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Exploring visitor perceptions of Quanzhou Ancient City through user-generated content analysis

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ABSTRACT

Living intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has increasingly become a core attraction in many World Heritage destinations, creating visitor experiences that differ from those centered mainly on tangible heritage resources. However, these distinctive experiential patterns remain insufficiently examined in tourism research. This study explores visitor perceptions of Quanzhou Ancient City through a combined analytical framework integrating word frequency analysis, 4E experience coding, and sentiment analysis of reviews collected from two major Chinese online travel platforms. The results show that visitor cognition is organized into four dimensions: place, affective, cultural, and landscape images, with living ICH holding cognitive importance comparable to physical heritage. Within the 4E framework, entertainment emerges as the dominant experiential dimension, primarily driven by ICH performances and local culinary activities. These experiences also strongly support educational engagement, indicating an inherent relationship between learning and entertainment in living heritage tourism. Sentiment analysis further reveals differences between experiential diversity and emotional outcomes among visitors. The findings suggest that living ICH reshapes the relative significance of the 4E dimensions in heritage tourism experiences. In addition, the integration of sentiment analysis and experience coding demonstrates methodological value for tourism studies using user-generated content. The study also provides practical implications for enhancing immersive tourism experiences and improving the quality of ICH performances at World Heritage destinations.

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KEYWORDS

Experience economy; 4E model; intangible cultural heritage; Quanzhou; sentiment analysis

1. Introduction

The heritage tourism has grown steadily in the world cultural tourism environment. The UNESCO World Heritage List offers an internationally recognised system of protection, but the inscription itself leads to tensions: in addition to the undoubted benefits of increasing the international image and visitor attractiveness of a destination (Canale et al. 2019), the inscription increases the confrontations between conservation and tourism development (Z. Zhang, Xiong, and Huang 2023). Constant increment of visitors may hasten over-commercialisation, loss of cultural authenticity, and experience deterioration (Dominguez-Quintero, Gonzalez-Rodriguez, and Paddison 2020; Lv, Shi, and Gursoy 2022). Striking