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Journal article

Designing a tourist experience for numen seekers

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Designing a tourist experience for numen seekers

Purpose Although tourist experience has been considerably studied, there is a dearth of research on spiritual cognitive stages in tourism literature. Therefore, this paper aims to reveal the dimensions of the tourist experience based on numinosity context.

Design/methodology/approach A qualitative method is used by the etic and emic approach with an ethnographic background. After observation and active participation in the field, data were collected from 44 participants with semi-structured interviews to reveal their numinous experiences dimensions.

Findings The results show that numinous experience in three categories (mysterium, tremendum and fascinans) can be evaluated in seven dimensions including history, story, awe, reverence, atmosphere, place-based and nature-based dimensions.

Practical implications This study provides managerial and practical implications for tourism stakeholders to be aware of numinous experiences and to better manage sacred places.

Originality/value This paper offers a novel tourist experience design in the numinous context to the best of the authors' knowledge.

Keywords: numinous experience, religion, tourism, emic-etic approach, Virgin Mary House.

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

Believe in God or not; have a tendency of a belief or not, why people do visit a sacred place with an excursion programme during their all-inclusive holiday instead of sipping a cold beer next to the beach on a sunny day? Similar questions can be asked for different tourism scenarios like Cameron and Gatewood (2003, p.55) ask, “*why else beyond information-gathering, having fun, and creating family memories, do people go to historic places?*”. The answer may be multidimensional: getting bored to have the sea, sun and sand travel combination, willing to escape from the current mood and environment (Scitovsky, 1992), or simply desiring to experience the ‘different’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The nature of experience itself is a complex matter of fact (Bideci & Albayrak, 2018) and has multiple dynamics, meanings and stages. With this regard, there has been an upsurge research trend on tourist experience studies in terms of tourists` meaning-making paradigm (Rounds, 1999) which is relatively a new phenomenon for tourism researchers compare to well-established service-based experiences including service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1994); personal characteristics (Uriely, 2005); services (Zatori, Smith and Puczko, 2018); physical environment, motivation,

and expectations (Walls et al., 2011). This trend has also brought varied definitions to the tourist experience. For example, from Dewey (1938) to Pine and Gilmore (1999), tourist experience has been defined as an outcome of economic settings which lead to happiness in moments or learning something by participating in a touristic activity however, they may not be the only constituents of tourist experiences, especially in sacred places.

Although many researchers have disclosed emotional and cognitive stages of the tourist experience around the sense of being remembered, unforgettable or different from daily life (Packer and Ballantyne, 2016), less attention has been devoted to understanding the psychological stages. As Falk and Dierking (2013, p.174) state “...*these feelings tend to coalesce into a single experience perceived as a whole, but a whole much larger than generally recognized, or at least fully acknowledged...*”. At that point, Cameron and Gatewood (2003) introduced a new term ‘numinous experience’ based on Otto’s (1917) numinosity theory for those who (numen seekers) seeks deeper and more spiritual meanings. The numinous acts, which are rooted in substantive religion theory, are defined metaphorically as a spiritual influence by an object or place (Otto, 1917) and have a symbolic meaning (Jaeger and Selznick, 1964). In both sacred and touristic settings, religiosity may not be the sole trigger to attract people, but also the structural features and aesthetic components of the places (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004) or a unique version of experience in which a “*positive connection or bond between a person and a particular place*” (Williams and Vaske, 2003, p.831) can play a significant role by creating a construct feeling of numinosity (Rounds, 1999). Moreover, as Watson (2007) states, psychological states can be combined with mystical experiences as a form of numinous consciousness. Hence, numinous characteristics like mystery, fear, fascinate in spiritual forms can be useful to explain these consciousness stages while visiting a sacred place.

This paper, therefore, aims to examine the tourist experience in a sacred place and proposes a new tourist experience design including numinous characteristics. The study contributes to the literature in three different but interdependent angles. First, the paper provides a theoretical background of tourist experience and its changing structure. Second, it describes the characteristics of numinous experiences and repositions them for the tourism sector. Third, the paper proposes a conceptual framework of numinous tourist experience by the emic and etic approaches and provides implications for the new experience design. The paper ends with a discussion of the current perspective of numinous experience practices and its reflection on future studies.

2. Literature review

2.1. *The changing structure of the tourist experience*

The contemporary economic environment has influenced the notion of consumer experience in a continuous change. (Losada, Alén, and Domínguez, 2019). In time, this transformed from agrarian (farm-based) and goods-based industrial incentives into the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) which is an important value but “not an amorphous construct” (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, p.1) for businesses. According to Kahneman (2011), these changes have been evaluated by the researchers in terms of some criteria including being ‘remembered’, offering a ‘peak point once in life’ or ‘teaching something new’. In other words, as Hemmington states (2007, p.749) “...customers do not buy service delivery, they buy experiences; they do not buy service quality, they buy memories”. Accordingly, the consumer experience has been interpreted mainly by four forms in the realm of cognition: peak (Maslow, 1970; Mkono, Markwell and Wilson, 2013); 4Es -esthetic, entertainment, education, escape- (Pine and Gilmore, 1999); memorable (Zatori, Smith and Puczko, 2018; Tung and Ritchie, 2011); and transformative (Wassler and Kuteynikova, 2020).

Introduced by Maslow (1970), peak experience is defined as exhilarating experiences which generate an advanced form of perceiving reality that affects the experimenter. When visitors engage with unknown and unfamiliar places and people, there will be a feeling of a peak in their emotions, but generally for a short time (Luhmann, 1982). Through the involvement of emotional and cognitive processes, economies have ceased to be experience-oriented and have created an experience economy based on psychological stages (Kim and Chen, 2019) with provided services. In this regard, the 4Es experience economy has been proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) and associated with visiting, seeing, learning, enjoying and involving which “*corresponds to customer participation and the connection, or environmental relationship*” (p.101). Thoroughly, experience results in education, esthetic, escape and education forms by tourist participation (active or passive) and tourist connection (absorption or immersion). Later, the term of memorable tourism experience (MTE) has been used to “*understand the cognitive processes that impede individuals from paying attention to their experiences, as well as the conceptual processes of memory formation and retention*” (Tung and Ritchie, 2011, p.1367). Hedonism (Kim, 2010), memory (Kim and Jang, 2016), involvement (Wei *et al.*, 2019), emotion (Knobloch, Robertson, and Aitken, 2016) and novelty (Kim and Ritchie, 2014) are common dimensions of MTEs which focused on consumers` memory stages to understand the memorable experiences. The physical attributes such as the design of the place, the employees in the workplace, other customers, souvenirs and, more

importantly, a story told to the customers create a memorable experience. Recently, the transformative experience has been issued which refer to busting out of the comfort zone to grow, learn and engage with the world outside of the personal bubble that helps to have an organic and effective way to bring about personal change with touristic experiences. Transformative experience in a tourism context is seen in different forms such as volunteer tourism (Magrizos, Kostopoulos and Powers, 2020); religious tourism (Becker, 2018); couch surfing (Decrop, Del Chiappa, Mallargé, Zidda, 2018); or urban tourism (Wearing, Foley, 2017). The main dimensions of transformative experiences are experiential value, the motive of learning and the expansion of perception.

Although exploring the experiences and potential consequences (e.g., being memorable, transformative) have been common in related literature, the act of ‘seeking’ and find a ‘meaning’, feeling a deep engagement or transcendence have remained limited to understand the psychological stages (e.g., fear) of the tourist experience. However, because of the negative cause-effect reflection of recent swift mobility and sameness-of-demand, a comprehensive understanding including those psychological stages of experience is essential (Wilson, McIntosh and Zahra, 2013). Moreover, travels to sacred places have become important practices (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) and preferences (Wilson, McIntosh and Zahra, 2013) for those who seek a deep (spiritual) meaning instead of a sole religious or pure touristic experience. Therefore, as adopted in this paper, numinous experiences which have certain cognitive characteristics are mainly related to visitor’s emotional stages to spice the feelings than the touristic products or service-related emotional stages.

2.2. *The numinous experience*

The contemporary era has witnessed dramatic alterations in religious structures and networks and increased the visibility of ‘combinative’ spirituality which refers to a combination of both religiosity and secularity. According to McCloud (2007), due to “*improvisatory picking, mixing, and combining of beliefs and practices from a variety of religious traditions*” (p.298), this combinative form has created a “*reflexive project of self*” (p.300). Hence, religious places, named as ‘spiritual marketplace’ (Roof, 1993), are important venues to discover self-identity and host the followers of combinative spirituality. The spiritual-based experience in such places gains a new insight compared to traditional religious institutions’ practices. In response to this, the theologian Rudolf Otto (1917) introduced the term ‘numinous’ in ‘The Idea of the Holy’ as the sense of experiencing a mystery that is at once terrifying and fascinating. This experience emerges phenomenologically as a reaction to the presence of a sacred or demonic

entity, a wholly other, and is ineffable, that is, it cannot be exhaustively described using rational terms. Beyond contributing this rather general definition of numinosity to the theory, he formulated a three-ground classification of numinosity in Latin version to capture the essence of the experience: (1) *mysterium* in which the numinous is "wholly other" -entirely different from anything we experience in ordinary life; (2) *tremendum* (terrifying) in which the dreadful, fearful, and overwhelming aspect of the numinous appears; (3) *fascinans* (fascinating, merciful and gracious) or "*the Dionysiac element*" (Otto 1950, p.31-34), by which humans are irresistibly drawn to the glory, beauty, adorable quality, and the blessing, redeeming, and salvation -bringing the power of transcendence.

As one of the main characteristics of the numinous experience (Schlamm, 2007), *mysterium* differs from routine feelings in daily life experiences with an unusual sense based on the reality that relates to the sacred (Dawson, 1989). The sense of numinosity appears as an act to the presence of a *mystery* which is "*beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own*" (Otto, 1958, p.28). The *tremendum* refers to a pious fear in which there is a dominating feeling of willpower, energy, excitement, and activity related to the numinous presence (Schlamm, 2007). In a tourism setting, *tremendum* reflects the experiences which related to some emotional stages such as feeling fear or deep respect. The *fascinans* stands for 'harmonic contrast' to *tremendum* (Otto, 1917) with the absence of time perception, logical associations, and peripheral attention outside the immediate area of focus including the desire of living something 'more' and 'deeper' (Otto, 1917). In that stage, such feelings may be one of the most satisfying experiences one can have in life which is described as supernatural related to mystical encounters of the spiritual experiences.

The notion of numinosity which specifies the type of experiencing the mystic, tremendous and fascinating as the presence of the unique cognitive nature of people has been applied in different fields, such as ethnology (Cameron and Gatewood, 2003) and cultural sciences (Johannsen, 2008); neuropsychology (Johnstone et al., 2012); and folkloric narratology (Varnado, 2015). For instance, in ethnology, the numinous experience has been studied as the reflection of cognitive concepts of unknown and fascinated feelings (Johannsen, 2008). In addition, research in cultural sciences has adopted the term numinosity and proved its utility in various contexts which addressed the numinous experiences' bond with the place itself. As an example, Latham (2013) studied the numinous experiences with museum objects and found out that visiting a museum provides deep engagement and the feeling of

transcendence as numinous experiences. According to Miles (2014), visiting a dark tourism place provide a thanatotic motivation with a numen-seeking orientation in the site by feeling the horror and awe. Moreover, within a wellness tourism setting, Pernecky and Johnston (2006) have addressed the importance of numinosity when choosing a wellness place.

Contrary to its existence in a wide range of fields, there is an ongoing discussion about the numinous experience because of unclear differences of three numinous forms especially between *tremendum* and *mysterium* (Miranda, 2018). Separating the meaning of these forms from well-known terms is challenging because of Otto's (1917) work which refers to supernatural phenomena such as deities, ghosts, sacred things or demonic entities of wholly other that is ineffable and cannot be exhaustively described using rational terms. Indeed, some researchers recommend distinguishing these three forms according to their structures whether an experience can be explained by commonly known terminology such as 'mystic' (Hood & Francis, 2013; Wulff, 2014). According to Proudfoot (1985), this can be achieved by interpretation of the experience and by explaining the wholly other.

When it comes to a tourism setting, there are reflections of the numinosity in tourists' desires in terms of being a part of a transcendental connection with some external elements, engagement with the past (Cameron and Gatewood, 2003); setting an empathy about what life was really like in the era of a particular place; getting a feeling of fear along with being fascinated and engaged in a specific place. For example, as Cameron and Gatewood (2000) state, the experiences can be "*transcendental that people can have in contact with a historic site or object in an exhibit*" (p.110) which "*...a certain portion of visitors want to consume history in a deeper, effective, and personal way [and want] to go back in time and imagine what actors were feeling*" (p.194). These feelings may also cover the feeling of 'peak', in which tourists can be fascinated and live a unique experience; memorable, by which tourist can create a cognitive bridge between the mind and emotions to have memorable moments including the feelings of mystery, fear and admire; and transformative experience, by which tourist can also live a transcendental moment by numinous experiences at one time.

According to Schmitt (1999), the tourist experience encompasses sensing, feeling, thought, action, and belonging which implies a subjective, personal, multidimensional, and complicated construct; therefore, understanding of the experience become demanding. Moreover, although religious imagery is based on a religious experience, the numinous feelings are beyond religiosity but still exist in a holy form which is applied to encounters of different contexts or the secularly spiritual (Sharp, 2014). Therefore, religious activities continue to exist in daily life for all humanity, even those who do not have a religious identity (Wuthnow, 1988),

because the spirituality seekers of combinative religion are connected to places and others. Hence, exploring combinative spirituality on the wholly other with a contrast harmony can be useful to interpret the tourist experience. However, the meaning of the numinous experience because of a deep engagement or transcendence with a sacred place remained limited to understand the cognitive notion of the tourist experience.

Please Insert Table 1 here

To identify the gap between existing studies in experience context, this study provided an overall insight into tourist experience concepts. According to Table 1, experience which counted as peak (Maslow, 1970), 4Es (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and MTE-memorable (Tung and Ritchie, 2011) are mainly based on service-related commodity and/or activity, transformative (Wassler and Kuteynikova, 2020) and numinous types are more activity related experiences which differ from each other in terms of attributes. Similarly, a specific time is important, generally for a short time for peak, 4Es and memorable while these experiences are enduring for transformative and numinous. The other dynamics, behaviour, cognition, emotion, character, offer and delivery are different for numinous from other experience types. A distinctive difference can be found especially in the spiritual and emotion-based structure of numinosity (Otto, 1917; Cameron and Gatewood, 2003; Latham, 2007) in terms of emotion, offer and delivery of the experience. In this connection, to understand better and interpret the tourist experience formed by mysterium, tremendum and fascinans attributes, this study is grounded on discovering the numinous experience characteristics related to sacred places within the tourist experience context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research area

Offering both sacred and touristic activities (Bideci, 2018), Virgin Mary House (VMH) was chosen as the research area. The main characteristics of this house are framed by its physical space and religious profile. The physical space of VMH is an authentic one located on a green mountain and between an archaeological ancient site (Ephesus) and a touristic destination (Kusadasi). The house also holds a religious image by inholding mythical and religious identities. After being discovered in the 19th century by following the vision of a Catholic nun Emmerich about the exact location, the house has received a considerable number of pilgrims. After Pope VI's visit in 1967, the popularity of the VHM has increased and attracts around

700.000 tourists every year (SCC, 2016) which made this place one of the most visited tourist destinations in Turkey. The tourists from different religions, nationalities and beliefs degree visit VMH based on multiple reasons e.g., the story of Saint John, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus and Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, who came and lived here (Alaharasan, 2006). Upon entrance, a tourist is met by a small chapel with an altar and a large statue of Mary. Outside of the house, there are some religious recreational areas such as a wishing wall by which tourists wish something with a piece of fabric and a three-head fountain which is believed to provide fertility, healing, luck and love if drinking.

3.2. Research design

According to Platenkamp (2007), even though tourists share similar backgrounds they are confronted with different cultural environments when they visit, due to the multi-dimensional structure of tourists' behaviour, experience, and decisions (Martin and Woodside, 2008). In this sense, tourist experience is associated with understanding others' actions, meanings, cultures and rituals within products and services provided in cross-cultural destinations. However, this cross-cultural travel behaviour may be difficult to understand with a quantitative research approach. Therefore, this study is designed by a qualitative method with emic and etic approaches to understanding the tourist experiences in VMH by both in-depth interviews and observation with active participation (Sogunro, 2002). To conceptualize numinous experiences, both etic and emic approaches are needed which were first introduced by Pike (1954) and used by Gottlieb (1982) in the tourism field. According to Jennings (2010), the researcher should actively participate in the research setting to be involved as a member to immerse a rarely discovered concept. The etic approach refers to research that studies cross-cultural differences and includes understanding the insights on tourist experience by implementing the methodology rules and field study with defining the research questions. The emic approach refers to research that fully studies the concept without cross-cultural focus (Fetvadjev and van de Vijver, 2015), and allows researchers to capture the complexities of leisure travel experiences (Martin and Woodside, 2008) by conducting observation, active participation, as given in Figure 1. To explore the notion of numinous within tourists' experience, the emic approach (researcher's interpretation which concerning with the concept inside the research environment) and etic approach (the study outside of researcher's interpretation which defining empirical analysis and strict method rules) have been used as the method of the study.

Please insert Figure 1 here

3.2.1. Emic approach

Before interviewing with participants on the field, to understand the real context (the numinous phenomenon) (Bogden and Biklen, 2007) behind the theoretical world, an observation process by authors was implemented to seek the tourist experience at the field with an outsider gaze. During the observations, which lasted for 7 days in the field, the authors kept a research journal to record all ideas, thoughts and observations to provide a useful source (Delbridge and Kirkpatrick, 1994) for understanding the structure and ingredients of tourists' experiences. As a part of the emic procedure, the researchers actively participated in activities to understand the numinous experience. It was observed that a typical tour lasts four hours via a package tour in VMH. In this regard, the authors experienced the four-hour whole tour from the tourists' gaze. This active participation also provided an observation opportunity and to practice what they observed in the field (Johnson, Avenarius and Weatherford, 2006). The tour included mainly a service-based experience such as transportation from the city centre to VMH, tour guiding service in the bus and on the field, the opportunity of buying souvenirs and getting food and beverage service. All details related to experience in VMH were recorded in the research journal (Burgess, 1981) including service-based services and the emotive and cognitive experiences stages such as praying in the church and wishing fortunes by fountains.

3.2.2. Etic approach

An etic approach process to understand the insights of numinosity of tourist experience, we used literature search (Heppner *et al.*, 2015) for the theoretical background of numinous experience, interviews with religious staff of VMH and with the tourists to identify the conceptual themes and items. To ensure that the procedure goes smoothly, each step was determined and checked based on related literature (Churchill, 1979; Hinkins, 1995). Firstly, as no approach exists in terms of numinous experiences in a similar context, before and during the data collection process, the numinous related experience statements were searched from literature to explore how and why these statements have been used in different disciplines (e.g., psychology, education, sociology). Second, an interview based on criterion sampling (scheduled via email) face to face with the priest (Male-34 years old) of VMH was conducted in the research area for 40 minutes to understand both the touristic and spiritual atmosphere of VMH and tourist profile. Through the priest's recommendation (snowball sampling), the three nuns (3 Female-25/26/30 age) of VMH were individually included in interviews (took around

25 minutes for each) to understand the atmosphere of this sacred place, performed rituals by both tourists and pilgrims, the provided services, which created a database for the thematic analysis of this study. Third, with the purposive sampling method (Gentles et al., 2015), 40 tourists were selected who visited VMH and experienced the rituals and services and were included in the research. Required ethical procedures were applied to the research and all interviews were held in English.

The tourist profile of VMH changes from Christians to atheists because of the combinative structure of the place (McCloud, 2007). Therefore, their motivation to visit VMH mainly divides into two categories (1) tourists who come to be a pilgrim or to pray and (2) tourists who take a daily trip package from a travel agency or passer-by travellers who wonder about the place. Although the place is specified for Catholic Christians, the design of visiting area provide opportunities for all tourists to experience the sacred rituals and services like pilgrims. In this study, without discrimination, tourists from the different religious background were invited to interviews (only who completed the whole tour were invited to interviews) in recreation areas (in café and shopping places) of VMH. Before starting to interview, the general framework of the study and details of the interview (duration, where the data will be used) were explained to each participant. Subsequently, the participants were asked to respond to the open-ended questions about their VMH visit experience. Semi-structured interviews started with firstly asking demographic related questions (e.g., age, gender, religious affiliation, and belief degree) and motivation to visit VMH to provide the trustworthiness of qualitative data (Polit and Beck, 2014). Especially the questions related to their religious affiliation and belief degree intentionally were chosen to understand their experiences more deeply. Then broad questions (adopted from Cameron and Gatewood, 2003; Latham, 2007) such as “What does the VHM mean for you?” and “How do you describe your experience in the VHM?” were asked. These questions led to in-depth conversations (appx. 30 minutes) about their understanding and perception of experience. During interviews, with the permission of participants, a voice recording was applied following ethics procedures to ensure the reliability of data (Foroudi et al., 2017). The saturation of data was a cue to stop the process because participants’ expressions began to repeat (Corbin and Holt, 2005).

3.3. *Data analysis*

Once in-field research was completed, the research journals and voice recordings of participants were transcribed into written text forms by the researchers. To achieve the transcription process systematically, researchers assigned an Id number, date and duration

information for each audio recording file. Then each researcher transcribed audio files manually in word formats and re-read them several times until data formed as more meaningful. After the transcription process, the content analysis was performed to analyse recorded data (Kassarjan, 1977) by authors and two other researchers who are familiar with the content analysis. The emic approach let the authors identify the key themes during the active participation and observations and helped to create a draft format of coding rules, while taking Otto's (1917) *mysterium*, *tremendum*, and *fascinans* into consideration, a code list was generated (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Thoroughly, a coding score was ruled to classify the data into three dimensions as '1' for *mysterium*, '2' for *tremendum*, and '3' for *fascinans*. Then, after settling each sentence in the appropriate group, the coding process was conducted using certain themes. To reveal subsections of *mysterium*, the words 'different', 'mystery', 'legend', 'myth' and 'other'; for *tremendum* 'fear', 'sin', 'reverence', and 'respect'; and for the *fascinans*, the words of 'power', 'strong', 'fascinating', 'atmosphere', 'interesting', and 'surprising' were used.

Coding error is a part of the nature of qualitative analysis (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Therefore, a cross-check process was implemented to minimize the risk of unreliable and invalid data and clarifying statements for their similarity or necessity (Dedeoglu *et al.*, 2020). First, the re-coding process to determine themes were applied for the same data, independently by two researchers of this study and two external researchers in the same academic field. Second, to provide inter-rater reliability between coders, the percentage agreement (Krippendorff, 2011) method was used. According to the result, the Kappa coefficient of inter-four works was 0.89 which is accepted as almost perfect agreement (Viera and Garret, 2005). All process was taken placed independently and controlled systemically and data was transcribed the same as bare fact. 7 themes were derived from each coder and these themes were transformed into preliminary statements for the initial data pool. The agreed-on themes are history; story; awe; reverence; atmosphere; place-based; nature-based. The thematic content of the research was proved to reveal the main actors of numinous feelings in tourist experiences.

4. Findings

The demographics of interviewers were 22 males and 22 females out of 44, and their ages ranged between 25 to 60. Although there is not a difference between the number of pious (13) and non-pious tourists (13), most of the participants were Christian and mainly from the Catholic sect (% 30). Table 2 illustrates that the main reasons (based on 40 tourists) for visiting

VMH were mainly touristic (67.5 %), and the rest was for religious (32.5 %). Regarding findings related to numinous experience, 7 themes, which are consistent with Otto's (1917) three factors of numinosity (the *mysterium*, *tremendum* and *fascinans*), were used as the key categories of statements and guide dimensions. According to results, the awe and reverence belong to *tremendum*; history and story dimensions support the *mysterium*; atmosphere, place-based and nature-based refer to *fascinans*. As a general outcome, all of the participants including non-pious tourists stated that they were affected by both the spiritual atmosphere and the historical value of VMH confirming its combinative structure. This also showed compatibility with priest and nuns' statements regarding how tourists live an experience in VMH. The next subsections present the participants' experiences in numinous form.

Please insert Table 2 here

4.1. *Mysterium*

The *mysterium* appears in the story and history forms derived from visitors' sense of wonder and mystery which is enriched by Emmerich's legend and papal visits throughout modern history in VMH.

4.1.1. *Story*

While each travel act needs a reason, some travels are more intriguing with both tangible (e.g., physical characteristic) and intangible (e.g., story, myth, legend) reasons. In this study, both the journey of Virgin Mary and Saint John and the vision of Emmerich have created an intense imagination and bring a feeling of numinosity for the tourists. Approximately 90 % of participants said that the stories they heard before coming to VMH and during the visit have led them to wonder about the place and created to feel a spiritual feeling and attachment to story hero/es. In this regard, as one of the distinguished findings of this study, the story of VMH has impressed tourists and provided a willingness to go past and influenced them to make a bond with the place with a story (e.g., the dream of Emmerich) as a part of numinous experience. For example, a 43-year-old-Catholic-female participant, who visited VMH to be a pilgrim for the first time, stated that she had the feeling to witness the mentioned time told in the story:

It has a fantastic story full of legends! [...] I would like to witness those times.

The narratives about VMH also empowered the meaning of tourist experiences which differ from daily life experiences and other touristic experiences such as holidaying in a five-

star hotel. Moreover, the mystery part of the stories leads tourists to set an empathy with the people who were supposed to live in VMH. According to a 48-year-old-female-Catholic participant who came with religious reasons, the experience of this religious site was both surprising and also made her think about the ancient residents:

It is surprising that such a humble place, such a quiet place, has such a beautiful story. Runaway and settle here to keep your religion alive. Centuries later, this place becomes one of the centres of that religion. The story I heard about the Virgin Mary impressed me.

Further, the effect of stories in VMH proved the combinative structure of VMH by reaching both pious tourists who come to be a pilgrim and non-pious or moderately pious tourists who visited VMH only for touristic reasons. For example, according to a 30-years-old male atheist, the story of VMH gave a feeling of:

Mystery and as a result living [...] an extraordinary experience in [...] life.

4.1.2. History

History refers to physical attributes in VMH and lived experiences in the past, beyond stories. Especially about Virgin Mary's travel from Jerusalem to Selcuk told by tour guides to the participants during their trips have established a historical perspective. Although none of the scriptures mentions the journey of Virgin Mary to Selcuk (Virgin Mary House, 2021), according to Gospel of John "...from that time on, this disciple (Saint John) took her (Mary) into his home" (19, 25-27). Therefore, both the religious identity of the place and the role of Virgin Mary are important elements in VMH history. In line with this view of point, according to a 31-year-old-Atheist-female participant who visited VMH with touristic reasons, the idea of someone who lived in VMH created an attachment to history:

The fact that someone used to live here has made me connect with the past.

Moreover, a 32-year-old-moderately-religious-female participant, who came for a touristic reason, mentioned that "...as if I followed Mary's footsteps here". This view highlights the role of history on tourist experiences and also prove an emotional attachment with VMH. Similarly, the historical elements such as art paintings inside VMH help to feel the history of lived times as a 27-year-old-Buddhist-non-pious-male participant states:

The drawings inside the church took me back to the living times.

For tourists, who have different religious backgrounds, the results revealed that they attached to the past with emotional engagement and wonder about the mystery. A 28-year-old-Muslim stated:

Its past made me wonder about those times [...] so mystical but also fascinating.

As a result, as much as the story is told about VMH, historical attributes affect tourists who have similar or different religious characteristics. Therefore, story and history as part of the mysterium become important constituents of numinous experience.

4.2. Tremendum

The tremendum as part of numinous experiences has been related to a sense of horror or alienness (Johannsen, 2008). According to results, these are recognized as tremendous feelings based on awe and reverence.

4.2.1. Awe

Although the story and history of VMH have provided emotional engagement and wonder with the past, participants live also some unique feelings such as fear which make them turn into themselves by questioning their personal life. For example, in terms of cognitive stimulus, a 27-year-old-Hindu-pious-female participant states that:

I felt something strong here which made me fear about my sin.

Those kinds of feelings are seen in dark tourism places where the sense of death and the feeling of fear are very intense while visiting a war or massive death destination. However, in such a combinative place as a form of both religious and touristic place, while services and rituals make tourists enjoy the environment, the sacredness of VMH leads them to make a self-inquiry. This self-inquiry stage starts with feeling sovereignty and discovering how this holiness is bigger than humanity. For example, the feeling of something bigger than self was stated by a 57-year-old-Baptist-moderately-pious-male participant:

I felt very strange inside [...] there was something empowering. It affected me very spiritually. Although it is just a church, I see people from all around the world. You know...they don't believe. But they respect Mary [...] It is strong, it is really bigger.

In this connection, a visit to combinative places provides unique experiences with mixed feelings including both the awe and spirituality together. A 34-year-old-Orthodox-male participant mentioned that:

I had a deep feeling of here. I felt God was with me. It'll even be pretentious, but I even felt I am a small creature in front of God.

The results of such point of view about experience show that the reflective role of awe is common among participants as stated by Priest like “*people feel different here. After visiting they realise there is something bigger than themselves*”.

4.2.2. Reverence

Reverence in numinous form can be experienced during a trip which differs from everyday encounters. In this study, reverence refers to a feeling of respect for tourists. Accordingly, VMH provides a deep feeling of reverence as stated by a 35-year-old-Methodist-moderately-pious-male participant who visited VMH with touristic reasons:

I was just going to have fun [...] while I was waiting for a vacation where I was going to swim and drink something, it felt good to come across a place that reminds me of God [...] I was touched and felt his reverence.

Similar to awe, the feeling of something greater than the ‘self’ also creates reverence. Instead of feeling the fear, remembering something bigger than self who lost this feeling in everyday life may cause such a feeling of respect. Experiencing reverence is not specified only for Christians. According to a 27-year-old-Buddhist-male participant who visited VMH with touristic reasons, because of the similarities in her religion and VMH, she refers that the feeling of reverence is independent of any certain religion and generalizable to other belief systems:

I am Hindu, I have visited a sacred place that has similarities to my religion. Because Mary and Shiva are actually very similar. I think there is a strong bond between them. So, I feel a huge respect for here.

In line with narratives, the reverence is beyond the differences in religions but is a mediator to transfer the sacred feeling and, as a result, showing respect as stated by a Nun (age 26) as “*both similarity and differences are alive here in terms of religion. People come, learn Virgin Mary and respect her*”.

4.3. *Fascinans*

Fascinans addresses feelings that evoke happiness and the sense of transcendency along with enlightening. For example, the big mountains, castles or public spaces have been a source for tourists to acquire spiritual inspiration and the sense of transcendency which has a direct influence on both being in flow and good mood (Tsaur, Yen and Hsiao, 2013). However in a combinative place like VMH, fascinans differs as a Nun (age 30) stated that “*here is different [...] pilgrim come, tourist come. It`s not like a museum. People feel this place, live here*”. To reveal the experience, in this study, fascinans is provided by three sub-dimensions: atmosphere, place-based and nature-based.

4.3.1. Atmosphere

In terms of atmosphere, the ambience-based feeling plays an important role to have numinous experiences. The difference of this dimension from others is participants especially stated the word ‘atmosphere’ when they were interviewed. Therefore, the narratives are general observations and refer to mainly the ambience of VMH. As a 55-year-old-Catholic-male participant who visited VMH to be a pilgrim highlighted, VMH is a place hosting a wide range of visitor profiles who experience this place with different acts:

I was surprised that people from different religions and countries visited this place. Even more interesting, something emotional is happening here, those who cry, those who pray.

The spiritual atmosphere of the place is a key constituent of numinosity, which is shaped by the perceived unique experiences and becomes a distinguishing feature of the numinous experience. The participants, especially those who are not familiar with VMH or Christianity, felt an atmosphere that surprised and impressed them. For example, a 58-year-old-Atheist-female participant states:

Surrounding and interior of the church was very emotional [...] walking around and watching people was a spiritual activity for me. There was really a different ambience here compared to others.

4.3.2. Place-based

The spiritual feelings come along with admiring VMH nature, the praying rituals and also the told stories. Undoubtedly, these factors impress the tourists’ experience spiritually compared to service or product-based experiences (Cameron and Gatewood, 2003). Accordingly, the

place-based offerings can be involved in fascinans in terms of the feeling of being surprised and fascinated with tangible elements. For example, the art paintings were seen as an effective transmitter between participants and the place experience, like a 26 years old Orthodox and moderately pious male participant who visited VMH as a part of his holiday stated that:

When I entered the church, it was the artistic paintings that affected me the most, it was fascinating!

For tourists, a meaningful experience is one of the crucial elements for visiting a destination. In terms of tour organisation, this requires more than having a common trip preparation process, like a pre-set system in such combinative destinations. Such as a well-organized tour, availability of visiting hours, the helpfulness and attitudes of the employees, and the role of the tour guide are the key components that the tourists pay attention (Kresić, Mikulić and Milličević, 2013). For example, a 33-year-old-Protestant-moderately-pious-female participant who visited VMH with a package tour states that:

The information the employees gave about the House of Virgin Mary impressed me [...] I think it was the best part of this tour for me.

4.3.3. Nature-based

In terms of the tourist experience, only the religious structure of VMH is not enough to get a numinous experience, therefore, the first impression of the church area and natural beauties were important points for tourists. Contacting with nature which results in a spiritual experience can create a sense of meaning, as opposed to human-made settings such as buildings and cityscapes (Passmore and Howell, 2014). According to a 27 years old Orthodox and moderately pious male participant who visited VMH as a part of an excursion, nature is important in terms of being fascinated:

It has an extraordinary view. Amazing. This is where you can see the whole city. Exciting! This view was the best part of today!

Moreover, the esthetic perspective of nature also provided a fascinating experience for the tourists as a 54-year-old-Catholic-female participant who visited VMH for religious purposes points:

When I got off the bus, I noticed how green this place was. Especially, both sides of the road leading to the church are full of greenery and trees. I was surprised that it was so green. It is fascinating!

Overall, numinous experience is based on one multi-faces factor which combination of feelings, narratives and physical attributes. These emerged in different dimensional structures in Otto's (1917) three factors of numinosity. Therefore, 7 themes, grounded in the mysterium, tremendum and fascinans, provide a broad insight into the numinous experience. Similarly, the priest stated that *"Mary is a special person, this place is as special as she is. Therefore, there is not a single definition for the feeling you can have here [...] People fear, admire or go to the past. They have sinned, they feel guilty [...] We say, come here and heal your soul. There is nature, there is history and spiritual feelings but there is Virgin Mary here"*. All these factors create a different experience for tourists and differ from daily life. Therefore, understanding such experience in combinative places, the numinous experience becomes an important outcome.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

With the guidance of Otto's (1917) study, this research contributes to the theory as no research has focused on the combinative tourist places regarding numinous experiences. First, the originality of this study stands for understanding the spiritual cognitive stages during the visit in such places by revealing numinous experience characteristics which cannot be easily described within the rational service-based experience measures and their effect on experiences in a tourism context. Second, the results show that the place itself can provide a spiritual and emotive experience for the tourists who even are not religious, therefore, the numinous feelings are beyond religiosity but exist in a holy form for those. Compared to previous studies mentioned in this study, the results can help to explain these consciousness stages while visiting a combinative place. Moreover, while tourist experience literature has focused mainly on service-based tourist experience attributes and creation on delivery of the experience as a form of the experience economy, memorable, restorative, and transformative experiences, this paper explores the combinative deep spiritual feelings. In other words, this study focused on revealing unstudied tourist experience constituents in touristic destinations with exploring emotive, cognitive psychological dimensions. Even though there is some research to reveal the relation between emotions and spiritual experience (Andriotis, Foroudi and Marvi, 2020), this

study conceptualizes different stages of emotions and shows their link to the spiritual feeling which offering unique emotional stages, by engaging, visiting, experiencing and deep feeling.

Third, this study proposes a conceptual framework of numinosity with tourism and marketing literature within the scope of service and environment-based dimensions that is coherent to Otto's (1917) philosophy of "mysterium, tremendum et fascinans" to examine numinous experiences. As McCloud (2007) stated, combinative places like VMH, where both spirituality and touristic products and services exist, can provide Otto's three-tailed numinosity which has been a rare subject in the tourism literature. To achieve this, the study describes the characteristics of numinous experiences in practice and repositions them for the tourism sector.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the visitor experience in combinative places by using a two-staged methodology and presents a numinous tourist experience design with an emic and etic perspective which is in line with current literature (e.g., Otto, 1917; Latham, 2013). This study reveals the numinous experience dimensions in three categories (mysterium, tremendum and fascinans) can be divided into seven dimensions (history, story, awe, reverence, atmosphere, place-based and nature-based) to understand and explore better the multi-dimensional structure of a wide range of tourist experience` elements during their visit to a combinative place.

Results show that legends, stories told by others revoke mystery and help tourists to live numinous experiences in the sense of *mysterium*. According to Cameron and Gatewood (2003), personal experiences are seen in 'numen' form which leads to a mysterious motive for tourists. Fairy tales, folkloric events, stories or legends about supernatural entities create a sense of numinous experience even though the reality behind may be profane (Johannsen, 2008). The (sub)dimension of the *story* is consistent with the study of Belhassen, Caton and Stewart (2008) who state that the story of a tourist destination is particularly important as a value of attraction. In addition, *history* is also an important dimension to provide a numinosity for tourists. As Andriotis, Foroudi and Marvi (2020) addressed that the emotional attachment of a destination with a sense of authenticity is derived from historical background. Similarly, Latham (2013, p.9) pinpoints, an experience in a historical place provides insight as "*...imagined touching the object spoken of, citing this as an important way to get "into" ... is the importance of being "on the spot" where something happened ... helps connect the person with "real" history*". In this connection, both story and history contribute independently but interrelatedly to the numinous experience for tourists regarding the feeling of mystery.

In a tremendum form, the dimension of awe showed that tourists have the feeling of fear which refers to judging the sin or guiltiness and spirituality in a combinative place at the

same time. Similarly, Zheng *et al* (2019), has revealed that ‘mixed feelings’ including both fear and spirituality are mingled “...*although sites of death evoke horror, grief, and other intense negative emotions...*” (p.108) which is also consistent with social stimulus. Moreover, as Su *et al.* (2020) state, awe is one of the emotional experiences in the travel sector that has considerable effects on tourists in terms of creating an emotional reaction with an external stimulus, which are social (e.g., culture, religion), physical (e.g., nature) and cognitive (e.g., psychological stimulation) factors. Therefore, the experience of awe can be lived with the different social contexts in these combinative places. For example, as Sharma (2019) states that in Hindu context “...*the image of corpses lying on the ground, some of them already burning and some being prepared for the funeral pyre, reminded this tourist of corporeal materiality, or the impermanence of the human body and the certainty of death*”, (p.29), aligning with the numinosity in terms of offering awe-based experiences. In combinative atmospheres like VMH, the feeling of respect to the powerful one is a common reaction. In this study, the feeling of respect refers to *reverence*. Even though reverence is used for religion and related to ‘be respectful to God’ in Otto’s (1917) study, it can be felt outside of the realm of a certain religion but still gives a feeling of spirituality (Latham, 2013). As Rolston (2004) states “... *there is something demanding appropriate respect, something inviting reverence, something divine*” (p.292) in such combinative touristic places. As a result, both awe and reverence are the fundamental parts for tremendous feeling which arousal to being admired and reminded of the God via VMH.

Fascinans refers to spiritual and physical attributes of the place derived from the *atmosphere* with *place* and *nature-based* experiences. When participants enter a new and unfamiliar place, they feel an atmosphere that surprise and penetrate a conscious awareness (Sorensen, 2020). A tourist could be impressed spiritually in terms of emotions from their experiences (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004) and this may not differ for religions or belief degree. A place-based feeling provides a numinous experience because of wondering about the story that impressing tinged with the place` spiritual atmosphere which triggers “...*sparkling the perceptions, thoughts, and/or feelings in this encounter, and acts as evidence or a witness to the past. It begins the experience*” (Latham, 2013, p.9). Nature-based elements are also important to create a feeling of *fascinans* because esthetic-based nature experiences can include a sense of unifying emotion and completeness (Dewey, 1938). Similarly, Latham (2013, p.11) use the term “*unity of moment*” to describe the numinous experience in terms of natural form. Overall, the numinous experience in touristic places can be defined as:

“Numinous experience stimulates spirituality and touristic feelings by giving symbolic meaning with the combination of history, story, awe, reverence, atmosphere, place and nature-based attributes.”

This study provides managerial implications for tourism stakeholders to be able to enrich numinous experience-based service and attract a diverse type of visitors to combinative places. For example, this study presents a guide for practitioners in combinative destinations to understand better the visitor characteristics and their experiences to customize the service and products. Thus, stakeholders (e.g. religious staff, tour guides and locals) can increase their socio-economic benefits while ensuring and enriching the numerous experience for visitors. To design the experience, story and history related to the place which gives a uniqueness; awe and reverence that stimulate the spiritual feelings; and atmosphere, place and nature-based dimensions which enrich the symbolic meaning of the place are important constituents for a numen seeker. Therefore, this study’s results raise some questions for destination managers to frame the experiences which is an important process (Bideci and Bideci, 2021) to better understand the tourist experience regarding the following questions: 1) What experiences tourist lives in combinative places; 2) what the dimensional structure of experience is in combinative place; 3) how the religious environment, atmosphere, feelings, and narratives affect numinous experiences. In this sense, the history and story of a destination become the most important dimensions of numinous experiences for both sacred and secular profiles due to bonding to the place.

The study suggests to stakeholders improving the awareness of destinations’ historical backgrounds and related mythical stories or legends to enrich the numinous experience. This also develops tourists’ feelings regarding the place based on awe which is grounded in tremendous. Empathy and engagement with others in the place help to understand the other ‘self’ contributing to the feeling of respect as a form of *reverence* because social interaction during an experience is important (Gronroos, 2007). In terms of service-based experiences, the told stories by tourist guides can also help to increase curiosity with the past or the people living in the destination among those who are not religious. Besides, the results showed that nature-based attributes increase the attractiveness for all characteristics visitors of the combinative places along with the spiritual atmosphere. Overall, destination managers can consider newly presented seven conceptual numinosity dimensions in three-grounded categories as a guideline to design and enrich the numinous experience facilities.

The study encourages future studies to search seven dimensions of numinous experience in other touristic places with different contexts, for example, whether numinous experiences affect the place attachment in the sense of loyalty or satisfaction. This study also proposes some research questions for future studies: (1) What is the relationship of numinous experience and deeply spiritual and emotional feelings in different tourism scenarios? (2) How is the dimensional structure of numinous experience in a quantitative research setting? (3) Do conceptual dimensions of numinous experience affect future behaviours more than service-based experiences? These questions also show the limitations of this study in terms of being based only on qualitative research and conducted in one destination. Future studies could investigate the contributions of the numinous experience in tourism literature by such emotional antecedents in different contexts and environments.

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