

MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCE IN SLOW CITIES: A NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS IN THE CASE OF HALFETİ

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Abstract

The study aims to explore the components of foreign tourists' memorable tourism experience about Halfeti which is one of the slow tourism destinations of Türkiye. The study seeks to answer the questions of "In what expressions do tourists describe their Halfeti experiences?", "What are the factors that tourists focus on in their description of Halfeti experiences?" and "How does the title of slow city affect tourists' Halfeti experiences?". The study is qualitative and netnography design was used in the research. To access the experiences of foreign tourists visiting Halfeti, the Tripadvisor platform was chosen. The data used in this study include 42 online narratives and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The factors that shape Halfeti experiences of foreign tourists were determined as "admiration", "activities", "nature", "history", "local culture", "restaurants" and "location". This study provides practical and future recommendations concerning the importance of the awareness of the title of slow city. The results show that the slow city title of Halfeti is not a determinant on MTE. Although some components that guide tourists' MTEs are a result of the initiatives initiated by the title of slow city, there is no indication that they had an MTE due to the destination being a slow city. This shows that while the district continues its activities related to the slow city, it also needs to increase the awareness of this title.

Keywords: Memorable tourism experience, slow tourism, slow city, netnography, Halfeti

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid changes in the world, while the touristic demand has evolved from mass tourism to niche tourism products, the phenomenon of "slow tourism" has emerged as a significant actor in many aspects. Slow tourism destinations that focus on localness can provide tourists unique experiences with activities that prioritize preserving and sustaining cultural heritage and historical values, revitalizing local and traditional production, and protecting the environment and nature.

To consume tourism is to consume experiences. An understanding of how tourists experience the places and people they visit is therefore significant (Sharpley & Stone, 2011). Slowness is a value that leads to the restructuring of time and quality of experience, an integral element of the journey, and the choice of mode of transport that provides a richer

experience (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011: 269). Therefore, slowness is an essential value that also plays a role in memorable tourism experiences.

Encouraging tourists to make slower choices when planning and enjoying their holidays has several benefits for the destination's environment, local people and the tourists. During these holidays, which have elements such as relaxation and recreation, both tourists will have more meaningful experiences and the local economy will be revived (Caffyn, 2012). Slow tourism contributes to the development of sustainable tourism by associating the qualitative experiences of slow tourists in the journey and destination with the benefits they provide to local stakeholders (Conway & Timms, 2012).

The greatest role of slow tourism in memorable tourism experiences is its emphasis on localness. As the goal is to discover specific features of a place through its geography, its cultural heritage, or whatever makes it interesting to live in harmony with that place and its inhabitants (Matos, 2004), slow tourists explore more about the natural and built heritage, local cuisine, traditions and some of the special features of the destination (Caffyn, 2012). Slow tourism explicitly links the three E's of sustainable development –environment, economy and equity (Conway & Timms, 2010) and promotes local distinctiveness by understanding the cultures of others and developing common interests between hosts and tourists (Conway & Timms, 2012).

The Cittaslow movement, founded in July 2000, aims to improve the quality of life in the urban environment by promoting slowness (Matos, 2004). There are 287 slow cities in 33 countries and territorial areas all over the world as of June 2022. In Türkiye, there are 21 slow cities by 2022, and Halfeti, which is one of these slow cities and also the subject of the present study, joined the Cittaslow network in 2013 (Cittaslow.org).

The reason why Halfeti was chosen for the study is that Halfeti, with its rich background, story, and natural and cultural values, has a more touristic potential compared to other slow city destinations in Türkiye. Moreover, the fact that it has increased this potential from year to year with the projects initiated after the slow city title sets an outstanding sample in terms of researching memorable tourism experiences in slow cities. Halfeti has a rich background as a place that has hosted different civilizations for thousands of years and where different cultures live together. In addition to its rich natural assets and tangible and intangible cultural heritage elements, its changing fate by being submerged under dam waters has made Halfeti an attractive tourism region. The desire to see and photograph the old settlements underwater, the boat tours organised in Birecik Dam and the expansion of the scope of these tours, the

beginning of regular tours from the Gaziantep coast of the dam, the inclusion of Halfeti in the tour programs by the local and foreign tour operators, participation at international tourism fairs, the opportunity to do water sports such as underwater photography in the dam, canoeing, diving, nature sports such as bird watching, trekking, mountain biking and camping facilities, festivals organised in different areas, endemic plants such as karagöl (Yılmaz & Güneş, 2013), movies and TV series shot in the region and reaching large audiences (Çiftçi, 2016) are the reasons that have made Halfeti popular in the touristic sense. Various projects initiated by Halfeti after receiving the title of a slow city also increased the tourism potential of the district and the number of tourists.

Although the main purpose of slow cities is to increase the welfare of local residents and maintain local values and traditions, initiatives in this regard undoubtedly make the slow city stand out as a tourism destination, so that the slow city can offer tourists more authentic and memorable experiences. The main focus of the paper is the memorable tourism experience. As memorable tourism experience dimensions differentiate in touristic areas with different destination attributes, slow cities were chosen as the research area.

Many studies aimed to explore memorable tourism experience components in different fields of tourism such as heritage tourism (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021); cultural tourism (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Seyfi et al., 2020); dark tourism (Ülker Demirel, 2020), winter tourism (Akkuş, 2017), hotel experiences (Sthapit, 2018), local food (Sthapit et al., 2019; Tsai, 2016). The current study will fill the gap in the literature by investigating the components of memorable tourism experiences in the context of slow tourism.

The present study aims to explore the components of memorable tourism experiences of foreign visitors in the case of Halfeti, one of the slow cities in Türkiye. By revealing the determinants of the foreign tourists' Halfeti experience, how the title of slow city affects the memorable tourism experience is discussed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Memorable Tourism Experience

The tourist experience is a complex combination of particularly subjective factors that shape a tourist's feelings and attitudes regarding the visit. While a part of this combination consists of the needs, wants and motivations of the tourists, the other part consists of destination attributes such as the facilities offered by the destination, the attractions it has, and the image of the destination (Cornelisse, 2014).

Rather than the functionality of the product or service that consumers buy, the feeling created by that experience in their minds may also be important in purchasing decisions (Ülker Demirel, 2020). Tourists tend to make biased choices based on their past experiences (Kim, 2014). The perspectives on past experiences, touristic activities, touristic products and the general structure of the destination are effective in the memorable tourism experience (MTE) of tourists (Keskin et al., 2020). According to Zhang et al. (2018), although MTEs and tourist experiences seem to be related, they are two different concepts in terms of connotation and extension. Tourists selectively construct an MTE based on their own assessment of the experience (Kim et al., 2012).

A positive memorable tourism experience (MTE) is defined as “a tourism experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim et al., 2012: 13). Positive memorable experiences are crucial to gaining a competitive advantage for tourism providers (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017). If visitors encounter more favourable and delightful experiences during their visits, the perception in their minds about these destinations will be more positive (Chandralal et al., 2014).

Kim et al. (2012) developed a measurement scale and identified seven dimensions of MTEs. The authors conducted a cross-cultural study to verify these dimensions. These seven dimensions are “hedonism”, “refreshment”, “local culture”, “meaningfulness”, “knowledge”, “involvement”, and “novelty”. Table 1 describes the seven dimensions of the memorable tourism experience scale developed by Kim et al. (2012).

Table 1 The Seven Dimensions of MTEs

Hedonism	expressed as pleasure or enjoyment, means that tourists are very impressed by having a new experience, they really enjoy and are excited about this experience
Refreshment	characterizes the effects of the holiday experience such as revitalization and refreshment, it also includes the liberating effect of the experience.
Local Culture	includes the interaction of tourists with the local people in the destination and the good impressions they have about them and experiencing the local culture entirely.
Meaningfulness	emphasizes that tourists have a meaningful and important experience in the destination and reveals that this experience offers important opportunities for tourists to get to know themselves.
Knowledge	highlights that tourists achieve different cognitive gains such as acquiring new information and exploring new things or new cultures.
Involvement	describes the experience in a destination that has been wanted to go for a long time or to participate in an activity that has been desired for a long time.
Novelty	portrays the experience as a unique one and emphasizes that it is very different from previous experiences and even the experience of a lifetime

Source: Kim et al. (2012)

These dimensions were later analyzed in many studies (Akkuş, 2017; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Cornelisse, 2014; Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Kim, 2014; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2021; Tsai, 2016; Zhang et al., 2018). In one of these studies, Coudounaris & Sthapit (2017) investigated the antecedent factors of MTE and their relationship to visitors' behavioural intentions. They found that hedonism, local culture, involvement, and knowledge significantly impact tourists' behavioural intentions. Chen and Rahman (2018) examined the interplay of MTE, visitor engagement, cultural contact, revisit intentions, and intention to recommend in the cultural tourism context. They revealed that a higher level of cultural contact results in a higher MTE for the tourists. Cultural contact especially positively influences the dimensions of local culture, novelty, knowledge and meaningfulness. Akkuş (2017) conducted a comparative analysis of the memorable tourism experiences of Polish and Iranian tourists in the context of winter tourism. According to the results of the study, it was revealed that Polish tourists perceive their experience more positively than Iranian tourists in terms of hedonism and meaningfulness. Zhang et al. (2018) developed a causal relationship model among perceived image, MTEs and revisit intention. According to the result of the study, country image and destination image influence revisit intention via the mediating effect of MTEs. Similarly, Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) developed an integrated model of visitor engagement, authenticity, and destination image in driving revisit and electronic word-of-mouth intentions of heritage tourists through the mediating role of MTE. The study showed that MTE could be a mediator for the effects of visitor engagement, authenticity, and destination image on revisit and eWOM intentions in a heritage tourism context. In another study, Tsai (2016) investigated the relationships among MTE of local cuisine, place attachment and behavioural intention. The results indicate that experiencing local cuisines creates positive MTEs and these memories significantly influence the cognitive place attachment.

Qualitative studies aiming to reveal the memorable tourism experience dimensions were also carried out. In one of these studies, Chandralal et al. (2014) who asserted that the sample of MTEs developed by Kim et al. (2012) is more oriented toward the typical tourists, identified seven themes of MTEs in their study which aimed to reveal memorable tourism experience dimensions by analyzing travel blogs through netnography. These themes are "local people, life and culture", "personally significant experiences", "shared experiences", "perceived novelty", "perceived serendipity", "professional local guides and tour operator services" and "affective emotions". Seyfi et al. (2020) found six dimensions of memorable cultural tourism experiences: "Prior perceived significance", "authenticity", "engagement", "culinary attraction", "cultural exchange", and "the quality of service". While the dimension

of “prior perceived significance” is similar to the findings of Chandralal et al. (2014), the “cultural exchange” dimension is compatible with both Kim et al. (2012) and Chandralal et al. (2014). In another study, Ülker Demirel (2020) identified ten dimensions under emotional and cognitive dimensions: “moving feelings and emotionality”, “being affected and admired”, “feeling lost and heavy-hearted”, “feeling pride”, “knowledge”, “tour guide”, “involvement”, “meaningfulness”, “novelty”, “local culture”. As the study is in the context of dark tourism, different dimensions were revealed while at the same time similar dimensions to the results of previous studies also emerged. This confirms that the dimensions of the memorable tourism experience can differ according to distinctive fields of tourism.

Slow Tourism

The terms “slow travel” and “slow tourism” are now considered to refer to forms of vacation different from the mainstream (Guiver & McGrath, 2016). Slow travel is an emerging concept that can be explained as an alternative to air and car travel where people travel to destinations more slowly overland and travel less distance (Dickinson et al., 2010), and defines a form of vacationing different from mainstream contemporary tourism (Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011). Both slow travel and slow tourism ideas arose out of the Italy-born, Slow Food Movement (Conway & Timms, 2012).

Like slow travel, slow tourism is an alternative to mass tourism that is regenerative through meeting the maturing needs of a growing cohort of new tourists. It shares the anti-mass tourism goals of the new tourism model but offers a more sustainable, humanistic, eco-friendly tourism product that is a less alienating experience for hosts and guests alike (Conway & Timms, 2010: 332). Two forces broadly underpin relatively new types of tourism such as ecotourism, cultural tourism, heritage tourism, green tourism, and health tourism: environmental sustainability and personal/social well-being. Slow tourism is an understanding that emerges from these personal and environmental concerns (Oh et al., 2016).

Matos (2004) emphasized that slow tourism should be based on two fundamental principles: Taking time and attachment to a particular place. Taking time means having a different perception of nature, and living in harmony with a place, its inhabitants, and their culture. Attachment to a particular place is to discover the place-specific values of a destination such as topography, local culture, history, and cultural heritage, and to be compatible with these values. Caffyn (2012) outlined the dimensions of slow tourism and the elements in each dimension. These are; Place (locality, distinctiveness, landscape, heritage, environment, produce); People (community, culture, local enterprise, cuisine, hospitality,

authenticity); Time (pace, relaxation, unhurried, more in-depth); Travel (distance, speed, mode, low carbon); and the Personal (well-being, pleasure, recreation, conviviality, learning, meaning, enjoyment, understanding). These dimensions may vary from destination to destination, and some elements may be emphasized more in some destinations. However, the more factors that can be brought to the fore, the greater the contribution of slow tourism to the sustainability of the destination. In another study, Guiver and McGrath (2016), pointed out five themes in slow tourism. The first theme, as Matos (2004) and Caffyn (2012) emphasized, is “time” as opposed to “fast”. The second is “conscious decision-making” that the conscious choice of “slow” is an essential attribute of being a slow tourist. The third theme is engaging the sense, which is parallel to that described by Matos (2004). Enjoying local food and drink is an essential aspect of slow tourism. This benefits the destination and offers opportunities to mix with local people. The fourth one is holiday duration and location. As Caffyn (2012) highlighted, one of the best ways of experiencing a place more deeply is to stay longer. The fifth theme was determined by the authors as anti-commercialism, as the slow tourism movement emerged as the opposite of mass tourism.

Oh et al. (2016) determined six general slow tourism motivations as relaxation, self-reflection, escape, novelty-seeking, engagement, and discovery. These suggested slow tourism motivations significantly overlapped with general travel motivations in the literature. The authors remarked that people may not necessarily have a set of motivations unique to slow tourism per se; instead, they may be motivated to travel “slowly” in the same way they are for most other modes of travel. The authors argue that the term “slow” should be defined subjectively by individual travellers, rather than that, for example, all visitors in certain travel genres or to certain destinations are categorized as slow travellers. In another study, Yurtseven and Kaya (2011) pointed out that the consumer's interest is a distinctive point to be considered a slow tourist. They categorized slow tourists as dedicated slow tourists, interested slow tourists, and accidental slow tourists. Dedicated slow tourists are open to slow experiences and discovering new cultures. They are educated and independent tourists. They have good cultural knowledge and slow philosophy. They have high expectations concerning the region they are visiting and also they enjoy eco-gastronomy. Interested slow tourists have moderate to high interest in slowness, Slow Food, and Cittaslow but accidental slow tourists see slowness as a tourist attraction of the town visited and their interest is aroused by general tourism promotion.

Since "place" is a significant element in the slow tourism philosophy, the Cittaslow movement, which includes experiencing all the local elements of a place, attracts increasing attention as an essential pillar of the slowness philosophy. The Cittaslow movement is a

grassroots reaction to globalization and is closely related to the Slow Food movement. Although the goals of these two movements are different, they complement each other. Both are in favour of local, traditional cultures, a relaxed pace of life and conviviality (Knox, 2005). The Cittaslow movement aims to improve the quality of life of local people and to create visitor-friendly destinations. It tries to preserve and develop architectural and traditional elements in cultural heritage-oriented destinations (Nilsson et al., 2011). The Cittaslow movement emphasizes the use of new technologies for collective well-being as well as promoting the quality of the local environment and local production (Miele, 2008). The snail in the logo of slow cities symbolizes the slowness of the city, and its shell the protectionism. Cittaslow is a traditionalist, environmentalist and creative movement against today's globalizing, technological and fast city life (Özhancı et al., 2012).

The Cittaslow movement has set out with the goal of an alternative city where people can interact with each other, be self-sufficient in production, have good infrastructure opportunities, use renewable energy resources, and benefit more from the opportunities of technology. For being a Cittaslow member, a city must accept the Slow Food guidelines and strive to conserve the local values (Cittaslow.org). The population must be less than 50,000 and meet the list of criteria set by the association (Heitmann et al., 2011). There are 72 criteria, subdivided into 7 areas. These areas are; “Energy and environmental policies”, “infrastructure policies”, “quality of urban life policies”, “agriculture, touristic and artisan policies”, “policies for hospitality, awareness and training”, “social cohesion” and “partnerships” (Cittaslow.org).

In the next section, information about the district's history, cultural values, tourism potential and the projects realized after it became a slow city are presented in order to better understand the findings of the study.

Halfeti

Halfeti, a district of Şanlıurfa to the northwest of the city, is approximately 120 km from the city centre and 90 km from Gaziantep (Boyras and Bostancı, 2015: 54). Economic life in Halfeti is based on farming and tourism activities (Pekdemir, 2018). There are two dams in the region, Atatürk Dam 145 km north of Halfeti and Birecik Dam 55 km south of Halfeti on the Euphrates River (Özüpekçe, 2019). A part of Halfeti has been flooded when water started to accumulate in the Birecik Dam in 2000. Then, the village of Karaotlak, located 8 km east, was determined as the new settlement area (Bakırcı, 2002: 58). Halfeti, which was one of the important cities of the Commagene Kingdom 4000 years ago, came under the rule of many civilizations throughout history (Pekdemir, 2018).

Halfeti is a district that has valuable natural assets with its rich flora and fauna, especially the Euphrates River. There are many endemic plant and animal species in the district. Black rose is in the foreground among the endemic plant species. It is known that the black rose, which grows only in Halfeti in Türkiye, was brought from France. These roses grown at home have become an important economic branch. Making a significant contribution to the family budget of the local people, the black rose also attracts the attention of tourists (Boyras & Bostancı, 2015). Visiting the breeding farm where black roses are grown is an attractive activity for tourists (Pekdemir, 2018).

Among the main tangible cultural heritage elements of the Halfeti region are Roman Castle, Ulu Mosque, Savaşan Village, Çekem Village, Norhut Church and Kantarma Inn. Roman Castle, which gained importance with its sheltered position as a castle city throughout history, had become an important religious centre from time to time (Bakırcı, 2002). The reason why Roman Castle is important in terms of Christian history is that Johannes (John), one of the apostles of Jesus, settled here and spread Christianity here. It is said that the Apostle John copied and hid the manuscript of the Gospels here while he was in seclusion; later on, the copies were taken to Beirut (Ballice, 2010: 329).

Halfeti became the 9th city from Türkiye to become a Cittaslow member at the Cittaslow International Coordination Committee meeting held in Kristianstad, Finland on 12-13 April 2013 (Boyras & Bostancı, 2015). After the slow city membership, a series of projects have been developed for tangible cultural heritage to prevent the destruction of the flooded area in Halfeti and for sustainable protection. Some of these are; Ulu Mosque and Landscaping, Halfeti Urban Protected Area Coastal Improvement Project, Savaşan Village Improvement Project, and Old Halfeti (Atatürk and Orta Street) Street Improvement Project (Karatosun & Çakar, 2017).

Many of the projects have been implemented under the headings of infrastructure policies, environmental policies, hospitality and awareness efforts, slow food activities and projects, and projects for the elderly and disabled people, to revive the district in terms of tourism with the Cittaslow membership. Meetings on the slow city philosophy are held especially for tradesmen and employees dealing with tourism, and awareness-raising activities are held for students in schools. In addition, courses and training are organized for local residents in areas such as felt accessories, stone dolls, pumpkin carving and painting, mother-of-pearl inlay, amigurumi, jewellery making and artistic mosaic to protect local values and ensure the sustainability of traditional handicrafts. These handcrafted products produced by the local residents are offered to tourists at the handicraft market established on the pontoons belonging

to the Municipality of Halfeti. As part of Slow Food Activities and Projects, arrangements were made for restaurants in the district. In line with the initiatives in this field, many new activities have also been implemented. In this context, as a result of efforts focused on Halfeti cheese, this cheese took its place in the festival known as Türkiye's first cheese festival. Apart from this, events such as the Fruit Food Festival and the Fragrance Festival, have started to be organized traditionally, are organized (Göker, 2020).

Most tourists prefer the spring and autumn periods for visiting Halfeti, avoiding the scorching heat of summer (Özüpekçe, 2019). As of April, tourist movements in Halfeti begin to revive and reach their peak in May. The number of visitors, which decreased to a certain extent in the summer months, starts to increase again in the autumn months. Halfeti, where tourist movements are intense, especially on weekends, comes between 10,000 and 12,500 on Saturdays and between 15,000 and 18,000 on Sundays, depending on the seasons (Çiftçi, 2016). While Halfeti hosted approximately 600,000 tourists in 2018, with the effect of 2019 being declared the "Year of Göbeklitepe" it attracted nearly one million tourists, both domestic and foreign, before the pandemic (iletisim.gov.tr). Although the tourism activity in the district decreased to 30% of normal due to the effect of Covid-19 in 2020, it started to increase again as the district was in the low-risk category and the bans were lifted (trthaber.com). However, the accommodation period of tourists in Halfeti is quite short. Since it is between two cities with high tourism potential such as Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa, it is usually included in the tour programs as a day trip. In a study, Çiftçi (2016) found that 78.7% of the tourists stayed in Halfeti for 1-2 days.

DATA AND METHODS

The study aims to find out the components of foreign tourists' memorable tourism experience about one of the slow cities of Türkiye, Halfeti. The study tries to answer the questions of "In what expressions do tourists describe their Halfeti experiences?", "What are the factors that tourists focus on in their description of Halfeti experiences?" and "How does the title of slow city affect tourists' Halfeti experiences?".

Netnography design was used in this qualitative paper. Netnography, first introduced by Robert Kozinets, is a research approach within the consumer research framework (Mkono, 2012: 554). Netnography could be called in different terms such as "virtual ethnography", "digital ethnography", "web ethnography", "mobile ethnography", "smartphone ethnography", or "ICT ethnography" (Kozinets, 2015). Kozinets (2015: 2) defines

netnography as “specific sets of research positions and accompanying practices embedded in historical trajectories, webs of theoretical constructs, and networks of scholarship and citation; it is a particular performance of cultural research followed by specific kinds of representation of understanding”. In other words, netnography is not simply typing some terms from the narratives on the web, it is searching for a deeper cultural understanding behind the communication of people.

Netnographic research involves searching for and analyzing relevant computer-generated data to address identified research questions (Mkono, 2012: 554). Researchers need to identify specific marketing research questions and select particular online forums appropriate for those question types. Researchers should learn as much as possible about the forums, groups, and individuals they are trying to understand (Kozinets, 2002: 63).

Netnography is also suitable for tourist research due to a growing number of tourism consumers are joining online discussion sites to post messages pertaining to their travel experiences around the world. Besides, the number of sites that are dedicated to travel experience message boards is rising (Mkono, 2012). One of these platforms, Tripadvisor, was chosen in the study following the strategy of Kozinets (2002) to choose online communities which provides detailed and descriptive data on the research topic. Tripadvisor is the world's largest travel guidance platform as of June 2022 (similarweb.com). There are more than 1 billion reviews and opinions of nearly 8 million businesses on the platform and as a travel guide company, it is available in 43 markets and 22 languages (tripadvisor.com).

The second step involves data collection. This phase was conducted during January-March 2021. At this stage, the narratives of foreign tourists on the Halfeti page of the Tripadvisor platform were examined. Halfeti has two main touristic areas, "Old Halfeti" and "Roman Castle". Old Halfeti is the sunken part of the city; Roman Castle is the historical area on the boat trip route. At the same time, as mentioned in the previous section, Roman Castle is one of the old names of Halfeti. Halfeti's Tripadvisor page also includes these two sub-headings under the “things to do” section. Other sub-headings include narratives about businesses such as hotels and restaurants and they are business-specific evaluations. Therefore, the narratives under the sub-headings of "Old Halfeti" and "Roman Castle", which reflect the experience of Halfeti as a touristic destination, were included in the study. At first, 45 narratives were reached on Halfeti experiences of foreign tourists. Although negative reviews are a part of the memorable tourism experience, three negative comments were excluded because they mostly include personal situations related to tourists and do not represent a general situation and are less in percentage. 42 online narratives were included in the dataset. The narratives are from

April 2013, when Halfeti was declared a slow city, to March 2021, when the data collection phase was carried out. All narratives are in the English language. 35 tourists have country information on their Tripadvisor profile. Accordingly, the distribution of tourists by country is as follows: “United Kingdom (8)”, “United States of America (5)”, “Austria (2)”, “Malta (2)”, “Sudan (2)”, “Australia (1)”, “Bahrain (1)”, “France (1)”, “Germany (1)”, “Iraq (1)”, “Jordan (1)”, “Lebanon (1)”, “Lithuania (1)”, “New Zealand (1)”, “Poland (1)”, “Qatar (1)”, “Slovenia (1)”, “South Africa (1)”, “The Netherlands (1)”, “Ukraine (1)”, “United Arab Emirates (1)”.

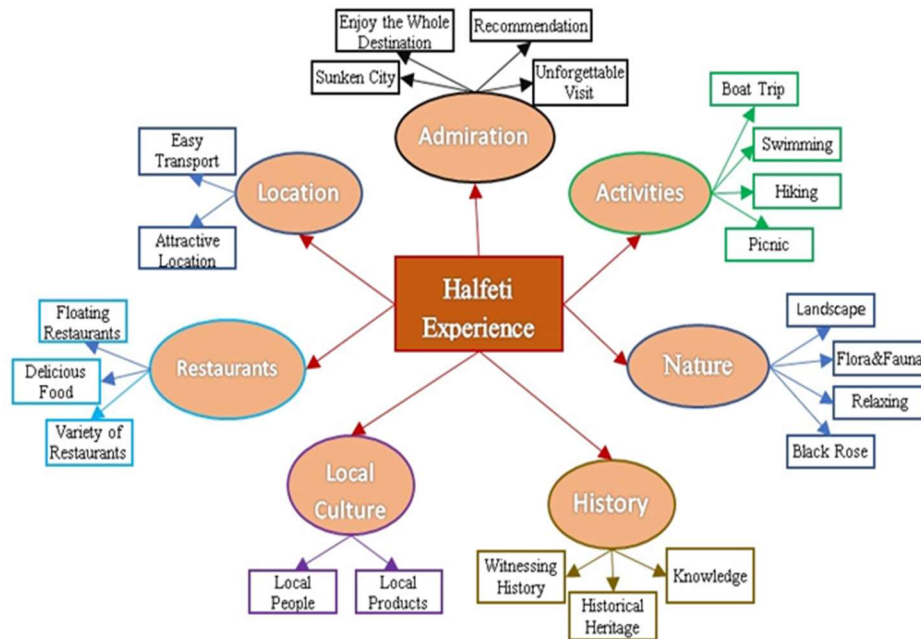
This study used thematic analysis to analyse online narratives. Braun and Clarke (2006: 79) defined thematic analysis as *“a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”*. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 87), there are six phases of the process. Tab. 2 shows the six phases of thematic analysis.

Table 2 Thematic Analysis Process

Phase	Description the process	The process of the current study
Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, and noting down initial ideas.	The data were read from the beginning to have an idea about the experiences of the tourists.
Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.	In the coding phase, 226 codes were found by reading the narratives. After the first coding, it was checked by re-coding starting from the beginning and some codes that have the same meaning were combined and 204 codes were reached.
Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	The themes were not determined beforehand, they were revealed during the analysis process. By combining the related codes under categories, seven main themes were explored.
Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work concerning the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.	In the reviewing themes phase, the entire data set was reviewed by checking whether the codes were related to themes or not. The thematic map of the study was generated (Figure 1)
Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	In the study, seven dimensions were found as “admiration”, “activities”, “nature”, “history”, “local culture”, “restaurants” and “location”.
Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, the final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.	In the final part of the analysis, the report was produced.

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006: 87)

Figure 1 Thematic Map of the Study



Source: Generated by the authors.

RESULTS

Admiration

Foreign tourists who visited Halfeti expressed admiration while representing their experiences and pointed out that they had distinctive experiences. Sub-themes determined within the scope of this theme; "Enjoying the whole destination", "unforgettable visit", "sunken city", and "recommendation".

Foreign tourists expressed their feelings of admiration, covering the whole of their destination experience. Among the expressions stating that the tourists enjoyed their travel experience in Halfeti and their experiences were exciting; “amazing”, “breathtaking”, “heavenly”, “interesting”, “so beautiful”, “escape to heaven”, “serene”, “calm”, “hidden gem of Türkiye”, “very quiet”, “wonderful”, “5 stars for its beauty”, “worth the time”, “sense of peace”, “impossible not to enjoy”, “The feeling of missing the place forever”, “peaceful”, “unspoilt”, “impressive”, “vivid memory”, “something different”, “a hidden treasure”, “well worth the time and money”, “unexpected beautiful village”.

Foreign tourists stated in their narratives that the Halfeti experience was one of the MTEs in their lives. It is understood that the attractions of the destination offer tourists a new experience and this experience is different from previous experiences.

“One of the best places I have been to in Turkey.” (R09)

“I’ve not seen a place so beautiful in my life.” (R02)

“I had heard about Halfeti from a close friend and also read about it on the internet and always wanted to visit and this past week I had the chance to see Halfeti. It is truly a beautiful place to visit and I highly recommend taking the boat tour (one of the main attractions) around the mountains and take in the beautiful scenery!” (R14)

“I have a feeling I’m gonna miss this place forever, really beautiful place for unforgettable evenings on a little ship while sightseeing” (R30)

Tourists impressed by Halfeti, both expressed that they would like to experience this destination again when possible, and also recommended Halfeti and its attractions to potential visitors. The number of narratives that include Halfeti as a "must-see place" is quite high.

“All I can say is do not miss out on visiting here!” (R15)

“Unbelievable experience! Is a definite must-see!” (R13)

The most admirable element of Halfeti is the sunken city part, which was submerged after the construction of the dam, which actually changed the destiny of the district, but made it a tourism destination with the projects. Almost all of the visitors mentioned in their narratives how admirable it was to see the sunken city, the mosque with only its minaret above the water through a boat tour.

“The attraction here is that the minaret of the local mosque can be seen protruding from the water.” (R06)

“It’s well worth it for a glimpse of the mighty Euphrates and to see the fascinating sunken city.” (R22)

“It was stunning! I could say it was the best trip in Turkey. Amazing landscape, the river of Euphrates, sunken mosque and ruins and much more...” (R42)

Activities

Although Halfeti, as a tourism destination and slow city, offers many activities to its visitors, most of the tourists have pointed to the boat tour as the main activity to be held here. Tourists mentioned the coexistence of nature and history by experiencing the submerged part of the area through a boat trip and witnessing its historical places. In addition, the tourists who stated that the boat tour is one of the must-do activities here added that it is definitely worth it.

“Just being able to float along the historic Euphrates is well worth the time and money.” (R37)

“It is really a wonderful trip along the river and while experiencing the beauty one also feels a bit sad seeing all the houses underwater.” (R39)

Besides the boat trip, there are activities such as hiking, swimming and picnic among other elements that shape the experiences of tourists, although they are less in percentage.

Nature

Natural attractions have been identified as one of the essential themes that shaped the Halfeti experience. Sub-themes developed based on this theme are: "landscape", "flora & fauna", "relaxing" and "black rose". The mountains, hills, and rocks surrounding the Old Halfeti region, especially the Euphrates River, and the landscapes created by these attractions are among the most mentioned natural attractions in the narratives. Visitors commented that the destination deserves a visit to witness these views.

Feelings such as calmness and peace that these landscapes provide to the visitors constitute the “relaxing” sub-theme of this theme and visitors especially remarked that they are relaxed, renewed and revitalized with these feelings offered by natural attractions. The rich flora&fauna, especially the black rose an endemic species that grows only in Halfeti, has taken its place as one of the significant elements that make Halfeti memorable for tourists.

“It is beautiful, the water is crystal clear and one could really be at peace with themselves and the world.” (R24)

“Worth a visit, the landscape and setting on this warm, sunny autumn day was strikingly beautiful.” (R29)

“I will be back to see the black rose!” (R07)

History

The history of the Halfeti region, and especially as a historical heritage Roman Castle is highly appreciated by tourists. The sub-themes of this theme are "historical heritage", "witnessing the history" and "knowledge". The history theme is mostly explained by the ruins of Roman Castle and its surroundings. Visitors commented that they travel in time due to the attractive castle with its location, magnificence, view as well as historical heritage value. Roman Castle, which dates back to the Roman period and has hosted many civilizations afterwards, has found its place as a heritage that allows visitors to witness history in their comments. Some visitors emphasized that they got detailed information about this historical

heritage and made a very informative visit as they visited this place through a tour guide. Therefore, "knowledge" was determined as a sub-theme of this theme.

"It's like travelling in time along shores of Euprat - take a trip with a boat to see ancient architecture, carve up in the steep mountains above your head." (R08)

"A beautiful, historic place! Take the boat to see where historians think John the Baptist lived in a cave copying the Bible, and to the submerged mosque." (R20)

"You would notice the diversity of history, from prehistoric caves, church caves, mosques. The word "Kale" comes from the Arabic word "Kala'a" and means citadel or fortress, and the area was home to every people who lived in/or nearby this spot." (R27)

Local Culture

Another factor that shapes the MTEs of some foreign tourists is the local culture. The "local people" and "local products" emerged as sub-themes of this theme. Visitors noted that the local people were friendly and helpful and that this factor played an important role in having a good experience. In addition, various local products were seen positively in the narratives of the visitors.

"You can be sure people are friendly and kind, willing to show you their beloved Halfeti!" (R08)

"Amazing. I've not seen a place so beautiful in my life. The black rose perfume is also great." (R02)

Restaurants

Foreign tourists also included positive comments about food and beverage businesses in their evaluations of Halfeti. Floating restaurants are lined up along the river, and the variety of these restaurants and delicious food, especially fish, are among the MTEs of foreign tourists about Halfeti. The sub-themes of this theme are "floating restaurants", "delicious food" and "variety of restaurants". One of the remarkable points of the study is that visitors do not include these foods in their comments, although there are many local flavours unique to Halfeti, except for the fish species that grow in the Euphrates River and are unique to the region.

"All very interesting with several cafés and restaurants all along the bank at the remaining part of the city that was covered by the dam waters." (R38)

“You have to take a boat and see more parts and also if you taste fish from that part you would never forget its taste!” (R40)

“Not to forget to enjoy the delicious fresh fish meal and olive salad in one of the restaurants along the river.” (R41)

Location

The favourable location of Halfeti between the two important cities of the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Türkiye, Şanlıurfa and Gaziantep, which stand out with their cultural tourism potential, has also enabled foreign tourists to draw attention to this element in their narratives. Many visitors mentioned that Halfeti has a very attractive location on the banks of the Euphrates River between these two cities and can be easily reached by various means of transportation. "Easy transport" and "attractive location" are determined as sub-themes of this theme.

“This is a fun and easy place to visit providing you have your own transport to get you to Halfeti, where you board a boat to travel up the Euphrates, an experience in itself.” (R33)

DISCUSSION

This research aims to reveal what factors affect the MTEs of foreign tourists visiting Halfeti, one of Türkiye's slow city destinations, and to evaluate to what extent the title of slow city affects these factors. As a result of the study, the factors are as follows; "admiration", "activities", "nature", "history", "local culture", "restaurants" and "location". The findings are also in line with the dimensions of the seven-factor MTE developed by Kim et al. (2012). While admiration, activities, nature, history and local culture themes and sub-themes are similar to the study of Kim et al. (2012), restaurants and location are different themes specific to this study. Foreign tourists mentioned the floating restaurants in the destination without specifying the name of any restaurants, and it was revealed that these restaurants are an inseparable part of the destination. Similarly, Halfeti's attractive location, located in the middle of Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa, two cities that have a significant share in Türkiye's cultural tourism, and on the banks of the Euphrates River, emerged as one of the destination attributes that shaped memorable tourism experience.

The main themes of this study apart from admiration, are the themes related to the cognitive dimension of a memorable tourism experience. Among the seven-factor MTE of

Kim et al. (2012); “hedonism”, “refreshment”, “involvement” and “novelty” are affective dimensions while “local culture”, “meaningfulness” and “knowledge” tend to be cognitive (Zhang et al., 2018). In the study carried out by Ülker Demirel (2020) to determine the factors affecting the MTEs of foreign tourists visiting the Gallipoli Peninsula, four themes are affective and six are cognitive of the ten main themes developed. Since Gallipoli Peninsula is a dark tourism destination, affective themes such as "moving feelings and emotionality", "being affected and admired", "feeling lost and heavy-hearted" and "feeling pride" were found. In the case of Halfeti, on the other hand, it was observed that affective evaluations are limited to various expressions of admiration and feelings of renewal brought by nature.

The theme of "admiration" was created as a result of the evaluations highlighting that foreign tourists really like the destination experience, are excited and delighted, and that this experience is different from previous holiday experiences. Similarly, in the study carried out by Ülker Demirel (2020), the theme of "being affected and admired" was created based on the expressions of admiration from tourists. The result of the present study coincides with the “hedonism” and “novelty” dimensions of Kim et al. (2012).

Tourists mentioned the natural attractions and historical elements of Halfeti, and thus the other two main themes, nature and history, emerged. While natural attractions evoke feelings of relaxation, refreshment etc., historical sites offer the opportunity to witness history and gain new knowledge. The point that tourists agree under the theme of "activities" is to witness these historical and natural attractions through a boat trip. Hence, tourists specified boat trips as a must-do activity as the main activity of the destination. The refreshment and knowledge dimensions of the MTE in the study of Kim et al. (2012) coincide with these results. The refreshment dimension covers both “nature” and “activities” themes in the present study; tourists can also experience the feeling of peace, relaxation, revival and renewal provided by Halfeti's natural attractions through a boat trip.

The knowledge dimension in the study of Kim et al. (2012) was determined as a subtheme of the “history” theme in this study. Halfeti's rich historical background greatly affected the experiences of foreign tourists; while tourists had the opportunity to witness history through this rich heritage, they took pleasure in discovering and learning something new if they were interested in history or travelled with a tour guide. This result shows similarities with the results of Chandralal et al. (2014) and Ülker Demirel (2020), and the acquired knowledge and the discovery of some new information can be a part of MTE.

As stated above under the theme of “activities”, the boat trip was included in the majority of the narratives as the main activity, and besides, tourists also mentioned activities such as

hiking, swimming and picnic as an unforgettable memory of their holiday experiences. Apart from these, many activities such as underwater photography, canoeing, diving, bird watching, mountain biking, and camping, which are among the significant activities of the district offered for tourists, could not be a part of the memorable tourism experiences of the tourists.

The dimension of local culture, which is one of the dimensions of the scale of Kim et al (2012), was determined as the main theme also in the present study. Although the evaluations of the local culture are less than other dimensions in terms of quantity, regarding this theme foreign tourists commented that they have good impressions of the local people and that they were friendly and nice people. Even if these findings coincide with the local culture dimension in the study of Kim et al. (2012), there was no evidence that foreign tourists experienced Halfeti's local cultural values in practice personally such as local life, customs, traditions, local production areas etc. For example, as a result of the study of Chandralal et al. (2014), a theme named “local people, life and culture” of memorable tourism experience was determined and the authors evidenced that the travellers made evaluations about villages, local lifestyles, markets, farms, cultural activities and rituals in their narratives.

In the Halfeti experience, only a few comments were made about local products. However, Halfeti is very rich in terms of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage elements, and many initiatives and projects have been started to promote these values after the district became a slow city. This result shows that Halfeti should focus on product diversity to bring its local values to tourism and make an effort to transform its cultural values into tourism products without spoiling their originalities. As Chen and Rahman (2018) also remarked that interacting with local culture and residents enable tourists to experience the local life of the tourist destination more closely, which ultimately provides them with an experience to remember.

A similar situation is strikingly observed under the themes of "history" and "restaurants". The evaluations made by foreign tourists regarding the historical values of Halfeti were limited only to Roman Castle and its surroundings, many tangible cultural heritage items in the villages of the district and brought to tourism through improvement projects were not mentioned. Regarding this issue, the data obtained under the theme of “restaurants” show that there is no awareness of Halfeti's local cuisine. Tsai (2018) found that experiencing local cuisines enables tourists to have positive memorable experiences and such positive experiences further enhance their identification with or strong attachment to local attractions. In the Halfeti sample, the floating restaurants on the river, the variety of these restaurants and the offering of delicious food positively affect the MTEs of the tourists, but it does not seem

that any local food stands out, except for the fish species unique to the region. The name of the fish (şabut) which is unique to the region is not mentioned in the narratives. It is revealed that initiatives such as organizing restaurants and training employees within the scope of slow food activities initiated with the district's slow city title are successful, but the findings display that more emphasis should be placed on promoting local dishes and raising awareness about these values.

CONCLUSION

As Halfeti became a slow city, as mentioned in the previous sections, various projects were initiated both to sustain the tangible cultural heritage and in many areas such as infrastructure, environment, slow food, and hospitality. The scope of the initiatives could be counted as increasing the welfare of the local people, improving the touristic infrastructure and creating various touristic activities that could attract visitors. The people of Halfeti transform their traditional values into touristic products and offer them to the visitors so that both the promotion and sustainability of these values are possible and the economic welfare of the people is increased. These projects and initiatives undoubtedly have a very significant role in the district's being a tourist destination. Before the pandemic, the destination was visited by approximately 1 million tourists, both domestic and foreign, in 2019. Therefore, it indicates that Halfeti has turned the slow city title into an advantage in its efforts to develop tourism and has benefited successfully.

The narratives of foreign tourists about their Halfeti experiences show that tourists have unforgettable memories in Halfeti. However, in this study, it has been concluded that the title of slow city does not have a direct determining effect on the MTE. Although some of the main themes and sub-themes that are determined as the components that guide tourists' MTEs are a result of the initiatives initiated by the district with the title of slow city, there is no indication that they had an MTE due to the destination is a slow city. It is assumed from the narratives that the landscaping projects, the coastal improvement projects and the arrangements for the restaurants in the district have a positive effect on the Halfeti experience of the tourists. However, it is another result that local values such as traditional handicrafts products, local food, festivals, and traditions, which are essential components of a slow city, did not make an indelible impression on the memories of tourists. As stated in the previous sections, although many projects were also implemented in these areas after the slow city announcement, it is a remarkable point of the study that these initiatives have not risen yet as

tourism products. From Halfeti experiences, mostly natural beauties, historical elements and boat trips are engraved in the memories of tourists.

In the comment of only 1 visitor, it was stated that Halfeti is a slow city to share information. When this result is evaluated according to the slow tourist typology of Yurtseven and Kaya (2011), it is seen that the foreign tourists visiting Halfeti are mostly in the accidental slow tourist category. Their interest needs to be aroused by general tourism promotion. This shows that while the district continues its activities related to the slow city, it also needs to increase the awareness of this title. Even though there are awareness-raising efforts for local people, it should be ensured that tourists have information about this title, and realize that the services they experience or the products they buy are related to the title of slow city. This result is in parallel with the study results of Kürüm Varolgüneş and Canan (2018). As a result of SWOT analysis, the authors revealed factors such as insufficient promotion and marketing, the lack of awareness of the title of slow city in the district, the stagnation in the winter period and the consequent lack of infrastructure and service quality among the weaknesses of Halfeti. They concluded that the strongest aspect of Halfeti's sustainability as a slow city is its rich cultural and natural assets. Other strengths are listed as having natural resources and an unspoiled environment, geographical location and tourism potential. As the most important opportunity of the slow city title, the attractiveness of the Old Halfeti area, which was flooded with the rise of the Birecik Dam waters, was stated in their study. This result about Halfeti's strengths is also consistent with the results of the present study.

As can be seen from the findings of the study, the factors that shape the memorable tourism experiences of tourists are limited to the natural beauties and historical heritage elements, especially the Roman Castle, boat trip, and sunken city. In the study of Özüpekçe (2019), the reasons for tourists to visit Halfeti were listed as boat trips (37%), seeing sunken villages and mosques (33%), and visiting Roman Castle (21%). These findings coincide with the present study. However, as a tourism destination, Halfeti offers more than these attractions to tourists. For example, under the theme of "history", many more historical heritage items besides Roman Castle; under the "restaurants" theme, much more local food; and under the "activities" theme, many sports and nature activities apart from the boat trip are offered to the tourists.

There is a similar situation in the theme of "local culture". Foreign visitors commented that they were very pleased with the hospitality of local people and to experience a few local products. However, local culture, which is an essential element of Cittaslow philosophy, includes much more than that. Many advantages of the district such as local life, festivals,

traditional handicraft products, traditional production areas, and traditional architectural structure in Halfeti should be transformed into interesting tourism products in a way that will shape the MTEs of tourists. Therefore, one of the managerial implications of this study coincides with the results of Chen and Rahman (2018). Planners and managers of slow tourism destinations should focus on how to promote cultural exchanges and how provide an authentic experience to the tourists through effective host-tourist interactions rather than commodifying cultural products with a mass tourism agenda.

Zhang et al. (2018: 334) asserted that destinations should not only focus on satisfaction management but rather put emphasis on MTEs. It is crucial to create MTEs every time that tourists visit and hence need to manage the experience differently to satisfy every visit and still generate MTEs. It will be possible to further increase the tourism potential and to create MTEs of the slow city Halfeti with new tourism products, new routes, new events and projects that will enable the local people to interact more with tourists in the district.

Slow tourism destinations should focus on which factors contribute to tourists' experiences. Knowing the tourism experience and the factors that contribute to MTE is helpful for destination managers as it provides them with guidelines to serve increasingly experienced and sophisticated visitors (Seyfi et al., 2020). Therefore, destination management organizations in Halfeti must first effectively manage the experience and encourage more visits. It should not be forgotten that it is vital to increase the length of stay of the tourists visiting Halfeti. Because, as emphasized by Caffyn (2012), the best way to experience a destination fairly depends on staying there for a long time. This will only be possible by increasing the awareness of the local products unique to Halfeti with the emphasis on the slow city title and creating new tourism products where tourists can interact with the local culture. Local governments and other organizations should make efforts in cooperation with local residents, one of the most significant stakeholders in a destination, so that tourists can ideally experience "slowness" in the local and cultural sense, and leave the destination with meaningful experiences.

In this study, it was aimed to explore the factors affecting the MTEs of foreign tourists visiting Halfeti with the netnography method and it was evaluated to what extent the title of slow city of the district affected these factors. Although the evaluations of all foreign tourists on the platform between April 2013 and March 2021 were included in the study, the fact that Halfeti is a tourism destination that has been developing in recent years has led to a low number of data. The fact that the first comment on Halfeti on the platform belongs to 2012 also confirms this. In this context, the low number of available data can be considered an

important limitation of this study. In future research, more comprehensive research data can be obtained with the data to be collected from different platforms or travel blogs. On the other hand, since the concept of memorable tourism experience leads to different themes in touristic areas with different characteristics, qualitative or quantitative comparative analyzes to be carried out with other slow cities may reveal more concrete findings on the dimensions of memorable tourism experience in slow cities.

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