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Analyses of Visitors' Experiences in a Natural World Heritage Site Based on TripAdvisor Reviews

ABSTRACT

Danube Delta is the second largest European delta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and a famous paradise for nature lovers and bird watchers, which attracts increasing numbers of tourists every year. The article uses mixed methods, qualitative (i.e., narratives) and quantitative (i.e., computer) analyses, to examine the main components of visitors' subjective experiences of the Danube Delta. Data is represented by online visitor reviews, posted between 2011 and 2017 on the TripAdvisor website.

The results showed that experiences of the Danube Delta are mostly positive and centered on direct contact with nature and wildlife. However, managerial aspects linked to visit organization, such as boat types, trip itinerary, duration, or food, were more prominent in the tourists' impressions and recommendations, compared to destination attributes. Experiences of the Danube Delta are mostly passive, dominantly visual, with low visitor emotional and physical engagement. The cultural and environmental dimensions are underrepresented in people's reviews.

Introduction

Ecotourists have grown into a significant market segment in recent decades (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; The International Ecotourism Society [TIES], 2017) due to travelers' increasing environmental awareness and interest in nature-based, authentic experiences. However, the growing number of tourists visiting natural areas has intensified the pressures on these destinations, thereby increasing the national and global interest in implementing policies for the conservation and sustainable capitalization of heritage through tourism. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Heritage List and Man and the Biosphere Program are two examples of initiatives seeking to balance heritage conservation and socio-economic needs (UNESCO, 2018).

The Danube Delta (DD) is the second largest European delta and a famous international destination for bird watchers and nature lovers. It has been a natural world heritage site (WHS) since 1991 and a biosphere reserve since 1990, which contains over 300 species of birds, wild natural landscapes, and traditional fishing villages (UNESCO, 2018). In recent years, the DD's nature-based tourism has grown and diversified, thus intensifying the need for a better understanding of visitors' experiences to improve destination management and visitor satisfaction. To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have focused on visitors' experiences in the DD. The present research sought to fill this gap in the literature by conducting an in-depth analysis of DD tourists' experiences, using data from online visitor reviews (OVRs) posted on the TripAdvisor website between 2011 and 2017.

Nature encounters facilitate complex, multidimensional experiences (Hill, Curtin, & Gough, 2014; Packer & Ballantyne, 2016; Packer, Ballantyne, & Bond, 2018). The same location can generate diverse experiences depending on visitors' subjective reactions to the external stimuli provided by travel organizations (e.g., itineraries, interpretations, and activities) and destination attributes (e.g., natural settings, people, and food) (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016). Individual variations are produced by internal factors such as visitors' motivations, expectations, or memories (Skov, Lykke, & Jantzen, 2018).

The resulting experiences are then interpreted and shared, influencing other visitors in turn. When communicated online, experiences gain greater significance and shape destinations' image and future visitors' decisions and expectations (Zhang & Cole, 2016). Therefore, understanding these experiences' components and final outcomes (i.e., shared memories) is essential to improving visitor satisfaction and destination evaluation and management.

Study's goals and contributions

The present study sought to extend previous research on the dimensions of general or specific tourism experiences in natural areas by applying a novel approach that uses data from TripAdvisor reviews. These texts have the advantage of providing valuable information regarding travelers' subjective, memorable impressions in a synthesized, nondirected way.

An automated content analysis of OVRs was conducted to identify and quantify the main dimensions of visitors' experiences and memories of the DD. The results were interpreted in relation to similar studies that used more traditional survey methods. The following research

question was addressed: What are the main dimensions of visitors' experiences in the DD?

Literature review

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is defined as environmentally responsible travel in natural areas, which supports environmental conservation, education, and sustainability, as well as contributing to the wellbeing of host communities (Chiu, Lee, & Chen, 2014; TIES, 2017; United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2012). Many studies have underlined ecotourism's benefits for nature conservation, local development, and environmental education (e.g., Diamantis, 1999; Fennell, 2008; Goh & Rosilawati, 2014; Powell & Ham, 2008; Weaver, 2005). Other research has emphasized how ecotourists' interpretations influence their satisfaction and enhance the dissemination of environmentally responsible behaviors (Chiu et al., 2014; Powell & Ham, 2008; Wang, 2015).

Ecotourists and nature-based tourists are motivated by the need to experience nature, learn about the environment, discover new places and cultures, escape stress, bond with family and friends, or simply have unusual experiences (Carvajal Martinez, 2013; Weaver, 2002). These visitors seek opportunities to improve their personal and social image, interact with locals, contribute to environmental protection and conservation, and observe unusual fauna and flora (Paco, Alves, & Nunes, 2012; Weaver, 2002; Weaver & Lawton, 2002; Zografos & Allcroft, 2007).

Conceptual frameworks of visitors' experiences in natural areas

Tourists' experiences can be defined as subjective and personal responses to external and staged activities, settings, or events (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016). These experiences are diverse, multidimensional, or multifaceted (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016; Packer et al., 2018), making them difficult to measure. However, they strongly influence other travelers' decisions, especially when experiences are shared online.

Nature encounters are usually associated with nature-based activities, learning opportunities, recreation, and outdoor adventures. The encounters stimulate visitors' sensorial, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions (Curtin & Kragh, 2014; Hill et al., 2014) and range from superficial to deep immersion in nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Nature encounters also facilitate lasting memories, a fuller understanding of and emotional connection with nature, and environmentally sustainable behaviors (e.g., Ballantyne, Packer, & Hughes, 2009; Breakey, 2012; Pearce, Strickland-Munro, & Moore, 2016).

Visitors' perceptions of ecotourism experiences are influenced by internal factors, such as motivations, expectations, and emotional connections to places (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016; Tonge, Valesini, Moore, Beckley, & Ryan, 2013). Significant external factors include the destinations' attributes including, among others, destination image (Chen & Tsai, 2007), social environment (Khuong & Luan, 2015), weather (Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001), infrastructure, accessibility (e.g., Pietila, 2017), and aspects linked to tourism organizations. These tour guide interpretations, prices, eco-friendly management, staff, tourist facilities, place design, recreational activities, and unique experiences (Chan & Baum, 2007; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Ross, Melber, Gillespie, & Lukas, 2012). Interpretation, in particular, plays a key role in educating visitors and enhancing heritage preservation and appreciation, cultural respect, and site promotion (Benton, 2011).

Regarding useful theoretical frameworks, Ballantyne, Packer, and Sutherland's (2011) model of nature encounters includes four dimensions. These are sensory impressions, emotional affinity (e.g., empathy, connection, or a sense of privilege), reflective responses (e.g., environmental awareness), and behavioral responses (e.g., environmental responsibility or volunteerism). Hill et al. (2014) also propose a four-dimensional model based on content analysis of individuals' impressions. This model includes sensory interactions, emotional responses (e.g., awe, spiritual fulfillment, fright, security, calmness, or excitement), subjective and intersubjective performativity (e.g., interactions with nature and other visitors), and spatiotemporal mobilities (e.g., trajectories, pace of visits, or temporal dislocations).

Packer and Ballantyne (2016) subsequently developed a more complex model of the nature and content of visitors' experiences, after reviewing the existing research on this topic. The cited authors identified 10 major experiential facets: physical (e.g., action), sensory, restorative (e.g., escape and relaxation), introspective (e.g., contemplation and reflection), transformative (e.g., inspiration and fulfillment), hedonic (e.g., fun and indulgence), emotional (e.g., surprise and joy), relational (e.g., social interaction and a sense of belonging), spiritual (e.g., communion with nature), and cognitive (e.g., learning opportunities and discovery). Surveys and interviews have been the method most often used to study these dimensions or facets. Packer and Ballantyne (2016) model was developed and tested for various indoor and outdoor attractions (Packer et al., 2018).

Understanding the nature and composition of visitors' experiences is a necessary step in improving guests' satisfaction, destination management, and marketing strategies (Skov et al., 2018). Much qualitative and quantitative research has thus focused on general or specific experiences' dimensions, components, or facets (e.g., Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Packer & Ballantyne, 2016; Packer et al., 2018; Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

Tourism in the DD

Tourism in this delta has developed quickly over the last decade. The number of tourist arrivals increased from 73,767 in 2006 to 100,423 tourists in 2017 (National Institute of Statistics [NIS], 2019). However, official tourism statistics only partially depict the current reality because they only consider the visits registered in accommodation units. Thus, no comprehensive data exists, and efforts to monitor all visitor flows and experiences in the DD have been inadequate. Accurate estimates are difficult to make because most visitors take day boat tours lasting several hours and many tourists' stays are not registered.

Tourism in the DD is managed by the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority (DDBRA) and centered on ecotourism. Visitors mostly come to enjoy recreational activities, such as boat trips, sunbathing on Black Sea beaches, water sports, photo safaris, and sport fishing, whereas others are attracted by scientific tourism, special youth programs, and rural tourism (DDBRA, 2017). Most tourists prefer day leisure trips in large groups (i.e., 60–80 people) on bigger ships or in smaller groups (i.e., up to eight people) on private boats (DDBRA, 2017).

The average length of stay is 2.1 nights. Only 27% of all visitors are foreigners (NIS, 2019), who come mostly from Europe: Germany (25.4%), Italy (14.14%), Austria (12.12%), and Great Britain (1.35%) (Plesoiu & Simionescu, 2016). A recent study of DD visitors' photographs posted on TripAdvisor (Stoleriu & Ibanescu, 2017) found that about 70% of the visitors are nature enthusiasts seeking to photograph natural features (e.g., natural landscapes and birds). Visitors rarely take photographs focused on cultural heritage (i.e.,

traditional food and villages) or social experiences.

Given the present lack of studies on visitor flows coupled with chaotic tourism development, an increasing numbers of speed boats, and the problem of overfishing (Tejler, 2013), a better understanding of tourists' experiences in the DD is urgently needed. This would ensure a balance is maintained between tourism development and resource protection and conservation.

TripAdvisor reviews in tourism

Research on visitors' experiences has increasingly used alternative sources of information. These include, among others, OVRs (Brochado, Stoleriu, & Lupu, 2018; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015; Su & Teng, 2018), museum visitor books, comment cards, feedback boards (Kunz Kollmann, 2007; Winter, 2018), visitors' photographs (Donaire, Camprubí, & Galí, 2014; Stoleriu & Ibanescu, 2017), geographical information systems (Pietilä, 2017), and social media (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012). Spontaneous visitor comments and reviews coming from these alternative sources provide specific insights into visitors' experiences that traditional interviews can overlook (Winter, 2018). Researchers have found that visitors prefer digital reviews for their ease of use, accessibility, immediacy, freedom of expression, and integration with existing means of communication (Winter, 2018).

With about 10 million travel reviews, 5 million registered members, and 25 million visitors per month (TripAdvisor, 2017), TripAdvisor is currently the most popular travel website with user-generated content (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). When writing reviews on TripAdvisor, consumers are aware that this online content will be available to the rest of the world. Overall, Web reviews are perceived as accessible, reliable, credible, and readily available information by both consumers and researchers (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Consumers often consider Web reviews more trustworthy than official destination websites (Fotis et al., 2012; Kusumasondjaja, Shanka, & Marchegiani, 2012). The reviews can have varying impacts and credibility depending on the reviewers' level of expertise, which is associated with the number of reviews they have posted that have been rated as popular or helpful (Amaral, Tiago, & Tiago, 2014; Lee, Law, & Murphy, 2011).

TripAdvisor reviews have been increasingly considered a valid source of data in travel research (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015; Lee et al., 2011; Lupu, Brochado, & Stoleriu, 2017; O'Connor, 2008). They are perceived as a reliable, accessible, and readily available source of travel information (Ayeh et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) regarding visitors' experiences, opinions, preferences, behaviors, and satisfaction (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015). Because of their spontaneous, undirected nature (Kladou & Mavragani, 2015), OVRs provide insightful information difficult to obtain via traditional survey methods (Winter, 2018). The reviews represent "a natural setting" in which to study travelers' lived experiences (Zhang & Cole, 2016, p. 16) and an alternative data source for service quality studies (e.g., Brochado, Oliveira, Rita, & Oliveira-Brochado, 2019; Su & Teng, 2018).

Recent studies have used TripAdvisor reviews to analyze the main dimensions of lodging for guests with disability challenges (Zhang & Cole, 2016), medical tourism (Rodrigues, Brochado, Troilo, & Mohsin, 2017), dark tourism (Lupu et al., 2017), and surf camps (Lupu, Stoleriu, & Brochado, 2018). Other research has used TripAdvisor reviews to analyze tourists' profile (Amaral et al., 2014) or service quality dimensions of tourists' experiences of museums (Carter, 2016; Su & Teng, 2018), airline companies (Brochado, Oliveira, Rita, & Oliveira-Brochado, 2019), and luxury shopping (Brochado, Oliveira, Rita, & Oliveira-Brochado, 2018). OVRs have also been extensively used in hospitality research (Liu, Teichert, Rossi, Li, & Hu, 2017; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015; Xiang, Du, Ma, & Fan, 2017).



Los Angeles, CA

60 52

★★★★★ Reviewed August 29, 2015

Pristine and unlike any other ecosystem in the world

One of the World Heritage sites, the delta is not to be missed. There is a great range of accomodation in Tulcea, from boutique to luxury, and it is a great homebase to take day boat trips through the delta to see wildlife endemic to the area, found no where else in the world.

Show less

Date of experience: September 2014

[Ask NotLostWanderer about Danube Delta](#)

2 Thank NotLostWanderer

This review is the subjective opinion of a TripAdvisor member and not of TripAdvisor LLC.



County Cork, Ireland

34 11

★★★★★ Reviewed August 28, 2015

Holidays in a natural resort

This is an amazing place but not for party people. Cars are banned in the delta. Your are rewarded with one of the most amazing stars sky when it is not cloudy of course. The milky way seams in reachable distance. At nighttime or after sunset be prepared for mosquitoes. It is also highly recommended that you know someone in Romania to arrange accommodation in the Danube Delta

Show less

Date of experience: September 2014

Figure 1. Examples of visitor reviews extracted from TripAdvisor used in the study.

Other studies have reinforced the key role of OVRs in the tourism industry, such as their effective identification of destination attributes (Bigne, Andreu, Hernandez, & Ruiz, 2016) and reflection of visitors' experiences (Filiari & McLeay, 2014). In addition, OVRs have an impact on destination image, travel decisions, and tourists' planning processes (Ayeh et al., 2013; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015).

Method

TripAdvisor provides specific information regarding worldwide tourist destinations, such as brief descriptions of destinations and the main things to do there (i.e., attractions, restaurants, or hotels), as well as visitors' reviews, photographs, and ratings. The present research's data were collected in the form of visitors' reviews of the DD destination posted on TripAdvisor between January 2011 (i.e., the first post's date) and December 2017. Out of the 351 reviews posted during this period, only the 226 reviews written in English were analyzed because of their stronger impact on other visitors, especially foreign ones, as well as to avoid the need to translate the texts (see Lupu et al., 2017, and Rodrigues et al., 2017). The data collection and analysis respected the reviewers' anonymity.

The variables collected from TripAdvisor were the reviews' title and text, quantitative ratings (i.e., stars), posts' year and month, and reviewers' nationality, gender, age group,

Table 1. Reviewers' demographics.

Variable	Category	Reviews number	%
Gender	Female	70	37.2%
	Male	118	62.8%
Age group	18–24	22	18.5%
	25–34	31	26.1%
	35–49	26	25.7%
	50–59	34	28.6%
	= >60	32	26.9%
Region	Europe	145	72.9%
	Romania	67	33.7%
	Other Europe (20 countries)	78	39.2%
	North America	27	13.6%
	Rest of the world	27	13.6%

and traveler profile (see the example in Figure 1). TripAdvisor's star ratings are as follows: 1 star (hereafter designated by 1^*) = terrible; 2^* = poor; 3^* = average; 4^* = very good; and 5^* = excellent. Visitors' photographs were not included in this study.

Chi-square tests of independence were run to examine the association between tourists' ratings of their experiences and their sociodemographic (i.e., gender, age, and geographical origin) and trip variables (i.e., month and year). Next, qualitative and quantitative content analyses of the OVRs were conducted to identify the main components of tourists' experiences. This study used Leximancer software, which analyzes words' occurrences and co-occurrences in texts to isolate key concepts (i.e., collections of frequently associated words) and group them into themes (Leximancer, 2011). Leximancer carries out two types of analysis: a conceptual step measuring the presence of concepts in the texts and a relational step checking for interrelationships between the concepts.

First, the program identifies the most frequently used words (i.e., concept seeds). Second, it recovers clusters of words that travel together throughout texts (i.e., concepts). Last, Leximancer calculates the frequency of co-occurrences between concepts and graphically displays the results in a concept map. Concepts are clustered into higher-level themes, which are shown as colored circles. Leximancer thus performs unsupervised quantitative content analyses of natural language texts saved in an electronic format and facilitates the identification of themes with minimal manual intervention by researchers. As in previous studies using Leximancer (e.g., Brochado, Stoleriu, et al., 2018; Lupu et al., 2017), these quantitative analyses were followed by a narrative (i.e., qualitative) analysis, which identified the reviews containing the different themes identified. The research results were interpreted based on existing conceptual frameworks of ecotourists and nature-based visitors' experiences.

According to the data collected, 70 reviews were written by females (37.2%) and 118 by males (62.8%; see Table 1). Most reviewers (81.5%) were over 35 years old, and 55.5% were over 50. Around a third or 33.7% of the reviews were posted by Romanians, 39.2% by visitors from European countries (17.6% by British tourists), and 13.6% by visitors from North America. About 93.8% of the reviews provided ratings of 4^* (15%) or 5^* (78.8%) out of 5^* possible.

As mentioned previously, no accurate data were available for DD visitors' general profile except for local authorities' estimate that Romanians make up 75.9% of all tourists in the DD (DDBRA, 2017). The present study, in turn, offers additional information regarding DD visitors who are more active online—specifically on TripAdvisor.



Figure 2. The concept map of Danube Delta experience.

Results

Concept map

The concept map produced by Leximancer reveals the weights of and connections among nine major themes (see Figure 2). The themes and their associated concepts highlight various dimensions of visitors' experiences in the DD.

Themes

The "boat" theme is the most important in terms of connectivity and frequency. This theme includes the concepts "boat" (frequency count 66, likelihood of occurrence in reviews 99%), "trip" (42, 63%), "tour" (37, 55%), "area" (28, 42%), "rides" (14, 21%), and "nice (boat)" (15, 22%). Boats are the only mode of transportation within the DD,

so they strongly influence visitors' experiences. As one tourist wrote, "[t]he true delta begins once you set foot on the boat" (female, Romanian, 5^{*}).

The boats' "size" is an often mentioned theme as it conditions tourists' direct contact with nature. Small boats are preferred because they are less noisy and they facilitate access to narrow inner channels with plentiful wildlife. Larger boats are more comfortable but noisier, and they cannot enter the inner reservation, thereby limiting nature encounters and the thrill of discovery. A visitor observed, "[y]ou really have to take a small boat tour to see the birds and animals in the narrow creeks" (female, British, 5^{*}). The importance of boat size connects to previous ecotourism research that found small tourist groups are considered more appropriate for enjoying nature (Curtin & Kragh, 2014).

The "place" theme includes the concepts of "place" (67, 100%), "recommend(ation)" (16, 24%), and "world" (10, 15%). Some reviews express an appreciation for both natural and cultural attributes and make frequent travel recommendations such as:

It is the only place in Europe [where] you can see old horses [running] free. You can visit places with very special cultural features. You can eat traditional fish dishes and stay on a pristine beach between the river ... You will meet people, locals [who are] very helpful and happy to chat with you. (Male, Romanian, 5^{*})

The "bird" theme is strongly linked to the "wildlife" and "boat" themes. The "bird" theme includes the concepts "birds" (59, 88%), "(bird) watching" (12, 18%), "amazing [birds]" (18, 15%), and "species" (9, 13%). The DD has always been promoted as a bird lover's paradise, so birds weigh heavily in visitors' expectations and memories. The bird sightings' value grows depending on the numbers, esthetics, or representativeness (i.e., iconic species) of birds. One tourist wrote, "[t]he highlights of this delta cruising trip ... [was] birds [sic] watching[,] particularly for pelicans" (male, Chinese, 4^{*}). Several reviews also mention the seasons' impact on opportunities to observe wildlife or the nuisance of mosquitoes during trips.

The "nature" theme includes only the concept of "nature" (59, 88%). The DD is known for its wild natural landscapes, which explains how frequently visitors mention this theme. One reviewer stated, "[t]his place is where Nature still gives birth [sic] as it probably ... [did] at the beginning of the world!!!" (male, Romanian, 5^{*}).

The "day" theme comprises the following concepts: "day" (48, 72%), "cruise" (17, 25%), and "lunch" (17, 25%). This theme is frequently associated with impressions of and recommendations about tour organizations, such as trip duration, meals, or tour type (e.g., cruises or private boat tours). The tours last several hours, and those including local food are highly appreciated. For example, one review reads, "Tulcea is a great place to start a Danube Delta cruise ... [O]urs was four hours and included a delicious meal made onboard" (male, Canadian, 5^{*}).

The "wildlife" theme includes the concepts "wildlife" (42, 63%), "beautiful (place)" (28, 42%), and "wonderful (landscape)" (12, 18%). Wildlife watching is central to visitors' experiences of the DD, leading to frequent references to esthetic details. The relevant reviews describe the DD as "an oasis of peace with wonderful landscapes and wildlife" (male, German, 5^{*}) perfect for wildlife enthusiasts.

The "experience" theme contains the concepts "experience" (24, 36%), "visit" (25, 37%), and "time" (17, 25%). The 38 reviews using the word "experience" refer to

various aspects of visit organizations such as means of transportation, accommodations, seasons, or places visited. A satisfied tourist wrote:

Staying overnight at Mila 23 was a great experience too as we could taste good home cooking [including] great lunches and dinners! ... If you can I would recommend going to the Letea Forest. We had a great time wandering around that area. (Female, no nationality mentioned, 5^{*})

The “unique” theme is strongly associated with experiences and places. One reviewer said, “[t]he tranquility, the birds, the food, [and] the plants make for a unique experience” (male, British, 5^{*}).

Chi-square tests of independence revealed that no association exists between tourists’ ratings of their experiences and their sociodemographic (i.e., gender, age, and geographical origin) and trip variables (i.e., month and year). Visitors’ levels of satisfaction appear to be more strongly linked to the nature of their subjective experiences than to personal features or traveler types.

Overall, the concept map confirms the diverse, multidimensional nature of individuals’ experiences in the DD. The experiential dimensions identified reinforce previous conceptual frameworks of visitors’ experiences in natural areas, which have been developed by Ballantyne, Packer, and Sutherland (2011), Hill et al. (2014), and Packer and Ballantyne (2016).

Discussion

Sensory experiences

Nature encounters are often associated with multisensory experiences that stimulate visitors through their sense of sight, hearing, smell, and touch (e.g., Hill et al., 2014; Packer et al., 2018). The concept map indicates the predominance of visual esthetic experiences, as indicated by the concepts boats, [wildlife] watching, birds, channels, beautiful [places], and nice [boats]. Most visits to the DD are boat tours that give visitors opportunities to see and photograph wildlife and natural features. Given the large share of high ratings and positive concepts, this type of experience appears to satisfy tourists enough to increase the perceived value of the DD and visitors’ impressions of authenticity.

Visitors’ reviews of boat tours frequently also mention auditory experiences. Many OVRs recommend smaller, quieter boats because they can navigate the narrow inner channels where visitors can see birds and wild landscapes from shorter distances. Larger boats are noisy and spoil “the peace of nature” (male, Greek, 5^{*}). Similar disturbing effects of humans’ presence on natural features have been highlighted by other studies (e.g., Chan & Baum, 2007; Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001; Torres-Sovero, Martínez-López, González, & Kirkby, 2012).

In addition, many local tours in the DD facilitate more complex, memorable sensory experiences through fresh fish-based meals. These are especially appreciated when served in traditional villages by local hosts. The meals enable a deeper immersion into the local natural environment and represent the main way of experiencing local culture. A satisfied tourist wrote, “[the food in Mila 23 was outstanding, [with] really fresh fish ... [and without] many extras. You can smell, taste and feel the flavour of nature”

(male, Swiss, 5^{*}). Boat food, however, received extremely few and less appreciative reviews.

Another important finding is that local culture, which has been confirmed to be a major motivation for ecotourists (Carvajal Martinez, 2013; Chan & Baum, 2007; Weaver, 2002), is underrepresented in DD visitors' experiences. Tourists experience local culture mainly visually (i.e., from boats) or through tastings of local food when traditional villages are included as lunch stops. This indicates that DD tour providers' planned interactions with residents are superficial and limited to guides or local hosts providing traditional food and accommodations. Sustainable heritage interpretations must include both natural and cultural heritage (Benton, 2011).

Other significant ecotourist motivations (Chan & Baum, 2007) noticeably absent from the present concept map are accommodations and prices. Accommodations appear in only a few reviews in which lodgings are evaluated for their capacity to enable faster or closer contact with places (e.g., rural guesthouses). The underrepresentation of prices indirectly confirms a typical behavior of ecotourists, namely, their willingness to pay more for quality visits (e.g., Dolnicar, Crouch, & Long, 2008; Eagles & Cascagnette, 1995; Wight, 2001).

Awe and wonder or emotional experiences

The most evident subjective aspects of visitors' experiences shown in the concept map are awe and wonder, as reflected by the concepts amazing, unique, and wonderful. Nature encounters are known to generate intense emotional reactions such as awe, empathy, and a feeling of connection (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2014). Awe and wonder correspond also to the fascination dimension identified by Packer et al. (2018), which is often associated with first-time visitors and experience seekers.

Emotional reactions can be both positive or negative (Chan & Baum, 2007), and they are often linked to the visual esthetic features (Pearce et al., 2016) which are predominant in DD reviews. Positive reviews such as “[w]e were all in awe the whole trip” (female, Turkish, 5^{*}) dominate over negative ones such as “after traveling some 2,800 k[ilo]m[eters] across Europe, the Danube River appeared an unattractive, sickly-looking brown color” (male, Canadian, 4^{*}). These dominant positive perceptions foster visitors' place attachment, loyalty, and ecological behaviors (Hughes, 2011).

Other emotional reactions are less prominent in the present study's concept map. A deep connection with nature, for example, is known as an important motivation for and benefit of nature encounters (e.g., Bulbeck, 2005; Curtin & Kragh, 2014). In the DD, this reaction is associated with the navigation of inner channels. A tourist wrote, “[w]e really felt connected to nature on the little canals and [when] bathing in the sun” (female, Canadian, 4^{*}).

Typical feelings of peacefulness, relaxation, and escape (Chan & Baum, 2007; Hill et al., 2014) are less frequently mentioned and mostly associated with boat tours' slow-paced, immersive experiences. One visitor stated, “[t]he peacefulness of the place, the sounds and smell[s], the view and the remote and small canals ... make [this] a wonderful and relaxing experience” (female, Romanian, 5^{*}).

The results also indicate that the UNESCO label has a low impact on reviewers' narratives. This is in line with other studies of WHSs, which found that nature experiences are a more important motivation for visits than this famous label (Breakey, 2012; Shackley, 2006).

Cognitive (reflective) experiences

Given the characteristics of online communication (i.e., spontaneity, immediacy, and brevity), a reflective dimension is less well developed in OVRs compared with classic surveys (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Packer & Ballantyne, 2016) or studies of visitors' long-term memories (Anderson, 2003; Anderson & Shimizu, 2007). Nonetheless, a cognitive dimension can be found in DD tourists' OVRs.

Various reviewers emphasize the DD's uniqueness and international importance (e.g., the concepts of unique [experience] and world) and compare the DD with similar places around the world—most often rating the DD as better. For some non-Romanian reviewers, DD visits help shape or change their opinions of Romania as a whole. One visitor wrote, “[i]t is worth the effort to go there and discover a hidden corner of Romania that can change [your] overall idea about what this country has to offer” (female, no nationality mentioned, 5^{*}). In contrast to similar studies' results (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Chiu et al., 2014; Paco et al., 2012; Powell & Ham, 2008; TIES, 2017; Wang, 2015), the concept map generated for the present study indicates a subrepresentation of transformative experiences in the DD, more specifically downplaying educational and behavioral ones.

A further unexpected finding is the concept map's underrepresentation of tour guides' interpretation. Previous research has identified this as a key factor in the shaping and evaluation of natural heritage experiences and in the fostering of knowledge, appreciation, and conservation (Benton, 2011; Breakey, 2012; Hughes, 2011; Van Dijk, Smith, & Weiler, 2012). WHSs' mission is to interpret heritage and encourage environmentally responsible behaviors (Benton, 2011), but this is not reflected in DD reviews.

However, many OVRs mention that boat drivers often act as guides. They are evaluated according to their level of English skills, knowledge of wildlife and places, friendliness, entertaining qualities (i.e., jokes and interactions), driving prowess, or respect for visitors' preferred pace. A visitor shared that the “boat driver was very friendly and tried to explain everything. [H]e has quite good English skills and you always had the feeling that he loves to ... [give] tours” (male, Austrian, 5^{*}). The interpretations provided by boat tour guides are mostly focused on the presentation and sometimes explanation of wildlife, which indicates the presence of a cognitive experiential dimension (Packer et al., 2018) but one with less educational and transformative value.

Environmental awareness appears in only a few reviews, mainly in the form of indignation toward disturbances of nature by noisy boats or litter pollution. Broader reflections regarding sustainability and responsible behaviors on a local or global scale are even rarer. For example, a tourist stated, “[t]he question remains how sustainable this whole delta boat tourism really is” (female, Swiss, 4^{*}). Another visitor hoped that “the global warmth [sic] effect will not affect the wild birds['] life cycle here and everywhere” (male, Chinese, 4^{*}). The underrepresentation of reflective and behavioral engagement in

the OVRs analyzed indicates shortcomings exist in the interpretation services offered, which thus has little impact on individuals' environmental and conservation behaviors.

Recommend (or recommendation) is another concept linked to postvisit evaluations. OVRs include recommendations such as the best month to visit, type of boat, accommodations, and meals. This aspect reinforces the essential role of electronic word of mouth in highlighting the key destination attributes (Bigne et al., 2016) visitors search for or consider essential to their experiences. The recommendations shape other visitors' decisions and experiences (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2018; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), replacing traditional recommendations from family and friends.

Thus, sharing experiences and recommendations online is motivated by strong emotions and satisfaction, a desire to help or influence others, and the need for self-expression and social interaction (Choe, Kim, & Fesenmaier, 2017; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014), as well as a dedication to promoting service improvement (Ghazi, 2017; Winter, 2018). Writing positive reviews is strongly motivated by perceived social benefits and a desire to help service providers, whereas the need to warn other consumers away from bad experiences motivates tourists to write negative reviews (Ghazi, 2017).

In the case of the DD, recommendations are mostly associated with predominantly positive concepts, high ratings, and return intentions, which indicates high levels of visitor satisfaction and loyalty. The predominance of positive reviews in nature-based tourism has also been observed in previous studies based on OVRs (Brochado, 2019; Brochado & Brochado, 2019; Litvin et al., 2018).

Spatiotemporal dimensions

The spatial and temporal dimensions of nature experiences emphasized by Hill et al. (2014) appear frequently in DD reviews (e.g., the concepts of boat, area, channel, and day). Modes of transportation and planned itineraries are essential experiential components that are strongly dependent on this destination's regulations and especially on tour operators' choice of itineraries, tourism activities, and boat size or speed. The DD can be enjoyed, experienced, and understood only through boat tours.

In contrast, the physical (i.e., active) dimension identified by Packer et al. (2018) is underrepresented in the current study's results as boat tours mostly facilitate a passive discovery of local heritage reduced to sightseeing and taking photographs. Tour providers appear to focus more on choosing the perfect itinerary for displaying nature and wildlife and less on enhancing physical engagement and emotional, relational, or behavioral elements (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016). Visitors rarely mention hiking, swimming, fishing, or sun bathing.

In addition, the tourists' preference for smaller, slower boats reinforces the connection found by other studies between the slow pace of nature experiences and visitor satisfaction (e.g., Hill et al., 2014). Small boats are the only way to navigate the maze of inner channels where rich wildlife panoramas can be seen. Speedboats are hardly ever recommended by reviewers and only because of the advantage of covering larger areas. A visitor stated, "if you want to see large parts of the Delta[,] take a speedboat[. B]ut if

you want to enjoy the stunning birdlife, take a slow boat on a rainy day!" (male, Dutch, 5*).

Various visitors wrote about nature-related challenges (i.e., remoteness and difficult access) and limitations on wildlife encounters. The timing of visits, that is, the weather and season, can strongly affect tourists' experiences. Poor accessibility in terms of getting to and traveling around within the DD (e.g., boat schedules) can generate frustration and the perception that the DD is "not quite [at] the end of Europe but not far from it" (male, German, 5*).

Other important aspects highlighted by our concept map are the external and internal factors shaping visitors' experiences in the DD. The boat, day, and channel concepts, together with the associated themes, underline the key role of visit organizations' facilitation of optimal experiences, namely, modes of transportation, trip duration, itineraries, and food. The importance of local management is in line with other studies of heritage interpretation in natural areas (e.g., Benton, 2011). The bird, wildlife, place, and nature themes, in turn, underline the most memorable destination attributes. The internal components of visitors' experiences are linked to subjective interpretations (i.e., the unique and experience themes).

Conclusions

Theoretical contributions

The present study fills a research gap regarding tourism in a major European ecotourism destination, providing valuable insights into visitors' experiences and the main components that make them memorable. The results offer a deeper understanding of visitors' experiences in natural WHSs, which has implications for destination management and tour guide interpretation. Overall, the findings based on content analyses of visitors' reviews reinforce the existing models of visitors' experiences in natural areas (e.g., Curtin & Kragh, 2014; Hill et al., 2014; Hughes, 2011; Packer & Ballantyne, 2016; Packer et al., 2018).

However, despite the DD's ecological value, the behavioral dimension is underrepresented in the reviews analyzed in the present study, and the emotional and reflective dimensions are not well developed. Visitors' emotional reactions are less nuanced and intense compared to those reported by similar studies (Pearce et al., 2016), and the educational value (Paco et al., 2012) is limited to passive observation of and knowledge about wildlife. Unlike parallel studies of natural heritage sites (Benton, 2011; Breakey, 2012; Paco et al., 2012), DD experiences were found to have a weak behavioral impact.

This indicates little effort has been made to facilitate the significant outcomes that experiences in this WHS could produce (i.e., reinforcement of environmentally responsible behavior, protection, and conservation). The tour operators also enable a short, superficial contact with local culture. All these results point toward a "softer" version of ecotourism (Weaver, 2002; Weaver & Lawton, 2002) that is more passive, with less physical activity and environmental commitment and with organized, safe experiences designed by locals. Interactions with host communities are limited to observations, interactions with tour guides, and experiences of local food.

With regard to the external components (i.e., stimuli) of visitors' experiences (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016), the present study's findings highlight the key role of managerial aspects linked to visit organizations. These aspects include transportation (i.e., boat type), itineraries, and trip duration, as well as the inclusion of traditional food. Experiences are strongly dependent on tour operators' professional and social skills, such as their knowledge and valorization of the area and communication skills.

The most memorable destination attributes shaping visitors' experiences are birds, wildlife, and nature. This focus on the natural environment appears in many studies of nature-based tourism experiences (Chan & Baum, 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Donaire et al., 2014; Górnert, 2007; Khuong & Luan, 2015; Stoleriu & Ibanescu, 2017; Torres-Sovero et al., 2012). The present results reinforce the DD's fame as one of the last wild areas in Europe and a UNESCO site. Cultural stimuli are, however, underrepresented and mostly limited to local food.

As for the internal (i.e., subjective) component of visitors' experiences, this is represented mostly by emotional and sensory reactions. Other experiential dimensions identified in similar studies (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Hill et al., 2014; Packer & Ballantyne, 2016) are less well developed in DD experiences (e.g., environmental behavior and spatial mobility) or completely missing (e.g., relational aspects).

The present research's most important contribution to visitor studies are its innovations in data collection and methodology. TripAdvisor reviews represent a valuable source of information that is free and easily accessible and that covers multiple years and all seasons. Similar to museum visitor books and comment cards, OVRs synthesize and express in undirected ways what visitors consider most important regarding their subjective experiences of places. Furthermore, OVR content analysis circumvents the inconveniences of traditional survey methods and offline visitor feedback, facilitating the collection and processing of large-scale data, faster measurements of change over time, and comparisons of visitors' experiences at multiple sites.

OVRs also have a strong influence on other tourists' decisions (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Khuong & Luan, 2015; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015). Even though the DD OVRs under study have a weaker reflective dimension, their most vivid aspects are similar to those found in studies of visitors' long-term memories (Anderson, 2003; Anderson & Shimizu, 2007). These include, among others, emotional reactions (i.e., amazement), key and novel tourist attractions (i.e., birds), and frustrated agendas (e.g., seasonal, weather, or boat-type limitations).

Notably, similar to other studies of natural heritage sites (Breakey, 2012; Shackley, 2006), the current study's content analysis showed that the UNESCO label is not necessarily a powerful motivator for visiting the DD, which implies a need for improvements in how destination managers can capitalize on this label.

Managerial implications

The frequent mentions of concepts linked to visit planning reveal that, to enable more sustainable tourism in the DD, tour operators and destination managers need to focus more on developing services and facilities that enable meaningful contact with the local environment. These offers can include small tour boats, visits to inner channels,

diversified tourist activities, personalized guide interpretation, traditional food and accommodations, and more interactions with local hosts. Tour operators' interpretations should more fully emphasize the unique value of natural and cultural attributes, as well as the DD's overall international importance. Guides must encourage visitors' perceptions of having once-in-a-lifetime experiences, become more emotionally engaging and inspiring environmental awareness and sustainable behaviors.

The underrepresentation of other experiential dimensions in OVRs (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016) indicates a need for better management that makes boat tours more entertaining and interactive and pays attention to staff selection and training. To increase visitors' satisfaction, the destination and tour operators' websites should provide useful information about accessibility, weather, seasonal limitations of wildlife encounters (e.g., recommendations for seasonally appropriate itineraries), and environmental regulations.

Finally, this study's results highlight the value of conducting content analysis of Web reviews in visitor studies. Managers can benefit from how this approach can improve the existing understanding of key dimensions of visitors' experiences.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Given that this study focused on only one WHS in Romania, the results' limited generalizability in terms of applications to further visitor research needs to be stressed. However, the same methods used to produce these results can be tested in—and compared with studies of—other natural sites such as wetlands, national parks, or natural WHSs. These comparisons across multiple sites or different periods of time could help to understand better the experiences, profiles, and specific needs of visitors to natural heritage sites.

The main limitations of OVRs are their limited credibility and content (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012; Litvin et al., 2018). However, previous studies have shown that individuals usually trust OVRs and that readers are confident of their own ability to detect truthfulness (Filiari, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015). OVRs, nonetheless, include fewer demographic and socioeconomic variables, and reviews reflect only the opinions of visitors who are more active online. Thus, OVR data should be correlated and integrated with official tourist statistics and traditional survey methods.

Another limitation is the high level of satisfaction expressed in DD OVRs, which has also been observed in similar studies (Litvin et al., 2018). Future research needs to include comparisons across various types of visitors and similar destinations with a broader range of ratings. Finally, from a methodological perspective, further studies could also utilize a content analysis approach to combine different types of user-generated content (i.e., texts, photographs, and videos) to describe visitors' experiences in greater depth.

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