

Original Research Article

A Conceptual Framework for Place Experience in Iran's Tourism of Culture: Integrating Sensorimotor Perception and Cultural Memory

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Abstract | Tourism research in Iran often approaches heritage experience through outcomes such as satisfaction and destination image or through the physical attributes of place. Phenomenological terminology is also sometimes used without systematic lived-experience data or a clear methodological logic. Consequently, the mechanisms linking bodily perception, memory, social interaction, and interpretation remain insufficiently theorized. How do sensorimotor perception, cultural memory, social interaction, and interpretation interact in shaping place experience in Iran's historical contexts? This study uses "Tourism of Culture" as an analytical label for the relational, embodied, and interpretive dimensions of cultural tourism and develops a conceptual framework for place experience in Iran's historical contexts. The term does not denote a distinct form of tourism; rather, it foregrounds how meaning emerges among visitors, places, narratives, and other social actors. The article adopts a theoretical-critical design based on theory synthesis, drawing on literature in phenomenology of perception, place theory, cultural memory, tourism performance, hermeneutics, and tourism experience. Sources were selected for relevance, traceability, and their capacity to connect individual experience with broader cultural and social contexts. Analysis involved conceptual extraction, cross-source comparison, examination of inconsistent cases, and formulation of theoretical relationships. Place experience is conceptualized as a dynamic feedback process involving four interacting mechanisms: sensorimotor attention, activation of cultural memory, co-construction of meaning through social interaction, and symbolic interpretation. Self-reappraisal is not a fifth mechanism but a possible, conditional, and time-dependent outcome. Sensory features do not generate cultural meaning by themselves; their significance emerges through prior knowledge, narratives, social encounters, and moderating factors. The framework is empirically examinable and treats place experience as culturally, socially, spatially, and temporally situated. It can inform heritage interpretation, tour guide training, and future field research. Its specifically Iranian applicability requires comparative empirical examination across diverse sites and visitor groups.

Keywords | *Tourism of Culture; Place Experience; Sensorimotor Attention; Cultural Memory; Co-construction of Meaning; Symbolic Interpretation.*

Introduction | A tourist's cultural experience moves beyond mere visitation when place is experienced not simply as an assemblage of attractions, but as a field of relations, memories, behavioral conventions, and meanings. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of tourism research measures experience through outcomes such as satisfaction, revisit intention, or destination image. Although these indicators are useful for tourism marketing and destination management, they do not adequately explain how meaning is formed in encounters with place. At the same time, as the literature on cultural tourism has

expanded, research has become dispersed across themes such as heritage, technology, narrative, food, and creative tourism. A coherent framework is therefore still needed to explain the relationship between visitor and place (Matteucci et al., 2022; Richards, 2018, 2025).

In Iran, this problem is accompanied by another weakness. Some studies focus on physical conservation, economic capacity, or tourist attitudes; by contrast, some phenomenological studies do not clearly distinguish among phenomenological philosophy, phenomenological research methodology, and literary description of space. Empirical phenomenological research requires

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systematic data on lived experience, such as interviews, observations, or participant narratives; without such data, findings cannot be attributed directly to tourists' actual experience (Finlay, 2009). A theoretical study, by contrast, can systematically synthesize perspectives in order to formulate concepts and relationships for subsequent empirical examination (Jaakkola, 2020).

The present article follows this theoretical path and does not treat either the "Iranian tourist" or "Iranian space" as possessing fixed and uniform characteristics. Social and cultural differences among tourists, as well as the diversity of places such as mosques, bazaars, gardens, historic neighborhoods, and museums, may generate different experiences. The central research problem is therefore how the sensory qualities of place, cultural memory, social interaction, and interpretive narratives become interconnected in the formation of place experience.

To address terminological ambiguity, this article makes an analytical distinction between "cultural tourism" and "Tourism of Culture." Cultural tourism is an established concept in tourism scholarship whose scope has expanded from visitation and learning to participation in everyday life, performance, and the co-creation of cultural experience; it therefore cannot be reduced to the consumption of a cultural product (Richards, 2018, 2021). By contrast, "Tourism of Culture" in this study does not denote an independent type of tourism. It is an analytical label proposed to foreground the relational, embodied, and interpretive dimensions of experience: a situation in which culture is not merely the object of visitation but part of the tourist's processes of attention, remembering, interaction, and interpretation. Tourism of Culture therefore does not stand in opposition to cultural tourism; rather, it offers an analytical angle for examining the process of meaning formation within that field (Table 1).

Accordingly, the main research question is formulated as

follows: How is place experience in Tourism of Culture shaped through the interaction of sensorimotor perception, cultural memory, social relations, and interpretation, and how can these relationships be examined empirically in the historical contexts of Iran?

The aim is not to offer a definitive model generalizable to all places and tourists, but to formulate a coherent framework for explaining the process through which place experience is formed. The framework treats experience neither as a mere product of sensory stimuli nor as a basis for generalizing outcomes such as sacred feeling or self-reappraisal to all tourists without evidence.

Review of the Literature

In early tourism research, tourist experience was commonly explained through concepts such as authenticity, escape from everyday life, and connection with a cultural "center." Cohen showed that tourist experiences are not uniform and may range from recreation and entertainment to a search for meaning; tourists therefore cannot be assumed to share a single motivation (Cohen, 1979). Wang likewise distinguished objective, constructive, and existential authenticity. In his account, the experience of authenticity does not always derive from the factual genuineness of a historical object; it may emerge from the type of activity in which a person engages and the quality of relations with others (Wang, 1999). These perspectives yield an important point for the present study: not every cultural visit necessarily leads to a deeper understanding of the self.

As this theoretical development continued, the predominantly visual understanding of tourist experience was challenged. Research demonstrated that place experience is shaped not only by viewing landscapes and images but also by bodily movement, behavioral habits, modes of presence in space, and interaction with others

Table 1. Analytical comparison of "Cultural Tourism" and "Tourism of Culture". Source: Author.

Criterion	Cultural Tourism	"Tourism of Culture" in this study
Conceptual status	An established term in tourism scholarship and management; encompasses a broad range from visitation and learning to participation, performance, and co-creation of experience.	An analytical label proposed in this article to foreground the relational and processual character of experience; not an independent tourism category.
Purpose	To examine motivations, attractions and cultural products, modes of consumption or participation, outcomes, and the management of cultural tourism.	To explain how meaning emerges through relations among the body and senses, cultural memory, other actors, narratives, and place.
Approach	Contemporary literature has moved beyond product/consumption approaches and also includes action, performance, and co-creation (Richards, 2018, 2021).	Relational, embodied, and interpretive; the primary focus is on mechanisms of place experience rather than defining a market segment or tourism product.
Type of experience	May range from observation and learning to active participation and deep cultural experience.	A situated experience in which meaning emerges from the interaction of sensorimotor perception, memory, social interaction, and interpretation, without assuming that every visit is necessarily deep or transformative.

(Crouch, 2001; Edensor, 2001; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Sensory studies have likewise emphasized the simultaneous roles of seeing, hearing, touch, smell, and movement in the formation of experience and memory (Agapito et al., 2013). This approach has also expanded in studies of walking and heritage, where movement rhythms, pauses, wayfinding, spatial presence, and atmosphere have been examined as part of the process through which environments are known and experienced (Masberg & Silverman, 1996; Küpers & Wee, 2018; Fouseki & Alexopoulos, 2019; Burlingame, 2022).

Despite these advances, three important gaps remain. First, some multisensory studies equate an increase in stimuli with a deepening of experience. Yet light, sound, or smell becomes meaningful only when it directs tourists' attention and interpretation; otherwise, it may amount simply to clutter or disturbance.

Second, cultural memory is sometimes reduced to the presence of symbols or references to the past. Memory, however, is a selective process that foregrounds some narratives while marginalizing or excluding others, and it is also shaped by institutions and social contexts (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995).

Third, many models of tourist experience continue to rely on linear sequences such as "stimulus–emotion–satisfaction–loyalty." Such models are useful in marketing research, but they do not adequately account for reciprocal relations among feeling, memory, interaction, and interpretation, or for changes in experience over time.

Research in Iran has also addressed different dimensions of this issue. A study of residents in the historic fabric of Yazd showed that tourism experience is not formed solely from the visitor's perspective; social relations, economic activities, and the privacy of residents' everyday lives also matter (Azimi & Partovi, 2020). Research on creative cultural attractions in Tehran emphasized the importance of pre-visit mental imagery, the quality of the experiential environment, and the formation of memory (Farhadi Uonaki et al., 2023). A study of historic houses in Isfahan likewise demonstrated the potential for linking tangible and intangible heritage with tourists' multisensory experience (Movahedi et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, each of these studies focuses on part of the process or on a particular group, and none explains the relationship among sensorimotor perception, cultural memory, social interaction, and interpretation within an integrated and dynamic framework. This gap provides the basis for the framework proposed here.

The contribution of this article lies not in adding new components, but in reorganizing the relationships among them. First, it distinguishes the sensory conditions of place from the cultural meaning of experience, because light,

sound, smell, or movement does not generate meaning by itself. Second, residents, guides, and official and local narratives are treated as part of the process through which experience is formed, rather than as peripheral influences. Third, "self-reappraisal" is not assumed to be a certain consequence of every cultural visit, but is treated as a conditional and temporal outcome that should be examined through narrative evidence and follow-up of experience.

Theoretical Foundations

• Sensorimotor perception

From Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) perspective, the body is not merely an object in space but the primary medium through which human beings relate to the world. Perception does not arise independently of the body and environment; it depends on bodily condition, prior motor experience, and individual expectations.

Accordingly, the experience of being in a historic bazaar is not simply the result of seeing buildings and ornament. Factors such as crowd density, the narrowness or openness of a route, ambient temperature, pace of movement, and opportunities to stop also affect tourists' attention and behavior.

In this study, "sensorimotor affordances" refers to environmental characteristics that enable or constrain particular forms of movement and attention. Shade, for example, may enable pausing; sound may redirect attention or movement; and a spatial threshold may shape patterns of entry and behavior.

• Place, dwelling, and sense of place

Relph (1976) and Tuan (1977) understand place as space that acquires meaning through experience, attachment, and differentiation from other spaces. Norberg-Schulz (1980) similarly emphasizes the role of architecture in orientation and in the formation of human relationships with the environment.

These perspectives, however, should not be interpreted as implying a fixed "genius loci" that is identical for everyone. Spatial characteristics create possibilities for experience, while prevailing narratives, patterns of use, management policies, and individuals' social and cultural backgrounds all participate in the formation of place meaning.

In the present framework, therefore, "sense of place" is understood as the outcome of relations among spatial characteristics and individuals' social and interpretive conditions, rather than as a fixed meaning that pre-exists in the environment.

• Cultural memory and contested narratives

Halbwachs (1992) conceptualizes remembering as a social process shaped within group frameworks. Assmann (2011) extends this view by distinguishing

communicative memory from cultural memory and showing how cultural memory is sustained through stabilized texts, rituals, objects, and places.

In tourism, a historical place can prompt remembering, but what is remembered is neither neutral nor uniform (Casey, 2000). Interpretive panels, guide narratives, modes of restoration, ongoing rituals, and even visitor routes may foreground some narratives and marginalize others. The “activation of memory” therefore does not mean direct transmission of the past, but its selective rereading in the present.

This issue is particularly relevant in Iran’s historical contexts, where a place may simultaneously carry national, religious, local, class-based, or family memories. These layers may reinforce one another or come into tension in the interpretation of place, and they may be redefined through cultural learning (Zhang et al., 2021).

• Social interaction and the co-construction of meaning

In Husserlian phenomenology (Husserl, 1963/1970), the lifeworld is intersubjective from the outset: individual experience always takes shape within a horizon in which the presence and perspectives of others matter. Social interaction in this study therefore refers to live, situated encounters that can affect tourists’ attention and interpretation in the moment -from the behavior of other visitors and conversations with residents to photography rules, the presentation of handicrafts, or responses to rituals. Through the concept of “tourist performance,” Edensor (2001) likewise shows that tourism practices occur within learned conventions and patterns, but that these rules may be affirmed, challenged, or transformed in practice. Social interaction is therefore not merely a medium for transmitting narratives of the past; it can reinforce tourists’ prior narratives, modify them, or confront them with new meanings.

Within this framework, cultural memory and social interaction are distinct but related mechanisms. Cultural memory introduces prior narratives, symbols, and expectations into the visit, whereas interaction in the present can activate, reproduce, or reinterpret these resources. Social interaction cannot therefore be reduced to cultural memory, even though the two continually influence one another in the formation of experience.

• Interpretation of meaning and self-reappraisal

In Gadamer’s (1960/2004) hermeneutics, understanding is not simply the acquisition of new information. Individuals enter an encounter with pre-understandings and expectations, and understanding deepens when these pre-understandings are reconsidered through dialogue with the subject matter, a narrative, or another person. The “fusion of horizons” likewise denotes the expansion or revision of one’s horizon of understanding rather than the complete abandonment of one’s prior viewpoint.

Accordingly, place experience may lead to self-reappraisal when the encounter produces a question or a discrepancy for the individual. A historical narrative, a conversation with residents, the observation of a ritual, or a gap between expectation and actual experience may challenge a tourist’s previous understanding. If the person interprets this gap and relates it to personal experience, the encounter can move beyond sensory reception or informational learning; otherwise, it may remain at the level of momentary affect or emotion.

Research on transformative tourism similarly indicates that a salient event alone is insufficient for transformation; what matters is the meaning individuals construct from the experience and, at times, the way they continue to reflect on it after the journey (Kirillova et al., 2017b) (Table 2). This article therefore distinguishes among “momentary affective response,” “interpretive meaning-making,” and “relatively enduring self-reappraisal.”

Table 2. The role of theoretical traditions in the development of the research framework. Source: Author.

Theoretical tradition	Primary focus	Role in the research framework	Limitation if used alone
Phenomenology of perception	The body and modes of attention	Explains how human beings are present in place, move through it, and direct attention to the environment.	Pays comparatively less attention to institutions, power relations, and conflicts among narratives.
Place theory	Attachment, orientation, and the distinctiveness of place	Shows how spatial characteristics contribute to the formation of an individual’s sense of place.	May imply that place possesses a fixed and uniform meaning for all people.
Cultural memory	Signs, rituals, and modes of remembering the past	Explains how the past is maintained, selectively reread, and narrated in the present.	Pays less attention to tourists’ moment-to-moment experience and individual differences.
Performance studies and co-construction of meaning	Behavior, conventions, and the presence of others	Explains the roles of tourists, residents, and guides in the shared construction of place experience.	May understate the material characteristics and historical background of place.
Meaning interpretation and existential authenticity	Interpretation of experience and self-reappraisal	Explains how place experience may alter a person’s viewpoint and affect perceptions of self-identity.	May overgeneralize big personal change to all cultural visits.

Research Method

• Research design

This article is neither an empirical phenomenological study nor a field-based investigation. It is a theoretical-critical study employing a “theory synthesis” strategy. In this approach, theories that explain different dimensions of a phenomenon are systematically integrated so that relationships among concepts and propositions suitable for empirical examination can be formulated (Jaakkola, 2020). This strategy is appropriate to the interdisciplinary nature of the problem: phenomenology of embodied perception addresses sensory and motor experience; memory theory addresses cultural continuity; performance studies address social interaction; and hermeneutics addresses interpretation. None of these perspectives alone explains all dimensions of place experience.

• Source identification and selection

A purposive search for sources was conducted through July 2026. English keywords included tourism experience, phenomenology, embodiment, sensory experience, heritage, place, cultural memory, intersubjectivity, existential authenticity, and cultural tourism. Persian keywords included “lived tourism experience,” “phenomenology of historic fabric,” “experience-based tourism,” “cultural memory,” and “historic house.”

Sources were identified through scholarly databases and publishers’ pages, DOI records, the Comprehensive Portal of Humanities, and domestic journal websites. Classic works outside the principal time range were included only when they played a foundational and direct role in defining the study’s core concepts.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) direct relevance to at least one mechanism of place experience; (2) publication in scholarly sources or authoritative reference works; (3) traceable bibliographic information; and (4) presentation of a concept or finding relevant to the relationship between individual experience and cultural context. Studies that reduced tourist experience to variables such as satisfaction and loyalty without explaining underlying mechanisms, technology-focused research without a specific discussion of place, and sources with incomplete bibliographic information were excluded.

The objective was not exhaustive coverage of the literature or statistical saturation, but sufficient theoretical coverage for developing a conceptual framework. Some sources concerning Iranian cases were used only to illustrate the framework in the discussion and did not contribute to the formation of its theoretical constructs.

• Analytical procedure

The sources were analyzed in four stages. First, each source’s position on perception of place, meaning formation, the role of others, the temporality of experience, and its

outcomes was extracted. Second, related concepts were grouped without erasing their conceptual differences; for example, “sensory reception” was not treated as identical to “sensorimotor attention,” nor “cultural memory” as identical to “historical interpretation.”

Third, conditions that challenge simple linear models—such as cultural unfamiliarity, narrative conflict, crowding, and the commercialization of space—were examined. Fourth, relationships among the four principal mechanisms and their possible outcomes were formulated as theoretical propositions. This process followed the logic of conceptual-framework analysis and semi-systematic review (Jabareen, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

• Rigor of the theoretical analysis

To strengthen analytical rigor, bibliographic information was checked, contrasting theoretical perspectives were compared, cases inconsistent with the framework were considered, and the scope of claims was limited in accordance with the study’s non-field-based character.

The proposed framework should therefore not be read as a definitive account of tourists’ experience in Iran. It is a set of theoretical relationships that must be examined in future research using lived-experience data, observation, and cross-case comparison. “Empirical examination” is not restricted here to quantitative measurement or the fitting of a single statistical model; it may instead focus on identifying processual evidence and cases that do not conform to the proposed relationships.

• Strategy for empirical examination of the framework

Given the interpretive nature of the framework, its empirical examination is best conducted primarily through qualitative, process-oriented, and comparative designs. The objective is not to produce a single score for constructs such as attention, memory, or interaction, but to show how these mechanisms emerge in actual experience and influence one another. Phenomenological interviewing and the “go-along” method are among the approaches suited to examining experiential meaning, environmental perception, and spatial action in real settings (Kusenbach, 2003; Finlay, 2009).

A field design could follow experience at four moments: before the visit, to record motivation and prior knowledge; during the visit, to observe routes, pauses, sensory responses, and interactions; immediately after the visit, to reconstruct meaning and salient elements of the experience; and at a later follow-up, to examine the persistence or transformation of memory, interpretation, and self-reappraisal. This sequence makes it possible to distinguish momentary affect from more enduring outcomes.

The validity of the proposed relationships can be examined

through convergence of evidence and comparison between confirming and discrepant cases. Quantitative data may complement the analysis by comparing groups, dwell time, movement patterns, or differences in motivation and prior familiarity, but they are not substitutes for lived and processual data. In mixed-methods designs, the quantitative component should support comparison and cautious generalization of qualitative patterns rather than serve as the sole criterion for validating the framework.

Findings: Mechanisms in the Formation of Place Experience

• Sensorimotor attention: From environmental stimulus to perceptual selection

The first mechanism is sensorimotor attention. Historical places contain multiple stimuli, but these do not enter the tourist's experience with equal force. Direction of movement, physical ability, crowding, prior expectations, and spatial conventions shape what becomes salient and what is overlooked.

A central courtyard, for example, may be meaningful to one tourist through light, water, and calm; it may function as a play space for a child; and for an older visitor it may be experienced primarily in terms of accessibility and movement. Multisensory experience therefore does not deepen simply by increasing stimuli; it depends on the coordination of environmental characteristics with opportunities for movement, pause, and concentration.

In Iran's historical architecture, elements such as the *hashti* (entrance vestibule), corridor, *iwan*, and courtyard can direct the rhythm of movement and attention through changes in light, constriction and openness, and opportunities to stop. Their effects, however, should be examined by observing movement routes, dwell times, and sensory descriptions among different visitor groups.

An environmental stimulus becomes potentially meaningful when it creates an "opportunity for attention." From this perspective, the quality of visitor-route design depends less on multiplying information and stimuli than on making perception, pausing, and spatial comparison possible.

• Activation of cultural memory: From sign to remembering

Sensory perception acquires cultural meaning when it becomes connected with memories, narratives, and prior knowledge. The sound of water, for example, may evoke the Persian garden or a family home for one person, while for another it remains simply an environmental sound. The tourist therefore does not receive the past directly, but establishes relationships between what is experienced in place and what is already known or remembered.

The way narratives are presented is crucial in this process. The dominance of a single official narrative may narrow

the interpretive range of a place, whereas representing different historical periods, changing uses of the site, and residents' narratives can enable a more layered understanding. The quality of cultural memory activation therefore depends less on the volume of historical information than on heritage interpretation's capacity to connect past and present and make visible the diversity or conflict of narratives.

• Co-construction of meaning through interaction

The third mechanism is the formation of meaning through social interaction. Cultural memory introduces prior narratives and pre-understandings into experience, while interaction in the present may confirm, challenge, or reinterpret them.

Tourist experience in a bazaar, shrine, or historic neighborhood therefore depends not only on the physical properties of place but also on the behavior of others and the unwritten conventions of the setting. Practices of photography, expectations of silence, conversations with vendors or guides, and residents' responses to tourists can all affect how an individual understands and inhabits the place.

The study of Yazd's historic fabric shows that tourism experience forms at the boundary between public spaces open to tourists and the residential and private spaces of residents (Azimi & Partovi, 2020). Place meaning is therefore not produced by the tourist alone; residents, guides, custodians, and vendors also contribute to shaping and transmitting it.

Interaction is more conducive to meaning-making when contact with the local community is not reduced to a staged display of culture and when tourists' presence does not disrupt residents' everyday privacy. Cultural experience thus requires a balance among the quality of tourist presence, the cultural integrity of the place, and the rights of the host community.

• Symbolic interpretation: From ready-made meaning to dialogue

Symbolic interpretation is the process through which tourists connect the perceptible features of place with cultural meanings. Yet symbols such as light, water, color, or geometry do not possess fixed and universal meanings; their significance depends on historical and cultural context and on modes of interpretation, and they may themselves be contested.

Responsible interpretation should therefore make clear the source and limits of any proposed meaning and recognize the possibility of alternative readings. Tour guides should distinguish among historical evidence, scholarly interpretation, local narratives, and personal interpretation and, rather than presenting a single definitive meaning, create conditions for dialogue and questioning.

The quality of interpretation is consequently measured

not by greater certainty, but by the accuracy with which evidence and meaning are connected and by interpretation's capacity to stimulate understanding and reflection.

• **Self-reappraisal: A conditional and temporal outcome**

Within this framework, "self-reappraisal" is neither an independent mechanism nor the final stage of every experience. It is a possible and time-dependent outcome. To distinguish it from momentary affect, its formation can be described through five analytical steps that are neither necessarily linear nor always complete.

First, some aspect of the experience -such as a spatial element, narrative, or interaction- becomes salient for the individual. Second, the encounter may conflict with an expectation or pre-understanding and generate a new question. Third, by comparing narratives, engaging in dialogue, and connecting the experience with prior knowledge and personal life, the tourist gives it meaning. Fourth, the experience is reviewed and reinterpreted after the visit, and its initial meaning may be stabilized or transformed. Fifth, if this reconstructed meaning affects the individual's understanding of self, belonging, values, or relationship with the past, one may speak of "self-reappraisal." Kirillova et al. similarly show that some deeper changes arise not at the moment of encounter but in the post-travel period through continued reflection on experience (Kirillova et al., 2017b).

Characteristics of a place therefore do not, by themselves, cause personal transformation. Self-reappraisal becomes more likely when the experience raises a personally meaningful question, when opportunities exist for interpreting and comparing narratives, and when reflection continues after the visit. Cultural and religious background, familiarity with the place, travel motivation, and the quality of interaction with others may strengthen, modify, or halt this process.

From a research perspective, claims of self-reappraisal are more defensible when evidence extends beyond an immediate response. The strongest indicator is an explainable change in the person's narrative about self, belonging, values, or relationship with the past, particularly if the change persists after some time has elapsed. Behavioral change or major life decisions may provide stronger evidence, but they are not necessary conditions for establishing self-reappraisal. By contrast, crying, excitement, calm, or wonder at the site, in the absence of interpretive and temporal evidence, indicates only a momentary affective response and should not by itself be treated as evidence of transformation or deep self-reappraisal.

• **Dynamics and feedback in experience**

The four principal mechanisms do not follow a fixed temporal order and can change one another reciprocally. A

conversation may draw a tourist's attention to new detail; a memory may alter the meaning of a sign; or conflict among narratives may prompt reinterpretation of the experience.

Place experience should therefore be understood not as a cycle with fixed stages, but as a dynamic feedback process in which sensorimotor attention, cultural memory, social interaction, and symbolic interpretation affect one another, while experiential outcomes may in turn shape subsequent perception and interpretation.

A Dynamic Conceptual Framework of Place Experience and Theoretical Propositions

The proposed framework consists of four interconnected components: place conditions, experiential mechanisms, moderating factors, and experiential outcomes.

Place conditions include sensorimotor characteristics, spatial organization, opportunities for movement and pause, rules governing the use of space, and modes of providing interpretive information. These conditions do not directly produce meaning; rather, they create possibilities and constraints for experience.

Experiential mechanisms comprise sensorimotor attention, activation of cultural memory, co-construction of meaning through interaction, and symbolic interpretation. They are not sequential and have reciprocal and feedback relationships. Cultural memory introduces prior narratives and expectations into experience, whereas social interaction can affirm, contest, or reinterpret them in the present.

Moderating factors such as prior knowledge, travel motivation, degree of cultural familiarity, previous experiences, and the tourist's social position influence how these mechanisms operate. A place therefore does not necessarily generate the same experience for everyone.

Experiential outcomes may include learning, the formation or transformation of memory, a sense of belonging, responsibility toward heritage, and, under some conditions, self-reappraisal. These outcomes are not certain and may emerge or change over time.

Individual and social moderators include prior knowledge, travel motivation, familiarity with the culture of place, previous experiences, social position, and power relations. These factors can affect the type of attention, the memory activated, the quality of interaction, interpretation, and experiential outcomes.

In addition, the outcomes of one visit may enter subsequent encounters as memories, expectations, or new pre-understandings. The proposed framework is therefore feedback-oriented rather than based on a fixed linear sequence. On the basis of the theoretical synthesis, five propositions are proposed for empirical examination:

Proposition 1. The effect of a place's multisensory characteristics on the depth of experience depends on tourists' opportunities for movement, pause, and

concentration. Increasing sensory stimuli without directing attention does not necessarily deepen experience and may produce perceptual overload.

Proposition 2. Cultural memory links sensory perception with place meaning; however, the meaning that emerges depends on tourists' prior knowledge and the narratives available to them and may be confirmed or reinterpreted through subsequent interactions.

Proposition 3. Social interaction is a mechanism distinct from cultural memory and may confirm, challenge, or transform prior narratives and expectations. Reciprocal and respectful interaction with local actors can deepen tourists' understanding of relations between people and place, whereas staged or unequal interaction may constrain this process.

Proposition 4. Polyphonic interpretation that makes sources, limits of claims, and differences among narratives visible can strengthen critical learning and a sense of responsibility toward heritage more effectively than a single-voice narrative.

Proposition 5. Sensory or emotional affect may lead to self-reappraisal when it generates a personally meaningful question, is reconsidered in relation to the tourist's pre-understandings through interpretation, and the resulting meaning persists after the visit. Enduring self-reappraisal therefore depends more on interpretive meaning-making and temporal continuity than on the intensity of momentary emotion.

These propositions translate the framework into a set of relationships that can be examined in field research. Each construct should be translated into a clear conceptual definition and observable indicators without being reduced to a single index. Attention can be examined through observation of routes and sensory experience; memory and interpretation through comparison of pre- and post-visit narratives; interaction through observation and interviews; and self-reappraisal through temporal follow-up. Operational definitions are presented in Table 3. The bidirectional arrows in Fig. 1 indicate that the four experiential mechanisms do not follow a fixed temporal order or a one-way causal pathway and can modify one another reciprocally. Feedback from outcomes to experiential mechanisms indicates that learning, memory, or self-reappraisal may affect tourists' pre-understandings and perception in later encounters. The model is therefore not a stage-based cycle but a dynamic network of reciprocal relationships.

Within this framework, "measurability" does not mean reducing experience to a single score. It refers to the possibility of identifying and comparing indicators of each construct in behavioral, spatial, narrative, and interactional data. Empirical examination can therefore combine observation, interviews, route tracking, and narrative

analysis. Table 3 presents conceptual definitions and empirically assessable indicators of the principal constructs.

Discussion

• Theoretical contributions

The first contribution of the framework is a redefinition of the body's role in place experience. The body is not merely a receiver of sensory stimuli; it participates in selecting, organizing, and understanding the environment. Multisensory studies should therefore not focus simply on increasing sound, smell, light, or interactive elements, but on conditions that make movement, pausing, attention, and interpretation possible.

Accordingly, the quality of experience along a historical route should be assessed not by the number of stimuli but by the capacity of space to create rhythm, spatial differentiation, and directed attention.

The second contribution is a redefinition of cultural memory in place experience. A historical place is not a "fixed storehouse of the past." Cultural memory is selective and is activated and reconstructed through visitor routes, interpretive texts, restoration, guide narratives, and ongoing rituals. Tourism management therefore affects not only space and services but also which historical narratives become salient or marginalized.

The third contribution is to distinguish cultural memory from social interaction while also demonstrating their relationship. Memory provides prior frameworks of remembering and expectation, whereas interaction in the present can affirm, negotiate, contest, or reinterpret those frameworks (Husserl, 1963/1970; Edensor, 2001). Meaning therefore emerges not only in the tourist's mind or in inherited narratives, but also through relations among tourists, residents, guides, and other actors. Such interaction must respect the privacy and everyday life of the host community.

The fourth contribution is to constrain claims about "self-reappraisal." The framework distinguishes momentary affect, interpretive meaning-making, and relatively enduring self-reappraisal, treating the latter two as dependent on the emergence of a question, reinterpretation of experience, and its continuation after the visit (Kirillova et al., 2017b). Self-reappraisal should therefore not be equated with lasting transformation of identity or behavior; claims of such transformation require stronger longitudinal evidence.

• Iran as a research context, not a fixed essence

Application of the framework in Iran must avoid two simplifications: first, the direct transfer of theories without attention to cultural, social, and institutional contexts; and second, the assumption of a unified "Iranian mind" and the attribution of spirituality, ritual memory, or fixed patterns of experience to all tourists.

Table 3. Conceptual definitions and empirically assessable dimensions of the framework's principal constructs. Source: Author.

Construct/ model component	Conceptual definition	Empirically assessable dimensions and indicators
Sensorimotor conditions of place	Material and spatial characteristics that enable or constrain movement, pausing, orientation, and the direction of attention; these conditions do not in themselves produce cultural meaning.	Changes in light, sound, and temperature; continuity or discontinuity of routes; thresholds and changes of scale; opportunities to sit and pause; accessibility; density and crowding; movement constraints.
Sensorimotor attention	The selective organization of environmental stimuli by the moving body, determining what becomes salient or remains unnoticed in experience.	Location and duration of stops; changes of direction or walking speed; points of concentration; spontaneous references to sound, smell, light, or texture; fatigue; ease or difficulty of movement.
Cultural memory	Selective activation and reconstruction of the past in the present through prior knowledge, signs, learned narratives, rituals, and collective or personal memories.	Type of association (national, religious, local, family); source of remembering; differences between pre- and post-visit narratives; overlap or conflict among narratives; changes in the salience of a particular past.
Co-construction of meaning in interaction	The construction or modification of meaning in live interaction with residents, guides, and other visitors and through encounters with the rules and social expectations of the present situation.	Type and direction of interaction; reciprocity; negotiation of behavioral rules; respect, cooperation, or conflict; roles of guides and residents; changes in attention or interpretation after conversation.
Symbolic interpretation	The process of attributing cultural meaning to sensible signs of place by relating evidence, pre-understandings, and official, scholarly, or local narratives.	Source of narrative; distinction among historical evidence, scholarly interpretation, local narrative, and personal opinion; presence of alternative narratives; questions or doubt; changes in initial meaning after new information.
Individual and social moderators	Prior individual characteristics and social conditions that alter the intensity, direction, or quality of experiential mechanisms and do not constitute a stage of experience.	Visit motivation; prior knowledge; degree of cultural familiarity; previous visits; role as tourist/resident/guide; language ability; social position; relevant previous experiences.
Proximate experiential outcomes	Changes occurring during or shortly after the visit without necessarily implying transformation of identity or self.	Learning; formation or increased salience of memory; sense of belonging; sensitivity or responsibility toward heritage; ability to articulate multiple narratives about place.
Self-reappraisal (conditional outcome)	Relatively enduring reflection on identity, belonging, the past, values, or ways of life arising after interpretive meaning-making and distinct from momentary affect or emotion; it is not equivalent to certain personality or behavioral transformation.	A questioning encounter or discrepancy with expectation; change in self-narrative or belonging; reframing of a prior belief or narrative; mental return to or retelling of the experience; persistence of new meaning over time; in stronger cases, relation of the experience to a new decision or attitude.

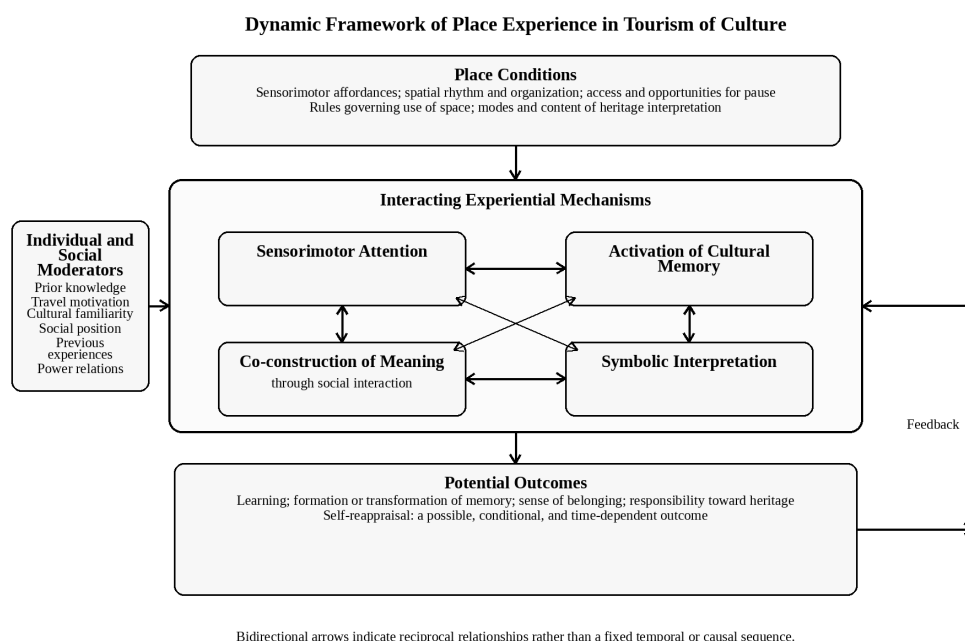


Fig. 1. Dynamic framework of place experience in Tourism of Culture: place conditions, interacting mechanisms, moderators, and potential outcomes. Source: Author.

Iran is therefore treated here not as a fixed cultural essence but as a diverse context for empirical examination. The central issue is to determine which narrative becomes meaningful for which group of tourists, in which place, and under what conditions.

To illustrate the explanatory capacity of the framework, two places in Iran are examined analytically. These cases do not constitute empirical tests of the model; rather, they show how national/heritage, religious, and local memories may coexist in a single place and interact or come into tension.

- Naqsh-e Jahan Square, Isfahan: Coexistence of national, religious, and local memories

Naqsh-e Jahan Square exemplifies the coexistence of multiple layers of meaning. UNESCO describes the ensemble as a cultural, economic, religious, social, and political center of Safavid Isfahan, while the Imam Mosque, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Ali Qapu Palace, and Qeysarieh Portal connect religious, governmental, and commercial layers within a single urban space (Meidan Emam, Esfahan, n.d.). Babaie likewise emphasizes the relationship between the spatial organization of Safavid Isfahan, statecraft, and Shi'ism during the reign of Shah Abbas (Babaie, 2008).

At the national/heritage level, the square is represented as one of the major Safavid monuments and a World Heritage property. At the religious level, the presence of mosques and the historical relation of the space to Safavid Shi'ism are significant; at the local level, the bazaar and everyday use of the square move it beyond the status of a monument alone. The renaming of "Shah Square" as "Imam Square" also demonstrates that the official narrative of place changes over time.

From the perspective of the proposed framework, attention to scale, tilework, or movement rhythm can become connected with historical and religious narratives and with observation of everyday bazaar life. The meaning of the square consequently emerges not from its physical fabric or a single narrative, but from interaction among sensory attention, cultural memory, the presence of others, and interpretation.

- Amir Chakhmaq Square, Yazd: Ritual memory, Local Meaning, and the Tourist Gaze

Amir Chakhmaq Square, within the Historic City of Yazd, exemplifies the relationship among ritual memory, local identity, and tourist experience. UNESCO emphasizes the continuity of religious rituals, waqf, and local social organizations in the living city of Yazd ((Historic City of Yazd, n.d.). In this context, the tekyeh and nakhl of Amir Chakhmaq are not merely visual elements but acquire meaning within a network of religious significations and local memory. Research on the Nakhl-

gardani ritual in Yazd likewise shows that participants connect the ritual with religious and collective meanings; it therefore cannot be reduced to visual attraction for tourists (Ebrahimbay Salami & Mahmoudi, 2022).

The difference between the tourist gaze and local perspectives is important here. What may appear to tourists as a historical scene or an opportunity for photography may be, for local participants, a religious ritual and part of collective memory. Residents are not a homogeneous group either; they may experience tourism simultaneously as an economic opportunity, increased visibility of local culture, or disruption of everyday life (Azimi & Partovi, 2020). From the perspective of the proposed framework, observing the ritual, learning rules of presence, and speaking with local actors can change tourist attention and interpretation and reveal the difference between "ritual for participants" and "ritual for spectators."

The examples of Naqsh-e Jahan and Amir Chakhmaq show that national, religious, and local memories are neither necessarily harmonious nor simply separate; they may reinforce or challenge one another. The proposed framework makes it possible to examine these relations without reducing them to a single meaning. These examples remain analytical applications, however, and empirical validation of the model requires field research with visitors, residents, and other actors.

• Relationship to previous studies

In its emphasis on the body and the senses, the framework aligns with sensory-tourism research but does not treat an increase in sensory stimuli as sufficient to deepen experience (Agapito et al., 2013). It also shares concerns with phenomenological approaches to tourism experience while giving greater emphasis to cultural, social, and institutional contexts (Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014).

The framework is consistent with affective-heritage research in recognizing the importance of presence and atmosphere, but it distinguishes affective response from cultural interpretation (Burlingame, 2022).

The proposed model also converges with the literature on existential authenticity in recognizing that authentic experience may emerge through action and social relations, while treating such an outcome as neither necessary nor certain for all tourists and all visits (Wang, 1999; Kirillova et al., 2017a).

Compared with domestic studies, the framework is consistent with findings from Yazd's historic fabric regarding the role of residents in shaping tourism experience (Azimi & Partovi, 2020). It also situates the importance of pre-visit mental imagery and post-experience memory, emphasized in experience-based tourism research, within a broader process of attention, memory, and interpretation

(Farhadi Uonaki et al., 2023). The emphasis of studies of historical houses on relations between tangible and intangible heritage is similarly reformulated here through the relationship between place characteristics and cultural meanings (Movahedi et al., 2017).

The main difference of the present study is that it does not treat components of experience as an isolated list, but explains them as reciprocal relationships whose operation can be strengthened or weakened under particular conditions. "Tourism of Culture" is likewise not proposed as a new tourism type or market segment, but as an analytical angle within cultural tourism that shifts attention from cultural attractions or motivations alone to the relational process through which meaning is formed in place.

Practical and Policy Implications

• Designing visitor routes around experiential quality

Tourism routes should be organized around the rhythm of experience, opportunities to pause, changes of scale, silence, and dialogue. Excessive use of multimedia and interactive elements may create informational accumulation and reduce visitor concentration.

• Multi-level Interpretation

Interpretive content should distinguish among documented historical information, scholarly interpretation, local narratives, and open questions. This distinction prevents probable interpretations from being presented as historical fact and strengthens interpretive credibility.

• Training guides to facilitate experience

In addition to historical knowledge, guides should be able to observe group behavior, regulate movement rhythm, direct attention, manage silence, and pose questions. Their role is not simply to transmit information but to create appropriate conditions for understanding and interpreting place.

• Managing experience through resident participation

Evaluation of tourism routes should not rely only on visitor numbers, satisfaction, or revenue. The quality of tourist-resident relations, respect for everyday privacy, the presence of local narratives, and feedback from the host community should also inform destination management.

• Managing the risk of cultural Commodification

Turning rituals and everyday life into tourism products may alter their cultural meaning and function. Tourism development should therefore work with local communities to determine which aspects of culture may appropriately be made public, who participates in decisions about them, and how economic benefits are distributed among stakeholders.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

• Limitations

This study has three principal limitations. First, sources were examined for the purpose of theory synthesis; the study is not a systematic and exhaustive review of the entire literature, and some relevant perspectives may therefore be absent from the corpus. Second, the relationships proposed in the framework have not yet been examined using direct data from tourists' experiences, and the Iranian examples are used to illustrate application rather than to empirically confirm the model. Third, the study focuses on historic urban contexts; applying the framework to natural heritage, cultural events, nomadic life, or digital tourism may require modification of some concepts, particularly place conditions and modes of interaction.

• Directions for future research

Table 4 links the framework's principal relationships to specific research questions, target groups, study settings, and required data. The objective of these studies is not to confirm the model as a whole, but to examine the conditions under which each relationship emerges, strengthens, weakens, or is not observed at all. Such studies can clarify the limits of the framework and distinguish mechanisms that recur across places and groups from relationships more strongly dependent on cultural, social, and spatial contexts.

These research directions also make it possible to treat the framework's contextual specificity as an empirical question rather than an initial assumption. If relationships among cultural memory, social interaction, and interpretation differ substantially across places and groups, the framework should be adapted to cultural, social, and spatial contexts. Conversely, the recurrence of similar patterns may, with due caution, help clarify its range of applicability.

Conclusion

• Theoretical findings

The principal theoretical finding is that place experience in Tourism of Culture cannot be reduced to a simple chain of "stimulus-emotion-outcome." Meaning is formed through the dynamic interaction of sensorimotor attention, cultural memory, social interaction, and symbolic interpretation, while prior knowledge, travel motivation, cultural familiarity, and social position can modify the course of experience.

Two conceptual distinctions delimit the article's claims. First, cultural memory and social interaction are distinct processes: memory introduces prior narratives and pre-understandings into experience, whereas social interaction can confirm, challenge, or reinterpret them in the present. Second, "self-reappraisal" is not a mechanism on the same level as attention, memory, or interaction; it is a possible and time-dependent outcome whose formation depends on questioning, meaning-

Table 4. Proposed research agenda for empirical examination of framework relationships. Source: Author.

Relationship/variables examined	Target group and setting	Proposed data and method	Criterion for interpreting results
Sensorimotor conditions of place → sensorimotor attention, considering prior familiarity and travel motivation	Visitors with low and high prior familiarity; an active bazaar and a historic garden	Go-along method; route and pause-point tracking; sensory descriptions; short post-visit interviews	Do spatial/sensory changes actually alter the direction of attention and behavior, and how does this relationship vary with prior familiarity?
Cultural memory ↔ symbolic interpretation	Domestic and international tourists; cases such as Naqsh-e Jahan and Amir Chakhmaq	Comparison of pre- and post-visit narratives; coding references to national, religious, and local memories	Which memories are activated, and does the visit narrative confirm, expand, or revise the initial understanding of place?
Social interaction ↔ co-construction of meaning	Tourists, residents, and guides in a bazaar or living historic neighborhood	Observation of interactions and interviews with all three groups; recording rules, conflicts, negotiation, and changes in understanding	Does interaction merely reproduce prior memory and meaning, or does it challenge and reinterpret them?
Type of interpretation (single-voice/polyphonic) → critical learning and heritage responsibility	Visitors to a house museum or historical complex with comparable interpretive programs	Comparison of two narrative-presentation strategies and post-visit interviews	Ability to distinguish historical evidence, scholarly interpretation, and local narrative; degree of revision of initial understanding and increased attention to heritage responsibility.
Personal engagement and opportunity for reflection/retelling → self-reappraisal	Visitors to ritual or memorial spaces, especially those who report the experience as meaningful	Immediate post-visit interview and a fixed-time follow-up; comparison of the individual's narrative across the two moments	Persistence of change in understandings of self, belonging, or relationship with the past; distinction between more enduring reappraisal and momentary emotion or wonder.

making, and post-visit reflection. “Tourism of Culture” is likewise not treated as an independent type of tourism but as an analytical label emphasizing the relational and interpretive dimension of cultural experience.

• Managerial implications for cultural destinations

From a managerial perspective, deepening experience does not necessarily result from increasing sensory stimuli or interactive elements. More important is designing visitor routes that enable movement, pausing, concentration, and interpretation while avoiding purposeless accumulation of information.

Interpretive content should distinguish historical evidence, scholarly interpretation, and local narratives and, when different narratives exist, should make encounters with this polyphony possible. The guide's role extends beyond information transmission to directing attention, regulating the rhythm of a visit, and creating opportunities for dialogue. In living historical environments, tourism success should not be assessed only through satisfaction or visitor numbers. The quality of tourist–resident relations, respect for everyday privacy, the presence of local narratives, and tourism's consequences for the host community are also significant. Cultural destination management can therefore be understood as the simultaneous management of attention, narrative, and social relations.

• Recommendations

Future research can proceed along several main paths. First, relationships between the sensorimotor conditions of place and tourist attention should be examined across

environments and among groups with different levels of prior familiarity. Comparing spaces such as a bazaar and a historic garden may show when environmental characteristics concentrate or disperse attention.

Second, relationships among cultural memory, social interaction, and interpretation should be studied among tourists, residents, and guides. Comparing pre- and post-visit narratives and observing interactions in living historic contexts can show how official, local, and personal narratives contribute to the reinterpretation of place meaning.

Third, the relationship among personal engagement, opportunities for reflection, and self-reappraisal should be investigated longitudinally. Comparing tourists' narratives immediately after the visit and at a later follow-up can help distinguish momentary affect from relatively enduring reappraisal of the self, belonging, or the past.

Overall, the value of the proposed framework lies not in offering a single definition of an “Iranian experience,” but in translating place experience into a set of specific, empirically examinable relationships. Its validity and range of applicability will become clearer when the proposed relationships are examined across places and groups and when discrepant cases are used to determine the limits and possible revisions of the model.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding this study.

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