

# Visitors' experiences of UNESCO World Heritage Site: evidence from Göbeklitepe, Türkiye

Visitors'  
experiences

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Received 6 May 2023  
Revised 29 June 2023  
27 August 2023  
18 September 2023  
Accepted 19 September 2023

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study seeks to investigate and discuss the heritage experiences of both domestic and international visitors at Göbeklitepe UNESCO World Heritage Site in Türkiye.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative research approach was adopted in the current study. TripAdvisor's comments and reviews of both domestic ( $n = 519$ ) and international ( $n = 186$ ) visitors regarding their visits to Göbeklitepe were collected. The data were then subjected to content analysis by MAXQDA as qualitative data analysis software. Additionally, an abductive research approach, which consisted of three stages, was implemented for data analysis.

**Findings** – The three aspects of visitor experiences at Göbeklitepe, including cognitive, emotional and relational experiences were found and discussed. Additionally, commonalities and differences among domestic and international visitors in terms of the heritage experience they gained from their visit to Göbeklitepe were revealed and analyzed.

**Practical implications** – Based on the findings regarding the main aspects of heritage experiences at Göbeklitepe, including cognitive, emotional and relational experiences, site managers and destination marketers can create effective marketing strategies that focus on those characteristics to attract visitors to the site. Moreover, the study can guide destination marketers to develop targeted marketing campaigns that highlight the different historical and religious significance of the site for both groups of domestic and international visitors.

**Originality/value** – First, the study affirms that Göbeklitepe is an important and impressive cultural heritage site due to its historical significance to both domestic and international visitors. It also strengthens the multifaceted nature of heritage experiences. Especially, the evidence of relational heritage experiences, including the connectedness to heritage and the sense of belonging to the visitor community, enriches the literature of heritage experience in this regard.

**Keywords** Heritage tourism, Archaeological site, Tourist experience, Heritage experience, Göbeklitepe

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Heritage tourism provides an opportunity for tourists to develop a sense of belonging toward the heritage or/and the heritage destination (Yang, 2017). Along with heritage tourism products, services and facilities, heritage tourism destinations offer affluent and significant cultural heritage as compared to other tourism destinations (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Besides, such heritage sites, whose importance has become increasingly significant in recent years, have significant potential in terms of faith tourism but are also considered important for secular pilgrimage (Gursoy *et al.*, 2022). These sites, therefore, can potentially provide different experiences to visitors (Douglas *et al.*, 2023; Genc and Gulertekin Genc, 2023; Packer and Ballantyne, 2016) along with their increased contributions in terms of economic and social assets to the tourism industry (Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2022).



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Packer and Ballantyne (2016) have summarized the four main categories of heritage experience, including (1) experience as a flow of consciousness from an anthropological perspective, (2) experience as a subjective response to an event or stimulus from a psychological perspective, (3) experience as a memorable impression from a tourism and leisure management perspective and (4) experience as a designed or staged offering from a tourism and leisure marketing perspective. Based on these categories, they provide a holistic framework of visitor experience which includes the flow/connection between key factors of the wider physical and social environment, the external elements of the sites (activities, events, environments), the internal responses of visitors (thoughts and feelings) and the takeaway impressions (which are memories, stories and insights) (Packer and Ballantyne, 2016). The model also includes the transformation from the experience as an offering to the final experience as a product, i.e. the remembered experience, through the perceptions and interpretations of visitors.

On the other hand, Prentice *et al.* (1998) identified five models of consumer experience in the literature, including flow, hierarchical, insider–outsider, planner behavior and typological models. Other important elements are the extraordinary nature and remarkable/memorable features of the tourist experience. Tourist experience often happens outside of the daily routine, in a nonordinary and nonmundane context (Walls *et al.*, 2011) and thus extraordinary. These extraordinary experiences are often characterized by high levels of emotional intensity (Arnould and Price, 1993); thus, the emotional aspect is essential in the tourist experience.

Turkey has several historical and cultural richness in terms of heritage tourism that represents many different cultures and religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, including “Göbeklitepe,” which is treated as the oldest religious center of the world dating back to 11,500 years ago (Türker, 2016). Besides, since Göbeklitepe as a neolithic site has many different aspects in terms of its historical significance where Ancient Civilizations were located to foster the transmission process of hunter-gatherer communities, it comparatively differs from other similar international sites. Therefore, the study results are expected to contribute to and enhance the understanding of the site and could potentially provide valuable insights to analyze other historical and cultural heritage patterns (Polat, 2023). As such, by relying on a comparative perspective, the present paper seeks to find an answer to the question of what experiences the Göbeklitepe offers to the visitors.

## Literature review

### *Heritage tourism*

Heritage is commonly viewed as “the contemporary usage of the past” and is used “in responses to current needs for it” (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 1999, p. 105). As such, heritage is argued to be a modern social construct, where a particular value is created and constructed according to the interests and needs of the involved parties (Lowenthal, 1998). It is an inherently political process, where the identity and feeling of belonging are created (Anico, 2009). Heritage is therefore often treated as tourism products (Ho and McKercher, 2004). An abundance of historic and archaeological sites has been revived and enlivened with new uses and are opened for visitors. Additionally, newer urban heritage as well as intangible heritage such as culinary arts, festivals, traditional customs, etc. are being promoted and presented for tourism purposes. Tourism has always been considered a main concern in heritage management (Arora, 2007).

Heritage tourism has its roots dating back to ancient times, primarily through pilgrimage, which involved journeys to significant religious or spiritual destinations (Timothy, 2011). In the modern tourism landscape, heritage is still one of the most significant components of tourism (Timothy and Boyd, 2003). This type of tourism is defined as “tourism centered on what we have inherited, which can mean anything from historic buildings to artworks to

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beautiful scenery” (Yale, 1991, p. 21). In addition to this supply-side-oriented definition, there is a tourist-centric perspective on heritage tourism, which characterizes it as “a subgroup of tourism, in which the main motivation for visiting a site is based on the place’s heritage characteristic according to the tourists’ perception of their own heritage” (Poria *et al.*, 2001, p. 1048). In this context, heritage tourism involves activities where heritage takes center stage, serving as the primary motivation for travelers’ visits.

The introduction of the World Heritage List by UNESCO in the late 20th century not only led to better protection and conservation of heritage sites but also sparked a growing demand and supply of these sites as tourism products, making the World Heritage Site (WHS) designation a significant selling point for tourism destinations and a key tourist motivator (Timothy and Boyd, 2003; Poria *et al.*, 2006). The association between the designation and tourism management has been widely investigated, in terms of their economic assessment, strategic planning, community involvement, tourism demand/flow, visitor management, marketing practices and tourist perception (Mariani and Guizzardi, 2020). The experience of tourists at these WHSs has also been extensively explored with different types of WHSs in various geographic contexts (such as Atsız *et al.*, 2022; Khairi *et al.*, 2019; Sontikul and Jachna, 2016).

### *Heritage experience*

The tourist experience is widely studied yet remains a complex and somewhat ambiguous concept. This is because it is highly subjective and multifaceted. First, the subjective nature is due to the fact that experience is the interface between the external, i.e. the physical world, and the internal, i.e. the mind (Ansbacher, 1999). This interaction between the world and the self is the core of the meaning-making process of an experience. As individuals construct meanings through their own intellect and imagination, the same tourism activity/produce could be experienced differently by different individuals (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010). Hence, experience is highly subjective.

Second, experience in general is often considered as a multidimensional concept that includes five types of experiences: cognitive (think), physical (act), sensory (sense), affective (feel) and social identity (relate) (Schmitt, 1999). In a narrower context of the museum, Packer and Ballantyne (2016) offer a multifaceted model, which is comprised of 10 facets: physical, sensory, restorative, introperspective, transformative, hedonic, emotional, relational, spiritual and cognitive. This could be considered as an extension of Schmitt (1999)’s model where five other facets, i.e. restorative, introperspective, transformative, hedonic and spiritual, are added. Packer and Ballantyne (2016) model is more suitable for heritage experience as its additional facets effectively cover a wide range of values embedded in heritage, especially cultural heritage. Additionally, in tourism, tourists search for various experiences, depending on their motivations and sociological perspectives (Cohen, 1979). The tourist experience is also a process that unfolds in multiple sequential phases, including anticipation/expectation, travel to site/destination, on-site activities, return home and recollection/memories (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010). This discussion verifies the multifaceted nature of experience in general and tourist experience in particular.

Due to this multifaceted nature, the studies of heritage experience are also diverse in perspectives and dimensions. Hannabuss (1999) included the issues of identity, nostalgia and authenticity while discussing heritage experience and postmodernism. Ung and Vong (2010) evaluated six dimensions including site attributes, heritage attractiveness, facilities and service and heritage interpretation. Cetin and Bilgihan (2016) discussed five dimensions including social interaction, local authentic clues, service, cultural/heritage and challenge. Sontikul and Jachna (2016) evaluated Macau heritage experience using four realms of

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experience by Pine and Gilmore, including entertainment, education, aesthetic and escapism. Seyfi *et al.* (2020) identified six components of memorable heritage experience, including the prior perceived significance of the experience, engagement, authenticity, cultural exchange, culinary attraction and quality of service.

Ebejer *et al.* (2020) included three dimensions with a focus on interactions, including interactions with heritage attractions, interactions with local and other tourists, and interactions with self. Heritage tourism experience is closely related to the examination of both tangible and intangible assets of historical periods to the heritage sites (Jiang *et al.*, 2023). Gursoy *et al.* (2022) discussed six components of heritage tourism experience including authenticity, the importance of tour guides, cultural values, a sense of heritage, local hospitality and awe. These examples of the dimensions/components/aspects of heritage experience from previous studies in different contexts indicated the complexity of heritage experience, and that the inclusion of experience aspects depends on the interest of the researchers, the specific context and the particular experience of the visitors at the sites. The latter, again, indicates the subjectivity of heritage experience. Thus, the investigation of heritage experience should be organic and based on the unbiased expression of the visitors. This is the reason we examine heritage experience at Göbeklitepe site based on their online reviews. As Göbeklitepe site is also an archaeological site, a review of archaeological tourism and experience is offered in the next section.

#### *Archaeological tourism and experience*

With an interest in connecting to the origin of culture and identity of humankind, archaeological heritage increasingly becomes an important appeal for tourism purposes. Archaeological locations provide the exploration of the identity, history and heritage of contemporary society. Tourism has stimulated the transformation of archaeological locations into heritage sites (Hodder, 2002), which has been used for multiple purposes, including education, promoting national identity and for profit, i.e. tourism. Archaeological heritage is a part of heritage and is thus often discussed under cultural heritage studies.

Archaeology has gone through a paradigm shift from processual to postprocessual archaeology, which allows the openness and reflexivity to multivocality in the study and interpretation of archaeological materials (Pacífico and Vogel, 2012). This new approach facilitates the interrelation between archaeology and tourism, which is based on three essential themes including stewardship, education, and conservation (Lynott, 1997). This multiple usage of archaeological sites has resulted in multiple stakeholder groups with diverse interests (Pacífico and Vogel, 2012). Therefore, the balance between conservation by archaeologists, tourism development and the everyday life of the local community remains contentious (Pacífico and Vogel, 2012). The preservation of archaeological sites provides meaningful and valuable cultural resources for the development of tourism products and experiences (McKercher *et al.*, 2005). Meanwhile, the compromise between archaeological research for education or entertainment purposes could harm the objectivity and authenticity of archaeological data. Additionally, archaeological excavation and tourism development could contribute to the change, both positively and negatively, of the local community in terms of economic and social opportunities.

Archaeological tourism, in a basic sense, centers on the tourist activities at archaeological heritage and the experience that tourists physically create (Ross *et al.*, 2017). It focuses on the material remains of cultural heritage (Pacífico and Vogel, 2012). This conventional approach that focuses on tangible archaeological heritage is argued to overlook the value of archaeological sites that have a physical loss (Ross *et al.*, 2017). They believe that this material loss of archaeological sites could be considered as an intangible value encapsulated in historical knowledge and stories of the site and its culture (Ross *et al.*, 2017). This intangible

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aspect of archaeological tourism can thus significantly contribute to the experience of archaeological tourism.

The new approach in archaeology has also provided an opportunity for the interpretation of archaeological sites from a constructive perspective. This perspective focuses on encouraging the interaction with evidence, endorsing a holistic engagement with the site, and involving visitors' prior knowledge in order to stimulate critical thinking and reflective discourse (Ross *et al.*, 2017), which is connected to the cognitive aspect of tourist experience. This approach allows tourists to have their own way of interacting with the site, creating their own meaning of the past and of their experience. Ross *et al.* (2017) considered this as a cocreative archaeological tourism experience. The cocreation of archaeology heritage for tourism purposes provides tourists with a greater role in crafting their archaeological heritage experience, enabling them to utilize their knowledge, thoughts, experiences and creativity to make sense of the visited site and hence the past (Ross and Saxena, 2019). This cocreation process not only facilitates an emotional connection with both tangible and intangible aspects of the archaeological site but also contributes to reimagining the relevance of those historical values to contemporary tourism activities. In other words, not only emotional experience is induced by the archaeological visit, but the introperspective and transformative aspects of visitor experience (as in Packer and Ballantyne (2016)'s model) are also created.

Meanwhile, Mazzola (2015) suggested the application of the recreational opportunity spectrum (ROS) for the management of archaeological sites for tourism purposes. The core element of this theory is that quality recreational experiences tend to occur through exposure to a diversity of recreational opportunities (McCool *et al.*, 2007). ROS includes a range of biophysical, social and managerial settings, with a variety of recreational activities, resulting in a continuum of experience from primitive to modern (Mazzola, 2015). This approach, thus, could potentially meet the needs of a diverse visitor background at an archaeological site and create a wide range of archaeological experiences. This approach, together with the discussion above, confirms the multifaceted character of archaeological experience. Thus, Packer and Ballantyne (2016) model of 10 facets of visitor experience could be applied to explain different types of experiences created by an archaeological site visit.

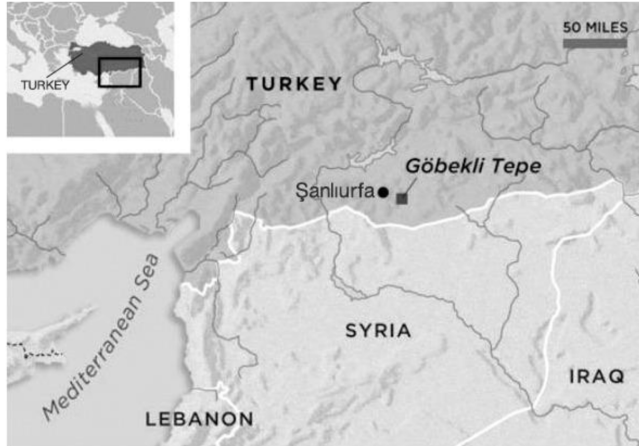
The existing literature on visitor experience fails to explore and deeply analyze visitors' insights toward heritage sites from a qualitative lens in a broader context. Hence, the motivation of the current work is to fill this gap by providing a wider analysis of the heritage experience of visitors from both domestic and international perspectives. In doing so, investigating differences and commonalities between different visitors constitutes another contribution to addressing the present gap. Therefore, the current work strives to find an answer to the question of "What kind of experiences does Göbeklitepe site provide to visitors?"

## Methodology

### *Göbeklitepe as a case study area*

The aim of the current research is to examine visitor experience of the Göbeklitepe site, which is situated in Şanlıurfa province of south-east Anatolia (Fagan, 2017), as shown in Figure 1. It is regarded as the zero point of World history and recognized as the oldest and largest worship site in the world whose history dates back to at least 11,000 years ago (Türker, 2016). With its inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2018 and the declaration of Göbeklitepe Year in Turkey in 2019, its international recognition has increased (Ünal and Bayar, 2020). Its popularity lies in its history which enables it to be the most popular cultural and religious tourism attraction for visitors (Ünal, 2015).

During the excavations carried out in Göbeklitepe, many animal figures along with about 100 T-shaped stone pillars and sculptures were investigated (see Figure 2). These stone



**Figure 1.**  
Location map of  
Göbeklitepe

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation



**Figure 2.**  
Temples and pillars at  
Göbeklitepe as a  
United Nations  
Educational, Scientific  
and Cultural  
Organization  
(UNESCO) World  
Heritage Site

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

sculptures and reliefs on which different animal species were drawn are assumed to have lived at that time showing that life existed 12,000 years ago and that Göbeklitepe was covered with wetlands and forests (Bengisu, 2020).

#### *Data collection and analysis*

Within the context of the qualitative research method, the unit of analysis of the present research consisted of both domestic ( $n = 519$ ) and international ( $n = 186$ ) visitors' comments and reviews posted between 2017 and 2020 that were collected in 2020 December from TripAdvisor. The data for the analysis were retrieved from a TripAdvisor portal regarding

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the experiences of travelers to Göbeklitepe by entering the words “Reviews and Comments of Visitors to Göbeklitepe” into the Google toolbar. TripAdvisor is treated as one of the most effective data sources among other social media platforms since it provides several advantages to researchers and scholars (Taecharungroj and Mathayomchan, 2019). Besides, as it enables rich content, its use has also recently received greater and more popular attention from visitors in the field of tourism (Yoo *et al.*, 2016). TripAdvisor is considered valid and a reliable source of data in terms of tourism visitations representative of both social media users and the general population (Ma and Kirilenko, 2021). Due to such emerging reasons, TripAdvisor has started to gain momentum and is thereby preferred by many researchers in reaching and analyzing data in the field of tourism (see Fernandes and Fernandes, 2017; Molinillo *et al.*, 2016).

Overall, the data process of the present research is split into main phases since the TripAdvisor portal provides rich textual data. In the first phase, data were processed through automated content analysis by using MAXQDA data analysis program. As such, an abductive research approach was adopted for data analysis, which consisted of three stages. In the first phase, collected data were processed in MAXQDA and created categories from TripAdvisor comments. As a second phase, the comments were reevaluated and manually coded by two independent researchers to increase both the objectivity and reliability of the research (Çakar, 2022). In the last stage, emerged categories, which are frequently encountered in the comments, were inductively grouped into main themes by discussing the independent human coders until an agreement was reached. Intercoder reliability can be appraised in the coding stage of qualitative data analysis to evaluate the robustness of the coding process. As such, finally, the coding scheme was constituted after the reduction, classification and synthesis of raw data to create a more concrete conceptual framework (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020).

## Findings

Overall, data analysis revealed that the site is considered an important archaeological heritage due to its historical past of the temple and is thus equally appreciated by both domestic and international visitors. The experiences in Göbeklitepe were mainly described with positive key words which frequently appeared in their TripAdvisor posts (as seen in Table 1). Most importantly, the heritage experiences of tourists who visited Göbeklitepe site were found to be multifaceted (see Figure 3). While Göbeklitepe UNESCO Heritage Site displays mostly religious characteristics that stimulate the cognitive sense of visitors, it was also found to possess nonreligious features that trigger their emotional and relational experiences, especially for domestic visitors. The three aspects of visitor experiences at Göbeklitepe, including cognitive, emotional and relational experiences are discussed in the following section, together with the most common key terms found in the literature. Additionally, commonalities and differences among domestic and international visitors in terms of the heritage experience they gained from their visit to Göbeklitepe were revealed and are discussed in the following section.

### *Cognitive experience*

The terms including *history* ( $n = 487$ ), *temple* ( $n = 125$ ), *religion/religious* ( $n = 48$ ) and *worship* ( $n = 29$ ), were frequently mentioned in their posts. These denote their cognitive interaction with the site and thus represent their cognitive experience at Göbeklitepe (Shavinina and Kholodnaja, 1996). The heritage sites dating back to ancient years are sensed positively as well as being regarded as valuable and a “must-see” destination due to their unique historical and cultural heritage value of the destination (Çakar and Seyitoğlu, 2021).

Key terms	International		Domestic		Total	
History	74	17.9%	413	44.3%	487	36.2%
Temple	70	16.9%	55	5.9%	125	9.3%
Nice	8	1.9%	108	11.6%	116	8.6%
Amazing	39	9.4%	35	3.8%	74	5.5%
Guide	39	9.4%	33	3.5%	72	5.4%
Recommend	17	4.1%	43	4.6%	60	4.5%
A Must (see/visit)	11	2.7%	43	4.6%	54	4.0%
Religion/religious	17	4.1%	31	3.3%	48	3.6%
Incredible	19	4.6%	23	2.5%	42	3.1%
Emotional	2	0.5%	39	4.2%	41	3.0%
Civilization	17	4.1%	19	2.0%	36	2.7%
Culture	14	3.4%	22	2.4%	36	2.7%
Wonderful	18	4.4%	15	1.6%	33	2.5%
Pillars	24	5.8%	6	0.6%	30	2.2%
Worship	8	1.9%	21	2.3%	29	2.2%
Ancient	23	5.6%	3	0.3%	26	1.9%
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)	2	0.5%	19	2.0%	21	1.6%
Archaeological	11	2.7%	4	0.4%	15	1.1%
Total	413	100.0%	932	100.0%	1,345	100.0%

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

**Table 1.**  
Frequency of key terms  
from trip advisor  
comments

Its historical value, which is one of the most important values of heritage sites (Díaz-Andreu, 2017), was well recognized by visitors with “history” being the most frequent key term. Moreover, it should be noted that this term was overwhelmingly mentioned by domestic visitors (44.3% of the total word count) and not as much by international visitors (17.9%). This indicates a higher connection with their own history and heritage by domestic visitors.

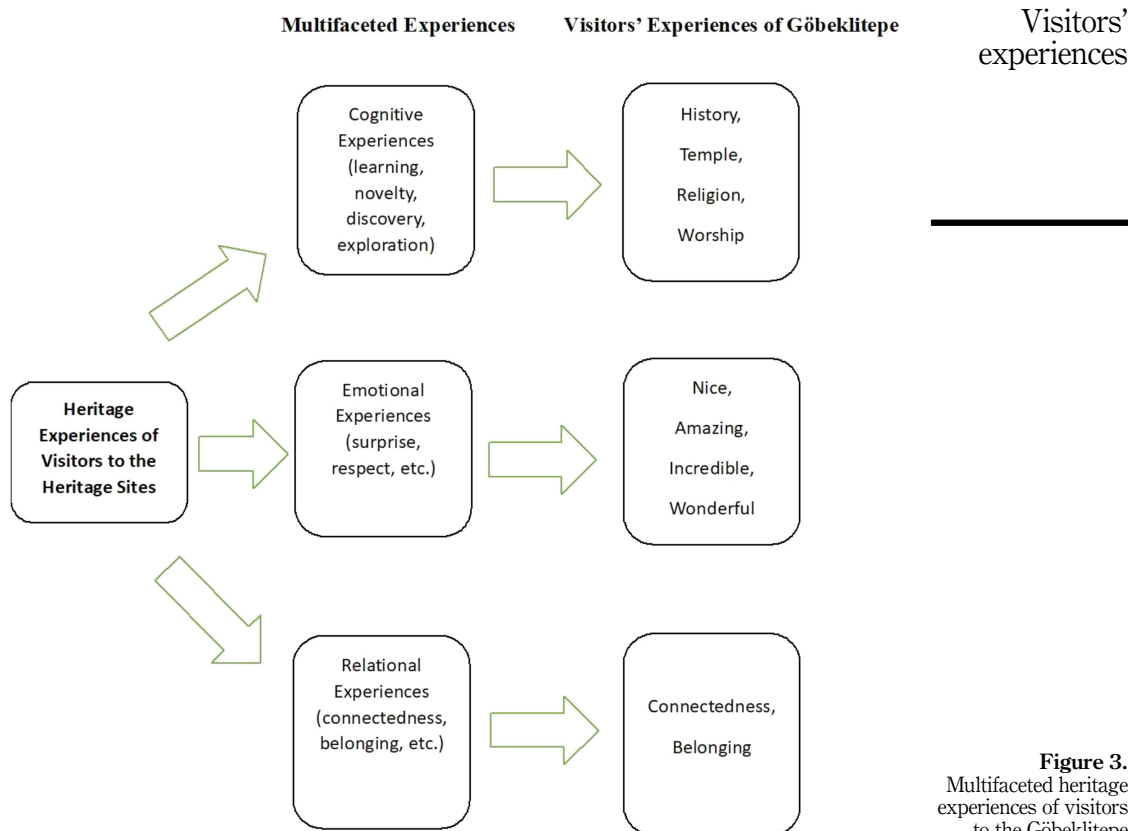
It should also be noted that Göbeklitepe is an archaeological site and thus its historical value was represented in phrases such as “*the oldest spiritual center of worship in the world,*” “*12,000 years old and the world’s first sanctuary*” and “*the earliest temple complex in the world – 12,000 years old*” were commonly acknowledged in visitors’ posts. Besides, its ancient architectural features such as “pillars” were found, indicating the recognition of its tangible archaeological value. Nonetheless, the term “archaeological” was not frequently found, except in some statements such as the one below. This is similar to the study of Corpas and Castillo (2019) in which the archaeological values of various Spanish WHSs were not as commonly discussed by visitors on TripAdvisor, thus more efforts for promoting archaeological values were recommended.

This place is such a masterpiece that change written history. It is oldest manmade structure in current history . . . [International Visitor, T 2]

The ground zero of beautiful history is one of the must-see places, with its magnificent, authentic, and history-smelling stones at the beginning of the world. [Domestic Visitor, T 4]

The authentic place where the foundations of the first communities were laid! There are very impressive limestone columns/formations and interesting figures on Vthem. Bald ibis, fox, etc. figures were very interesting . . . [International Visitor, T 24]

In this place where people from all over the world come to see it. The first traces of civilization are unbelievable. If civilization started as mentioned in 10000 BC as these ruins are also seen. You are questioning the current civilization. You definitely need to see this cultural heritage of ours. [Domestic Visitor, T 51]



**Figure 3.** Multifaceted heritage experiences of visitors to the Göbeklitepe

Source(s): Authors' own creation

It is the oldest and most mystic archeological place in Turkey. The gigantic carved pillars welcomes you among the fields in a hill 6 miles away from Sanliurfa city center. These holly stones are from a period where there were no metal objects or ceramics but just stones . . . [International Visitor, T 135]

It can also be put forward that Göbeklitepe site is labeled as a “must-see” area by visitors not only due to its significant historical and cultural heritage values but also for its religious attributes. It can be seen from the key terms above, such as *temple* ( $n = 125$ ), *religion/religious* ( $n = 48$ ) and *worship* ( $n = 29$ ), that Göbeklitepe as a heritage site has significant value for religious tourism, and it can also be considered for secular Göbeklitepe pilgrimage (Gursoy et al., 2022). As one of the oldest and largest worship sites in the world, Göbeklitepe is treated as a center of worship and is considered an important religious center, albeit symbolically (Türker, 2016). Furthermore, the term “temple” was somewhat more highly recognized by international visitors, suggesting a higher appreciation for religious value among international visitors.

This cognitive experience includes cognitive evaluation and knowledge acquisition of Göbeklitepe’s historical, cultural and religious values. Historical information regarding Göbeklitepe such as other detailed descriptions, as shown below, are learned and shared by visitors. It is important to note that learning is often an important motive to visit cultural and heritage sites, such as Göbeklitepe.

12.000 years old and the world's first sanctuary, so interesting to see such a place, made by hunters/gatherers, even before the domestication of animals and making pottery. Amazing how they could construct such a place in those days, with very nice carvings of animal images on the sides of the pillars. Only discovered some twenty years ago, but changing our view on history. [International Visitor, T 63]

It is the first Temple of the World. It is believed to be a centre of faith and pilgrimage during the Neolithic Age. The earliest three-dimensional depictions carved into stone are found here. According to scientists, the archaeological discovery of Göbeklitepe changed human history. It proves the existence of religious beliefs prior to the establishment of the first cities. [International Visitor, T 31]

Göbekli Tepe began to be built around 10.000 BC, what makes it the 1st temple in human history where pilgrims performed wild animals and birds' sacrifices. It consists of 7 concentric circles of 5–10 tons, 4–6 m tall T-shaped carved pillars. The carvings depict daily life animals and predators in bulk relieves. [International Visitor, T 60]

### *Emotional experience*

The posts about Göbeklitepe site often include emotional exclamation words such as “nice” ( $n = 116$ ), “amazing” ( $n = 74$ ), “incredible” ( $n = 42$ ) and “wonderful” ( $n = 33$ ). This indicates that the site provided an emotional experience since the Göbeklitepe teaches about history and religion while enriching the understanding of visitors toward the idea that the site belongs to their heritage (Poria *et al.*, 2009). Thus, content representing emotional experience, as shown below, was most frequently stated by both international and domestic visitors.

Amazing temples to discover! [International Visitor, T 147]

It took its place in my memories as one of the most incredible structures I have ever seen in my life. [Domestic Visitor, T 166]

If you are a fan of archeology or you just like the ruins, then you should definitely not miss visiting this place, Göbekli Tepe. It has a special emotional charge . . . [International Visitor, T 3].

It is an amazing place that should be seen by everyone, not just those who love history and culture. [Domestic Visitor, T 394]

We've been to Gobekli Tepe in April of 2009. We were on our way from Mardin to Sanliurfa, travelling in Turkey by car/ Guy at the petrol station we stayed to get some fuel told us about this fantastic place and he was the person, who made us go there. We were very sceptic on our way there, just trying to imagine what can be so special at this open place/ But when we reached the archaeological site area at the sunset with all those neolithic carved stones with animals and the strange kind of amphitheater, where those stones were placed, we've got really shocked/ It's incredible place, and No 1 Must See place in the world. Here you get in touch with history and it's so emotional. [International Visitor, T 152]

I heard that it is the oldest known settlement and I went, it is really a wonderful place [Domestic Visitor, T 479]

This emotional experience could be considered a result of the cognitive experience discussed above, according to cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991). This theory suggests that an individual's emotion regarding a situation emerges from the appraisal of such a situation in relation to their motives, goals and needs (Lazarus, 1991). As mentioned earlier, motivations to visit cultural heritage sites often include learning new knowledge (Timothy, 2011). Göbeklitepe is historically significant and culturally important to both domestic and international visitors since it provides educational information regarding history and religion while strengthening their sense of belonging to the heritage. The new knowledge acquired from the visit fulfilled the visitors' learning needs and thus aroused positive emotion, which is

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somewhat an expression of admiration for the incredible historical and religious significance of the site. Interestingly, a recent study by [Burlingame and Pappmehl-Dufay \(2022\)](#) found that highlighting affective and emotional heritage experiences is not often included in the archaeological process. Thus, the overall heritage experience could be further improved if the emotional aspects were considered and included in the archaeological process.

### *Relational experience*

In addition to the two dimensions of cognition and emotion presented above, the data indicated a sense of connectedness to the past and a sense of belonging to humanity, which is the indication of relational experience. Within this theme, key words such as *civilization* ( $n = 36$ ), *ancient* ( $n = 26$ ) and *archaeological site* ( $n = 15$ ) were found. Visitors' interactions with the destination's history, culture, recreation and heritage are regarded as some of the most significant dimensions of tourism experiences ([Gursoy et al., 2022](#)). Due to the considerable historical value of the archaeological site of Göbeklitepe, a visit leads visitors to engage spiritually, intellectually or physically with the site ([Packer and Ballantyne, 2016](#)). This engagement is shown in statements such as:

This is a historic archaeological site that puts organized worship or diplomacy or . . . we just don't really know, all the way back to pre-agrarian times. That means that even hunter gatherer societies had a level of organization that we had not understood . . . and it goes back to 12,000 BC! [International Visitor, T 65]

Incredible places that an extremely advanced civilization made for ritual meetings, even though there are no traces of settlement around . . . [Domestic Visitor, T 196]

According to Darwin or Hariri of popular culture, the ancient species that is tried to be understood is actually older than it is thought. A social being that has always needed faith and its motivation . . . [Domestic Visitor, T 20]

It is wonderfully humbling to imagine that people roamed here over 12,000 years ago. The museum buildings and the audio-visual tours before going to the potbelly hill is very well laid out. [International Visitor, T 20]

I have been dreaming of visiting Gobeklitepe and finally arranged the trip. It is a very important discovery that will change history of the stone age [ . . . ] [International Visitor, T 51]

The most valuable historical building in Turkey or even in the world, do not start visiting the east without seeing this place. It is 7,000 years older than the world's oldest and first temple "Stonehenge". Try to be there at sunrise or sunset. [Domestic Visitor, T 515]

As visitors see Göbeklitepe site as the starting point of human history and the oldest civilization, their personal attachment to the site was to be found very high thereby the site is considered as visitors sensed the site their own history and heritage from their point of view. As one of the oldest archaeological sites, which can be traced back to 12,000 years old for civilizations, visitors were mostly engaged with the site to which they attribute high personal attachment. For Turkish domestic visitors, this is the opportunity for them to get in touch with their roots and develop a deeper understanding of the culture to which they belong. For international tourists, this experience not only facilitates their understanding of other cultures but also provides a connection to the history of humanity. Consequently, visitors can strongly feel a sense of belonging for the considerable statues of the heritage sites to the contemporary civilizations and a sense of connectedness due to ancient peculiarity and thereby desire to socially interact with the sites. Heritage could indeed create a feeling of belonging with specific places, groups and causes ([Anico, 2009](#); [Timothy, 2011](#)). This sense of belonging, however, has not been linked to relational experience in the context of heritage experience.

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In addition to the connection to the history of the site as well as humanity, an engagement with peers was found in the collected comments. Key terms such as “recommend” ( $n = 60$ ), “a must see/visit” ( $n = 54$ ), indicating their recommendations, suggest the willingness to help other visitors in the online community by providing them with cognitive and affective information about the site. Indeed, at its core, an important motive for visitors to contribute to this user-generated content is social connectedness (Sun *et al.*, 2017) or social concern (i.e. concerns for others) (Bronner and De Hoog, 2011). It is, however, noted that this aspect of relational experience has only been mentioned in the overall travel experience but not in the context of heritage experience. While this relational experience occurs after the heritage visit, it is an important indication of the social interactions, the duty of sharing as well as a sense of belonging and online companionship within the visitor community.

## Discussions and conclusions

### *Conclusions*

The current research sought to investigate visitors' experiences at Göbeklitepe – a UNESCO WHS, using comments on TripAdvisor. A summary of the findings is provided in Figure 3. The study findings contribute to the existing knowledge in this regard on the following points:

First, this study confirmed the multifaceted heritage experience at Göbeklitepe, which can be attributed to its historical, cultural, religious and archaeological importance for both domestic and international visitors. The main three aspects of Göbeklitepe experience include cognitive, emotional and relational. The cognitive-emotion mix is frequently discussed in visitor experience studies, and this is highly associated with memorable experiences (Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown, 2018). It is also believed that both cognitive and emotional aspects are essential for the enjoyment and delight of consumers (Rivera *et al.*, 2019). These are also the main dimensions of visitor experiences which are acknowledged in various studies, such as McIntosh (1999), Tussyadiah and Zach (2012) and Godovykh and Tasci (2020). Particularly, the cognitive experience reflects the fulfillment of the learning motive when visiting cultural and heritage sites. This heritage site, with its significant archaeological, historical and religious values, strengthens the understanding of visitors toward the educational value of heritage, which is consistent with the prior research in the existing literature (Poria *et al.*, 2009). The study results also indicated that Göbeklitepe as an archaeological site offers meaningful and valuable cultural resources in terms of the development of tourism products and experience (McKercher *et al.*, 2005). This cognitive experience, in turn, creates an emotional experience. Emotion is often considered an essential component or an outcome of an experience (Godovykh and Tasci, 2020). In the case of Göbeklitepe, it reflects the awe, admiration and respect for the history and religion of ancient times. This finding is also partially supported by the cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991), where positive emotion is aroused when the visitors' motivation for learning and discovering is fulfilled.

Additionally, the visit to Göbeklitepe induced a relational experience, which indicates the connectedness to heritage and human history, which can also be seen in past studies such as Weaver *et al.* (2017) and Prayag and Del Chiappa (2023), as well as the sense of belonging to the visitor community which is also indicated in studies such as Sun *et al.* (2017) and Bronner and De Hoog (2011). This connectedness highlights the value of heritage experience in creating a relationship between visitors and their past (i.e. heritage) as well as their present (i.e. visitor community). The relational experiences of heritage visits, however, were not often discussed in the literature. It should also be noted that the sense of connectedness with a shared past would further strengthen the sense of belonging between the visitors, especially domestic ones. Also, in heritage studies, the senses of connectedness and belonging are often linked to the concepts of authenticity and nostalgia (Timothy, 2011).

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Second, the study findings confirm that the site is appreciated by both domestic and international visitors. However, it is noted that the experiences of both groups were not the same, which is acknowledged in previous studies (such as [Gannon \*et al.\*, 2022](#), [Nguyen and Cheung, 2014](#); [Prayag and Del Chiappa, 2023](#)). In the case of Göbeklitepe, the findings indicated a stronger cognitive experience among domestic visitors, with a stronger impression of the site's historical value. In terms of relational experience, domestic visitors also have a stronger sense of connectedness to the site while international tourists showed a slightly stronger sense of belonging with their guide and recommendations to the visitor community. These findings reflect a higher level of knowledge as well as a stronger sense of belonging of domestic visitors to their heritage, which is understandable. Meanwhile, the temple's religious value was more captivated by international visitors, and thus, their emotional experience was more dominant.

In summary, this research suggested that the archaeological tourism aspect of this archaeological heritage site was not well recognized by visitors, with the term "archaeology"/"archaeological" not frequently mentioned, which is similar to the case of [Corpas and Castillo \(2019\)](#). However, while the term itself was not often used, the essence of archaeological experience was clearly depicted. Both tangible, i.e. the temple's pillars, and intangible aspects, i.e. historical and religious values, were well recognized. Thus, not only the material remains of the heritage ([Pacífico and Vogel, 2012](#)) but also the historical and cultural knowledge ([Ross \*et al.\*, 2017](#)) of this ancient site contributed to the archaeological experience at Göbeklitepe. Additionally, the educational function ([Ross \*et al.\*, 2017](#)) of this archaeological site was evidenced by various cognitive information regarding the history, ancient architecture and religion provided by visitors. The above discussion, on the one hand, affirms the importance of the archaeological value of this heritage site through its tangible and intangible elements. On the other hand, this suggests that more efforts are needed to promote the archaeological significance of Göbeklitepe. Moreover, the archaeological process could employ a storytelling approach to foster affective and emotional visitor experiences ([Burlingame and Papmehl-Dufay, 2022](#)).

### *Theoretical implications*

The findings regarding the experiences at Göbeklitepe enrich and strengthen the multifaceted nature of heritage experiences. Particularly, it provides evidence of cognitive, emotional and relational heritage experiences at Göbeklitepe. While cognitive and emotional experiences have been demonstrated in heritage studies, such as [McIntosh \(1999\)](#), [Godovykh and Tasci \(2020\)](#), evidence of relational heritage experiences in the literature is scarce. The demonstration of relational heritage experiences at Göbeklitepe, including the connectedness to heritage and the sense of belonging to the visitor community, enriches the literature of heritage experience in this regard. Additionally, the differences between domestic and international visitors regarding Göbeklitepe heritage experiences confirm the disparity between these two groups from the user-generated content aspect. Finally, the awareness and the role of archaeology tourism from a visitor perspective are questionable, and thus further examination of these aspects is recommended.

Additionally, the study findings revealed that although it was used as a religious temple throughout human history, it has more heritage features in today's modern age. For this reason, visitors regardless of their beliefs and cultures are personally attached and engaged to the site internalizing it as they regard it as the common heritage of human history deriving from its historical and cultural value. Therefore, Göbeklitepe can be described as a unique heritage of humanity in our modern age which can improve our understanding of previous Civilizations in terms of their potential for the motivations and experiences of touristic visitations to those sites. In other words, it can be claimed that visitors not only believe that

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Göbeklitepe as an archaeological site could be treated as an intangible value that provides historical knowledge and stories (Ross *et al.*, 2017) but also tangible value to the visitors for whom the site is regarded as a most distinguished heritage area.

#### *Practical implications*

From a practical implication viewpoint, destination managers and marketers should focus on the various features of the site that offer both domestic and international visitors cognitive, emotional and relational experiences to generate effective marketing strategies that might attract major visitors to the site. As such, this kind of multifaceted characteristic of the site could better help destination marketers to promote both at domestic and international levels due to its high potential of attractiveness. Stakeholders can also develop their strategies by aligning them with the characteristics of the site toward increasing engagement and level of satisfaction of visitors. Besides, the findings can be a guide for destination marketers in terms of the development of targeted marketing campaigns that highlight the historical and religious significance of the site to attract both domestic and international visitors.

#### *Limitations and future research*

It should be acknowledged that the current paper utilized visitors' comments on TripAdvisor platform which constitutes certain limitations, such as the lack of social demographic data and the biased sample, i.e. including only those who used TripAdvisor. It is suggested that future studies could undertake more in-depth research with main tourism stakeholders to have their insights into how to provide sustainability of the heritage site. Also, a survey can be carried out with visitors in order to determine the typologies of the visitors visiting the site along with determining their needs and demands regarding the area.

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