



TOURISM IMPACTS ON AUTHENTICITY: THE CASE OF OLD BAZAAR IN SKOPJE, NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

Tourism significantly influences the development of cultural heritage sites, yet it triggers substantial changes in their uniqueness and sense of place. This paper sheds light on the negative impact of tourism, specifically the loss of the authentic ambiance of the Old Bazaar in Skopje, North Macedonia, resulting from a rapid tourism flow and commercialization. To assess the perceptions of supply-side, interviews were conducted with owners, managers, and employees of local shops located in the core center of the bazaar. The findings underscore a diminishing authentic cultural identity of the Old Bazaar and a rapid transformation that jeopardizes its historical value. The research recommends reinforcing the maintenance, protection, and preservation of the Old Bazaar by implementing practices that facilitate sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: *Tourism development; Impacts; Authenticity; Old Bazaar Skopje; North Macedonia.*

INTRODUCTION

With five centuries being under Ottoman rule, North Macedonia has a rich history and a distinctive fusion of cultures and religions. The nation has the second-largest repository of cultural property with an extraordinary collection of over 150 cultural treasures dating back to the Ottoman era (Marinoski, 2012). Nevertheless, according to Petrevska et al. (2020), only half of these assets are now assessed from a tourist standpoint.

In the past, old bazaars have frequently developed into essential stops on cultural tourist itineraries (Graf & Popesku, 2016). These bazaars, which are recognized as heritage sites, provide visitors with experiences steeped in both tangible and intangible relics from the past. As a result, bazaars provide a foundation for connecting cultural heritage with certain forms of tourism (Fonseca & Ramos, 2012; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011).



One of North Macedonia's greatest and most important collections of Ottoman architecture and history is found at the Old Bazaar in Skopje (Cipan, 1966). It used to had over 2,000 shops, 120 Islamic structures, 20 tekkes, nine schools housed in mosques, about 1,000 baths and about 200 different types of inns (Celebi, 1971). Throughout Ottoman rule, the Old Bazaar acted as a major hub for the handicraft trade which promoted craftsmanship and trade (Zografski, 1980).

As a protected historic core essential to preserving the spirit and timeline of the city's growth, the Old Bazaar is now formally situated inside its original bounds (Namichev & Namicheva Todorovska, 2022). A statute designating the Old Bazaar as a cultural heritage of special interest was passed in 2008 in recognition of its enormous cultural, historical, social, architectural, educational, and scientific value (Namichev & Namicheva Todorovska, 2022). Currently, the Old Bazaar attracts tourists by providing a link to a specific history, heritage, or cultural experience (Petrevska et al., 2023a).

Yet tourism may have a permanent impact and cause changes that jeopardize the authenticity, distinctiveness, and cultural significance of heritage sites (Hassan & Ekiz, 2021). It is imperative to preserve, safeguard, and encourage the protection of these sites (Katahenggam, 2020) to avert any alterations that would jeopardize the cultural identity.

This paper discusses the negative effects of tourism, emphasizing how commercialization and increased number of tourists have caused the Old Bazaar in Skopje, North Macedonia, to lose its authenticity. In addition to contributing to the existing literature that emphasizes the cultural value of heritage sites in North Macedonia (Petrevska et al., 2020 and 2023a; Petrevska & Nestoroska, 2023b; Namichev & Namicheva Todorovska, 2022), this paper focuses on the importance of the authenticity of the Old Bazaar by assessing the perception of the supply-side (owners, managers, and employees of local shops).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have thoroughly looked into how tourism affects cultural sites, especially focusing on authenticity, its spatial dimensions, and the sense of place (Gursoy & Chi, 2018; Hall & Page, 2014; Ioannides & Debbage, 1998; Li & Cheng, 2021; Liu & Zhao, 2021; Martin & Woodside, 2022; Novelli, 2020; Perić & Miletić, 2017; Richards, 2007; Richards & Marques, 2019; Shoval & Isaac, 2012; Wang & Djurica, 2017; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004).

Authenticity is crucial for tourism development and serves as a key criterion for tourists seeking meaningful and immersive experiences. Richards (2007) underscores the significance of authenticity in cultural tourism, while Wang and Fesenmaier (2004)

present a model highlighting authenticity as a determining factor in tourists' evaluation of a destination's appeal. Liu and Zhao (2021) explore the complexities of preserving authenticity, addressing the influence of tourism on physical authenticity, reconstruction challenges, and the impact of commercialization.

Perić and Miletić (2017) focus on revitalizing cultural sites, stressing authenticity's role in providing genuine and meaningful experiences. Similarly, Wang and Djurica (2017) examine how site authenticity influences tourists' perceptions and satisfaction, while Li and Cheng (2021) explore how site preservation contributes to destination authenticity, emphasizing the need to balance authenticity with tourism development. Ioannides and Debbage (1998) offer a holistic understanding of authenticity's role emphasizing the importance of preserving authentic experiences and cultural heritage.

Richards and Marques (2019) provide a multidisciplinary perspective on authenticity, addressing tensions between commercialization and preservation. They also focus on the complex nature of authenticity from the cultural anthropology perspective. Martin and Woodside (2022) delve into conceptualizations of authenticity and its various dimensions, supporting the argument that authenticity critically influences tourists' perceptions and satisfaction.

Gursoy and Chi (2018) and Shoval and Isaac (2012) highlight authenticity's role in tourism development, focusing on how architecture contributes to an authentic sense of place along with the cultural identity that supports tourists' experience. Novelli (2020) extends authenticity to overall destination development and management by elaborating that authenticity creates the sense of the place provoking long-term sustainability.

The literature also highlights the spatial dimension of authenticity. Hall and Page (2014) stress the importance of place in tourism experiences, emphasizing how authenticity creates a special sense and connection to the local environment. Additionally, besides the authenticity of the site, its cultural uniqueness attracts tourists, contributing to the construction of cultural identity, meaning sharing specific values and beliefs that the site offers (Hall, 2002). Wang (2013) argues that tourism can reinforce cultural identity as a sociological dimension, acting as a cultural symbol. This is also discussed by Richards and Wilson (2006) who point to tourism as a catalyst for cultural revitalization of heritage sites.

In summary, scholarly discussions consistently highlight the significance of authenticity in shaping tourists' overall experience, enabling them to connect with the cultural heritage site of a destination.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To assess the perception of supply-side on the loss of the authentic ambience of the Old Bazaar, the research was carried out in three stages (Fig 1).

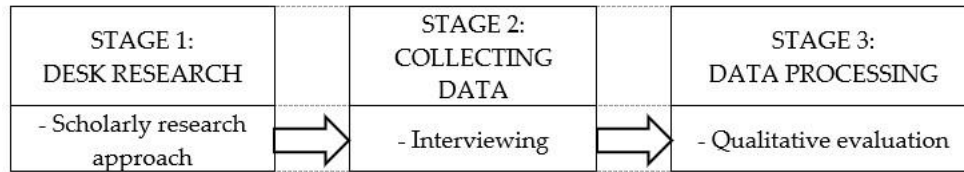


FIG 1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Source: Author

In the first stage, a scholarly research approach was applied, involving a literature review on authenticity as a crucial factor for attracting tourists to cultural sites.

The second stage comprised the collection of data through interviews with 15 owners, managers, and employees of traditional local shops situated in the central area of the Old Bazaar. These interviews were conducted informally in the local language, allowing respondents to freely express their thoughts on the proposed topic. Participants were encouraged to share their first-hand insights into the process of either preserving or losing the authenticity of the Old Bazaar due to tourism exposure. The interviews, lasting between 20-30 minutes, involved minimal intervention to guide the process.

The third stage involved data processing. Responses, comments, and discussions from the interviews were summarized in the form of notes, facilitating easy generalization of findings and conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents' perceptions on the preservation or loss of authenticity in the cultural landmark Old Bazaar in Skopje can be categorized into four groups:

1. *Transformation into a Tourist Attraction:* Respondents noted a substantial transformation of the Old Bazaar, shifting from an authentically traditional setting to a tourist point of interest. Economic impacts were highlighted as dominant and prioritized. The authenticity of the Old Bazaar was seen as directly benefiting local businesses, with respondents expressing satisfaction with tourism development, even if it meant losing the bazaar's unique cultural identity.
2. *Significant Changes and Pressures:* This category involves notable alterations, both physically and due to anthropogenic pressure resulting from tourism. Traditional aspects, uniqueness, and authenticity were perceived to be replaced by mass-

produced, commercialized souvenirs lacking additional value, inexpensive industrial products imported from China, modern cuisines without local traditional tastes, and the neglect of valuable architectural features in the Old Bazaar.

3. *Socio-cultural and Aesthetic Stress*: Respondents acknowledged significant stress in terms of socio-cultural and aesthetic pressure. Economic benefits of tourism were prioritized over concerns about socio-cultural and environmental damage. This raised questions about the current monitoring system's effectiveness in safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Old Bazaar.
4. *Discourse on Authenticity as a Conservation Criterion*: Respondents considered authenticity a fundamental concept and criterion for conservation. They emphasized the role of private tourism initiatives and government support as foundations for reinforcing conservation efforts. Proposed approaches included storytelling, narrating legends, myths, and stories to enhance the overall visitor experience.

In general, respondents, recognizing the benefits of the Old Bazaar for tourism development, unanimously agreed that it currently embraces culturally, socially, and environmentally unsustainable forms of mass tourism. They shared a consensus that without significant changes, the Old Bazaar is at risk of losing its authenticity in the very near future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research focused on the Old Bazaar in Skopje, North Macedonia, a landmark dating back to the Ottoman period. Over the past 2.5 decades, it has held the status of cultural heritage of special importance, enjoying permanent protection by the state. However, tourism development has induced changes that significantly threaten the authenticity and cultural identity of this heritage site.

By exploring the perceptions of the supply-side, encompassing owners, managers, and employees of local traditional shops, the study unveiled their first-hand insights into the authenticity of the Old Bazaar and its susceptibility to tourism impacts. The research discovered that the predominant positive economic benefits of tourism have shifted the authentically traditional setting of the Old Bazaar towards becoming solely a tourist attraction. Furthermore, the Old Bazaar was found to endure substantial physical, anthropogenic, socio-cultural, and aesthetic pressure resulting from tourism. This pressure has led to a noteworthy loss in uniqueness, traditionalism, and cultural identity,



with mass-produced, commercialized souvenirs replacing the once-embedded valuable architectural features.

The existing legislation and institutional framework designed to safeguard the core elements of the Old Bazaar, including its cultural identity, face numerous shortcomings. Respondents noted that strategic documents intended for preservation and protection have yielded only short-term impacts due to inadequate monitoring and management at the local level. Consequently, there is an urgent need to sustain the remnants of the Old Bazaar's authenticity by formulating strategic policies that balance tourism sustainability with effective monitoring, protection, and preservation.

This research highlights that tourism has redefined the true meaning of the Old Bazaar's authenticity, posing a significant threat to the delicate balance of its cultural identity. The findings provide valuable insights and serve as a foundation for future research, enabling a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in the process of preserving or losing the authenticity of a cultural landmark. Sustainable tourism valorization and development are crucial for cultural sites to successfully accommodate an ever-growing number of tourists. The practical implications of these findings extend to all stakeholders in the tourism industry, fostering a better understanding of the impacts on cultural heritage.

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