

TOURISTS' OPINIONS WHEN VISITING SAMARKAND (UZBEKISTAN): ANALYSIS OF REVIEWS ON TRIPADVISOR

Luís PACHECO ^{1*}, Fernando Oliveira TAVARES ¹, Makhabbat RAMAZANOVA ¹

¹ Portucalense University, Research on Economics, Management and Information Technologies, Porto, Portugal; luisp@upt.pt (L.P.); ftavares@upt.pt (F.O.T.); ramazanova@upt.pt (M.R.)

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Abstract: User-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) have become crucial sources of information for tourists over the past two decades. At the same time, tour operators and agencies are increasingly attentive to travelers' opinions, reflecting shifting expectations and preferences in destination choice. This paper analyzes TripAdvisor reviews of Samarkand's (Uzbekistan) main attractions, with the objective of identifying differences in ratings by attraction, travel type, and travelers' region of origin. In addition, it explores the dominant themes, emotions, and issues reflected in visitors' comments after visiting Samarkand, offering insight into perceived destination attributes. Using Maxqda and Leximancer software, 400 reviews of the eight most visited attractions in Samarkand were systematically analyzed through quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Results show that reviews are overwhelmingly positive, with only slight variations between attractions and regions of origin of travelers. Negative expressions were rare, while strong positive emotions and symbolic associations predominated across narratives. The findings illustrate how eWOM reinforces the city's reputation as a world-class heritage destination and highlights the symbolic role of online reviews in shaping cultural tourism perceptions. Furthermore, positive eWOM enhances Samarkand's global competitiveness by strengthening its visibility, credibility, and appeal among potential visitors. Content analysis also reveals that travelers' experiences are largely consistent across attractions, travel types, and regions of origin. These insights provide local authorities and tourism stakeholders with empirical evidence to strengthen Samarkand's identity and attractiveness, supporting more effective and sustainable heritage tourism promotion strategies, and destination management policies in emerging cultural tourism contexts.

Keywords: destination image, perceived authenticity, heritage tourism, Samarkand, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), online reviews

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INTRODUCTION

The identity of a city is deeply tied to its urban heritage, which is shaped by its historical background, cultural influences, local environment, and human activities (Liu et al., 2022; Rosley et al., 2024). Urban heritage reflects the unique attributes of a place and serves as an essential component of its heritage resources. However, preserving and conserving these urban heritage resources, such as historic buildings and sites, is becoming increasingly challenging. Factors like rapid urban expansion, large-scale construction projects, and the impacts of climate change in many historic cities worldwide are leading to a gradual loss of meaning and identity in these spaces (Paiva, 2023; Quesada-Ganuza et al., 2021). Moreover, the growing tourism demand for historical cities exerts additional pressure on them.

According to UNESCO (2011) urban areas are “engines” of growth, innovation, and creativity and centres for social opportunities. Thus, it is vital to balance between growth and safeguarding heritage, since historic centres are the most diverse manifestation of cultural heritage and the collective testimony of humankind. Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11) calls to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”, aiming through the target 11.4 to “strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage”. It is also crucial for tourism to preserve heritage, given its rapid development, especially in urban historical centers, and the need for effective management strategies to balance the demands of tourism with the safeguarding of heritage sites becomes essential (Ramazanova et al., 2024). Especially, the state of heritage sites may influence tourist perspectives, playing a fundamental role in shaping their perceptions, which, in turn, may influence their travel decisions and overall satisfaction.

Destination image is one of the most widely investigated areas in the tourism literature and literature on this topic is growing (Chia et al., 2021; San Martín & Del Bosque, 2008). The formation of the image of a particular destination might be based on various elements of destination and personal factors of tourists. In the case of heritage destinations, Huete Alcocer & López Ruiz (2020), evidenced that tourists' perceptions are formed based on their feelings and perceptions about the destination, which in turn influence their satisfaction. Mak (2017) examined online destination image by comparing national tourism organisation's and tourists' perspectives. Online destination image reflects holistic perceptions formed by

* Corresponding author

both official sources and tourist-generated content, influencing tourist behaviour and travel decisions. In the digital world, tourists widely rely on online sources, which shape their perceptions of destinations and influence their travel decisions. Although research recognises the growing influence of online content on destination image, there are still few studies associated with a systematic and exhaustive analysis of the image of a destination in an online context, particularly in emerging countries such as Uzbekistan, and in particularly the city of Samarkand. Samarkand, one of the oldest cities in Central Asia, is a cultural and historical gem that has long captivated travelers and scholars alike. The aim of this study is to understand tourists' perceptions of this relevant tourist destination. Expanding the literature on heritage destination image in online context and to attain our objectives, we consider guests' average rating of the 8 Samarkand's most commented attractions in one of the largest online travel platforms – TripAdvisor (URL: www.tripadvisor.com). The usage and analysis of TripAdvisor reviews is well established in the literature and remains widespread in recent academic studies (e.g., Lin et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Yannacopoulou & Kallinikos, 2025). The application of this methodology to a sample of Samarkand tourist attractions has not been done before. We aim to evidence some specific differences between the reviews in terms of attraction, type of travel, region of origin and travel experience. The content analysis of the reviews will provide valuable information about which are the main themes written by visitors. Results of this paper could be useful to tourism planners, agencies and operators, by identifying those aspects that have a greater impact on visitors' overall satisfaction.

The next section presents a literature review, followed by a brief presentation of Samarkand. Section four presents the data and methodology and section five the results. The last section presents some concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advancements in web technologies have revolutionized the way individuals search for and share information, introducing dynamic communication platforms that enable instant and seamless exchange of opinions, unrestricted by time or geography. This shift has made electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) particularly significant in the tourism and hospitality industries. User-generated reviews have become a vital resource for travelers, offering impartial insights and helping them make informed decisions about their destinations and experiences. Destination image is one of the most researched issues in the tourism literature (Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Yannacopoulou & Kallinikos, 2025). A destination image refers to the subjective perceptions, beliefs, and impressions an individual holds about a specific place, including both the knowledge and emotional feelings associated with it. Alcázar et al. (2014, p. 159) define it “as a set of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have of the attributes and/or activities available at a destination”. The concept of destination image gathers a set of dimensions, namely, emotional, cognitive and conative (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2021).

The cognitive dimension refers to knowledge of the destination. Emotional and conative factors play a significant role in shaping a visitor's experience when exploring a historical building or city (Del Bosque & San Martín, 2008; Li et al., 2024; Teles et al., 2024). Emotional factors relate to the feelings and connections evoked during the visit. For example, standing inside a centuries-old cathedral or mosque may inspire awe and reverence, while walking through historical ruins might evoke nostalgia or a sense of wonder about the past. These emotional responses can make the experience more meaningful and memorable (Yuksel et al., 2010). Conative factors, on the other hand, are linked to the actions or behaviors resulting from the experience, such as whether a visitor recommends the site to others or returns for a future visit (Wang et al., 2023). For instance, a traveler who was deeply moved by a historical city's ambiance may write excellent reviews online or encourage friends to visit, while someone frustrated by poor signage or overcrowding might warn others to avoid the location. Together, these factors influence how visitors perceive and share their experiences, ultimately affecting the destination's reputation and appeal (Yuksel et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023; Huang & Zhang, 2024).

Research has shown that tourists' emotional experiences significantly influence their perceptions of a destination's personality, satisfaction levels, and behavioral intentions. For instance, Kovačić & Šagovnović (2023), when analyzing visitors to Novi Sad found that positive emotional experiences enhanced the perception of the destination's personality traits, leading to higher satisfaction and increased likelihood of recommending the destination to others.

Additionally, tourists' emotional experiences can shape their overall image of a destination, which in turn affects their satisfaction and intention to recommend the destination to others (Prayag et al., 2017). These findings underscore the importance of tourism destination managers to consider both emotional and conative factors when developing strategies to enhance visitor experiences and promote positive word-of-mouth endorsements.

Ramazanova et al. (2023) investigated tourists' perceptions regarding lake destination, with a special focus on sustainability perception, and its impact on satisfaction and loyalty. Huete Alcocer & López Ruiz (2020) investigated the formation of the image of a cultural destination and found that tourists' perceptions are formed based on their knowledge and beliefs regarding the destination characteristics and feelings and perceptions about the destination. Mak (2017) examined online destination image by comparing national tourism organisations and tourists' perspectives. Online destination image reflects holistic perceptions formed by both official sources and tourist-generated content, influencing tourist behaviour and destination success. Thus, the way destinations are communicated online and perceived by tourists plays a vital role in attracting tourists, their satisfaction and loyalty. This is especially important for urban heritage destinations, where preserving and conserving urban heritage resources is becoming increasingly challenging.

According to Rosley et al. (2024), heritage tourism offers a unique experience to tourists, defined as “travelling to experience the places, artefacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present.” (The National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2008). It is associated with historic buildings, monuments, archaeological ruins and museums, or movable objects such as antique collections, handicrafts and art. On the other hand, cultural heritage also includes intangible elements such as music, rituals, festivals, foodways and folklore.

Unlike other forms of tourism, heritage tourism focuses on creating a compelling narrative and storytelling experience that integrates both tangible and intangible values, encouraging individuals to engage deeply with the tourism context (Rosley et al., 2024). As noted by Park (2013), heritage is shaped by how events are narrated, reenacted, and expressed, with the goal of showcasing the unique identity of places and destinations. Thus, the essence of heritage tourism extends beyond its physical products, relying heavily on people's behavior, perceptions, and motivations to connect with its meaning. These elements—behavior, perception, and motivation—form the foundation for sustaining heritage tourism (Poria et al., 2003).

Olorunsola et al. (2023) identify the main themes shared in online reviews by tourists, as well as identify factors known as satisfiers and dissatisfiers based on Herzberg's two-factor theory among tourists who visited Petra UNESCO heritage site. Their findings indicate that tourists who rated their experience as 4 (very good) or 5 (excellent) tended to highlight aspects such as architecture, buildings, safety, temples, monasteries, tours, tombs, and helpfulness. In contrast, visitors who gave lower ratings of 1 (terrible) or 2 (poor) frequently mentioned concerns related to cost, animals, carriages, local interactions, and shops. Considering the above, the present study aims to identify the main differences in ratings between attractions, type of travel, region of origin and travel experience in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

SAMARKAND AS A HERITAGE CITY

Samarkand, one of the oldest cities in Central Asia, is a cultural and historical gem that has long captivated travelers and scholars alike. Known as the "Crossroads of Cultures," this ancient city in Uzbekistan is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a key stop along the legendary Silk Road. Samarkand flourished the capital of centralized empire of Timurids, becoming as a centre of education and culture during the 14th and 15th centuries (Suyarov, 2017). It is renowned for its stunning Islamic architecture, vibrant bazaars, and rich heritage, blending Persian, Turkish, and Mongol influences. Iconic landmarks such as Registan Square, with its majestic madrassas adorned in intricate blue mosaics, and the mausoleum of Timur (Tamerlane), Gur-e-Amir, showcase the city's grandeur. Tourists can explore bustling markets, savour traditional Uzbek cuisine, and immerse themselves in the timeless traditions of this vibrant cultural hub. Whether drawn by its history or its awe-inspiring beauty, Samarkand offers an unforgettable journey into the heart of Central Asia. Nowadays, the tourism industry is the most important industry of the city and has vital economic importance (Suyarov, 2017; Jeong et al., 2023). Uzbekistan is simultaneously working to build a post-Soviet identity by emphasizing its pre-Soviet history, particularly the heritage of the Great Silk Road. This approach illustrates that the construction of a destination's image is closely tied to geopolitical dynamics within society, including debates and contestations over national identity (Fayzullaev et al., 2021).

At the national level, Uzbekistan is home to several UNESCO-recognized tourist destinations, offering unique historical and cultural experiences in cities such as Bukhara, Khiva, Shakhrisabz, and most notably, Samarkand (Jeong et al., 2023). Moreover, the country is home to almost 7,400 objects of cultural heritage (Allaberganov & Preko, 2022). All of this is reflected in the growing number of international visitors to Uzbekistan, with an average growth rate of 38% from 2018 to 2022, according to UNWTO data (Figure 1). The majority of tourists come from Europe, followed by East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia, and the Americas. Recognizing it, the Uzbek government has implemented several policies and strategies to boost its growth (Allaberganov & Preko, 2022; Jeong et al., 2023; Khurana & Ataniyazova, 2024).

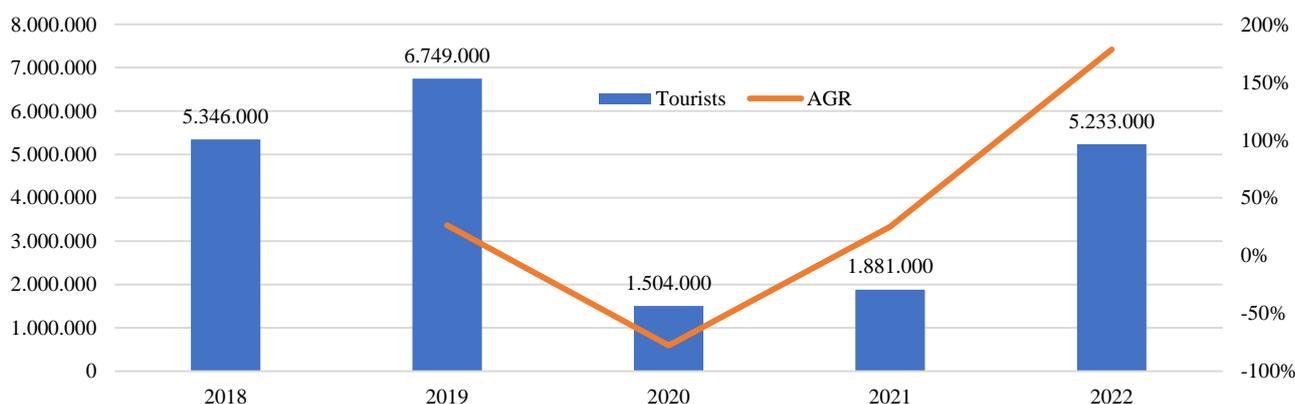


Figure 1. Number of tourists to Uzbekistan (Source: UNWTO (2023))

There is a growing interest in Samarkand, which attracted 1.2 million foreign tourists in 2022. This number increased significantly to 2.15 million in 2023, reflecting the city's rising popularity as a key tourism destination in Uzbekistan (Visit Uzbekistan, 2025). However, Patterson & Rakhmonov (2021) argue that Uzbekistan is not fully utilizing its tourism potential and there are much more to see in the country. They highlight the need for greater diversification of tourism products, particularly in the Samarkand region. Jeong et al. (2023) in agreement, state that there are many tourism opportunities in Uzbekistan, such as cultural tourism, culinary tourism, wildlife tourism, rural tourism, dark tourism, and adventure tourism. However, the authors point out that there is a research gap in the sustainable tourism literature of Uzbekistan. Available research about tourism of Samarkand is also limited. Olimova (2024) attempted to analyse the importance of cultural tourism for Samarkand, identify challenges and opportunities for its development. Jumanazarov et al. (2020), based on their research, explained that most studies conducted about tourism, focus on the national level and do not cover specific destinations within the country. Some papers addressing Samarkand primarily concern with issues

related to heritage preservation or religious pilgrimage. However, research on tourist behaviour in Samarkand, the leading destination in Uzbekistan, remains limited. In this context, Jumanazarov et al. (2020) assessed the city's destination attributes and their impact on international visitor loyalty behaviours, calling destination managers to strengthen the most highly evaluated attributes and to pay more attention to those that received lower evaluations.

In agreement with Jumanazarov et al. (2020) regarding the lack of research on the city of Samarkand and importance of analysing visitors' perceptions, experience and evaluation of destination attributes, this paper identifies the main differences in ratings between attractions, type of travel, region of origin and travel experience, employing a sample comprising eight main tourist attractions in Samarkand.

Thus, the two main research questions that we try to answer in the following sections, are:

- 1) Are there significant differences in ratings between tourist attractions, type of travel or region of origin?
- 2) What are the main themes and issues in travelers' comments?

These questions are expected to provide insights into the distinctive characteristics of Samarkand's attractions, and the preferences and behaviour of visitors. In our opinion, Samarkand offers an unique test case for destination image formation or heritage site perception.

DATA

The main tourist attractions in Samarkand that were listed on TripAdvisor were identified. As of December 2024, there were 206 attractions in the area under study. Due to the large number of attractions and reviews, the eight attractions with the highest number of reviews and a Travellers' Choice 2024 award were considered: Registan; Shah-i-Zinda; Gur Emir Mausoleum; Art Gallery Happy Bird; Siab Bazaar; Ulugbek Madrasah; Bibi Khanym Mosque; Tillya Kori Madrasah.

The main characteristics of the attractions analysed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main characteristics of the attractions analysed (Source: Data obtained from TripAdvisor in December 2024; Own calculations; TripAdvisor's classification goes from 1 (Terrible) to 5 (Excellent))

Attractions	Number of reviews	Number of reviews in English	Average review	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Poor	Terrible
Registan	1,943	724	5	1,595	273	47	14	14
Shah-i-Zinda	988	361	4	861	112	13	1	1
Gur Emir Mausoleum	838	297	4.5	632	185	19	2	0
Art Gallery Happy Bird	233	67	5	219	11	2	1	0
Siab Bazaar	376	109	4	161	152	58	1	4
Ulugbek Madrasah	457	127	4.5	318	112	25	2	0
Bibi Khanym Mosque	674	221	4.5	328	255	80	9	2
Tillya Kori Madrasah	253	79	4.5	198	48	5	2	0
Total	5,762	1,985		4,312	1,148	249	32	21

Most reviews are extremely positive (75%), followed by very good (20%). Negative reviews ("Poor" or "Terrible") are residual, totalling less than 1%. In December 2024, the last 50 reviews written in English from each attraction were manually retrieved from TripAdvisor, comprising a total of 400 reviews. The choice of the last 50 reviews was due to data availability and relevance, in order to include only reviews from the past six years. Travelers with different language backgrounds interpret eWOM differently because of variations in expressions, terminology, and linguistic structures.

Even with similar experiences, these differences may lead to varying satisfaction levels. Although some studies have examined multilingual reviews to explore such effects (e.g., Lin et al., 2024), analyzing eWOM across languages remains challenging. Since we use only the reviews posted in English we are focusing our analysis on a foreign point of view of Samarkand's attractions. Table 2 presents the main characteristics of the sampled reviews.

Table 2. Main characteristics of the sample analysed (Source: Data obtained from TripAdvisor in December 2024; Own calculations)

Attractions	Average review	Standard deviation	Excellent	Average number of photos by reviewer	Average number of posts by reviewer
Registan	4.74	0.890	45	3.6	2,344
Shah-i-Zinda	4.92	0.337	48	4.0	3,140
Gur Emir Mausoleum	4.70	0.574	37	3.3	3,352
Art Gallery Happy Bird	4.92	0.337	47	1.0	223
Siab Bazaar	4.08	0.744	16	2.6	4,612
Ulugbek Madrasah	4.80	0.400	40	2.4	3,666
Bibi Khanym Mosque	4.52	0.640	30	2.5	4,118
Tillya Kori Madrasah	4.90	0.300	45	2.5	3,320
Total	4.70	0.625	307	2.7	3,097

Most reviews are extremely positive (307 out of 400, or 77%), with negative reviews ("Poor" or "Terrible") being residual (around 1%). Reviews are very consistent, as can be seen by the low values for the standard deviation. The reviews of the most popular attractions tend to be accompanied by a higher number of photos, with the exception of the "Art Gallery Happy Bird", which seems to attract a different type of traveler. Most reviews were made by experienced travelers, with a significant track record in terms of presence in TripAdvisor. Albeit not presented, notice that the correlations

between the rating and the number of reviews or photos are extremely low, respectively, -0.02 and 0.14. The correlation between the number of reviews and the number of posted photos is higher (0.37).

Table 3. Type of travel by attraction (Source: Data obtained from TripAdvisor in December 2024; Own calculations)
(Notes: Percentages were computed considering only the 268 reviews presenting this characteristic)

	Couple	Family	Alone	Friends	Business
Registan	38%	14%	20%	24%	4%
Shah-i-Zinda	40%	15%	28%	15%	3%
Gur Emir Mausoleum	26%	19%	23%	32%	0%
Art Gallery Happy Bird	31%	14%	20%	23%	11%
Siab Bazaar	31%	14%	31%	23%	0%
Ulugbek Madrasah	17%	17%	39%	22%	6%
Bibi Khanyim Mosque	35%	30%	17%	17%	0%
Tillya Kori Madrasah	25%	11%	19%	44%	0%
Total	32%	16%	24%	25%	3%

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the sample distributed according to the type of travel, albeit about a third of the sample did not reveal how they traveled. Most reviews' types of travel are 'couple' (n=85, or 32% of total reviews), 'friends' (n=68, or 25%), and 'alone' (n=64, or 24%). As expected, 'business' motivation presents residual values.

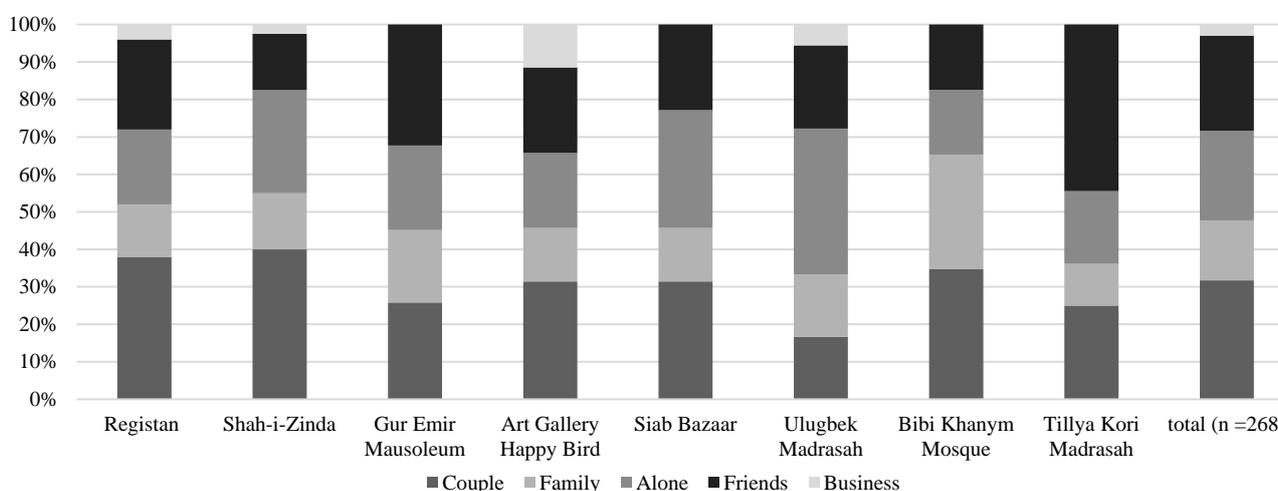


Figure 2. Type of travel by attraction (Source: Own calculations)

Considering the reviewers' country of origin, it was possible to identify 45 different countries in the 353 reviews which indicated the reviewer's origin. The five most represented countries are the United States (70 reviews, or 19,8%), The United Kingdom (53 reviews, or 15%), India (36 reviews, or 10%), Australia (35 reviews, or 10%) and, the United Arab Emirates (11 reviews, or 3%). Aggregating by regions, tourists from Oceania and Europe tend to give higher ratings (average of 4,83 and 4,78, respectively), whereas the lower ratings are given by Asian and Middle East tourists (4,59). This might be explained by cultural differences, and thus deeper appreciation of some attractions by visitors from Oceania and Europe.

Following these descriptive statistics, the following section presents further results, namely testing significant differences between reviews and a content analysis of the reviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Presence of significant differences

To test our first research question, we perform a t-test in order to determine whether there are significant differences in ratings. Table 4 presents the results for the t-test while differentiating between attraction, type of travel, region of origin and travel experience (with more than 1000 reviews in TripAdvisor or not). Since the t-test needs to consider an assumption regarding the equality of variances or not, previous to this test we tested whether the different pairs presented equal variances in order to perform the appropriate test for differences in means. Notice that a parametric test is used, since after computing the Doornik-Hansen test it was found that more than half of the data series followed a normal distribution.

Table 4. T-test for differences in review ratings between attractions, type of travel, region of origin and travel experience (Source: Data obtained from TripAdvisor in December 2024; Own calculations. * p<0.10; ** p<0.05 and *** p<0.01)

	t-test (p-value)
Registan vs. Art Gallery Happy Bird	-1.32 (*)
Registan vs. Siab Bazaar	3.98 (***)
Registan vs. Bibi Khanyim Mosque	1.40 (*)
Shah-i-Zinda vs. Gur Emir Mausoleum	2.31 (**)

Interestingly, negative words are almost absent, appearing mainly in the non-historical attractions (Happy Bird Gallery and Siab Bazaar). For instance, some travelers negatively note the presence of beggars and trash in Siab Bazaar.

So, it seems that the predominant themes regarding visitors' experiences in Samarkand main attractions tend to be independent of the type of travel, region of origin and travel experience. These themes illustrate the emotional and conative factors subjacent in tourists' reviews (Yuksel et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2023).

Table 5. Ten most frequent words (by attraction, rating, experience of travel, type of travel, and region of origin) (Source: Data obtained from Tripadvisor in December 2024. Own elaboration (using Maxqda))

Registan	%	Shah-i-Zinda	%	Gur Emir Mausoleum	%	Art Gallery Happy Bird	%	Siab Bazaar	%
square	4.75	beautiful	6.33	beautiful	6.58	local	4.32	good	10.69
amaze	3.85	much	4.33	small	2.89	many	3.75	nice	4.05
beautiful	3.85	stun	4.33	impressive	2.37	large	3.46	clean	3.70
light	2.49	amaze	3.00	great	2.11	fresh	2.59	great	2.88
different	2.26	blue	2.67	worth	2.11	good	2.59	friendly	2.63
much	2.04	worth	2.67	other	1.84	great	2.31	comfortable	2.50
many	1.81	many	2.00	stun	1.84	other	2.31	helpful	2.48
early	1.58	good	1.67	main	1.58	clean	2.02	big	2.04
free	1.58	different	1.33	actual	1.32	dry	2.02	large	1.82
great	1.58	fine	1.33	amaze	1.32	next	2.02	small	1.79
Ulugbek Madrasah	%	Bibi Khanym Mosque	%	Tilya Kori Madrasah	%	Rating 5	%	Rating < 5	%
beautiful	4.04	large	3.87	beautiful	5.04	beautiful	4.93	many	2.86
old	4.04	beautiiful	3.57	amaze	3.88	amaze	3.07	good	2.70
much	3.03	many	2.98	golden	3.10	great	2.39	large	2.70
amaze	2.69	much	2.98	much	2.71	much	2.20	other	2.22
leave	2.36	original	2.68	other	2.71	other	1.76	local	2.06
other	2.36	impressive	2.38	main	2.33	many	1.71	much	2.06
first	1.68	other	2.08	many	2.33	stun	1.66	beautiful	1.90
square	1.68	Interest	1.79	impressive	1.94	worth	1.46	nice	1.75
architectural	1.35	blue	1.19	last	1.94	old	1.27	small	1.75
blue	1.35	grand	1.19	square	1.94	square	1.27	main	1.59
> 1000 reviews	%	< 1000 reviews	%	With photos	%	Without photos	%		
beautiful	4.04	beautiful	4.28	beautiful	4.18	beautiful	4.21		
much	2.65	amaze	3.13	amaze	2.54	amaze	2.51		
many	2.02	great	3.13	much	2.19	great	2.51		
amaze	1.95	worth	2.14	many	2.12	much	2.11		
large	1.67	many	1.98	other	1.78	other	1.94		
other	1.67	other	1.98	great	1.58	many	1.78		
impressive	1.39	good	1.81	stun	1.51	worth	1.70		
small	1.39	stun	1.81	large	1.44	nice	1.62		
old	1.32	unique	1.81	good	1.30	local	1.46		
great	1.12	nice	1.73	old	1.30	square	1.38		
Europe	%	North America	%	Oceania	%	Asia & Middle East	%		
beautiful	4.73	many	4.19	much	4.26	beautiful	4.71		
amaze	2.67	beautiful	3.93	stun	3.88	amaze	3.19		
much	2.47	great	2.62	amaze	3.10	many	1.82		
other	2.47	other	1.83	beautiful	2.71	good	1.67		
great	1.95	amaze	1.57	blue	2.33	impressive	1.67		
large	1.95	lovely	1.57	worth	1.94	much	1.67		
many	1.75	peaceful	1.57	intricate	1.55	old	1.67		
old	1.64	well	1.57	other	1.55	square	1.67		
nice	1.54	worth	1.57	square	1.55	big	1.37		
square	1.54	affordable	1.31	ancient	1.16	local	1.37		
Couple	%	Family	%	Alone	%	Friends	%	ALL	%
beautiful	5.26	beautiful	6.19	beautiful	3.52	beautiful	4.55	beautiful	4.22
amaze	3.55	amaze	3.54	amaze	2.86	amaze	2.53	amaze	2.54
much	2.32	old	3.54	great	2.64	great	2.27	much	2.16
other	2.32	many	3.10	interest	2.64	square	2.27	great	2.02
different	1.85	other	2.65	many	2.42	many	2.02	many	1.98
nice	1.85	unique	2.65	much	2.42	much	2.02	other	1.87
square	1.70	affordable	2.21	other	1.76	nice	2.02	worth	1.49
worth	1.70	early	1.77	local	1.76	good	1.77	stun	1.34
great	1.55	good	1.77	well	1.76	stun	1.77	large	1.31
many	1.55	great	1.77	worth	1.76	worth	1.77	local	1.27

Second, Leximancer software was used to group concepts within themes and generate the corresponding concept maps to answer the first research question. Several phases were followed to build the concept maps. First, the Excel file with the

The Leximancer analysis yielded the following themes: ‘place’, ‘beautiful’, ‘tourists’, and ‘built’. The 12 significant concepts under the ‘place’ theme are ‘place’ (43; 81%), ‘buildings’ (34; 64%), ‘visit’ (42; 79%), ‘amazing’ (24; 45%), ‘mosque’ (25; 47%), ‘time’ (30; 57%), ‘history’ (22; 42%), ‘worth’ (16; 30%), ‘colours’ (14; 26%), ‘main’ (13; 25%), and ‘square’ (15; 28%). For travelers from Asia and the Middle East, the concept analysis identifies four themes, further separated into 38 concept seeds and structured in a conceptualized framework (Figure 7). The Leximancer analysis yielded the following themes: ‘visit’, ‘restored’, ‘decorated’, and ‘interesting’. For instance, there are 19 significant concepts under the ‘visit’ theme, with the most relevant being ‘visit’, ‘beautiful’, ‘place’, ‘building’, and ‘mosque’ (all with relevance above 50%), followed by ‘architecture’ and ‘dome’. Examples from some reviews are:

“Tilya kori is probably the best interior of all the architecture found in Uzbekistan. Fine gold gild work, amazing designs.” (traveler from India, March 2019).

“The whole place is a pure ensemble of architecture and culture history. No questions about it, Samarkand is one of Must Visit Places while in Uzbekistan.” (traveler from England, June 2017).

These results show the emphasis put by visitors on the buildings’ architectural aspects.

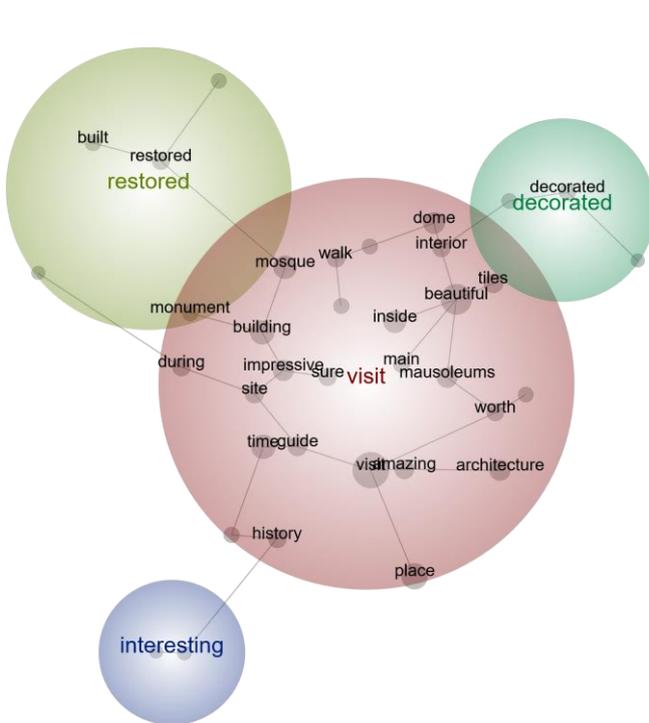


Figure 7. Concept map (Asian and Middle East travelers)
(Source: Own elaboration)

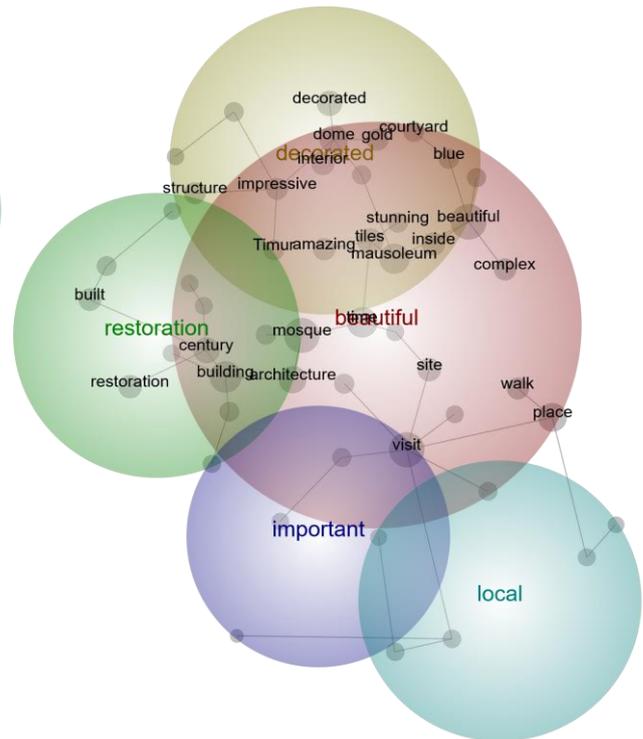


Figure 8. Concept map (Experienced travelers)
(Source: Own elaboration)

Finally, regarding reviews from Experienced travelers, the concept analysis identifies five themes, further separated into 51 concept seeds and structured in a conceptualized framework. The five themes revealed by the concept map are the following: ‘beautiful’, ‘decorated’, ‘restoration’, ‘local’, and ‘important’. The following are revealed by the concept analysis (Figure 8). For instance, the 7 significant concepts under the ‘decorated’ theme are ‘decorated’ (36; 53%), ‘interior’ (25; 37%), ‘gold’ (24, 35%), ‘impressive’ (23; 34%), ‘structure’ (27, 40%), ‘courtyard’ (22, 32%), and ‘Timur’ (23, 34%). This also evidences the importance given to the buildings visited and the impact of some of its architectural details. For instance, one traveler from Denmark posted that “This is a place that I have seen in books, films, documentaries etc. for years. And it is truly stunning. At a distance it is very impressive Persian style architecture, very beautiful, but close up, the details are just amazing.” (July 2024).

The common themes in all concept maps tend to be ‘visit’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘mosque’, highlighting the impact and relevance of Samarkand’s main historical buildings, a result which is in accordance with previous literature (Rosley et al., 2024).

Although not presented, other aspects of the sample were also analysed. For instance, for reviews associated with less experienced travelers, Leximancer identifies four themes (‘visit’, ‘shop’, ‘mosque’, and ‘unique’), separated into 53 concept seeds. These themes are quite different from the ones identified for experienced travelers, highlighting the importance of the visit and its uniqueness to the former. Finally, considering the two non-historical attractions, for Siab Bazaar Leximancer identifies 5 themes: ‘fruits’, ‘buy’, ‘place’, ‘area’, and ‘sell’, whereas, for the Happy Bird Gallery, it were identified four themes, namely, ‘place’, ‘beautiful’, ‘clothes’, and ‘best’. As expected, the ranking (and differences) between the themes reflects the differing types of attractions, guests, and their region of origin, which is an aspect identified in the literature (e.g., Ali et al., 2023, among others).

Regarding the second research question, it is possible to conclude that the travelers’ predominant themes regarding their experiences are mostly common and independent of the type of travel or region of origin.

Similarly, to previous research (e.g., Rosley et al., 2024), reviews tend to focus on the spectacular and impact factors of the buildings and their architectural features. Some visitors manifest concern with restoration aspects, maintenance of the buildings and accessibility conditions, but the vast majority tend to underscore the impactful and positive aspects of the different attractions. It should be noted that while there are various themes identified, none specifically address environmental or sustainability issues, for instance, concerns about over tourism or climate change impacts on fragile structures. This absence may reflect either the priorities of the visitors or the platform's structural design, which may not actively encourage or facilitate such types of feedback.

CONCLUSION

While extensive research has explored the use of online platforms to highlight people's motivations for engaging in tourism activities, there remains a lack of in-depth content analysis that thoroughly captures and represents the intangible and tangible heritage resources of destinations that appeal to heritage-focused tourists.

The aim of this study was to understand tourists' perceptions of a relevant tourist destination, Samarkand, in Uzbekistan. A netnographic analysis was carried out considering the reviews made on the TripAdvisor platform.

Eight main attractions were identified and a total of 400 comments were analysed, encompassing a period of 5 years, from January 2019 to November 2024. Considering the visitors' profile, a content analysis was carried out that sought to categorize visitors' perceptions into specific categories.

It is worth noting that the main tourist attractions in Samarkand listed on TripAdvisor have received extremely positive reviews, many of which were left by experienced travelers with significant history on the platform. It seems that these attractions are highly attractive and deservedly popular with international travelers. Very few comments such as the presence of beggars and trash only appear in the case of the non-historic attractions (Happy Bird Gallery and Siab Bazaar).

Regarding differences, the results show that travelers from Oceania and Europe differ significantly from travelers from Asia and the Middle East, with higher scores, possibly due to cultural reasons and different sensitivity to Islamic culture and architecture, which may be more novel and less known for them. While region of origin seems to matter, there is no evidence of significant differences between traveler's type. Visitors' feedback stresses the impressive architecture and positive experiences, regardless of origin or type of trip. As stated by Suyarov (2017), most tourists enjoy visiting historical sites and are particularly impressed by the architecture of Samarkand. Akbar (2020) in research regarding statistical analyses of tourism in Uzbekistan, found that Samarkand stands out in terms of "attractions," particularly its historical sites and natural tourism resources, when compared to other cities in Uzbekistan. However, Suyarov (2017) notes that there are tourists who seek more authentic experiences, such as visiting local houses, engaging with locals, and participating in the local gastronomic experiences. Therefore, it is important to develop new types of experiences in Samarkand to attract a wider range of international tourists (Suyarov, 2017).

It is very encouraging that the majority of comments on TripAdvisor are positive about Samarkand's attractions. Visitors seem to be particularly impressed by the stunning Islamic architecture, vibrant bazaars, rich heritage and hospitable atmosphere in the city. These positive impressions reflect the efforts of the government and tourism stakeholders to develop the sector in the country, especially over the last decade. However, it is important for tourism development to consider other aspects of sustainability beyond enhancing attractiveness. Environmental or sustainability related comments were not identified in the analysed reviews. However, we think that tourism planners and responsible agencies should take those issues into consideration. The continuous growth of tourism inflows to Samarkand raises concerns about the impact of unsustainable or over tourism on its main attractions. Additionally, climate-related phenomena (e.g., heat/cold waves, torrential rains, etc.), can have relevant impacts on historical structures, leading to higher maintenance and restoration costs).

Both intangible and tangible factors are important in attracting travelers to visit a certain site. Our results highlight the relevance of intangible aspects, rooted in the historical importance of Samarkand in the Silk Road. These intangible aspects engaged and inspired travelers, which reflected their positive sentiments in reviews, thus reinforcing loyalty and commitment among travelers for those aspects. Thus, regarding the main components of destination image, we consider that the three dimensions prevail in the reviews analysed. Several reviews reflect the historical context of Samarkand's buildings and knowledge about the centuries-old relevance of the city in the Silk Road. On the other hand, most reviews also transmit a sense of awe and reverence towards Samarkand's historical richness and buildings.

Finally, many reviews recommend Samarkand and its main attractions to other travelers or express the desire to return. It is essential for tourism destination managers to grasp the primary cognitive elements shared by tourists, as these highlight the most important features of the tourist experience. Emotional factors provide valuable insights into what makes an encounter truly memorable. Conative aspects, on the other hand, allow managers to gauge the extent of visitors' recommendations - both positive and negative - shared with others. This understanding helps management organizations identify which aspects of the destination should be maintained, improved, or addressed to foster its development. Overall, this paper provides local authorities and stakeholders with evidence to strengthen Samarkand's identity and attractiveness, guiding strategies for the sustainable promotion of heritage tourism.

This paper is of an exploratory nature, presenting some limitations that could be addressed in future research, namely (i) Since this study evaluates secondary data from TripAdvisor, issues related to the integrity of guests' reviews and the lack of control in data collection could compromise our conclusions. Future research should identify the impact of biased comments; (ii) Differences in reviews may depend on guests' gender, age, cultural background and other variables. Additionally, only reviews written in English are analysed, which cannot reflect tourists' interactions

worldwide, so that results may not be generalizable to non-English populations; (iii) We selected the last fifty reviews for each attraction. Although this approach provides more up-to-date data, it may introduce a recency bias into the study.

Therefore, random sampling of all reviews from a given time period or including reviews covering different periods may increase the generalizability of the findings; (iv) Finally, only reviews from TripAdvisor were used, it would be interesting to conduct a comparative study with other platforms to cross-validate travelers' perspectives. This issue is especially relevant since different nationalities tend to use different platforms.

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