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## Utilizing social media to explore cultural tourism experiences at Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village

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### Abstract

This research aims to explore and understand the visitor experiences at Al Jazeera Al Hamra, a significant heritage village in the United Arab Emirates recognized for its cultural importance and potential global value as reflected by its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Tentative List. The study employs a qualitative research design utilizing manual content analysis. The data source comprises travelers' reviews of Al Jazeera Al Hamra collected from TripAdvisor between July 2014 and January 2025. These reviews were systematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns in visitor perceptions and experiences. The analysis of traveler reviews revealed four key dimensions that significantly shape the unique visitor experience at Al Jazeera Al Hamra: "Authentic," reflecting the genuine historical atmosphere of traditional Emirati culture, architecture, and lifestyle; "Affective," characterized by mildly to strongly positive emotional responses; "Cognitive," indicating enjoyment derived from exploration and learning; and "Novel," associated with the discovery of different and rare aspects of the heritage site. The "Authentic" dimension emerged as particularly dominant in shaping the overall experience, fostering a feeling of stepping back in time. The study concludes that the unique blend of authenticity, positive emotional engagement, cognitive enjoyment through exploration, and the novelty of discovery are central to the visitor experience at Al Jazeera Al Hamra. The genuine historical atmosphere is a key driver of positive perceptions. The findings suggest that tourism policymakers can leverage social media platforms, particularly TripAdvisor, as valuable sources of data on traveler experiences to identify key areas for promotion and management. To cultivate memorable experiences, a holistic and integrated approach is crucial. This necessitates the development of sustainable management strategies focused on preserving the village's authenticity while strategically developing it as a cultural tourism destination. By understanding and emphasizing the identified experiential dimensions, policymakers can enhance marketing efforts and guide the sustainable development of Al Jazeera Al Hamra.

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**Transparency:** The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's digital age, social media has become important in all aspects of life as participatory platforms and a global phenomenon that enables direct communication and sharing of daily life through posting and messaging [1-4]. They are internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content [5] where anyone can 'post', 'tag' or so forth [6], thus increasing the social capital and the sense of participation of consumers [7].

This is particularly important for tourism as an information-intensive industry that has become almost fully influenced by social media [6, 8, 9]. The use of online travel platforms (OTPs) enables the creating, commenting, and adding of rich and diverse traveler content. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has changed the way tourism is promoted, allowing travelers to communicate directly and easily interact with review content [10-13]. E-WOM communication provides one-third of the information travelers use to plan holidays as comments, reviews and ratings [14]. Such information significantly influences travel decisions, highlighting the importance of understanding traveler perceptions, and is considered as trustworthy material [15]. OTPs, along with e-WOM, are highly effective media deeply integrated into modern marketing communications [16] where social media can enrich traveler experiences and encourage them to interact further with others [17]. Accurate information facilitates community development by providing functional and emotional stimulus, gradually shifting to the prevailing utilization of social media [18].

Travelers use social media to share their experiences after visiting a site, an event, or a tourist attraction, allowing them to form a relationship [19]. Social media also assists in co-creating the traveler experience through its mediator role [20]. Experience in tourism refers to a past personal travel-related event strong enough to have entered long-term memory [21]. Such experiences often reveal a pleasant memory that brings enjoyment, companionship, novelty, relaxation, aesthetic appreciation, and intimacy [22] and may have cognitive, conative, and affective components [23]. Furthermore, a holistic approach of experience posits emotional, cognitive, sensorial, and conative components [24]. Visiting a tourist attraction may also be related to experiencing fun or entertainment, known as a 'generic experience' [25]. The psychological nature of leisure experience is also evaluated as affective dimension [26], cognitive dimension [23, 27], and novelty dimension [28-30], which are together mentioned as experience dimensions [31].

Capturing traveler experience is a difficult task due to the many general definitions lacking specific components. However, understanding these experiences is very important for policymakers to better prepare the site to provide a memorable experience for travelers, as well as to ensure the sustainable development of the destination. Understanding experiences is particularly important for marketing and management of destinations [3, 32, 33]. Therefore, using social media is a major challenge for planners to determine travelers' behavior and to foster the development and sustainability of tourist destinations [34, 35] as well as to identify market segments and prepare tailor-made strategies [36].

Social media are particularly important in increasing the visibility of heritage villages, which are increasingly recognized as attractive tourist destinations offering travelers unique cultural experiences [37, 38]. These sites play a vital role in cultural tourism, contributing positively to local economies and fostering the preservation of cultural traditions. The global significance of many heritage villages is underscored by their designation as UNESCO World Heritage (WH) sites [39-41], a label that attracts visitors seeking authentic encounters with history and culture.

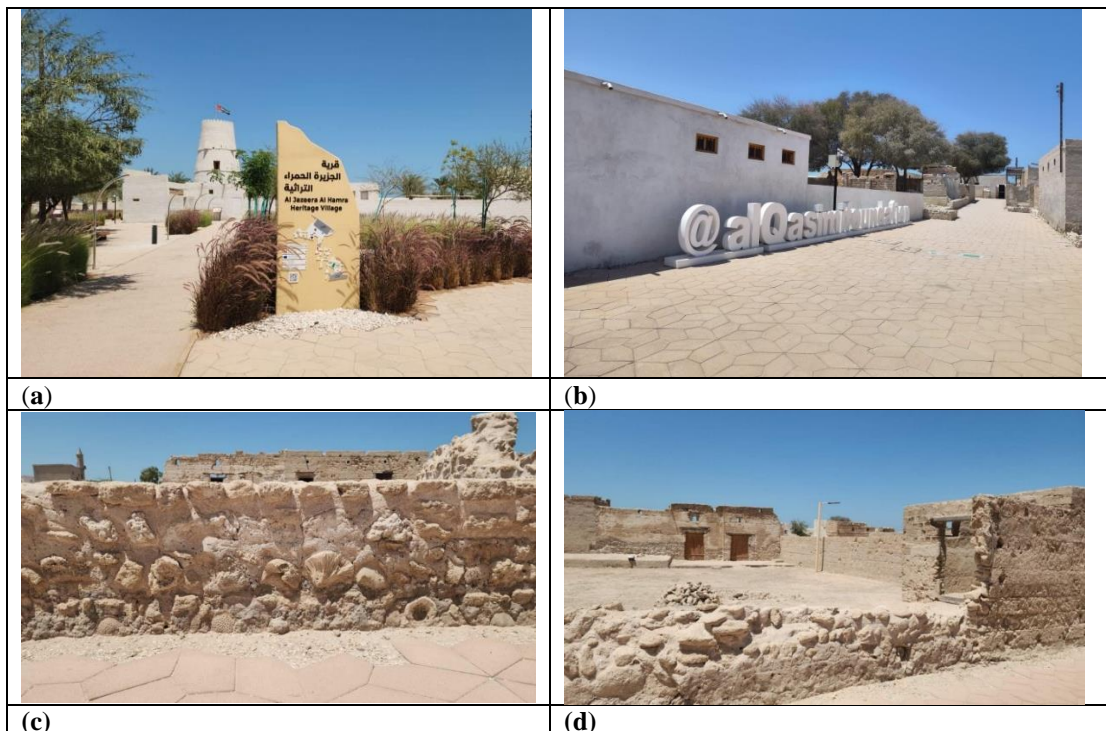
Although much research has been conducted on travel experiences posted on social media, there is a lack of consensus on the dimensions that create travel experiences, leaving a gap in understanding specific heritage sites. Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature and adds to the literature on traveler experiences in heritage villages on social media, which is rather limited. The objective of this study is to identify the dimensions of traveler experiences on social media when visiting Al Jazeera Al Hamra, one of the last remaining heritage villages in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This village possesses unique cultural heritage that needs to be preserved and protected as a site with rare tangible and intangible features. Despite its cultural significance and inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Tentative List [42], Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village has received limited scholarly attention. Generally, scholars discuss models and projects for representing this heritage, which is important for collective memory and national identity [43-48]. This research focuses on the origin of the main triggers that attract travelers. By analyzing online traveler reviews, this study provides valuable insights for travel and tourism policymakers to develop effective management strategies for preserving the village's authenticity, ensuring sustainable tourism, and enhancing the traveler experience.

Following this introduction, the paper continues with a description of the methodology, followed by the presentation of results, a discussion of the findings, and a concluding section.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Case Study

Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village is located in the south of the city of Ras Al Khaimah in the UAE. It is the only historical pearling village in the Gulf that showcases authentic architecture built with traditional materials (coral stones, fossilized beach rock, mangrove beams, palm trunks, palm matting, palm fiber ropes, and seashell layers for drainage), and provides a glimpse into traditional island settlement and Emirati life. Figure 1a-d visually depicts the original fabric of Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village.



**Figure 1.** Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village: (a) The entrance showcases traditional Emirati architecture, reflecting region’s cultural heritage and historical significance; (b) A pathway features prominent signage displaying the site’s social media handle, illustrating a modern approach to engaging visitors and promoting cultural heritage through digital platforms; (c) A close-up of coral stone construction showcases traditional building techniques that utilize natural materials and reflect historical architectural practices; (d) An overview of historical structures emphasizing the preserved remnants that illustrate the site’s rich cultural history and architectural significance.

**Source:** Schultz, et al. [49]

The village was abandoned after the formation of the country in the late 1960s and 1970s and is now known as the ‘Ghost village/town’. This transformation has highlighted the necessity of preserving its rare tangible and intangible cultural heritage [47]. Many old buildings featuring traditional architecture remained relatively intact, as wished by residents [45], so the site still provides a snapshot on traditional lifestyle in an Emirati coastal village. However, globalization and intercultural change have profoundly affected the site, causing it to slowly lose its identity [48], raising various questions about the possibilities for proper preservation and promotion [44].

A way out is detected in the suggested models for understanding the importance of the heritage the site possesses, along with implementing projects for the preservation and dissemination of that cultural heritage [46, 48]. Documenting architectural remnants, oral histories, and historical photographs of this traditional fishing and pearling village would enable a dynamic exchange of histories and artifacts for future generations [47].

Due to its cultural significance, as of 2020, Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village is included in the UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Tentative List [42]. Listed as “The pearl trading town”, UNESCO sets a nomination for criterion (iii), referring to the unique example of past traditional settled life along the coast of the Gulf and its architecture featuring unique building materials, and criterion (v), referring to pearl fishing and pearl trade as a thousand-year-old traditional industry.

**2.2. Methods**

To meet the research objective, the study employs a four-step methodology.

Step 1 involves data collection from the Internet as a landscape Standing et al. [50] more precisely from TripAdvisor, which is among the most visited OTPs, Bianchi [51], influencing 10% of global tourism spending Oxford Economics [52] and recording more than 859 million reviews in its dataset [53]. It offers an open set of data and with its transparency, encourages the posting of credible reviews [54]. The data sample contains 61 non-commercial online traveler statements from the “Reviews” section, posted between July 2014 and January 2025 (Table 1). The English version and translations into English are used for the analysis.

**Table 1.**  
Summarized sample data.

Item	Description	Number of Respondents
Timeframe	July 2014 – January 2025	61
Total words		4,315
Language of reviews	English	38
	Russian	13
	German	8
	Hebrew	1
	Arabic	1
Perception grade	Excellent (5)	26
	Very good (4)	21
	Average (3)	12
	Poor (2)	0
	Terrible (1)	2
Country of origin	Europe	25
	United Arab Emirates	14
	Russia	13
	Other	9
Type of traveler	Couples	19
	Friends	14
	Family	12
	Solo	4
	Other	12

Based on Table 1, it is noticeable a long-term timeframe of accumulated data on TripAdvisor. English is the dominant language, followed by Russian and German, while the presence of Hebrew and Arabic, although low in count, indicates a diverse user base. The median score of 4.1 suggests a generally positive reception. There is a significant user base from Europe and the UAE, with a notable Russian presence. Couples, friends, and families represent the main user groups, while the solo traveler count is very low.

Step 2 involves data pre-processing to improve data quality for better analysis, Chu et al. [55], comprising data filtering and profiling. Data filtering includes removing incomplete words or incorrect sentences, along with profiling posted texts. Initially, a total of 4,315 words is filtered down to 3,270, and the posts are divided into keywords, phrases, or other meaningful elements.

Step 3 employs manual content analysis Boo and Busser [56] to evaluate the overall sentiment of a paragraph, specifically if it contains an opinion about the site (i.e. document level analysis) [57] and to categorize the content into dimensions of traveler experience (Table 2). The collected data consists mainly of short reviews with an average length of approximately 70 words. The accumulated words are then used for extracting high-frequency words, visualized in word clouds using the Voyant tool (Figure 2a-d). In the visual presentation, larger and more emphasized words indicate that they are repeated more frequently in the reviews describing a particular traveler experience dimension.

Step 4 is reporting encompassing qualitative data evaluation [58].

### 3. Results

Table 2 presents the summarized results of key topics that define the traveler experience after visiting Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village, identifying four key elements that contribute to the unique visitor experience: authentic, affective, cognitive, and novel experiences. These dimensions are supported by high-frequency words (Figure 2a-d) that capture different facets of what travelers perceive after visiting the site.

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that in travelers' general experience, the authentic experience accounted for the largest proportion (a total of 1,134 words and 476 high-frequency words), followed by the affective experience (a total of 963 words and 368 high-frequency words). The cognitive experience is behind (a total of 760 words and 275 high-frequency words), and the novel experience is the least represented (a total of 413 words and 129 high-frequency words).

**Table 2.**  
Summary of key dimensions of traveler experiences to Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village.

Experience Dimension	Number of Words	Description of High-Frequency Words
Authentic	1,134	- Expressing connection to the past (heritage, ancient, tradition, etc.) - Expressing unique feeling (unique, mystique, sense of, etc.) - Expressing distinctive genuineness
Affective	963	- Strongly positive affect (amazing, highly recommend, great, etc.) - Moderately positive affect (enjoyed, refreshing, fascinating, etc.) - Mildly positive/neutral with positive connotation (interesting, feel like, etc.) - Ambivalent affect (mystery) - Negative affect (too bad, trouble, etc.)
Cognitive	760	- Experience related to knowing, understanding, remembering, learning, and making judgments (wandering, learn, exploring, remembering, thinking, getting good insight, etc.)
Novel	413	- Expressing discovery, encountering something new or different (different, rare, first, special, etc.)

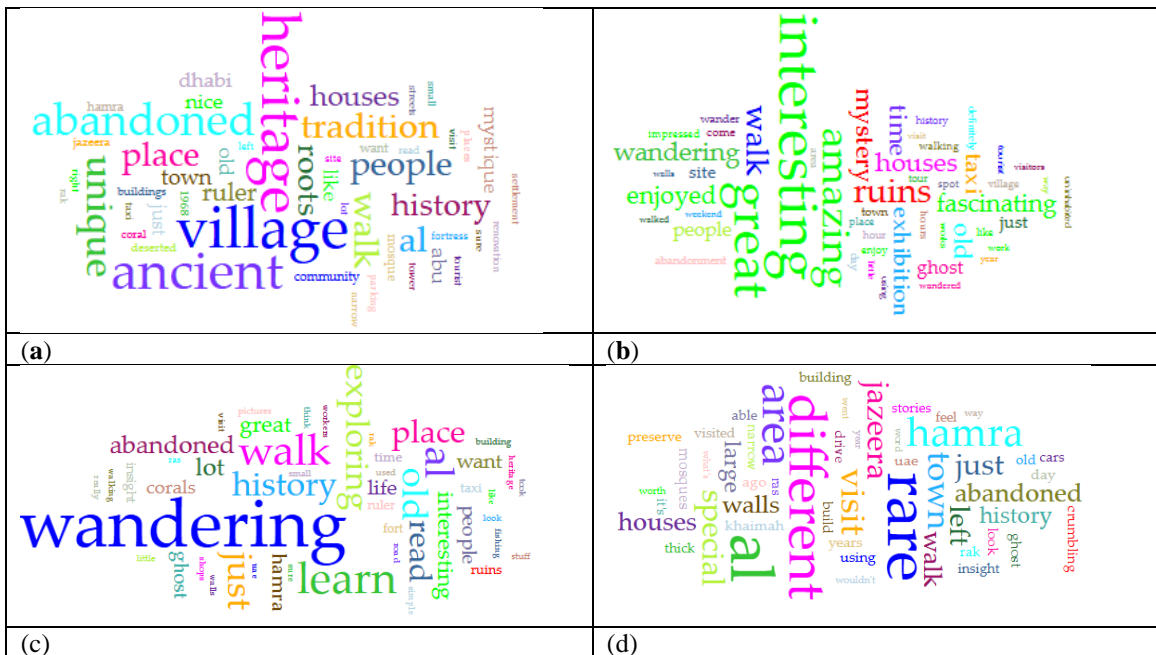
Figures 2a-d present the text analysis performed with the Voyant Tool. They visually describe the frequency and content of specific words related to each of the four identified dimensions of experience.

Figure 2a presents a word cloud of 476 high-frequency words referring to the "Authentic" theme, expressing connection to the past (heritage, ancient, tradition, etc.), a unique feeling (unique, mystique, sense of, etc.), and distinctive genuineness. This aligns with previous findings on authenticity, where perception is subjectively developed, referring to things' realness and uniqueness [59-61].

Figure 2b presents a visual description of the "Affective" dimension (368 high-frequency words). Travelers experienced a strongly positive affect (amazing, highly recommend, great, etc.), a moderately positive affect (enjoyed, refreshing, fascinating, etc.), a mildly positive/neutral affect with a positive connotation (interesting, feel like, etc.), an ambivalent affect (mystery), and a somewhat negative affect (too bad, trouble, etc.). Posts with a positive connotation lead to more sharing, expressing leisure experience and greater effects [26, 62].

The "Cognitive" aspect is presented on Figure 2c. This dimension is reflected through a small number of 275 high-frequency words (wandering, learn, exploring, remembering, thinking, etc.) expressing experience related to knowing, understanding, remembering, learning, and making judgments. This type of review supports mental connection [27] and the transfer of experience to others [63].

Figure 2d visualizes the "Novel" experience, where travelers express discovery and encounter something new or different. With only 129 total high-frequency words (different, rare, first, special, etc.), this dimension points to a lack of experience in capturing the distinctive aspects of visiting. The presence of words like new, unknown, and different captures the rarity of the visited site [28-30].



**Figure 2.**  
Word cloud: (a) Authentic experience (b) Affective experience (c) Cognitive experience, (d) Novel experience.

#### **4. Discussion**

The analysis identified four dimensions of traveler experience, which are closely related and interconnected, posing challenges for their clear distinctiveness.

The largest proportion of travelers' overall experience falls under the "Authentic" theme. The 476 high-frequency words (Figure 2a) indicate travelers' appreciation for the village's authenticity, expressing distinctive genuineness. Authenticity is crucial for cultural tourism development, as previously argued by Richards [64] and Wang and Fesenmaier [65]. The immersive experience of stepping back in time for a tangible connection with the traditional Emirati culture, architecture, and lifestyle is the most dominant dimension in the traveler experience. Such subjective-related perceived authenticity - referring to things' realness and uniqueness when travelers develop their own image of authenticity even without objective criteria in the online reviews - is confirmed in tourism studies [59-61]. These results align with UNESCO's preliminary listing, which underscores the site's authentic, exceptional value and potential for future designation as a WH site. The distinctive and unique architectural character of the village, along with the profound historical and cultural importance of pearl fishing and the pearl trade industry, results in creating an authentic experience.

On the other hand, projected images are important for representing a destination in the mindset of potential tourists [66] and the majority of the reviews create an image of an authentic destination. The focus is on words (Figure 2a) that suggest a genuine, personal encounter and reaction to the place, often implying a sense of discovery, feeling connected to the history or atmosphere, or having a unique or real encounter. Yet, the spatial-temporal dimension of the image must be taken into consideration, meaning that the image is perceived at a certain time and may change [66]. Furthermore, having in mind the increased reliability of social media, tourism policymakers should consider the data gathered directly from travelers and analyze their behavior, emotions, and attitudes [67].

Affection is the second important dimension of traveler experience, with 368 high-frequency words describing it (Figure 2b). The word cloud comprises 'amazing', 'interesting', 'great', 'fascinating', 'mystery', etc., indicating a primary concern of the travelers who wrote the reviews, thereby defining the affective element. This implies the presence of emotion, feelings, and a sense of connection. This type of post points to emotional responses elicited by the visit, including various feelings and a profound sense of cultural connection, and it is not just important what is said and where, but also how the experience is shared [49]. These reviews indicate effects ranging from strongly positive to mildly positive/neutral with a positive connotation. Such a positive connotation is highly appreciated, considering that the affective dimension is embedded in the psychological nature of leisure experiences [26]. Revealing this dimension is important because sharing positive experiences leads to experiencing greater positive affect compared to not sharing [62], along with boosting post-evaluation satisfaction and future loyalty [68].

The Cognitive dimension is the third largest in volume, explained with 275 high-frequency words (Figure 2c), where visitors' reviews reflect their engagement with the historical narratives and the learning opportunities presented by the site. This aspect examines the perception created during the process of learning about, using, maintaining, and the sensation of knowledge [69]. It involves mental processes such as exploring, understanding, remembering, and making judgments [23]. The reviews revealed that travelers are eager to enjoy, explore, and learn when visiting Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village, and to gain understanding and knowledge about specific aspects of the site. They are particularly focusing on the knowledge gained about pearl diving, traditional architecture, and the region's pre-oil history. This aspect is important because it assists in understanding the mental process connecting perception with traveler stimuli and behavior [23, 27].

However, the small share of reviews expressing cognitive experience within the total traveler wording suggests that travelers did not have sufficient opportunities to learn, see, and explore, despite the outstanding values of the site. This should be a starting point for improvements in future actions for tourism development of the site and tailor-made management strategies. Posting reviews with a cognitive dimension enables other travelers to obtain a similar experience related to learning, remembering, and seeing the historical context without visiting the site [63].

The "Novel" experience focuses on words that directly or indirectly suggest travelers are encountering something new or different from their usual experiences. While words like "interesting" or "amazing" could be part of a novel experience, they primarily express affect or cognition rather than the novelty itself, so in this context, they are contextually excluded. This dimension captures the unique and distinctive aspects of visiting Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village, highlighting the rarity of such preserved historical sites in the rapidly developing UAE. It accounts for the smallest portion of traveler experience, implying something new, unexpected, different from the usual, or previously unknown to the individual [28-30]. Despite the small number of high-frequency words describing this dimension, it is noticeable the traveler experience for village's ability to provide a unique encounter, setting it apart from other attractions. The novel experience shows travelers feel fascinated to capture the unique and distinctive aspects of visiting the site, highlighting its rarity (Figure 2d).

However, possessing a strong authentic dimension while simultaneously having a low novel experience among travelers is a sign that new management strategies could focus on this aspect. This is particularly important because novel experiences, positive or negative, are critical to experience memorability [30].

Generally, all dimensions allow for a further understanding of travelers' behavior when creating an experience. Traveler posts provide insight into key areas of practical importance. Their multidimensional facet shows that experience is not just an on-site activity but also involves dreaming and collecting memories that create a meaningful impact. Tourism policy makers should use social media for promotional activities [3] as they can benefit from data on traveler experiences that reveal a unique feeling with a connection to the past (authentic dimension), a mildly to strongly positive affect (affective dimension), an eagerness to enjoy, explore and learn when visiting (cognitive dimension), and the discovery of different and rare aspects (novel dimension). Understanding the motivations driving travelers whether it is a deep interest in historical authenticity, a

desire for novel experiences, or a combination of factors influencing their emotional and intellectual engagement is crucial yet complex.

To better prepare Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village to provide a truly memorable experience for travelers while simultaneously sustaining the destination's development, policymakers must adopt a holistic and integrated approach. This involves developing effective management strategies and implementing sustainable tourism practices to manage visitor flow, minimize environmental impact, and engage the local community in tourism activities. To preserve the village's authenticity, management strategies should prioritize the conservation of its historical structures and the intangible heritage associated with its pearling past. By strategically leveraging these insights, policymakers can create management plans that not only protect the unique character of Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village but also create memorable experiences that contribute to its long-term sustainability and appeal.

## 5. Conclusion

Because of the experiential characteristics of tourism products, creating travel experiences relies heavily on emotion and social interaction. The study explores the post-trip reviews posted on TripAdvisor for the Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village and identifies four key elements that shape traveler experiences: authentic, affective, cognitive, and novel.

The results reveal that authentic experience constitutes the largest proportion of travelers' overall experience, indicating a strong focus on the authenticity of the site and expressing distinctive genuineness. Affection is the second most important dimension, indicating affects ranging from strongly positive to mildly positive/neutral with a positive connotation, reflecting rich emotions after visiting the site. The cognitive dimension is the third largest in volume, revealing travelers' eagerness to enjoy, explore, and learn when visiting, and to gain knowledge about specific aspects of the site. The novel experience accounts for the smallest portion of travelers' overall experience, referring to encountering something new or different from their usual experiences.

The study posits that the use of social media can influence travelers' perceptions and interpretations of attractions, places, activities, or events. Having in mind that OTPs are powerful tools to shape the traveler experience and provide novelty, their importance for tourism imaging should be acknowledged. Al Jazeera Al Hamra is a heritage village with unique elements, and travel and tourism policymakers need to identify management strategies to maintain the village's authenticity and ensure its sustainable development as a cultural tourism destination. The research suggests a need for strategic planning of preservation efforts to enrich visitors' experiences while maintaining the village's authenticity, which is the primary driving factor for attracting visitors. It also highlights the key role of traveler experiences in significantly impacting the destination brand personality on social media.

The study has limitations and highlights future research directions. First, the results are based on one social media dataset with a relatively low total review count distributed across a long time frame. This raises questions about the data's density and the potential for robust trend analysis. The average review length is approximately 70 words, which suggests that the reviews might be relatively short, potentially limiting the depth of information available. Future research could combine two or more social media platforms to obtain more data. Second, the research focuses only on the overall experience of travelers by examining the key dimensions of experience. Future work may encompass cluster analysis to determine whether the reviews differ in terms of country of origin or type of traveler. Third, although the bulk of reviews fall within the "Very Good" and "Excellent" categories (medium score of 4.1), the presence of two "Terrible" ratings indicates that some very negative experiences need further investigation. Negative sentiments on social media may inform the management of reputational risks [70]. Fourth, the study applies word frequency analysis, which cannot automatically analyze complex words or word groups with different meanings, whether used together or separately. Therefore, a custom program is needed. Finally, the analysis is based only on traveler post texts and comments, and future research may include videos.

Regardless of its limitations, this study identifies the key dimensions of traveler experience at the Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village as the main triggers that attract visitors. It provides valuable insights for travel and tourism policymakers to develop effective management strategies for preserving the village's authenticity and developing it as a cultural tourism destination. Finally, it underscores the importance of using social media for collecting memories and creating a meaningful promotional impact.

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