

UNVEILING THE TAPESTRY OF CULTURAL TOURISM: INVESTIGATING THE NEXUS OF TOURISTS & EXPERIENCES, SATISFACTION, AND ENGAGEMENT IN ISTANBUL

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ABSTRACT: This study introduces a novel approach to cultural tourism in Istanbul by quantifying satisfaction and engagement as measurable values. The complex dynamics of cultural tourism in Istanbul is examined, with a specific focus on the interplay between tourist experiences, satisfaction levels, and the extent of engagement with the city's cultural offerings. Employing a quantitative research design, the investigation surveys tourists in Istanbul and employs rigorous statistical analyses to derive meaningful findings. Drawing insights from a sample of 230 respondents, the research presents the findings based on different aspects of cultural tourism, including tourist experiences, satisfaction, and engagement. Departing from traditional qualitative assessments, our research employs regression analyses to systematically explore the relationships between tourist experiences and these quantifiable dimensions. This innovative model offers a structured perspective on the impact of tourist experiences, providing unique insights into the intricate dynamics that shape cultural tourism in Istanbul. This methodological novelty advances the empirical understanding of cultural tourism and establishes a robust foundation for future research endeavors. The character of Istanbul as a cultural tourist destination is intricately shaped by the nuanced interactions between tourists and the city's tourism infrastructure. These interactions, characterized by a symbiotic relationship, meet travelers' expectations, and frequently surpass them, laying the foundation for a heightened sense of happiness. Satisfaction, a pivotal component of cultural tourism, is intricately linked to the authenticity of experiences. Istanbul's open infrastructure and unwavering commitment to preserving cultural heritage contribute significantly to the happiness and satisfaction of its visitors. Moreover, the dynamic facet of cultural tourism, termed engagement, transforms visitors into active participants in the cultural narrative. Engaged visitors seek deeper connections, fostering an upward spiral of satisfaction and positive experiences. The implications of these findings presented in the results obtained carry substantial weight for stakeholders in Istanbul's cultural tourism landscape, offering valuable insights that can inform strategic decisions and contribute to the sustainable development of cultural tourism in the city.

Keywords: cultural tourism, tourist satisfaction, Istanbul.

KÜLTÜREL TURİZMİN DOKUSUNU ORTAYA ÇIKARMAK: İSTANBUL'DA TURİSTLER VE DENEYİMLER, MEMNUNİYET VE ETKİLEŞİM ARASINDAKİ BAĞLANTIYI İNCELEMELER

ÖZET: Bu çalışma, memnuniyet ve etkileşimi ölçülebilir değerler olarak nicelendirerek İstanbul'da kültürel turizme yenilikçi bir yaklaşım sunuyor. İstanbul'daki kültürel turizmin karmaşık dinamikleri inceleniyor, özellikle turist deneyimleri, memnuniyet seviyeleri ve şehrin kültürel teklifleriyle olan etkileşim üzerine odaklanılıyor. Nicel bir araştırma tasarımı kullanarak, bu inceleme İstanbul'daki turistleri anketlerle sorguluyor ve anlamlı bulgular elde etmek için titiz istatistiksel analizler uyguluyor. 230 katılımcının örnekleminden elde edilen içgörülerle, araştırma turist deneyimleri, memnuniyet ve etkileşim dahil olmak üzere kültürel turizmin farklı yönleri temelinde bulguları sunuyor. Geleneksel nitel değerlendirmelerden ayrılarak, çalışmamız turist deneyimleri ile bu ölçülebilir boyutlar arasındaki ilişkileri sistematik olarak keşfetmek için regresyon analizleri kullanıyor. Bu yenilikçi model, turist deneyimlerinin etkisine yapılandırılmış bir bakış açısı sunarak, İstanbul'daki kültürel turizmi şekillendiren karmaşık dinamiklere

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benzersiz içgörüler sağlıyor. Bu metodolojik yenilik, kültürel turizmin ampirik anlayışını ilerletiyor ve gelecek araştırmalar için sağlam bir temel oluşturuyor. İstanbul'un kültürel turist destinasyonu olarak karakteri, turistler ile şehrin turizm altyapısı arasındaki nüanslı etkileşimler tarafından karmaşık bir şekilde şekillendiriliyor. Karşılıklı bir ilişki ile karakterize edilen bu etkileşimler, seyahatseverlerin beklentilerini karşılayıp çoğu zaman aşılıyor, böylece mutluluk duygusunun artmasını sağlıyor. Kültürel turizmin temel bir bileşeni olan memnuniyet, deneyimlerin otantikliğiyle yakından bağlantılı. İstanbul'un açık altyapısı ve kültürel mirası koruma konusundaki kararlı taahhüdü, ziyaretçilerinin mutluluğuna ve memnuniyetine önemli ölçüde katkıda bulunuyor. Dahası, kültürel turizmin dinamik bir yönü olan etkileşim, ziyaretçileri kültürel anlatının aktif katılımcılarına dönüştürüyor. Etkileşimli ziyaretçiler daha derin bağlantılar aramakta, memnuniyet ve olumlu deneyimlerin yukarı yönlü bir spiralini teşvik etmektedirler. Elde edilen sonuçlarda sunulan bu bulguların etkileri, İstanbul'un kültürel turizm manzarasındaki paydaşlar için önemli bir ağırlığa sahip olup, stratejik kararları bilgilendirecek ve şehirde kültürel turizmin sürdürülebilir gelişimine katkıda bulunacak değerli içgörüler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kültür turizmi, turist memnuniyeti, İstanbul.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism stands as a pivotal force in fostering connections among nations and peoples, fueled by the profound historical narrative and strategic geographic positioning inherent in destination choices. Istanbul holds an important geographic location globally as it stands on the boundaries of Europe and Asia and possesses diverse cultures, histories, and traditions (Altunel & Erkurt, 2015). Enriched by a millennia-old history and a captivating synthesis of Eastern and Western influences, the subject city has consistently magnetized a large number of global tourists. However, a complex network of connections, events, and emotions, warranting an in-depth investigation, lies beneath the surface of this renowned tourist destination. Istanbul's appeal transcends its iconic monuments and historical artifacts, delving into the dynamic interactions between visitors and the local culture (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). This research aims to systematically extract profound insights and unravel the intricate dynamics of cultural tourism in Istanbul. Specifically, the study focuses on exploring various facets of cultural tourism, emphasizing the understanding of tourist experiences, evaluating satisfaction levels, and analyzing the extent of tourist engagement with the cultural offerings of Istanbul. The overarching goal is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing cultural tourism in the city and contribute valuable knowledge to inform strategies for enhancing the overall tourist experience within Istanbul's cultural context.

Throughout centuries, Istanbul, previously known as Byzantium and Constantinople, has served as a focal point where the East intersects with the West. It is also a critical place as Islam coexists with Christianity in Istanbul. This dynamic convergence of ancient global traditions and contemporary cosmopolitanism has endowed Istanbul with an extraordinary cultural richness, consistently drawing millions of visitors each year (Özdemir & Yolal, 2017). Tourists visiting Istanbul seek not merely to witness cultural treasures but also to immerse themselves in the living traditions of the city. They aspire to savor the flavors of Turkish cuisine, engage in conversations with locals, and partake in traditional rituals, as noted by Rather et al. (2022). These experiences extend beyond the material realm, exploring the essence of cultural exchange and significantly impacting the satisfaction and overall experience of tourists. Tourism, fundamentally, is an experiential pursuit wherein tourists are active participants in the narrative of the places they visit. In Istanbul, tourists' experiences encompass a diverse range, from historical and architectural explorations to culinary adventures and interactions with locals (Rasoolimanesh, et al., 2022). The research model adopted for this study involves a comprehensive examination of cultural tourism in Istanbul, with a specific emphasis on the interplay between tourist experiences, satisfaction levels, and engagement. A quantitative research method is employed to gather data on tourists' perceptions, preferences, and behaviors. Key components within the research model include cultural attractions, accessibility, and cultural events, while factors influencing satisfaction and engagement, such as the quality of tourist services, cultural interpretation, and overall destination management, are integrated to provide a holistic understanding of cultural tourism dynamics in Istanbul.

Satisfaction, as a pivotal metric, encapsulates the culmination of a tourist's journey, encompassing positive emotions, perceptions, and evaluations of the tourism experience (Alrawadieh, et al., 2019). In

Istanbul, tourist satisfaction is intricately linked to encounters with cultural heritage, the hospitality of locals, the authenticity of experiences, and the fulfillment of expectations. Simultaneously, tourist engagement emerges as a dynamic force, propelling visitors beyond the realm of passive observers. Engaged tourists actively seek meaningful interactions, invest time and effort in their explorations, and forge connections with the cultural milieu (Su, et al., 2020). This engagement infuses vitality into the tourist experience, transforming it from a mere checklist of attractions into a deeply resonant and transformative journey. The relationship between tourist satisfaction and engagement is complex, marked by a web of influences and interdependencies. Engaged tourists, driven by their thirst for authentic experiences, often exhibit higher satisfaction levels, while satisfied tourists may be more inclined to actively engage with the encountered culture. Understanding this symbiotic relationship is vital in Istanbul's cultural tourism context, offering insights to enhance the overall tourist experience and foster sustainable tourism practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a vibrant and dynamic subset of the tourism industry, cultural tourism has garnered significant scholarly attention due to its potential to foster cross-cultural understanding and economic growth. Cultural tourism is fundamentally about the exploration and engagement with the cultural heritage of a destination. UNESCO defines cultural tourism as “movements of persons for essential cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts, cultural tours, travel to festivals, cultural events, and exhibitions” (Chen & Rahman, 2018). With its rich historical legacy spanning centuries, Istanbul embodies the essence of cultural tourism. The city's cultural attractions, ranging from architectural marvels like the Hagia Sophia to immersive experiences in the Grand Bazaar, draw tourists seeking to delve into the intricate tapestry of its history and traditions. According to Peng et al. (2023), tourist experiences are crucial to the attractiveness of cultural tourism. The “experience economy” notion proposed by Pine and Gilmore implies that customers desire unique and transforming encounters. Tourists seek experiences that go beyond the surface, hoping to get immersed in the culture of the place. These encounters include architectural wonders, gastronomic excursions, and interactions with local craftsmen and customs. The concept of “edutainment” is especially pertinent here, emphasizing the educational and enjoyable components of cultural tourist experiences (Bryce, et al., 2015). Furthermore, relationships between visitors and locals play an important role in creating their experiences. The friendliness and kindness of the locals contribute substantially to the overall enjoyment of the resort. Tourists desire to observe and interact with the local culture, generating important interactions and exchanges.

Satisfaction is a significant indicator in determining how tourists perceive their cultural tourism experiences. According to Oliver's Expectation-Confirmation Theory, the alignment of expectations and perceived performance influence satisfaction. Tourists arrive with particular expectations in cultural tourism based on preconceived concepts, marketing materials, and prior knowledge (Ponsignon & Derbaix, 2020). Their levels of satisfaction are determined by how well these expectations are satisfied or surpassed throughout their stay. It should be emphasized that the authenticity of experiences is critical. Tourists desire authentic cultural interactions because they want to avoid commercialized or manufactured events. Su et al. (2020) claim that visitors' views of authenticity are raised by the preservation of cultural heritage places and traditions, and absence of overt commercialization. Additionally, the friendliness of the locals has a big influence on contentment. Tourists who experience warm and genuine interactions with locals tend to report higher satisfaction levels. The notion of “host-guest interaction” emphasizes the importance of these interpersonal connections in cultural tourism experiences (Seyfi, et al., 2020). Besides this, the accessibility and convenience of cultural attractions and activities also influence satisfaction. Infrastructure, transportation, and amenities that facilitate tourists' exploration of cultural treasures contribute positively to their satisfaction.

Tourist engagement is a dynamic dimension that transcends passive observation and transforms tourists into active participants in the cultural milieu. Sheldon and Var's typology of tourist roles identifies “explorer” and “participator” roles, highlighting the diverse ways in which tourists engage with cultural tourism experiences (Mokoena, 2020). Engaged tourists actively seek out opportunities to delve deeper into the local culture. This involves attending traditional performances, participating in workshops, or conversing with local artisans. Engaged tourists exhibit a higher level of commitment to their experiences, investing time and effort to explore the diverse aspects of the destination. Fan and Luo (2022) assert that tourist engagement is closely intertwined with satisfaction. Engaged tourists, driven by their quest for

authentic and meaningful experiences, are likelier to report higher satisfaction levels. Their active involvement enhances their overall perception of the destination and fosters a sense of personal connection.

Empirical research on cultural tourism has provided light on the intricate links between visitors, their experiences, satisfaction, and participation. Kankhuni and Ngwira (2022) investigated the levels of satisfaction of people who visited cultural venues. Their findings emphasized the importance of the total tourist experience, and the impact of satisfaction in encouraging return visits and favorable word-of-mouth. Seyfi et al. (2020) investigated the elements influencing tourist satisfaction in the context of cultural tourism in another study. Authenticity, cultural attractiveness, and contact with the local community were recognized as major predictors of satisfaction. Their findings emphasized the necessity of preserving cultural heritage places and allowing authentic contact with local culture. Additionally, Gursoy et al. (2022) examined the significance of involvement in the context of cultural tourist experiences. The dynamic nature of visitor involvement and its favorable effects on overall satisfaction in Istanbul were highlighted by their research. As a result, Istanbul's cultural tourism provides an enthralling trip through history, tradition, and interpersonal relationships. Tourists seek authentic and immersive experiences that transcend passive observation, actively engaging with the cultural milieu. However, the literature review revealed a lack of empirical studies investigating the relationship between cultural tourism experiences, satisfaction, and engagement in Istanbul. Hence, this study aims to bridge this gap and provide key insights to enhance the experience of the tourists so that a positive effect can be incurred on their satisfaction and engagement.

3. METHODOLOGY

This quantitative research design was meticulously chosen as the foundation for collecting empirical data from tourists in the vibrant city of Istanbul. This methodological choice was rooted in its capacity to allow for the precise measurement of variables and the establishment of robust statistical relationships. To achieve a thorough grasp of the complex dynamics of cultural tourism in Istanbul, the study methodology used a cross-sectional strategy that included data gathering from tourists around the city. The major data collecting method used for this study was a structured survey questionnaire, which allowed for the gathering primary quantitative data (Saunders, et al., 2007). These surveys were carefully designed to collect as much information as possible from tourists visiting Istanbul's cultural landmarks and attractions. The survey was intelligently divided into four areas, each having its own purpose: demographics, visitor experiences, satisfaction levels, and engagement activities (see Appendix). Participants were given carefully crafted Likert-scale questions to answer that expressed their experiences, rated their degrees of pleasure, and measured their participation in cultural events to evaluate these characteristics (Crowther & Lancaster, 2012). A convenience sampling technique was employed to select respondents to ensure that the research findings reflected a diverse cross-section of tourists visiting Istanbul's cultural attractions. This method was chosen for its practicality and feasibility, effectively allowing the research team to gather data from tourists who were accessible during the study period. The determination of an appropriate sample size, crucial for the study's statistical power, was achieved through rigorous power analysis. A sample of 230 participants was deemed sufficient to provide robust statistical insights into the complex relationships being investigated (see Figure 1). The actual process of data collection was conducted meticulously and ethically. The surveys were personally administered to tourists on social media tourism groups and online forums of Istanbul for data collection. Care was taken to clearly explain the research purpose to the participants and secure their informed consent. The anonymity and confidentiality of respondents' data were highly valued to encourage candid and accurate responses. A pilot survey was carefully conducted at the beginning to assess the questionnaire efficacy and clarity, allowing for any necessary tweaks and updates to be implemented prior to the primary data-gathering phase.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to analyze the quantitative data collected for this study properly. The purpose of this research was to extract important insights and illustrate the complex dynamics of cultural tourism in Istanbul. Descriptive data were utilized as a starting point for the analysis. This includes summarizing the participants' demographic information and giving a clear picture of the visitors who participated in the research. These numbers were a valuable reference point in the creation of the respondents' profiles. This study used regression analysis to determine the relationship between cultural tourism, tourist experiences, satisfaction, and engagement. Regression analysis allowed to examine the strength and interplay between experiences, satisfaction and engagement. Correlation analysis was also applied to investigate the complicated relationships between the variables under

examination (Crowther & Lancaster, 2012). By examining the strength and direction of these linkages, we were able to find patterns and relationships between visitors' experiences and their levels of enjoyment and engagement. This method makes it feasible to measure the relationships between these crucial elements of cultural tourism. In addition to correlation analysis, regression analysis was a vital component of our quantitative approach. We were able to find drivers of tourist satisfaction and engagement using this statistical strategy. By analyzing the data, we were able to identify which individual factors had the greatest impact on the satisfaction and engagement levels of tourists in Istanbul. This gave critical insights into the factors that influence visitor experiences and, as a result, their levels of enjoyment and engagement (Newhart & Patten, 2023). At all stages of this inquiry, adherence to ethical principles was critical. The ethical difficulties were in obtaining informed permission from all study participants and ensuring they were fully aware of the research goals and effects. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly adhered to, resulting in an environment that encouraged respondents to express honest and candid feedback. The data analysis findings were carefully analyzed in the context of Istanbul's cultural tourist scene. Insightful conclusions on the complex interactions between travelers, their experiences, satisfaction levels, and involvement were made possible by the statistical findings. This holistic approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the cultural tourism dynamics at play in Istanbul. Figure 1 shows the research methodology flowchart:

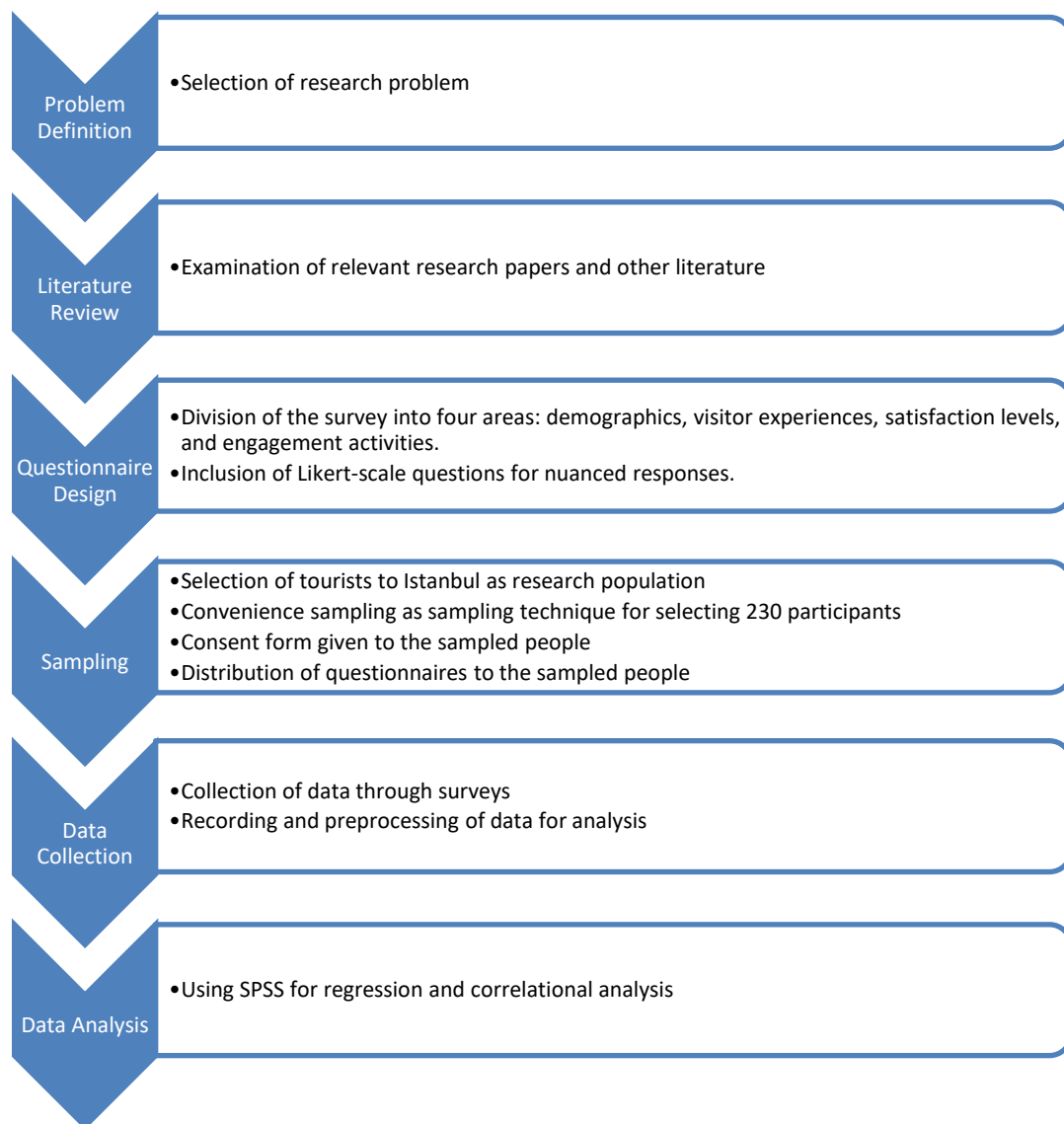


Figure 1. Research methodology.

4. RESULTS

The research was conducted among tourists in Istanbul, and people aged 24 and above were selected to ensure that highly reliable data was gathered and analyzed. The survey results on cultural tourism in Istanbul provide valuable insights into the relationships between tourists, their experiences, satisfaction, and engagement. The respondents were fairly evenly distributed across different age groups, with the majority falling into the 35-44 and 45-54 age brackets, each accounting for approximately 27% and 24% of the total sample, respectively (see Figure 2). This indicates a diverse range of age groups participating in the study, contributing to its representativeness.

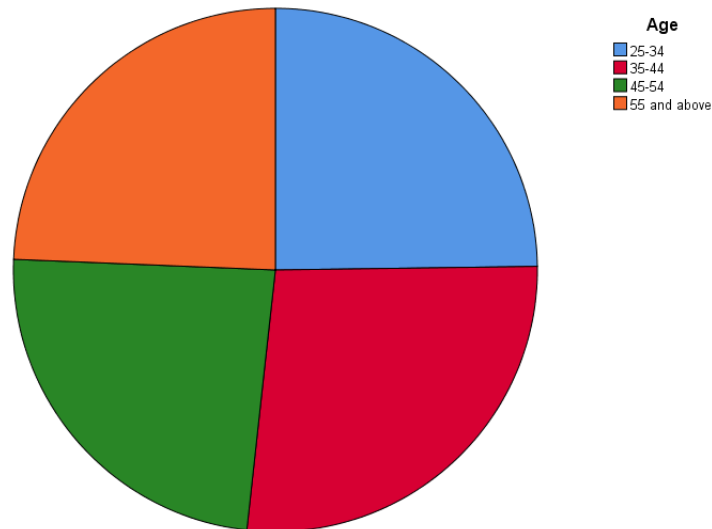


Figure 1. Age Distribution

The respondents' gender distribution showed a slight majority of females, comprising 53.5% of the sample, while males accounted for 46.5% (see Figure 3). This gender balance suggests that both male and female perspectives were adequately represented in the study.

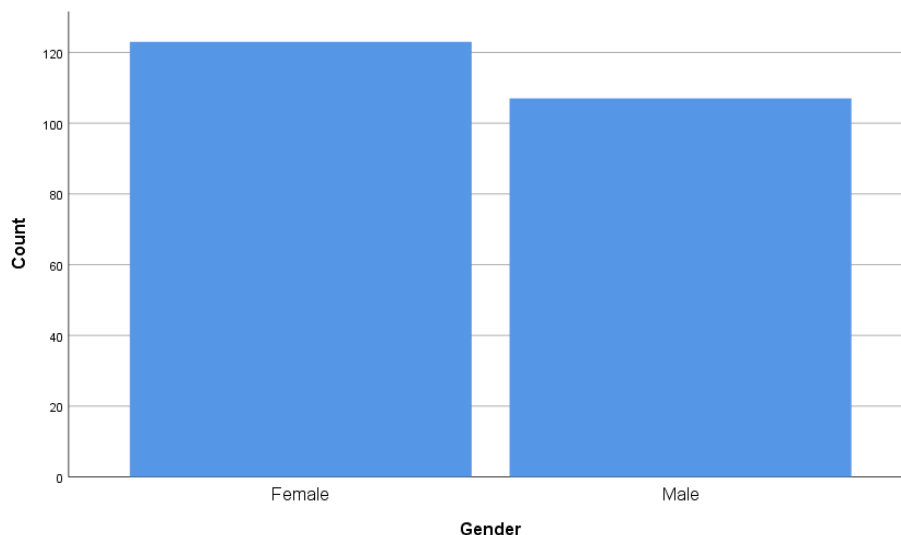


Figure 2. Gender Distribution

The study attracted participants from various nationalities, with a significant portion originating from countries such as Saudi Arabia, the USA, and Iran (see Figure 4). The diversity of nationalities reflects the international appeal of Istanbul as a cultural tourism destination.

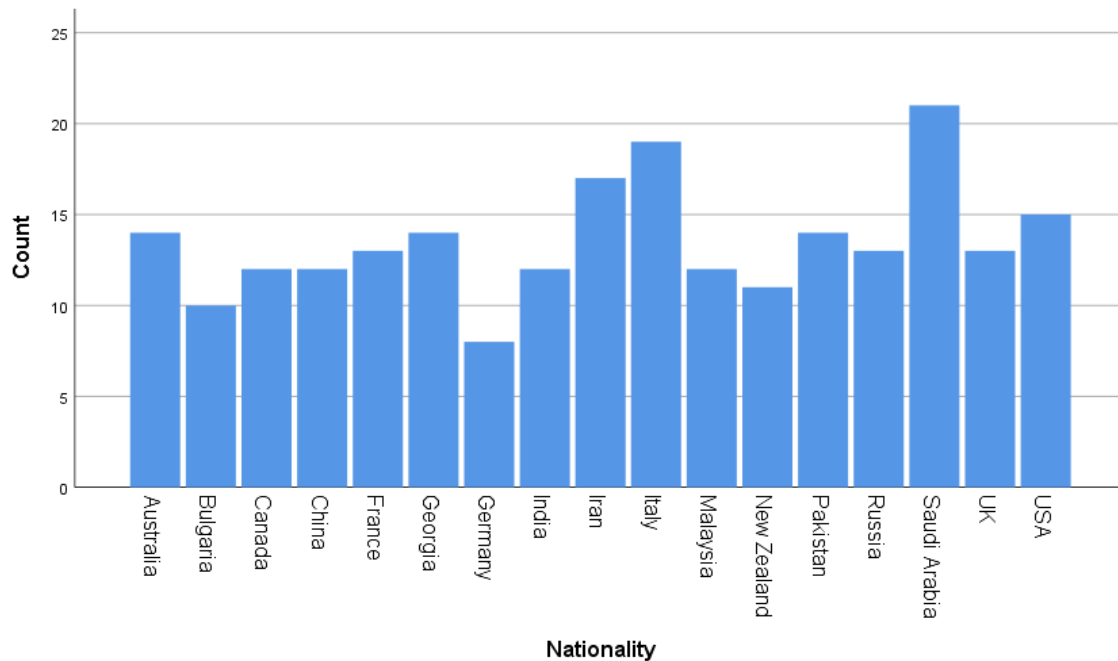


Figure 3 Nationality of Participants

In terms of visitation frequency, the respondents were divided into three groups. The largest group included those visiting Istanbul for the first time, making up 36.5% of the sample. The “2-3 times” and “More than 3 times” groups accounted for 26.5% and 37.0% of respondents, respectively(see Table 1). This distribution provides insights into tourists’ varying degrees of familiarity with Istanbul.

Table 1. Visitation Frequency

How many times have you visited Istanbul before?				
Valid	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
2-3 times	61	26.5	26.5	26.5
First time	84	36.5	36.5	63.0
More than 3 times	85	37.0	37.0	100.0
Total	230	100.0	100.0	

4.1. Regression Analysis

Regression is an important statistical method to examine the relationship between different variables. This technique has been used in this research to explore the relationship between tourist experiences and tourist satisfaction, and tourist experiences and tourist engagement. The summary for regression model 1 in Table 2 for tourist satisfaction indicates a moderate positive relationship between “Tourist Experiences” (independent variable) and “Tourist Satisfaction” (dependent variable) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Regression Model 1

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
1	0.562 ^a	0.316	0.313	0.56858

Note: a. Predictors: (Constant), Tourist Experiences

The R-squared value of 0.316 suggests that approximately 31.6% of the variance in tourist satisfaction can be explained by tourist experiences. Table 3 demonstrates the statistical significance of the regression model ($p < 0.001$). This value indicates that “Tourist Experiences” variable significantly influences “Tourist Satisfaction.” In the regression coefficients (see Table 4), the unstandardized coefficient for “Tourist Experiences” is 0.583 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a positive relationship. This suggests that as tourists’ experiences in Istanbul improve, their satisfaction levels also increase.

Table 3. Regression ANOVA

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	34.105	1	34.105	105.498	0.000 ^b
	Residual	73.708	228	0.323	105.498	0.000 ^b
	Total	107.813	229			

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Tourist Satisfaction
b. Predictors: (Constant), Tourist Experiences

Table 4. Regression Coefficients

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.614	0.225		7.168	0.000
	Tourist Experiences	0.583	0.057	0.562	10.271	0.000

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Tourist Satisfaction

The regression model 2 for tourist engagement reveals a stronger positive relationship between “Tourist Experiences” (independent variable) and “Tourist Engagement” (dependent variable) compared to tourist satisfaction (see Table 5). The R-squared value of 0.370 suggests that approximately 37.0% of the variance in tourist engagement can be explained by tourist experiences. The ANOVA table demonstrates the statistical significance of the regression model ($p < 0.001$) (see Table 6). This indicates that “Tourist Experiences” variable significantly influences “Tourist Engagement.” The regression coefficients show that the unstandardized coefficient for “Tourist Experiences” is 0.576 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a positive relationship (see Table 7). This suggests that as tourists’ experiences in Istanbul improve, their engagement levels also increase significantly more than their satisfaction levels.

Table 5. Regression Model 2

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
2	0.608 ^a	0.370	0.367	0.49782

Note: a. Predictors: (Constant), Tourist Experiences

Table 6. Regression ANOVA

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
2	Regression	33.191	1	33.191	133.926	0.000 ^b
	Residual	56.505	228	0.248		
	Total	89.696	229			

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Tourist Satisfaction
b. Predictors: (Constant), Tourist Experiences

Table 7. Regression Coefficients

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
2	(Constant)	1.696	0.197		8.604	0.000
	Tourist Experiences	0.576	0.050	0.608	11.573	0.000

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Tourist Satisfaction

The regression analyses conducted in this research present valuable insights into the relationships between tourist experiences, tourist satisfaction, and tourist engagement in the cultural context of Istanbul. The results of Regression Model 1, focusing on the relationship between tourist experiences and tourist satisfaction, reveal a moderate positive association. The R-squared value of 0.316 indicates that approximately 31.6% of the variance in tourist satisfaction can be explained by variations in tourist experiences. The statistical significance of the regression model, as demonstrated by the ANOVA table (p

< 0.001), affirms that tourist experiences significantly influence tourist satisfaction. The unstandardized coefficient for “Tourist Experiences” (0.583, $p < 0.001$) underscores a positive relationship, suggesting that as tourists’ experiences in Istanbul improve, their satisfaction levels also increase.

Moving to Regression Model 2, which explores the relationship between tourist experiences and tourist engagement, a stronger positive association is evident compared to tourist satisfaction. The R-squared value of 0.370 indicates that approximately 37.0% of the variance in tourist engagement can be explained by variations in tourist experiences. The ANOVA table highlights the statistical significance of the regression model ($p < 0.001$), emphasizing the significant influence of tourist experiences on tourist engagement. The unstandardized coefficient for “Tourist Experiences” (0.576, $p < 0.001$) indicates a positive relationship, suggesting that as tourists’ experiences in Istanbul improve, their engagement levels increase significantly more than their satisfaction levels. These results hold profound implications for Istanbul’s cultural tourism stakeholders. Recognizing the pivotal role of tourist experiences in shaping both satisfaction and engagement underscores the importance of investing in initiatives that enhance the overall quality and authenticity of tourists’ encounters with the city’s cultural offerings. Furthermore, the differential impact on satisfaction and engagement implies that strategies tailored to specific aspects of the tourist experience may yield varied outcomes. Therefore, a nuanced approach to cultural tourism management in Istanbul, considering both satisfaction and engagement, is recommended. Ultimately, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of cultural tourism, providing a basis for informed decision-making and the development of sustainable practices in Istanbul’s cultural tourism landscape.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

The correlation matrix reveals strong positive correlations between “Tourist Experiences” and both “Tourist Satisfaction” ($r = 0.562$, $p < 0.01$) and “Tourist Engagement” ($r = 0.608$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 8). These findings affirm the hypothesis that positive tourist experiences contribute significantly to both higher satisfaction and greater engagement. Additionally, there is a strong positive correlation between “Tourist Satisfaction” and “Tourist Engagement” ($r = 0.515$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that tourists who report higher satisfaction levels are also more likely to be engaged in their cultural tourism experiences.

Table 8. Correlation matrix

		Correlations		
		Tourist Experiences	Tourist Satisfaction	Tourist Engagement
Tourist Experiences	Pearson Correlation	1	0.562**	0.608**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000
Tourist Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	0.562**	1	0.515**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000
Tourist Engagement	Pearson Correlation	0.608**	0.515**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The significance of the results lies in the understanding that they offer regarding the intricate dynamics of cultural tourism in Istanbul. The identified positive relationships between tourist experiences and both tourist satisfaction and engagement emphasize the pivotal role of these experiences in shaping the overall tourist experience. The findings highlight that enhancing the quality and authenticity of tourists’ encounters in Istanbul contributes to heightened satisfaction and significantly increases their level of engagement. This critical insight is crucial for cultural tourism stakeholders in Istanbul, providing a roadmap for strategic interventions to enrich the visitor experience. The differential impact on satisfaction and engagement suggests that tailored initiatives can yield varied outcomes, necessitating a comprehensive approach to cultural tourism management. Moreover, the results emphasize the need for ongoing efforts to safeguard and enhance the city’s cultural heritage and infrastructure, as these elements contribute significantly to both satisfaction and engagement. Succinctly, this research contributes valuable knowledge to inform decision-making processes, fostering sustainable practices and elevating Istanbul’s cultural tourism landscape to new heights.

5. DISCUSSION

These research results provide profound insights into the intricate nexus between tourists, their experiences, satisfaction, and engagement in the cultural tapestry of Istanbul. The study began by peering into the demographic profiles of the respondents. Age-wise, Istanbul's allure spans generations. The even distribution across age groups echoes the sentiments of previous research, emphasizing Istanbul's universal appeal to diverse demographics (Egresi & Kara, 2014). The gender balance in the sample reflects the inclusive nature of Istanbul's cultural tourism, debunking any myths of gender bias in travel preferences. This resonates with the understanding that cultural tourism is a magnet for both men and women (Venter, 2017). Nationality-wise, the study showcased Istanbul's cosmopolitan nature, drawing tourists from across the globe. This harmonizes with Istanbul's reputation as a melting pot of cultures and histories (Roberts, 2015). Visitation frequency, the third demographic dimension, is an interesting facet. Most first-time visitors suggest Istanbul's timeless appeal, continuously captivating fresh eyes. Meanwhile, those who have visited this city more than three times underline its ability to enchant and beckon return visits.

5.1. Tourist Experiences

The exploration of tourist experiences lies at the heart of this study. Istanbul's attractiveness resides in its ability to offer authentic cultural experiences. The findings resonate with Pine and Gilmore's "experience economy" concept, where tourists seek transformative and educational encounters (Pine & Gilmore, 2013). The high positive correlation between tourist experiences and satisfaction echoes the essence of the Expectation-Confirmation Theory (Chen, et al., 2021). Tourists, arriving with certain expectations, find satisfaction when these expectations align with or surpass their actual experiences. This mirrors the findings of Egresi and Polat (2016), who identified authenticity and cultural attractions as key determinants of tourist satisfaction in Istanbul. The warmth and hospitality of Istanbul's residents play a vital role in enhancing tourist experiences. The findings underline the "host-guest interaction" theory, emphasizing interpersonal connections as pivotal in cultural tourism experiences (Zhang, et al., 2020). Positive interactions with locals fostered satisfaction and engagement among tourists, affirming the significance of genuine cultural exchanges.

5.2. Tourist Satisfaction and Engagement

Tourist satisfaction in cultural tourism is intricately tied to the alignment of expectations and perceived performance, with a particular emphasis on the authenticity of experiences as a significant influencer (Lu, et al., 2015). The study underscores the often-overlooked factors of access and convenience in cultural tourism, highlighting their substantial impact on tourist satisfaction through the lens of infrastructure and amenities (Dumitraşcu, et al., 2023). Istanbul's accessibility emerges as a key player in elevating levels of tourist satisfaction. Furthermore, the dynamic dimension of cultural tourism, encapsulated by engagement, goes beyond passive observation. The research demonstrates a robust positive relationship between tourist experiences and engagement, emphasizing the transformative nature of cultural tourism experiences (Wee, 2019). Engaged tourists actively seek deeper connections by participating in performances, workshops, and engaging with local artisans, thereby enriching their overall perception of the destination. The findings align with observations of Su et al. (2020), establishing a positive correlation between tourist satisfaction and engagement. Tourists reporting higher satisfaction levels are more likely to engage actively in their cultural tourism experiences, creating a symbiotic relationship where increased engagement fosters satisfaction, forming a virtuous cycle in the tourism experience.

5.3. Implications for Istanbul's Cultural Tourism

These findings have significant implications for cultural tourism stakeholders in Istanbul. Increasing the enjoyment and involvement of tourists by emphasizing authenticity, human relationships, and accessibility. The value of cultural history and customs cannot be overstated, as authenticity emerges as a significant driver of enjoyment. Furthermore, Istanbul's attractiveness appeals to a wide range of ethnicities and countries. This variety highlights the importance of focused marketing and customized experiences to adapt to the distinct interests of various visitor categories.

6. CONCLUSION

This research examined the nexus of tourists, their experiences, satisfaction, and engagement in the tapestry of Istanbul's cultural treasures. The findings of this study resonate with the "experience economy," where tourists seek transformative encounters. In Istanbul, these experiences are a mélange of authenticity, warmth, and genuine interactions with locals. Visitors arrive with expectations, and Istanbul delivers experiences that either meet or exceed these expectations, fueling their satisfaction. Being the cornerstone of cultural tourism, satisfaction is intricately woven with the authenticity of experiences. The study aligns with the Expectation-Confirmation Theory, emphasizing the pivotal role of meeting or surpassing expectations in crafting satisfied tourists. The genuine warmth and hospitality of Istanbul's residents, its accessible infrastructure, and its unyielding commitment to preserving cultural heritage all elevate satisfaction levels. Engagement, as the dynamic dimension of cultural tourism, transforms tourists into active participants. Engaged tourists actively seek deeper connections with local artisans. Their active participation fosters satisfaction, creating a harmonious cycle. The implications of the findings are profound for Istanbul's cultural tourism stakeholders. Crafting memorable and transformative cultural tourism that prioritizes tourists' experiences, authenticity, interpersonal interactions, and accessibility can lead to higher levels of satisfaction and engagement.

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Appendix – Questionnaire

Demographics:

1. Age:
 - a. 18-24
 - b. 25-34
 - c. 35-44
 - d. 45-54
 - e. 55 and above
2. Gender:
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
3. Nationality: _____
4. How many times have you visited Istanbul before?
 - a. First time
 - b. 2-3 times
 - c. More than 3 times

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
Tourist Experiences					
I have visited cultural attractions and historical sites in Istanbul.					
The cultural experiences I had in Istanbul were authentic and genuine.					
I was engaged in activities that allowed me to interact with the local culture in Istanbul.					
My overall experience in Istanbul's cultural tourism was memorable.					
Tourist Satisfaction					
My visit to Istanbul met or exceeded my expectations.					
I was satisfied with the accessibility and convenience of cultural attractions in Istanbul.					
The warmth and hospitality of the local people in Istanbul contributed to my satisfaction.					
Tourist Engagement					
I actively sought out opportunities to engage with the local culture in Istanbul.					
I participated in cultural activities or events during my visit to Istanbul.					
My engagement with Istanbul's cultural heritage enhanced my overall satisfaction with the trip.					
I would recommend Istanbul as a cultural tourism destination to others.					

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