumen

Este estudio investiga las experiencias de los visitantes en el Sitio Arqueológico de Ani, un destino incluido en la Lista del Patrimonio Mundial de la UNESCO, con el objetivo de comprender cómo las dimensiones experienciales y los componentes del destino moldean las percepciones de los visitantes. Basándose en el marco ampliado de la Economía de la Experiencia de Pine y Gilmore y en el modelo de componentes del destino de Scott Dickman, la investigación examina cómo estas dimensiones y atributos moldean las percepciones de los visitantes. Se analizaron 836 reseñas de usuarios en TripAdvisor mediante un análisis de contenido cualitativo. Para garantizar la precisión conceptual, el análisis se estructuró en torno a dos pilares fundamentales: los componentes del destino y las dimensiones de la experiencia. Los resultados revelan que las dimensiones intelectual, emocional y existencial predominan en las experiencias de los visitantes, mientras que las dimensiones física y cognitiva resultan menos prominentes. En términos de componentes del destino, la accesibilidad, las atracciones y las instalaciones son los temas más frecuentes. Los visitantes destacan particularmente la atmósfera histórica, arquitectónica y espiritual de Ani, pero también plantean preocupaciones respecto a las instalaciones limitadas, la accesibilidad inadecuada y los esfuerzos de preservación insuficientes. El estudio contribuye a la literatura sobre turismo al establecer un modelo analítico coherente que vincula las deficiencias de gestión con la calidad de la experiencia del visitante y, al mismo tiempo, ofrece perspectivas prácticas para que los gestores de destinos mejoren la calidad del servicio, la satisfacción del visitante y la gestión sostenible del sitio.

Palabras clave: Turismo Cultural; Turismo de Experiencia; Destino Turístico**;** Sitio Arqueológico.

HOW TO CITE: Güçlü Nergiz, H. (2026). Experiencing Cultural Heritage at Ani. *Anais Brasileiros de Estudos Turísticos / ABET*, v. 16, n. 1 (Regular Issue), 1 – 14, Jan./ Dez. Retrieved from: https://periodicos.ufjf.br/index.php/abet/article/view/50626
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18046986.

Licenciada por Creative Commons 4.0 / Internacional CC BY 4.0

* Hatice Güçlü Nergiz is Associate Professor at the Department of Tourism Management, Faculty of Tourism, Kocaeli University, Turkey, since 2009. PhD in Tourism and Hotel Management from Anadolu University, Eskişehir, Turkey. Master's degree in Tourism from Adnan Menderes University, Turkey (2001). Bachelor's degree in Tourism Management and Hotel Management from the School of Tourism and Hotel Management, Adnan Menderes University, Turkey (1996). Her main research interests include ethics in the tourism industry, women's studies, cultural heritage, and hotel management. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8848-7014 E-mail: hg.nergiz@kocaeli.edu.tr

1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a vibrant, continuously evolving global industry that intersects deeply with cultural heritage preservation (Pai et al., 2026). Within this broad industry, cultural heritage tourism remains one of the fastest-growing forms of tourism, accounting for approximately 40% of global tourism (UNESCO, 2023).

The industry's dynamic structure, combined with advances in transportation, technology, and media communications, has reduced tourists' traditional interest in sun, sea, and sand holidays and shifted them toward more memorable and engaging travel experiences (Timothy, 2011; OECD, 2012).

In this regard, rapidly expanding cultural heritage tourism drives economic growth, attracting visitors seeking authentic experiences while generating income for local economies (Smith, 2020). In order to benefit from this economic power, successful management of cultural heritage sites within the competitive landscape of attractions has become essential.

Understanding the perceptions and opinions of cultural heritage visitors is therefore a key component in developing effective management plans and marketing strategies surrounding these attractions (Richards, 2001a; Poria et al., 2004; Daengbuppha et al., 2006).

Accordingly, cultural heritage research is expected not only to contribute theoretically to academic knowledge but also to play a remedial role in addressing field challenges and enhancing visitor satisfaction. Meeting these expectations, however, depends on identifying visitors' expectations of cultural heritage sites.

Within Turkey, nearly 100 cultural heritage sites are listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List and the Tentative List. Recently, these sites have become significant tourist attractions. To enhance tourism activities in these areas, it is essential to examine visitor experiences. Providing memorable experiences depends on understanding visitors' preferences, needs, and requirements.

Although visitor experiences are inherently personal and subjective, they still offer rich insights into perceptions of cultural heritage sites, grounded in tangible and lived experiences. Using this information, cultural sites can become more attractive, and improvements that address fundamental shortcomings can increase satisfaction within visitor experiences (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016).

However, while the practical benefits of analyzing visitor feedback are well-documented, a theoretical gap remains in understanding how the interplay between site-specific constraints and experiential dimensions influences the co-creation of value at UNESCO-listed archaeological sites. Much of the existing literature remains descriptive, often overlooking the deeper conceptual debate on how physical and functional shortcomings impact the cognitive and emotional pillars of a memorable experience.

Based on this perspective, this study goes beyond a descriptive application of online comments; it seeks to address this gap by mobilizing the 'Experience Economy' (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) and 'Memorable Tourism Experience' (MTE) frameworks. Furthermore, it acknowledges User-Generated Content (UGC) as a critical medium of digital mediation. By doing so, the study treats these digital narratives as spontaneous reflections of the 'lived experience', bridging physical site management and visitors' intangible emotional responses.

By integrating destination components and management deficiencies into a single analytical lens, the research seeks to answer a central analytical question: How do perceived deficiencies in heritage management and infrastructure at a multi-layered site like Ani affect the sensory, emotional, and intellectual dimensions that define a high-quality cultural experience?

The findings may guide the development and implementation of management strategies to ensure effective visitor experiences. The study also aims to identify factors that negatively affect visitors' experiences. This will help address shortcomings and determine the essential elements needed to create memorable experiences at cultural heritage sites. The study first reviews the literature on cultural heritage, cultural tourism destinations, and cultural tourism experiences.

By synthesizing destination management components with the multidimensional nature of tourism experiences, the study develops a unified analytical model to categorize visitor feedback. It then presents the methodology and findings of a field study conducted on this subject. Finally, it discusses implications for management processes, limitations, and future research opportunities based on the findings, and provides recommendations.

2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1 Cultural Heritage and Cultural Tourism Destinations

Cultural heritage tourism, a core component of the tourism sector, plays a significant role in attracting both local and international visitors. However, it has been observed that visitor experiences, particularly those of archaeological site tourists, have been addressed in a limited number of studies within tourism research (Alrawadieh & Alrawadieh, 2020; Boukas, 2012; Islam, 2025; Nguyen & Cheung, 2016; Olorunsola et al., 2023).

As an internationally recognized label, cultural heritage has gained prominence through UNESCO-led initiatives (Karabaşa & Kara, 2022, p. 501) and, in this context, has become a source of development (Chen et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019). The development of cultural heritage has also been shown to create employment opportunities, stimulate rural development, and strengthen communities' cultural identity and social capital (Loulanski, 2006).

Similarly, Richards (2001b, p. 37) defines heritage tourism as "travel undertaken away from the normal place of residence to cultural attractions in order to collect new knowledge and experiences to meet cultural needs." Ashworth (2009, p. 7) argues that tourist experiences of local heritage are typically short-term, with visits to specific towns measured in hours and visits to specific sites or exhibitions measured in minutes or even seconds.

Therefore, these sites must be designed to meet visitors' expectations and needs as effectively as possible. Preserving the historical and cultural elements among a destination's main attractions and presenting them effectively to visitors is crucial to providing the travel experience that tourists expect (Özdemir, 2008, pp. 32–33). Within this context, identifying

factors that influence visitors' experiences during short visits is of great importance.

Understanding visitors' motivations and their cognitive and emotional interaction with heritage places is essential for interpreting tourism experiences and for supporting the sustainable development of cultural destinations (Balério et al., 2022). At the same time, globalization and homogenization have weakened local culture and identities.

Tourism development may also threaten the continuity of traditional crafts and local cultural expressions if adequate preservation strategies are not implemented (Mukunda &Vjay, 2025). In particular, tourism development in areas rich in local elements can accelerate this process. Therefore, protecting local heritage in archaeological sites is essential in response to globalization's effects today.

2.2 Experiential Value and Cultural Tourism Experience

Changing living conditions and economic development have led consumers to prefer purchasing an "experience" rather than a product or service (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In recent years, studies have increasingly focused on understanding the core components that influence the experiences sought by tourists or visitors in cultural heritage sites. In particular, understanding how visitors emotionally and cognitively engage with tourism places has become an important research focus in experience-based tourism studies (Balério et al., 2022).

The experiential dimensions typology proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) is one of the most widely used models in the field of cultural tourism. This model conceptualizes the foundations of the experience economy by considering the consumer's active or passive participation and their mental or physical engagement with the environment. In this approach, passive participation combined with mental engagement constitutes the entertainment dimension, while passive participation with physical engagement corresponds to the aesthetic dimension, which reflects integration with the environment.

The new tourist no longer settles for a passive experience; instead, they seek authenticity in destinations and adopt an approach aimed at understanding the local culture, history, environment, and ways of life (Soares & de Jesus, 2014, p. 51). Active participation involves mental engagement with learning, reflecting the educational dimension, whereas physical engagement that leads to a new sense of self is referred to as the escapist dimension (Hosany & Witham, 2010).

Educational experiences actively engage the mind, arouse interest, and satisfy the desire to learn something new (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Escapist experiences involve immersive, active participation that allows participants to gain strength and energy (Hosany & Witham, 2010). Aesthetic experiences provide sensory enrichment that enhances the overall visitor experience, whereas entertainment experiences involve enjoyment through performance-based engagement (Conti et al., 2020).

Memorable tourism experiences are shaped not only by marketing-related factors but also by elements such as learning, visual impressions, entertainment, and destinations' ability to create lasting memories for visitors (Bezerra, 2019). This approach to experiential dimensions has been applied in various contexts, including museum experiences (Jelinčić & Senkić, 2017; Radder & Han, 2015), cruise tourism (Hosany & Witham, 2010), wine tourism (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012), music festivals (Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011), ethnic restaurants (Kim & Jang, 2016), and cultural cities (Conti et al., 2020).

Research examining the application of experiential dimensions within the Turkish context remains very limited (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016; Şahin & Kılıçlar, 2023), highlighting a knowledge gap in evaluating Turkey's rich cultural heritage through the lens of experience-based tourism. With its millennia-long historical accumulation, cultural diversity, and unique geographical features, Turkey occupies a significant position on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The first heritage sites listed in 1985 included Divriği Grand Mosque and Hospital, the Historic Areas of Istanbul, and Göreme National Park and Cappadocia (UNESCO, 2025). One of these heritage sites, the Ani Archaeological Site, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2016. Ani, as a tangible representation of Turkey's cultural heritage, has been recognized by UNESCO for its cultural landscape, architectural diversity, and multicultural past, contributing to the development of cultural heritage awareness both nationally and internationally. In this respect, Ani serves as an important example strengthening Turkey's contribution to global heritage.

2.3 Research Area

The Ani Archaeological Site, one of Turkey's cultural heritage assets, is also a notable tourist destination. Located in Kars province, Ani plays a key role in attracting both local and international visitors to the region. Studies examining the experiences of cultural heritage visitors in Kars exist (Akyol, 2022; Aslan & Aktaş, 2019; Buluk & Eşitti, 2019; Çelik & Geçgin, 2021; Çelik, 2022; Duman & Gelibolu, 2021; Gelibolu et al., 2017; Kerse, 2023; Kocalar, 2024; Özbay & Çekin, 2020; Yüce et al., 2019); however, research specifically focused on the Ani Archaeological Site remains limited (Balta, 2023; Diken, 2020; Eşitti, 2017; Özlü & Kaleli, 2019), representing a constraint in ensuring the site's competitiveness. This need informed the selection of Ani Archaeological Site as the focus of the present study.

The study analyzed online reviews from tourists who visited the Ani Archaeological Site, located in Ocaklı Village, 42 km southeast of Kars's center. The site, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in July 2016, is known by several names, including "Ani," "Ani Ancient City," "Ani Ruins," "Ani Historical City," and "Ani Archaeological Site" (Diken, 2020). In this study, we use the name "Ani Archaeological Site," as recorded by UNESCO.

The site is situated on a secluded plateau overlooking a valley forming the natural border between Turkey and Armenia. As a medieval city, Ani reflects characteristic medieval urbanization through its residential, religious, and military structures, built over centuries first by Christian and later by Muslim dynasties. The city flourished during the 10th and 11th centuries as the capital of the Bagratid Medieval Armenian Kingdom and a checkpoint on one branch of the Silk Road. Under Byzantine, Seljuk, and Georgian rule, it remained

an important crossroads for merchant caravans (UNESCO, 2025).

Ani preserves impressive walls, religious and civil architecture, and city planning (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2025), including Ani Cathedral (Fethiye Mosque), city walls, and the Abu'l Manuchehr Mosque, which continue to welcome visitors today. In 2021, Ani Archaeological Site received 66,174 visitors, including 64,358 domestic and 1,816 international tourists. In the first two months of 2022 alone, 34,500 visitors were recorded (Anadolu Agency, 2022). The rising number of visitors shows growing interest in Ani Archaeological Site as a cultural tourism destination.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study examined online reviews on the TripAdvisor platform to analyze visitor experiences at the Ani Archaeological Site, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Turkey. TripAdvisor was selected because reviews include attributes such as date, location, and rating, and because it has a broad user base (Gursoy et al., 2021). The research was designed in accordance with the qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research aims to analyze pieces of information obtained from primary or secondary sources in a way that forms a coherent whole (Kozak, 2014).

Accordingly, the study adopted document review as the data collection technique. As Karasar (1994, p. 183) states, the document review method involves "acquiring information from documents and evidence that are closest to the phenomenon, reflecting it and integrated with it," which makes it suitable for this study.

TripAdvisor, as a digital platform containing user-generated content, has recently become an important data source in tourism and marketing research (Abaalzamat et al., 2021; Garay Tamajón & Cànoves Valiente, 2017; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Marine-Roig, 2019; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016; Nowacki, 2019; Qi & Chen, 2019; Simeon et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018).

Nowacki (2019) emphasizes that TripAdvisor is currently one of the most widely used tools for evaluating and recommending tourism products and that tourists tend to trust such sites more than official sources. Because TripAdvisor serves an average of 463 million users per month and hosts over 859 million reviews, data from this platform provide a valuable source for evaluating tourist destinations. Searching under the "Kars" city heading and the "Ani Ancient City" subheading, we identified 836 reviews.

For this study, all reviews published up to March 15, 2025, were evaluated. All reviews, regardless of language, were included to enable the analysis of opinions from visitors from different countries.

3.2 Data analysis

This study used content analysis to analyze the data. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278) define content analysis as "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns." This method, which has spread rapidly in social research (Neuendorf, 2002), allows contextual, replicable, and valid interventions based on data (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21). Neuendorf (2002, p. 1) also extends content analysis as the systematic, objective, and quantitative analysis of message characteristics.

In this study, visitor reviews of the site were first evaluated in terms of content. The study then analyzed visitor experiences at the Ani Archaeological Site by categorizing them into themes. A directed content analysis method was employed, in which researchers start data analysis with initial coding categories based on existing theories or prior studies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To ensure a robust conceptual architecture, the analysis was structured around two primary pillars. Table 1 presents examples of categories, main themes, sub-themes, and key expressions.

Table 1. Experience Dimensions and Themes at Ani Archaeological Site

Category	Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Example Key Phrase
Destination Components	Attractions	Natural, historical, cultural, and architectural elements attracting visitors	Beauty, historical structure, natural scenery, unique, captivating, cultural heritage, authentic
	Facilities	Support services such as rest and walking areas that meet visitors' needs	Toilet, rest area, souvenirs, clean, comfortable, service
	Activities	Cultural, educational, artistic, recreational, or interactive experiences visitors can perform on-site	Guided tour, sightseeing, walking, photography, examining historical artifacts
	Accessibility	Ease of access to the destination, signage, infrastructure, and mobility within the area	Transportation, road, parking, signs, public transport, easy, difficult, disabled access
Experience Components	Physical Experience	Visitor's bodily interaction with the site	Tiring, comfortable, walking, reaching, exploration, spacious, physical arrangement
	Emotional Experience	Feelings experienced by visitors such as awe, sadness, pride, nostalgia, happiness	Impressed, emotional, fascinated, peace, pride, admiration
	Cognitive Experience	Knowledge acquisition, learning, and mental curiosity during the visit	Learning, gaining knowledge, exploring, understanding, realizing
	Intellectual Experience	Beyond knowledge acquisition: critical thinking, new perspectives, and in-depth analysis	Questioning, thinking, different viewpoints, making sense, evaluating
	Existential Experience	Spiritual meaning, sacredness, inner peace, self-transcendence	Finding peace, spiritual experience, inner journey

Source: own elaboration.

First, destination components were categorized based on an adapted version of Dickman's (1996) framework, resulting in four key themes: *attractions, amenities, activities,* and *accessibility*. Second, experience components were analyzed through an expanded lens of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) Experience Economy. To capture the heritage site's holistic and spiritual nature, these dimensions were further refined into five themes (physical, emotional, cognitive, intellectual, and existential), drawing on Packer and Ballantyne (2016) and Packer et al. (2018).

These themes were also named and operationalized based on recent studies, including Aydın (2024), Islam (2025), Stoleriu et al. (2019), and Weerasinghe & Biyiri (2024). Initially, two main categories were determined for all reviews: destination and experience components. Under the destination components, four themes were defined, whereas the experience components were analyzed under five main themes.

3.3 Data processing and reliability

The data analysis process was structured to ensure maximum transparency and methodological rigour. Initially, the sample size was standardized to 836 reviews to maintain consistency across all sections of the study. The analysis followed a hybrid approach where major categories (destination and experience components) were deductively established from the existing literature. At the same time, sub-themes and specific codes emerged inductively from the reviews through directed content analysis.

Given the multilingual nature of the data (including English, Russian, and other languages), we implemented a systematic translation and validation protocol. Non-Turkish reviews were processed using digital translation tools and subsequently subjected to a manual semantic validation by the author. This procedure followed the principles of semantic equivalence (Lewis, 2004), ensuring that the nuanced meanings and cultural contexts of international visitor comments were preserved without loss of information.

To address the inherent challenges of sole-author research and ensure the findings' reliability, the authors used a test-retest method. The entire coding process was conducted in two rounds, with a three-week interval, to establish intra-coder reliability. Within this framework, 'cognitive' experiences were defined as processing factual information and spatial orientation, while 'intellectual' experiences focused on deeper historical reflection and learning, avoiding thematic overlap.

We resolved discrepancies between the two coding rounds by applying the Constant Comparative Method, continuously comparing new codes with established categories to ensure internal consistency and conceptual clarity. This systematic approach ensured the final themes were rigorously derived from the data rather than constructed ad *hoc*.

4 RESULTS ANALYSIS

4.1 Locus of the object of study

Reviews on TripAdvisor were recorded between February 20, 2025, and March 15, 2025. In general, visitors visited the Ani Archaeological Site with family (157 reviews, 21.02%), friends (296, 39.63%), alone (113, 15.13%), and as couples (181, 24.23%). By year, the most reviews were from 2018, 2019, and 2017; the earliest review dates to 2008, with no reviews prior to this year.

Monthly distribution showed peaks in February, January, and July, while the lowest review counts were in November and April. English reviews (n=225, 27%) were second to Turkish (n=534, 64%), indicating that the site primarily attracts domestic visitors. Reviews in Italian (n=18), Chinese (n=13), Russian (n=12), German (n=9), French (n=9), Spanish and Japanese (n=5), Korean and Polish (n=2), Portuguese and Greek (n=1) were also recorded, showing Ani's appeal to visitors from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds.

4.2 Destination components dimension

The concept of destination components is based on a model developed by Dickman (1989) and includes attractions, facilities, activities, accommodation, and accessibility. In this study, accommodation was excluded because Ani primarily accommodates day visitors.

Attractions: Attractions refer to natural or man-made tourism resources that draw tourists, such as beaches, mountains, and waterfalls (Weerasinghe & Biyiri, 2024). According to Simeon et al. (2017), five critical components (admiration, uniqueness, relaxation, exploration, and knowledge) exist in cultural attraction experiences. Visitor experiences at Ani emphasize the "admiration" dimension, which emerges from experiences exceeding expectations.

Visitor reviews frequently highlighted Ani's uniqueness, atmosphere, and unexpected impact. For example, one visitor stated: "It needs more work but is very unique and impressive (English-Review 78), acknowledging both the originality and shortcomings. A review from İzmir in February 2022 mentioned, "…it was mesmerizing under the snow" (Turkish-Review 14), highlighting winter attractions. Similarly, "The atmosphere in the medieval Armenian city is amazing" (English-Review 64) emphasizes the historical ambiance.

A May 2012 review said, "I did not expect much from Ani, but I was truly amazed. The site and atmosphere are magnificent" (English-Review 198), reflecting an unexpectedly positive experience. A Turkish visitor noted, "More enchanting, striking, and profound than I expected" (Turkish-Review 21), clearly indicating the admiration dimension. These expressions show that Ani's attractions strongly impact visitors, particularly in admiration and uniqueness.

Facilities: When evaluated in terms of facilities, visitor reviews of the Ani Archaeological Site include both positive and negative opinions. Positive aspects highlighted in the reviews include the guides' knowledge and guidance, the availability of parking, and acceptance of the Museum Card. Visitors emphasized the presence of such services as positive contributions to the destination experience.

However, visitors also pointed out deficiencies in certain facilities. Most notably, Turkish, English, Japanese, and Italian reviews frequently mentioned the lack of tourist-appropriate toilets on site. For example, a visitor from

Colorado stated in June 2010, “There is no toilet inside Ani, but just outside the main entrance, there is a very clean, non-Western-style toilet” (English-Review 223), highlighting this shortcoming.

Similarly, visitors repeatedly criticized the lack of trash bins, ramps for families with children, sufficient resting areas, and graffiti damaging historical structures. A Turkish visitor remarked, “The floors are slippery with drops of water on shoe soles. I don’t understand why floor tiles are not made slip-resistant in cities with such weather conditions” (Turkish-Review 195), pointing to deficiencies in spatial arrangements.

These infrastructural shortcomings represent more than just physical discomfort; they act as critical 'hygiene factors' in the visitor experience. According to the experience economy framework, while high-quality destination components enhance the 'aesthetic' and 'educational' realms of an experience, fundamental gaps in facilities (such as hygiene and accessibility) prevent visitors from fully immersing themselves in the destination’s narrative.

When basic needs are unmet, the visitor's focus remains trapped in the physical environment, creating a barrier to higher-level experiential engagement. This suggests that the management of the Ani Archaeological Site currently struggles to balance its unique historical offerings with the practical requirements of modern international tourism, leading to a fragmented rather than a seamless visitor experience.

Additionally, the study noted inadequacies in information accessibility. One visitor commented, “Unfortunately, it is hardly possible to find informative signs at Ani. Informative panels should definitely be placed in front of all structures” (Turkish-Review 201), indicating a lack of on-site informational support. The site’s proximity to the Armenian border also caused issues with mobile network operators, which visitors reported as a negative experience.

Another frequently mentioned problem concerned site cleanliness and organization. In September 2023, a visitor from Russia wrote, “It’s on the UNESCO World Heritage List, but cows have unlimited access to graze here. Walking paths are covered with cow dung. There are bottles and trash around” (English-Review 8).

Overall, visitor reviews show that while some existing facilities at Ani Archaeological Site are satisfactory, improvements are needed, particularly in toilets, cleanliness, resting areas, and informational signage. The lack of on-site informational support directly limits the 'educational' realm of the visitor experience, as guests are unable to intellectually engage with the historical narrative of the structures.

Furthermore, grazing animals and waste clash with the site’s prestigious UNESCO status and its physical reality. This environmental neglect disrupts the 'aesthetic' realm, preventing visitors from achieving a seamless sense of immersion in Ani’s historical atmosphere and instead forcing them to focus on the degraded physical conditions.

Activities: The Ani Archaeological Site, with its cultural richness, offers visitors a variety of experiences. Its historical texture makes it a unique attraction for those seeking cultural value. For example, a visitor from İzmir wrote in March 2020, “One of the most impressive and large historical cities I have ever visited” (Turkish-Review 33), reflecting this perspective.

One of the most prominent activities in visitor reviews is photography. Ani’s visually striking structures encourage visitors to immortalize their memories. A review from May 2018 stated, “An unparalleled plateau for art history and photography enthusiasts” (Turkish-Review 253), while a visitor from Poland shared a similar experience: “Great for outdoor photography” (Polish-Review 2).

Photography appears to be one of the most attractive activities for visitors. This focus on photography suggests that visitors are primarily engaging with Ani through an 'aesthetic' lens, seeking visual gratification from its unique ruins. However, photography also serves as a tool for 'active participation,' allowing visitors to curate their own experience and preserve the site’s historical identity through their personal perspectives.

This activity bridges the gap between the physical remains and the visitor’s personal memory, making the ancient landscape more tangible and contemporary. Another highlighted activity is walking. Visitors value the opportunity to walk among historical structures and natural surroundings. A visitor from Istanbul commented in June 2019, “Walking on lands that have embraced 23 different civilizations is an incredible experience” (Turkish-Review 122).

A visitor from Switzerland wrote, “…we enjoyed a 2.5-hour walk among the ruins” (English-Review 195), emphasizing the walking experience, while a visitor from the Netherlands noted, “If you want to go down to the river and walk along it, you need at least three hours on site” (Dutch-Review 4), highlighting the site’s walking potential. The emphasis on long-duration walking experiences suggests that the site facilitates a 'pacing' of the experience, where physical movement becomes a way to internalize the vastness of the ruins.

This physical engagement allows a transition into the 'escapist' realm, as walking through 23 different civilizations enables visitors to distance themselves from their daily routines and immerse themselves in a different temporal and spatial reality.

Guided tours also emerged as a notable activity. A visitor from Ankara in January 2021 remarked, “It is about 50 kilometres from Kars city center; it’s recommended to go with guided tours” (Turkish-Review 27), indicating that guided visits are preferred for a more comprehensible and enjoyable experience.

Finally, reviews suggest that visitors perceive Ani as a learning space. For history enthusiasts, the site is not only a travel destination but also a chance to gain knowledge. A visitor wrote in September 2014, “A great way to see history and learn more about it” (English-Review 157), highlighting the learning aspect. Another visitor stated, “I have always loved seeing new places, learning, and experiencing. Ani was an interesting historical site that should be visited” (English-Review 36), showing that the site provides opportunities to gain new knowledge.

Overall, visitor reviews indicate that activities at Ani Archaeological Site mainly revolve around photography, walking, guided tours, and learning experiences. These activities allow visitors to experience cultural heritage visually, engage physically with the site, and gain historical knowledge. The preference for guided tours suggests that visitors seek a

structured 'narrative' to bridge the gap between the physical ruins and their historical significance.

This mediation transforms the visit from a purely 'cognitive' activity (gathering facts) into an 'intellectual' experience, where the visitor begins to synthesize historical information into a broader understanding of cultural heritage. Furthermore, when visitors describe Ani as a learning space, they are not merely consuming information but are actively engaging in an 'educational' realm that validates their personal interest in history. This highlights that the site's value is not only inherent in its structures but is also co-created through the visitor's mental effort to make sense of the past.

Accessibility: Visitor reviews regarding Ani Archaeological Site reveal various aspects of accessibility. Navigating the site requires a certain level of physical ability. Long walks and insufficient resting areas require physical effort, which can challenge visitors with health issues or mobility difficulties. Families with children may struggle to maneuver strollers, and individuals with limited mobility may find the terrain challenging. For instance, one review stated, "Ani is not wheelchair-accessible, and the terrain is quite difficult for those who need assistance walking" (English-Review 223).

Another critical aspect of accessibility is transportation. The site lacks public transport, making access without a private vehicle challenging, as noted in a February 2024 Turkish review: "…access is difficult without a vehicle; there is no public transport" (Turkish-Review 6). However, some visitors found transportation convenient: "The road is good, and access is easy" (Turkish-Review 346), "It's easy to reach the site from Kars district" (Italian-Review 12), and "Transportation between Kars and Ani city is via a dual-lane road" (Turkish-Review 271).

These differing experiences suggest that accessibility can be subjective. This subjectivity indicates that the 'physical accessibility' of a heritage site is not merely a logistical matter but a foundational element that dictates the 'escapist' potential of the journey. For visitors who find transportation and terrain challenging, the physical effort required consumes their cognitive resources, preventing them from shifting into a state of immersion. Conversely, for those with private vehicles or greater physical stamina, easier access serves as a 'facilitator,' allowing them to focus more on the site's aesthetic and historical values rather than their own navigation.

Furthermore, deficiencies in on-site information and signage affect visitor experience. The lack of adequate signs and brochures for historical structures was frequently mentioned. Reviews include: "A truly impressive and large historical site, but lacks informative signs and brochures. Some structures need restoration.

If you go with a guide, you may not need signs or brochures" (Turkish-Review 56); "Cows roam inside, maintenance is lacking, names were written on ruins, burned, in short, left to decay. Informative signs are unreadable" (Turkish-Review 133); "The signage and cleaning of Ani city need urgent attention" (Turkish-Review 178). These comments indicate that shortcomings in on-site guidance and information limit the visitor experience. This limitation creates a 'meaning-making' barrier for the visitor.

Without readable signage or brochures, the structures remain as silent ruins, and the visitor's experience is confined primarily to the 'aesthetic' realm (simply looking at the remains) rather than advancing into the 'educational' realm. The reliance on external guides to fill this informational gap suggests that the site's narrative is not currently self-sustaining, making the visitor's intellectual engagement dependent on third-party intervention rather than on-site interpretation.

In conclusion, visitor reviews reveal both strengths and weaknesses of Ani Archaeological Site in terms of physical access, transportation, and on-site information. While physical access and transportation may be restrictive for some visitors, deficiencies in signage and information reduce the quality of the experience. These findings highlight potential areas for accessibility improvements at the site.

4.3 Experience components dimension

In addition to destination components, visitors have also expressed their experiences. Considering the impacts of these experiences on visitors, they have been examined under five categories: physical, emotional, cognitive, intellectual, and existential experiences.

Physical Experience: Visitors' physical experiences at Ani Archaeological Site are observed through the sub-themes of movement, energy, and interaction with the space. While walking and exploring the site, visitors experience the area's scale and the challenges posed by the terrain. A visitor from South Korea commented in September 2018, "It's quite an active journey to see the ruins" (Korean-Review 1), highlighting this experience.

Similarly, a French review noted that the site sits on a plateau surrounded by cliffs, rivers, and mountains, and that exploration takes 3–4 hours (French-Review 3), reflecting the intensity of physical activity and the site's scale. A visitor from Switzerland also noted, "…we enjoyed a 2.5-hour walk among the ruins" (English-Review 195), emphasizing the physical opportunities for walking.

The energy and tranquillity the space conveys constitute an essential dimension of the physical experience. A French visitor remarked in February 2016, "A place filled with extraordinary tranquil energy" (French-Review 3), highlighting the energizing aspect of the site, while a Turkish review stated, "It has a different atmosphere, a very unique energy" (Turkish-Review 33), indicating the distinctive and impressive effect of the space on visitors.

Physical experience also encompasses activities such as walking, exploring the ruins, and discovering different points within the site. The duration and nature of these activities are directly related to the physical structure of the site and support visitors' bodily interaction with the environment. Thus, visitor reviews demonstrate that engaging physically with the space through activities such as walking and exploration is a fundamental aspect of the experience at Ani Archaeological Site.

Physical experience is shaped by the size, terrain, and spatial characteristics of the site, influencing visitors' bodily perceptions and actions. This aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) "escapist" dimension of the experience economy model, as visitors actively immerse themselves in the space, leaving daily life behind and deepening the experience through bodily engagement.

Additionally, the visual aesthetics of the ruins and landscapes observed during walks contribute an aesthetic

dimension to the experience, creating an integrated physical experience that combines movement and visual appreciation. This bodily engagement serves as a 'somatic bridge' between the modern visitor and the ancient site. The physical exhaustion reported by visitors (e.g., 3-4 hours of walking) is not merely a byproduct of the tour; it is a mechanism that reinforces the 'escapist' realm.

By pushing their physical limits, visitors disconnect from their sedentary daily routines and achieve a state of 'flow,' where the vastness of the ruins is felt through physical effort. Thus, the terrain of Ani does not just host the experience; it actively shapes it by demanding a commitment of energy that makes the historical encounter more tangible and memorable.

Emotional Experience: Most participants expressed that the silence and solitude among the ruins at Ani evoke a profound inner journey. Visitors noted that their emotional connections with the past intertwine with feelings of "awe," "respect," or "sorrow." A visitor from Italy stated, "You can be amazed by the remains of so many churches" (Italian-Review 17), highlighting the site's aesthetic appeal. A Turkish visitor in March 2019 noted, "Each building's architecture has a different, exciting history. It leaves you in awe" (Turkish-Review 150), reflecting admiration for the site's architectural details.

While appreciating the grandeur of past civilizations, visitors also contemplate their transience and the effects of historical processes. An English review remarked, "A place where you can admire the monuments and reflect on the transience of cities" (English-Review 225). These comments suggest that cultural heritage sites do not merely provide historical knowledge; they also stimulate deep cognitive and emotional processes, including aesthetic admiration, emotional attachment, and existential awareness.

The ruins at Ani offer both a visual aesthetic experience and an opportunity to reflect on the impermanence of human constructions, aligning with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) aesthetic and, to some extent, escapist dimensions. The aesthetic dimension emerges as visitors immerse themselves in the site's atmosphere, observe beauty, and feel awe. In contrast, the escapist dimension manifests as visitors move beyond daily life into solitude and silence, engaging in existential reflection.

The transition from 'awe' to 'sorrow' suggests that Ani offers a 'multilayered emotional landscape' in which the reality of decay constantly challenges aesthetic beauty. This emotional fluctuation moves the experience beyond simple sightseeing; it triggers what can be termed 'heritage empathy.' Visitors do not just see the transience of cities; they feel it as a personal existential encounter.

This emotional depth suggests that the site functions as a 'liminal space' where the boundaries between the past and present blur, allowing for a profound sense of 'immersion' that is central to the higher-level realms of the experience economy.

Cognitive Experience: Cognitive experience arises from opportunities for learning, exploration, and knowledge acquisition. This corresponds to the "educational" dimension in Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy model, where visitors enrich themselves intellectually through new knowledge. Reviews of the Ani Archaeological Site highlight this dimension.

For instance, one visitor stated, "Before seeing Ani, I thought of it as a church based on the pictures, but I was surprised to learn that around 330 churches existed at that time, and it was a significant settlement with a population of 120,000 close to Istanbul and other cities" (Turkish-Review 145). Another visitor, who enjoyed discovering new places and learning, described Ani as an interesting historical site worth visiting (English-Review 36).

Similarly, another review described Ani as "a wonderful experience," emphasizing the importance of engaging with history and learning more about the past (English-Review 157). Visitors also noted the impressive stonework, the freedom to explore without crowds, and the opportunity to learn about the Armenian Empire as a fully exploratory experience (English-Review 173).

A Turkish visitor emphasized that Ani's location on the Silk Road, its unique landscapes, and rich history necessitate spending at least four days on site (Turkish-Review 159). These comments demonstrate that Ani Archaeological Site offers not only cultural observation but also intellectually enriching cognitive experiences through learning and exploration, consistent with Pine and Gilmore's model. This cognitive engagement represents the 'acquisition' phase of the experience.

The surprise expressed by visitors regarding the site's historical population and scale (e.g., Turkish-Review 145) indicates that the experience functions as a tool for 'intellectual updating, 'where prior misconceptions are replaced by factual reality. This cognitive expansion is the foundation of the educational realm; it transforms the ruins from mere aesthetic objects into 'data-rich environments' that demand the visitor's mental participation.

Intellectual Experience: Ani Archaeological Site provides visitors not only with knowledge about past civilizations but also strengthens historical awareness and cultural identity. While exploring the ruins, visitors noted inadequate historical explanations and a lack of informative panels, creating a cognitive gap for some. However, some visitors perceived this as an opportunity for "self-guided discovery."

The site's natural and unaltered condition, with limited artificial restoration, enhances visitors' sense of direct engagement with historical reality. For instance, one visitor remarked, "A place to see with standing structures and natural surroundings" (Turkish-Review 379), highlighting the site's authenticity. In contrast, a visitor from the UK commented, "We loved this place because it is very unique and atmospheric, preserving the original environment.

All standing structures remain in their original locations. The impressive natural defensive position can be admired" (English-Review 123). Some reviews mentioned that access restrictions and safety measures disrupt the natural environment. Yet, the overall perception describes Ani as "a place where you find yourself amidst both natural and historical beauty" (English-Review 75). Local visitors, in particular, recognized Ani as an important memorial space for Turkish-Armenian shared history, emphasizing that "this is also a part of our past," highlighting cultural heritage's role in personal and collective identity formation.

These comments suggest that Ani stimulates intellectual curiosity and, combined with the site's authentic,

natural state, enhances cognitive learning, historical awareness, and both individual and collective identity. The site's authenticity provides opportunities for direct engagement with historical reality, aligning with the aesthetic dimension of Pine and Gilmore's model. Consequently, Ani Archaeological Site offers a strong intellectual experience that integrates cognitive learning with aesthetic observation and contributes to identity formation.

The distinction between cognitive and intellectual experiences lies in the shift from 'learning facts' to 'interpreting meaning.' While cognitive experience is about data acquisition, the intellectual dimension involves a 'reflective synthesis' where the visitor connects Ani's history to broader concepts of shared identity and cultural continuity.

The fact that some visitors view the lack of signage as an opportunity for 'self-guided discovery' suggests an active intellectual agency; they are not just consuming a pre-packaged narrative but are 'co-constructing' the site's significance. This engagement with authenticity and shared history (Turkish-Armenian heritage) demonstrates that Ani serves as a 'catalyst for historical consciousness,' moving the experience from simple education to a profound level of cultural self-awareness.

Existential Experience: Ani Archaeological Site offers visitors not only historical knowledge but also a profound spiritual and existential experience through its location, natural surroundings, and historical fabric. Participants noted that the site's geographic location (near the Armenian border), deep valleys, and surrounding plateaus intensify spatial perception. Visitors described this as "being at the edge" and "feeling at the crossroads of civilizations" (Turkish-Review 308).

Visitors perceive Ani not merely as an ancient city but as a space for a magical journey through history, where they can sense traces of past civilizations. One visitor remarked, "Walking through centuries step by step, making a magical journey in history, witnessing the past of various civilizations, looking down at the river reaching the Caspian, tracing the border with Armenia, it's like a dream to visit Ani" (Turkish-Review 308), emphasizing the spiritual and mystical impact of the site.

Additionally, visitors reported feelings of inner peace and awe inspired by the natural beauty and border perspective. Comments such as "Ani Ruins are magnificent; history, Silk Road, past experiences, border, spirituality, emotions… everything is different, everything is amazing. Feelings cannot be described; they must be experienced" (Turkish-Review 184) and "Here, you are not only visiting an ancient city, but you can also sit and deeply enjoy the border line with amazing nature" (Turkish-Review 257) concretize this experience.

Another visitor highlighted the effect of the border view, stating, "Especially the border view is magnificent" (Turkish-Review 345). These reviews demonstrate that Ani offers a spiritual experience integrated with history and nature, enhancing visitors' existential awareness. The site provides opportunities both to experience the traces of past civilizations and to embark on an inner journey amid natural and border landscapes. This aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) escapist and aesthetic dimensions: visitors actively engage with the space beyond daily life (escapist) while experiencing aesthetic integration and inner tranquillity through the ruins and surroundings (aesthetic).

Thus, Ani offers visitors not only exposure to cultural and natural heritage but also a spiritual connection that bridges past and present, facilitating existential reflection. This existential dimension is significantly intensified by Ani's status as a 'borderland.' The physical border with Armenia functions not only as a political boundary; it also serves as a 'liminal threshold' that prompts visitors to reflect on the fragility of human borders versus the continuity of cultural heritage.

When visitors describe the experience as 'magical' or 'like a dream,' they are experiencing a total 'absorption' into the landscape, where the spatial (the deep valleys) and the temporal (the centuries of history) collapse into a single moment of awareness. This suggests that Ani fulfills the highest level of the 'escapist' realm, where the visitor is not just avoiding daily life but is actively re-evaluating their place within the broader human narrative. The 'border view' thus becomes a contemplative tool, transforming a geographical fact into a profound spiritual realization about transience and shared history.

Table 2. Synthesis of Destination Components and Experience Dimensions at Ani Archaeological Site

	Attractions	Facilities	Activities	Accessibility
Physical	—	Infrastructure gaps (toilets, resting areas) hinder immersive engagement	Walking and exploration reinforce the escapist realm through physical effort	Terrain and lack of public transport shape the ease/difficulty of physical access
Emotional	Admiration, uniqueness, and awe dominate visitor responses (aesthetic realm)	Cleanliness/neglect issues disrupt the esthetic realm and emotional immersion	Photography channels aesthetic appreciation and personal memory-making	—
Cognitive	—	Lack of signage limits the educational realm	Guided tours and learning opportunities support factual/historical acquisition	—
Intellectual	Historical grandeur prompts reflective synthesis of cultural identity	Informational gaps create a "self-guided discovery" opportunity but limit interpretive depth	Guided tours mediate cognitive facts into intellectual synthesis	Information/signage deficiencies create a "meaning-making" barrier
Existential	Atmosphere and authenticity evoke spiritual/existential reflection	Infrastructural shortcomings paradoxically intensify the sense of authenticity ("disruptive hygiene factors")	—	Border location and remoteness intensify liminal, borderland experience

Source: own elaboration

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on online content created by visitors on TripAdvisor, this study examined the experiences of those visiting Ani Archaeological Site (UNESCO World Heritage Site) across both destination and experience dimensions. Online reviews provide valuable insights into visitors' perceptions of the site, their emotional responses, and cognitive gains. According to Kutlu and Ayyıldız (2023), a strong destination image significantly contributes to the formation of Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE), suggesting that the more unique and powerful the perceived image of a site like Ani, the more likely it is to result in lasting behavioural intentions and destination loyalty.

This study demonstrates its significance in three main ways. First, it systematically evaluates visitor experiences at Ani Archaeological Site, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Turkey. Second, it identifies the primary factors influencing visitors' emotional and intellectual experiences and analyzes them within the framework of destination components and experience dimensions. In this context, visitor experiences were categorized according to destination components, including attractions, facilities, activities, and accessibility.

The uniqueness and grandeur of Ani's historical structures, along with the captivating impact of centuries of lived experience, stand out under the attractions dimension, while guided tours, informational panels, and visitor infrastructure fall under facilities. Activities such as walking and photography contribute to visitor experiences under the activities dimension.

Within this framework, activities like photography transcend mere documentation; they represent a bridge to the 'aesthetic dimension' of the experience economy. At Ani, the visual splendour allows visitors to immerse themselves in the landscape, where capturing images becomes an active way to internalize the site's historical essence.

This aligns with the aesthetic dimension of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), where sensory enrichment is further enhanced by the modern demand for Instagrammable and visually spectacular environments. At Ani, the desire to capture and share these aesthetic moments online reflects a deep integration with the cultural landscape (Gazgireeva et al., 2022).

Interestingly, similar to findings in other protected natural and cultural landscapes, visitors often navigate a complex relationship between infrastructure deficiencies and the 'spirit of the place,' sometimes reconciling physical hardships as part of the authentic experience in highly conserved areas (Silveira et al., 2024). This suggests that at Ani, infrastructural shortcomings act as 'disruptive hygiene factors' that can, paradoxically, heighten the 'existential dimension' of the visit. The physical effort required to navigate the site appears to reinforce visitors' perception of authenticity and the ruins' rugged endurance.

Visitor experiences were analyzed across physical, emotional, cognitive, intellectual, and existential dimensions. The synergy of these dimensions reflects the core pillars of the visitor experience (emotion, knowledge, and imagination), which narrative-driven tourism has identified as central elements (Balerio et al., 2022). Furthermore, as Kutlu and Ayyıldız (2023) emphasize, these components are fundamental to constructing a Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE), where the destination's perceived image directly shapes post-travel evaluations and revisit intentions.

The physical dimension encompasses walking, energy, and movement-related interactions within the site; the emotional dimension reflects aesthetic and affective responses, including awe, respect, and sorrow; the intellectual dimension involves acquiring historical knowledge, perceiving authenticity, and developing awareness of cultural identity. A key distinction emerges: while the cognitive dimension relates to the factual acquisition of historical data, the intellectual dimension at Ani functions as a reflective synthesis.

In this realm, visitors do not just process information; they engage in identity reflection, aligning the site's narrative with their own cultural awareness. Furthermore, the existential dimension highlights the internal, spiritual, and existential impacts produced by Ani's geographic location, natural environment, and historical fabric. For instance, Weerasinghe and Biyiri (2024) examined tourists' perceptions of a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the relevance of landscape and historical significance.

Similarly, recent netnographic research suggests that such experiences often evolve into a profound connection with the essence of the place, where the synergy between landscape and personal identity creates a unique documentary corpus of traveller narratives (Silveira et al., 2024).

Finally, the findings indicate that online reviews constitute a valuable data source for understanding the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of visitor experiences. This aligns with recent netnographic research in protected conservation units, which emphasizes that building a documentary corpus from traveller narratives is essential to understanding the multifaceted nature of sustainable interactions between humans and heritage environments (Silveira et al., 2024).

Transforming these spiritual and intellectual encounters into long-term destination loyalty is essential for sustainable tourism. As Mukunda and Vijay (2025) suggest, when cultural heritage sites provide unique, high-quality experiences, they not only foster repeat visitation but also create vital opportunities for local community involvement and regional economic development.

This study provides a thematic overview and structured insights into visitor experiences based on user-generated content. This research evaluates experience dimensions and destination components in the context of cultural heritage tourism through an in-depth analysis of visitors' online reviews at Ani Archaeological Site.

The findings support the applicability of Dickman's (1989) destination components framework (attractions, facilities, activities, and accessibility) for heritage destinations. Moreover, consistent with Simeon et al. (2017), online reviews serve as a useful tool for examining the relationship between tourist experience and cultural attractions. Understanding tourists' perceptions of a destination's image can improve predictions of their loyalty (Pramanik, 2023).

Visitors at Ani engage directly with the historical and cultural essence of the site, experiencing its unique atmosphere and forming personal connections. Across experience dimensions, visitors report physical, emotional, cognitive, intellectual, and existential encounters. Ani's geographic location, historical structures, and natural environment evoke aesthetic admiration as well as deep cognitive and spiritual responses.

These findings indicate that cultural heritage destinations do not merely convey information but also strengthen visitors' existential awareness and cultural connections. Consequently, the study illustrates how online visitor evaluations can be organized within destination components and experience dimensions.

This organization shows that online reviews are not merely a collection of complaints or praise, but a structured reflection of how destination attributes directly shape specific experience realms, offering a more nuanced understanding of the visitor-heritage interaction.

Integrating these dimensions not only enriches the visitor journey but also aligns with sustainable rural tourism principles, which emphasize that high-quality, unique experiences are fundamental to turning visitors into repeat customers and ensuring long-term destination loyalty (Mukunda & Vijay, 2025).

The identified deficiencies in basic infrastructure should be viewed as more than logistical issues; they function as 'disruptive factors' that prevent visitors from fully engaging with the spiritual and cognitive depth of the site. Addressing these gaps is therefore essential to shift from a purely functional visit to a high-quality, immersive experience. For site managers and decision-makers, several practical implications emerge.

Ani's historical fabric and natural beauty are primary attractions for visitors; preserving and promoting these values can increase the destination's competitive appeal. Existing deficiencies in facilities (restrooms, resting areas, informational panels) may negatively affect visitor experience. Addressing these gaps could enhance both the time visitors spend on-site and the quality of their experiences.

Diversifying activities within the historical site, such as walking, photography, and guided tours, can increase visitor engagement. Establishing designated photography points and optional professional photography services is recommended. This recommendation aligns with the 'aesthetic dimension' of the experience economy, where visually optimized environments help visitors achieve deeper immersion and identity-building through their digital narratives.

Access difficulties for visitors with mobility limitations may limit the site's experiential value; virtual reality centers or physical improvements could be considered. Expanding public transportation and wayfinding options is also important. Implementing these measures would provide visitors with a satisfying experience while ensuring the long-term sustainability of Ani Archaeological Site.

This study has some limitations due to its reliance on online reviews. While the reviews provide valuable information on visitors' shared experiences, they may not capture all emotions and thoughts that participants wished to convey. Although the database includes all available reviews, it does not represent the perspectives of visitors who did not leave reviews. Future studies could adopt different methods to evaluate visitor experiences more comprehensively.

Nonetheless, measuring experiences in cultural heritage and archaeological site visits remains challenging regardless of the methodology. Expanding future research to include multiple archaeological sites would enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Future studies could expand the scope of this research by incorporating multiple data sources, such as Google Reviews, Booking, or social media platforms, to complement TripAdvisor content. A mixed-methods approach combining online reviews with surveys, interviews, or observational techniques would provide a more comprehensive understanding of visitor experiences.

Longitudinal studies could also trace changes in visitor perceptions and destination image over time, particularly in the post-pandemic era. In addition, advanced artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques may enhance the precision of sentiment classification and topic extraction. From a comparative perspective, examining Ani Archaeological Site alongside other UNESCO World Heritage archaeological destinations could reveal similarities and differences in visitor perceptions across cultural contexts.

Future research might also explore sustainability, heritage conservation awareness, and the socio-cultural impacts of tourism more explicitly. Finally, integrating theories such as the Experience Economy, Destination Image Theory, and Expectation-Confirmation Theory could help develop new conceptual frameworks, particularly for visitor loyalty, place attachment, and revisit intentions in cultural heritage tourism.

REFERENCES

Abaalzamat, K. H., Al-Sulaiti, K. I., Alzboun, N. M., & Khawaldah, H. A. (2021). The role of Katara cultural village in enhancing and marketing the image of Qatar: Evidence from TripAdvisor. *Sage Open*, *11*(2), 21582440211022737.

Akyol, C. (2022). Doğal ve kültürel kaynaklara dayalı turizm: Kars destinasyonu (tourism based on natural and cultural resources: Kars destination). *Journal of Applied Tourism Research*, *3*(1), 81–94.

Alrawadieh, Z., & Alrawadieh, Z. (2020). Developing a typology of tourist harassment in archaeological sites: a netnographic approach. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, *18*(2), 96–112.

Anadolu Agency. (2022). *Medeniyetler beşiği Ani'yi 2 ayda 34 bin 500 kişi ziyaret etti* [The cradle of civilizations, Ani, was visited by 34,500 people in two months]. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur-sanat/

Ashworth, G. J. (2009). Do tourists destroy the heritage they have come to experience?. *Tourism Recreation Research*, *34*(1), 79–83.

Aslan, H., & Aktaş, Ö. (2019). Kafkas Cephesi Harp Tarihi Müzesi ziyaretçilerinin müze ziyaretlerine ilişkin düşünceleri (Caucasian Front War History Museum visitors' views on museum visits). *Gazi Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi, 39(3),* 1775-1796.

Aydın, Ç. (2024). From ancient paths to modern discoveries: the backpacker tourism experience on the Lycian Way. *ROMAYA - Researches on Multidisciplinary Approaches, 4(2)*: 35–46.

Baleiro, R., Viegas, M. A., & Faria, D. (2022). Contributes to the profile of the Brazilian literary tourist: Experience and motivation. *Anais Brasileiros de Estudos Turísticos: ABET*, *12*(1), 10.

Balta, S. (2023). Tarihsel çevre peyzajlarında dini yapı tipolojilerinin incelenmesi: Ani Harabeleri, Kars Örneği (investigation of religious building typologies in historical landscapes: the case of Ani Ruins, Kars). *Akdeniz University Journal of the Faculty of Architecture, 2(2),* 178–209.

Bezerra, L. T. (2019). Experiência memorável para turistas em Natal-RN. *Revista Turismo em Análise*, *30*(3), 480-495.

Boukas, N. (2012). Young faces in old places: perceptions of young cultural visitors for the archaeological site of Delphi. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, *2*(2), 164–189.

Buluk, B., & Eşitti, B. (2019). Batıdan doğuya yavaş seyahat: Doğu Ekspresi'nin Kars'ın sürdürülebilir turizm gelişimine etkisi (slow travel from west to east: the influence of the Eastern Express on Kars' sustainable tourism). *Ahi Evran Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi, 5(2),* 159–176.

Cetin, G., & Bilgihan, A. (2016). Components of cultural tourists' experiences in destinations. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *19(2),* 137–154.

Chen, Z., Ren, X., & Zhang, Z. (2021). Cultural heritage as rural economic development: Batik production amongst China's Miao population. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *81*, 182–193.

Conti, E., Forlani, F., & Pencarelli, T. (2020). Visiting a cultural city in the experiential perspective: the case of Urbino. *Il Capitale Culturale: Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage, 21*, 391–424.

Çelik, K., & Geçgin, E. (2021). Kars ilinin kültürel miras kaynakları ve swot analizi (cultural heritage sources and swot analysis of Kars province). *Kafkas Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, *12*(23), 295–321.

Çelik, K. (2022). *Kars'taki somut olmayan kültürel miras değerlerinin sürdürülebilirliği için kültür turizmi tipolojisi ve turistik ürün bağlamında bir değerlendirme* (An assessment in the context of cultural tourism typology and tourism products for the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage values in Kars).Yayımlanmamış doktora tezi (unpublished PhD thesis). Kafkas Üniversitesi, Kars.

Daengbuppha, J., Hemmington, N., & Wilkes, K. (2006). Using grounded theory to model visitor experiences at heritage sites: Methodological and practical issues. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, *9*(4), 367–388.

Dickman, S. (1989). *Tourism: An introductory text*. Edward Arnold Australia.

Diken, H. A. (2020). Ani Ören Yeri'nin Kars'taki kültür turizmine katkıları bağlamında bazı tespitler (some observations on the contribution of Ani Ruins to cultural tourism in Kars). *Journal of Applied Tourism Research, 1(2),* 99–114.

Duman, M., & Gelibolu, L. (2021). Sürdürülebilir kültür turizmi: Kars örneği (sustainable culture tourism: the case of Kars). *Sosyal, Beşeri ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi*, *4*(11), 1077–1089. https://doi.org/10.26677/TR1010.2021.863

Eşitti, B. (2017). Ani harabelerinin bölgesel kalkınma üzerindeki etkileri (the impacts of the Ani Ruins on regional development). *Sosyal ve Beşerî Bilimler Araştırmaları Dergisi, 18(50)*, 129–147.

Garay Tamajón, L., & Cànoves Valiente, G. (2017). Barcelona seen through the eyes of TripAdvisor: Actors, typologies and components of destination image in social media platforms. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *20*(1), 33-37.

Gazgireeva, L. K., Churilina, I., & Semenova, L. (2022). Experience economy as an irrational philosophy in tourist and hotel services in transforming the socio-economic systems. *Anais Brasileiros de Estudos Turísticos: ABET*, *12*(1), 4.

Gelibolu, L., Samsa, Ç. & Cengiz, Ö. (2017). Destinasyon markalamasında temel konular: Sarıkamış kış turizmi destinasyonu üzerine nitel bir çalışma (fundamental issues on destination branding: a qualitative study on Sarıkamış winter tourism destination), *KAÜİİBFD 8(16)*, 447–462.

Gursoy, D., O. Akova, & O. Atsız. (2021). Understanding the heritage experience: a content analysis of online reviews of world heritage sites in Istanbul. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 20 (3): 311–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2021.1937193.

Hosany, S., & Witham, M. (2010). Dimensions of cruisers' experiences, satisfaction, and intention to recommend. *Journal of Travel Research, 49(3),* 351–364.

Hsieh, H. F., & S. E. Shannon. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15 (9),* 1277–1288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687

Islam, M. N. (2025). Visitors' sentiment in archaeological heritage sites: A study based on TripAdvisor reviews. *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, *26(1),* 90–111.

Jelinčić, D. A., & Senkić, M. (2017). Creating a heritage tourism experience. The power of the senses. *Etnološka tribina*, 40, 109-126.https://doi.org/10.15378/1848-9540.2017.40.03

Karabaşa, S., & Çiğdem, K. A. R. A. (2022). Oyanın mirası: Nallıhan iğne oyasının miras olma serüveni (heritage of Lace: The Inheritance Journey of Nallıhan Needle Lace). *Folklor/Edebiyat*, *28(110),* 499–522.

Karasar, N. (1994). *Bilimsel araştırma yöntemi: kavramlar, ilkeler, teknikler (*scientific research method: concepts, principles, techniques). Altıncı Basım. Ankara: 3A Araştırma Eğitim Danışmanlık Ltd.

Kerse, Y. (2023). Kars ilindeki turistik yerlerin çevrimiçi turist yorumları bağlamında incelenmesi (investigation of tourist sites in Kars province in the context of online tourist reviews). *İşletme, 4(2)*, 239–254.

Kim, S., Whitford, M., & Arcodia, C. (2019). Development of intangible cultural heritage as a sustainable tourism resource: the intangible cultural heritage practitioners' perspectives. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 422–435, https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873x.2018.1561703

Kim, J. H., & Jang, S. (2016). Determinants of authentic experiences: An extended Gilmore and Pine model for ethnic restaurants. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *28(10)*, 2247–2266.

Kladou, S., & Mavragani, E. (2015). Assessing destination image: An online marketing approach and the case of TripAdvisor. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, *4,* 187–193.

Kocalar, A. C. (2024). Kültür turizmi ve sürdürülebilir kalkınma politikaları bağlamında Kars (Kars in the context of cultural tourism and sustainable development policies). *Journal of Humanities and Tourism Research*, *14(2),* 124–145.

Kozak, M. (2014). *Bilimsel araştırma: tasarım, yazım ve yayım teknikleri* (scientific research: design, writing, and publication techniques) .Ankara: Detay Yayıncılık.

Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology*. London: Sage Publications.

Kutlu, D., & Ayyildiz, H. (2023). A research on the effect of the country image on memorable tourism experience in the context of some demographic variables. *Anais Brasileiros De Estudos Turísticos*, *13*(1). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7706198

Lewis, J. (2009). Redefining qualitative methods: Believability in the fifth moment. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *8*(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/24721735.2025.2571826

Loulanski, T. (2006). Cultural heritage in socio-economic development: local and global perspectives. *Environments: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 34 (2),* 51–69.

Marine-Roig, E. (2019). Destination image analytics through traveller-generated content: *sustainability*, *11(12),* 3392.

Marine-Roig, E., & Clavé, S. A. (2016). Perceived image specialization in multiscalar tourism destinations. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, *5(3)*, 202–213.

Mehmetoglu, M., & Engen, M. (2011). Pine and Gilmore's concept of experience economy and its dimensions: An empirical examination in tourism. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, *12*(*4*), 237–255.

Ministry of Culture and Tourism. (2025). *Ani ancient city, Kars*. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from https://www.kvmgm.ktb.gov.tr

Mukunda, B. G., & Vjay, G. (2025). Analysis of tourist satisfaction and perception - a pathway to sustainable community-based rural tourism development in Shivarapattana, Karnataka. *Latin American Journal of Tourismology*, *11*(Regular), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17675855.

Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook.* Thousand Oaks: Sage

Nowacki, M. (2019). World cities' image in TripAdvisor users' reviews—e-*Review of Tourism Research*, *16(2/3).*

Nguyen, T.H.H., & Cheung, C. (2016). Toward an understanding of tourists' authentic heritage experiences: evidence from Hong Kong. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 33(7),* 999–1010.

OECD. (2012). *Tourism trends and policies.* Paris: OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-tourism-trends-and-policies-2012_tour-2012-en.html

Olorunsola, V. O., Saydam, M. B., Lasisi, T. T., & Ozturen, A. (2023). Exploring tourists' experiences when visiting Petra archaeological heritage site: voices from TripAdvisor. *Consumer Behaviour in Tourism and Hospitality*, *18(1),* 81–96.

Özbay, G., & Çekin, A. (2020). Turizm, ulaşım ve sosyal medya etkileşimi: Doğu Ekspresi ve Kars'taki konaklama işletmelerine yönelik bir araştırma (tourism, transportation, and social media interaction: a study of the Eastern Express and accommodation businesses in Kars). *Ahi Evran Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi, 6(1)*, 327–344.

Özdemir, G. (2008). *Destinasyon pazarlaması (destination marketing)*. Ankara: Detay Yayıncılık.

Özlü, T., & Kaleli, C. (2019). Kültürel miras turizmi açısından bir değerlendirme: Ani Ören Yeri (an evaluation in terms of cultural heritage tourism: Ani Ruins). *Amisos*, *4*(7), 195–218.

Pai, C. H., Zhang, Y., Wang, Y. L., Li, K., & Shang, Y. (2026). Current challenges and opportunities in cultural heritage preservation through sustainable tourism practices. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *29*(5), 1016-1034

Packer, J., Ballantyne, R., & Bond, N. (2018). Developing an instrument to capture multifaceted visitor experiences: The DoVE adjective checklist. *Visitor Studies*, *21(2),* 211–231.

Packer, J., & Ballantyne, R. (2016). Conceptualizing the visitor experience: A review of literature and development of a multifaceted model. *Visitor Studies*, *19(2),* 128–143.

Pine, B .J., & Gilmore, J.H. (1998). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review, 76(4),* 96–105.

Pine, B .J., & Gilmore, J.H. (1999). *The experience economy*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press,

Poria, Y., Butler, R., & Airey, D. (2001). Clarifying heritage tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research, 28(4),* 1047–1049. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(00)00069-4

Pramanik, S. H. K. (2023). Influences of the underlying dimensions of destination image on destination loyalty in a cultural heritage destination. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 28(9), 984–999. https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2023.2283001

Qi, S., & Chen, N. (2019). Understanding Macao's destination image through user-generated content. *Journal of China Tourism Research, 15,* 503–519.

Quadri-Felitti, D., & Fiore, A. M. (2012). Experience economy constructs as a framework for understanding wine tourism. *Journal of Vacation Marketing, 18(1),* 3–15.

Radder, L., & Han, X. (2015). An examination of the museum experience based on Pine and Gilmore's experience economy realms—*Journal of Applied Business Research*, *31*(2), 455.

Richards, G. (2001a). *Cultural attractions and European tourism*. Wallingford: CABI.

Richards, G. (2001b). The experience ındustry and the creation of attractions. G. Richards (Ed.) Cultural attractions and European tourism içinde (ss. 55–69). Oxfordshire, UK: CABI Publishing.

Silveira, S. V. da, Braga, S. de S., & Pimentel, T. D. (2024). Netnographic analysis of the trekking in Lençóis Maranhenses National Park. *Latin American Journal of Tourismology*, *10*(Regular). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13357069

Simeon, M. I., Buonincontri, P., Cinquegrani, F., & Martone, A. (2017). Exploring tourists' cultural experiences in Naples through online reviews. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Technology, 8(2),* 220–238. https://doi.org/10.1108/jhtt-10-2016-0067.

Smith, M., Sulyok, J., Jancsik, A., Puczkó, L., Kiss, K., Sziva, I., Papp-Vary, A.F. & Michalkó, G. (2018). Nomen est omen – Tourist image of the Balkans. *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin, 67*, 173–188.

Smith, L. (2020). Uses of heritage. C. Smith (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of global archaeology*, ss. 10969–10974. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30018-0_1937.

Soares, B. R., & de Jesus, V. L. R. (2014). Turismo e cidades: reflexões sobre a experiência turística. *Turismo sertanejo: a comunidade, o lugar e os saberes locais/Anderson Pereira.*

Stoleriu, O. M., Brochado, A., Rusu, A., & Lupu, C. (2019). Analyses of visitors' experiences in a natural world heritage site based on TripAdvisor reviews. *Visitor Studies*, *22(2),* 192–212.

Şahin, A., & Kılıçlar, A. (2023). The effect of tourists' gastronomic experience on emotional and cognitive evaluation: an application of SOR paradigm. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, *6(2),* 595–612.

Timothy, D. J. (2011). *Cultural heritage and tourism: An introduction*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.

UNESCO. (2025). *Archaeological site of Ani – UNESCO World Heritage Centre*. Retrieved May 15, 2025, from https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1345

UNESCO. (2023). *Cutting edge: Bringing cultural tourism back in the game*. Retrieved March 5, 2025, from https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-bringing-cultural-tourism-back-game

Weerasinghe, G. B. I., & Biyiri, E. W. (2024). Exploring the tourist perceptions of destination components at the Sigiriya World Heritage site: A Tripadvisor-Based Study. *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites, 26*(2-3), 207–229, https://doi.org/10.1080/13505033.2024.2416194.

Yüce, A., Samsa, Ç. & Meriç, K. (2019). Destinasyon imajının tekrar ziyaret etme niyeti üzerindeki etkisi: Kars ili örneği (the effect of the destination image on revisit intention: the case of Kars). *Kafkas Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi (KAÜİİBFD), 10(19),* 131–150.

CRediT author statement

Term	Definition	Author 1
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
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/ reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs	x
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data	x
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection	x
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools	
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
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/ data presentation	x
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team	x
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution	x
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication	

Source: reproduced from Elsevier (2022, s/p), based on Brand et al. (2015).

Processo Editorial / Editorial Process / Proceso Editorial
Editor Chefe / Editor-in-chief / Editor Jefe: PhD Thiago D. Pimentel (UFJF).
Recebido / Received / Recibido: 24.10.2025; Revisado / Revised / Revisado: 12.12.2025 – 16.03.2026; Aprovado / Approved / Aprobado: 15.09.2026; Publicado / Published / Publicado: 16.11.2026.
Documento revisado às cegas por pares / Double-blind peer-reviewed paper / Documento revisado a ciegas por pares.