

# Tourism-Induced Transformations of Vernacular Cities: Insights from the Old Bazaar in Skopje, North Macedonia

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## Abstract

The Old Bazaar in Skopje, North Macedonia, stands as a prominent city landmark, attracting numerous tourists and visitors. Beyond its role as a tourist attraction, it is recognized as a cultural heritage site of significant importance for the country and warrants permanent protection. Given its substantial daily tourism flow, the Old Bazaar serves as a compelling case for in-depth analysis.

This paper delves into the transformation of the Old Bazaar resulting from tourism development by interpreting the perceptions of local supply-enablers. Through a series of interviews, data were collected and evaluated using a scale that facilitated the quantification of respondents' perceptions. Additionally, qualitative data was assessed, contributing to the empirical generalization of the findings.

The findings underscore a dramatic transformation of the Old Bazaar over the years, primarily attributed to the rapid growth of tourism and extensive commercialization. A singular focus on the economic aspect of the Bazaar's functioning jeopardizes its cultural values. Consequently, the study advocates for the formulation of strategies to sustain tourism while preserving the authentic essence of the Old Bazaar.

**Keywords:** Old Bazar, Transformation, Cultural landmark, Tourism development, Perception, North Macedonia.

## Introduction

Architecture dating from the Ottoman period, particularly during the Ottoman rule (1392-1912) has left behind a heritage of significant interest, owing to its historical grandeur spread across a vast geographical expanse. The alluring and exotic fragrance of the Orient, brought by the Ottoman Empire has imprinted itself on traditions, mentalities, and languages. This era has ushered in a new cultural wave on the Balkans, and many cities still boast sites and artifacts as remains of that rich culture (Cipan, 1966). Today, these sites attract tourists and visitors, offering a connection to a specific heritage, history, background, or cultural experience. In the past, each

city and a bazaar served as an economic center surrounded by public buildings such as hammams, bedestens, caravanserais, and other facilities, all adorned with the distinctive Ottoman spirit reflected in fully decorated architecture.

Over the years, old bazaars have often become integral parts of cultural tourism routes (Council of Europe, 2010; Graf & Popesku, 2016; Majdoub, 2009). Recognized as heritage sites, they provide tourists and visitors with experiences based on the tangible and intangible remnants of the past. Therefore, bazaars serve as foundations for establishing a link between cultural heritage and specific types of tourism (Fonseca & Ramos, 2012; Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011).

Nevertheless, tourism can exert both positive and negative impacts on cultural sites. While it plays a crucial role in maintaining, protecting, and supporting the conservation of these sites (Hazen, 2008; Jimura, 2011), tourism also has the potential to leave lasting footprints that may provoke transformations, endangering the authenticity, uniqueness, and cultural values of the heritage sites (Hassan & Ekiz, 2021; Katahenggam, 2020; Su & Lin, 2014). The continuous influx of tourists and visitors poses a persistent threat to cultural heritage, risking changes that could compromise its identity.

The maintenance, restoration, protection, and safeguarding of cultural heritage involves implementing strategies for responsible action, embracing sustainability from sociocultural, environmental, and economic perspectives (Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2017). In this regard, the UNWTO (UNWTO, 2005) emphasizes the importance of balancing the three pillars of sustainability while addressing the needs of industry, visitors, environment, and local communities.

This study aims to explore the transformation of the Old Bazaar in Skopje, North Macedonia, resulting from tourism impact. Its objectives are to evaluate the transformations and to identify future development challenges. Contrary to other studies that emphasize the cultural value of heritage sites in North Macedonia (Petrevska & Nestoroska, 2023; Petrevska et al., 2020; Namicev, 2017a, 2017b; Namicev & Namiceva Todorovska, 2022), this paper specifically focuses on the perception of local supply-enablers. The objective is to identify how the Old Bazaar has transformed due to exposure to tourism, emphasizing the content aspect of attitude rather than the structural aspect. This emphasis may guide tourism policymakers in developing sustainable practices and approaches to maintain tourism flows while preserving the authenticity of the Old Bazaar.

## Literature Review

Scholars exhibit significant interest in cultural heritage and tourism valorization, with exploration of heritage sites from the Ottoman period generally approached in two distinct ways. One perspective emphasizes the monumentality and functionality of buildings dating from the Ottoman Empire, while the other investigates the relationship between Ottoman heritage and tourism.

Daskalov and Vezenkov (2015) position the legacy as a foundation of historical culture and a perspective on the present that stems from a divided past. Hartmuth (2008) directs attention to assessments of the past that have shaped the understanding of the region's architectural heritage, with a focus on artistic expression and material legacy. Kiel (1990) also discusses monumental examples of Ottoman architecture, highlighting its pragmatic outlook with a centralized and hierarchical nature.

In contrast, another group of authors (Alp, 2009; Arslan & Polat, 2015; Davis, 2013; Freely, 2011; Luke, 2013; Nance, 2007) emphasizes the importance of understanding the authentic interpretation of cultural heritage alongside its preservation and promotion. For example, Nance (2007) introduces a facilitated access model, providing a framework for understanding how local communities engage with tourism in the context of Ottoman heritage. This model delineates the historical and contemporary utilization of tourism by these communities.

Alp (2009) asserts the existence of a comprehensive cultural heritage stemming from the Ottoman period (14-20 century) in the Balkans, characterizing it as a shared legacy among all nations in the region. Despite not attaining the architectural magnificence observed in Bursa,

Edirne, or Istanbul (Freely, 2011), the diverse array of remnants constitutes a significant cultural heritage, proving to be a magnet for a substantial flow of tourists.

In the exploration of Ottoman heritage representation in Israel, Davis (2013) focuses on the Hammam al-Pasha as a pivotal tourist attraction. This case study provides insights into the nuanced ways in which Ottoman cultural elements are presented and consumed in an international context.

Luke (2013) contributes to the literature by examining the rehabilitation of Islamic heritage in the Balkans. He contends that preservation initiatives within cultural heritage projects serve as manifestations of symbolic cultural sovereignty. Through varying perspectives, Luke (2013) sheds light on the intricate dynamics involved in reclaiming and preserving cultural identity in the context of Islamic heritage in the Balkan region.

Arslan and Polat (2015) discuss the Ottoman Empire's initial endeavors to establish hotels in Istanbul, drawing from scrutiny of the earliest extant documents related to this historical initiative. This examination provides valuable insights into the nascent stages of the hospitality industry within the Ottoman capital, contributing to our understanding of the historical evolution of accommodations in this significant cultural and economic hub.

North Macedonia has endured five centuries under Ottoman rule, fostering an exceptional mixture of cultures and religions. Todorova (2004) emphasizes that the Ottoman heritage in the region is essentially the accumulated remnants from the era of Ottoman domination over the Balkan Region, with the 15th-16th century witnessing a particularly strong influence and expansion of Ottoman architecture (Korunovski, 2008). As a result, North Macedonia boasts over 150 cultural assets scattered across its territory, constituting the second-largest collection of cultural heritage in the country (Marinoski, 2012). However, only half of these cultural assets are currently evaluated from a tourism perspective (Petrevska et al., 2020). Considering the significance of the buildings, the extent of their preservation, and accessibility to the public, North Macedonia currently recognizes only 33 significant Ottoman heritage sites with distinctive features (Jahic, 2013; Korunovski, 2008; Marinoski, 2012; Pavlov & Petkova, 2008).

### **Background of the Old Bazaar in Skopje**

The Old Bazaar in Skopje stands as one of the largest and most significant collections of Ottoman architecture and history in North Macedonia (Fig. 1). Its primary purpose is to preserve the essence of Skopje by maintaining its traditional form. Strategically situated within the central Balkans, Skopje's geographical location makes it conducive to hosting various military garrisons continuously, facilitating economic development and the establishment of a vibrant bazaar (Cipan, 1966).

During the 17th century, Skopje's bazaar plays a crucial role in supplying the needs of the city's 11,000 residents across 70 neighborhoods. The bazaar boasts an impressive array of structures, including 120 Islamic buildings, 20 tekkes, and nine schools housed within mosques. Moreover, it features around 1,000 bathrooms, over 2,000 shops, and approximately 200 inns of various kinds (Celebi, 1971). In that era, Skopje, along with its bustling bazaar, gains recognition as a major trading city. The presence of numerous crafts in the bazaar fosters craftsmanship and trade, solidifying Skopje's status as a significant center for handicraft trade during Ottoman rule (Zografski, 1980).

Many neighborhoods spring up near the bazaar, accompanied by the construction of numerous shops. This organic development naturally shapes the residential and trade-public character, forming the vibrant core of the city during the 19th century (Bogojevic, 2014). Over time, the bazaar shapes the primary monumental core, encompassing a cluster of buildings such as mosques, inns, and hammams, alongside a mix of commercial and residential buildings.

Following the Second World War, the absence of legislation for the protection of historical buildings leads to the disappearance of certain ambient values. A considerable portion of commercial buildings undergoes reconstruction without due regard for historical significance, thereby altering the stylistic and historical unity of the area (Namicev & Namiceva Todorovska, 2022).



**Fig. 1:** Location of the Old Bazaar in the city core of Skopje, North Macedonia

Source: Vidiani.com (<http://www.vidiani.com/large-detailed-tourist-map-of-central-part-of-skopje-city/>)

In the 1960s, a comprehensive plan is devised to safeguard the ethnographic and architectural elements, coupled with the formulation of a general urban plan (Arsovski, 1967). Particular attention is devoted to enhancing the visual appeal of the narrow streets and preserving the monumental buildings that hold important positions within the bazaar, such as Daut Pashin hammam, Chifte hammam, Gjulchiler hammam, Kurshumli inn, Suli inn, and others.

Following the devastating earthquake in Skopje in 1963, which results in the collapse of many historic buildings, substantial funds are allocated for restoration efforts, including those in the Old Bazaar (Cipan, 1966). To maintain authenticity and uniqueness, the original wooden construction system is predominantly reused in the restoration of most buildings within the Old Bazaar. The bazaar is officially incorporated within its authentic boundaries, designated as a protected historic core crucial for conserving the spirit and chronology of the city's development (Namicev & Namiceva Todorovska, 2022).

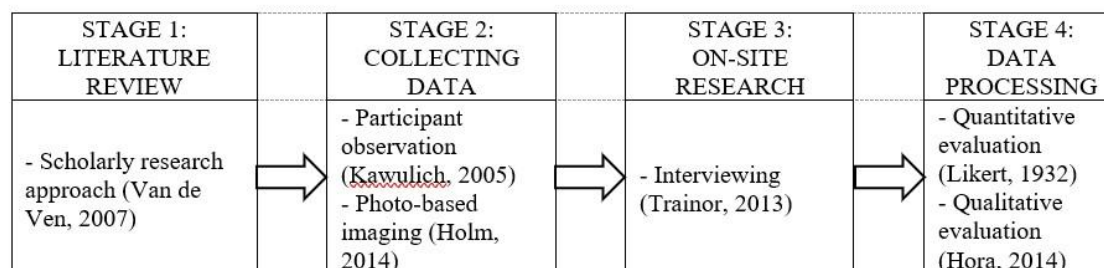
Presently, the Old Bazaar accommodates new facilities that have become integral parts of its structure, such as the Museum of Macedonia, the National Theater, and the shopping mall, functioning as a bridge. These additions contribute value to the traditional landscape of the bazaar, attracting tourists and visitors. Public cultural projects, including initiatives for animation and revitalization (1980, 2005), actively play a role in bridging the traditional old core of the bazaar with the new urban complex of the city.

Recognizing its profound cultural, historical, social, architectural, educational, and scientific significance, a Law is enacted in 2008 to declare the Old Bazaar a cultural heritage of special importance. Since then, it has been under the protection of the state. In early 2010, a comprehensive five-year revitalization program is initiated. The primary objectives are the restoration of facilities, the promotion of local crafts, and the pursuit of both economic and cultural development (Namicev & Namiceva Todorovska, 2022).

However, the grand national project "Skopje 2014" (Wikipedia: Skopje 2014) is a subject of controversy. This project aims to construct around 20 buildings and over 40 sculptures, monuments, and fountains in the core city center, right next to the Old Bazaar. The government, underscoring the importance of tourism for Skopje's economic development, prioritizes it as a high-impact agenda item. One of the objectives of the project is to enhance the tourism supply of the core urban center by installing monuments intended to further attract tourists and visitors.

## Research Methodology

By interpreting the perceptions of local supply-enablers, the research pursues a dual objective: (i) To investigate the impact of tourism on the Old Bazaar and its subsequent transformation; and (ii) To suggest the creation of strategies to sustain tourism while preserving the authentic essence of the Old Bazaar. This was accomplished through a multi-stage methodology (Fig. 2)



**Fig. 2:** Research methodology

Source: Authors

The first stage encompassed a literature survey of Ottoman heritage that attracted tourists and visitors. For this, a scholarly research approach, as advocated by Van de Ven (2007), was applied to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge.

In the second stage, visual data were collected through participant observation (Kawulich, 2005) and photo-based imaging (Holm, 2014). The observation and photography of local shops allowed developing a practical understanding of the Old Bazaar as a focal point of interest. Additionally, the inclusion of old photos from postcards adds scientific and analytical depth to the study, facilitating more profound conclusions.

The third stage involved on-site research conducted in September 2023, with the primary aim of collecting data that describe the perceptions of local supply-enablers. This data was crucial for a more detailed examination of the factors influencing the diversification level of the Old Bazaar. A total of 25 in-depth interviews (Trainor, 2013) were carried out in an informal manner, using the local language, with conversation times ranging from 20 to 30 minutes (averaging 24 minutes). The target group included owners/managers and employees of local shops located in the core of the Old Bazaar (Table 1).

The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, allowing respondents to freely structure their discourse on the proposed topics, with minimal intervention to guide the process and quantify responses. Prior to commencing the interviewing process, a protocol, previously approved by two experts in tourism policy, was prepared. Piloting was undertaken to ensure the validity, clarity, and layout of the protocol, identifying possible omissions, irrelevant items, and determining the time required to complete each interview (Cohen et al., 2007).

The protocol served as a guiding framework during the interviewing procedure, during which comprehensive notes were taken for later summarization of responses. It consisted of four sections, encompassing two primary elements: (i) The current status perceived by assessing the up-to-date tourism impact; and (ii) The development perspective, suggesting that the Old Bazaar may allow for ongoing synergy with the current tourism flow and past traditional cultural values.

The protocol comprises the following sections:

- **Section 1:** Introduction. The research aims and the critical role of respondents in providing first-hand data were briefly explained. This aims to prevent any attempts to manipulate the survey process and potentially bias the results.
- **Section 2:** Perception. This section facilitated easy quantification of collected data during the interview through multiple-choice closed questions. Respondents answered a set of neutrally phrased questions to describe their perception of the transformation level of the Old Bazaar due to tourism exposure. The questions followed the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) indicators (European Commission, 2016) for

measuring tourism impacts on the sustainable dimensions of the researched site, in this case the Old Bazaar. Four groups of questions were addressed, covering the three pillars of sustainability (socio-cultural, natural, and economic environment), along with items describing the overall perception of the respondents towards their personal identification with the Old Bazaar. Respondents used a five-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

- **Section 3: Challenges.** This section facilitated the collection of more subjective and qualitative data during the interview through an open-ended questioning session. Respondents answered a set of direct questions exploring the challenges for the further development of the Old Bazaar. They were asked to briefly explain their first-hand insights on the sustainability of the Old Bazaar concerning: (i) Unique cultural experience; (ii) Sense of place; (iii) Authenticity; and (iv) Monitoring and management practices and policies for sustaining cultural identity.

**Table 1:** Interviewee data

Source: Authors

Data	% ( $\Sigma = 25$ )
Gender	
Male	88
Female	12
Age (years)	
18–35	40
36–60	48
60+	12
Nationality	
Macedonian	16
Turk	32
Albanian	48
Other	4
Education	
High school	92
University	8
Working position	
Owner/Manager	88
Employee	12
Type of local shop	
Traditional artisan shops (Jewelry shop, Leather shop, Potter shop, Clothing shop, etc.)	52
Cuisine store	20
Combined shops (Shops that sell handcrafted goods along with modern products)	20
Other (Decorative art shop, Souvenir shops, etc.)	8

- **Section 4: Interviewee Data (Table 1).** Most respondents were male (88%), aged between 36–60 years, of Albanian ethnic origin (48%), and had completed high school education (92%). Generally, they were owners or managers of local shops (88%) working at traditional artisan shops (52%).

The fourth and final stage encompassed data processing. Quantitative data, expressed as Likert scale items (Likert, 1932), were transformed into scale marks, allowing for the interpretation of mean values. This adaptation facilitated the quantification of respondents' perceptions. Conversely, qualitative data were succinctly summarized. The sentences used by the respondents, including any repetitions and the vigor of their expressions, guided an overall expert judgment (Hora, 2014). The subjective assessment enabled the comprehensive compilation of judicial sentences and the empirical generalization of findings and conclusions.

## Findings and the Discussion

The research findings are elaborated in a two-fold manner:

Firstly, the assessment of supply-enablers' perceptions yields findings regarding the transformation of the Old Bazaar due to tourism impact. The respondents perceived and quantified the structural transformation of the Old Bazaar, keeping in mind the three-pillar concept of sustainability, along with their overall identification with the Old Bazaar. Additionally, based on the authors' observations and photo imaging, further insights are presented regarding the diversification of the Old Bazaar.

Secondly, through direct questioning, the supply-enablers explained their development perspective of the Old Bazaar in terms of strategic challenges to sustain the unique cultural experience, the sense of place, and authenticity. They also provide insights into managing practices aimed at sustaining cultural identity.

These findings can contribute to the development of solutions for reshaping and enhancing management efficacy for more sustainable development, implying the continuous preservation of the Old Bazaar and the promotion of responsible tourism development.

## Transformation of the Old Bazaar in Skopje

Local supply-enablers have assessed that the appearance of the Old Bazaar has undergone a substantial transformation, shifting from an authentically traditional setting to a point of interest for tourism. Table 2 presents the summarized results obtained from the quantitative data processing, addressing three pillars of sustainability.

**Table 2:** Summarized quantitative data

Source: Authors

Item	Mean
I. Socio-cultural impacts (6 items)	
Positive	4.0
Negative	3.23
II. Environmental impacts (3 items)	
Negative	2.78
III. Economic impacts (4 items)	
Positive	4.39
Negative	3.12
IV. Overall perception (3 items)	
Positive	4.31
Negative	1.72

Based on the Table 2, the study reveals that local supply-enablers identified economic benefits as having the highest mean impact value (4.39), followed closely by positive overall perception (4.31) and positive socio-cultural impacts (4).

According to the respondents, economic sustainability impacts, both positive and negative, emerged as the most crucial dimension. Specifically, respondents highly prioritize the positive economic benefits of tourism, emphasizing the direct creation of local business opportunities (Dyer et al., 2007) and the use of tourism as a source of income (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011). They enhance their local businesses by producing and selling goods, particularly during the high season (May-October). Consequently, the Old Bazaar's attractiveness leads to direct economic benefits, including increased money flow, job opportunities, and the prosperity of local businesses (Kim et al., 2018; Li et al., 2008). Therefore, the economic environment, characterized by direct benefits, significantly influences respondents' perceptions, and fosters a positive attitude towards tourism. As a result, it is reasonable to anticipate that the economic environment may further facilitate the development of tourism and shape the local business landscape. Conversely, and not surprisingly, respondents perceived pricing (the increase in prices due to tourism) as having a significantly negative economic effect.

Moreover, as indicated in the Table 2, respondents express a strong positive impact on the socio-cultural aspects of tourism, with a mean value of 4. The perceived benefits predominantly arise from tourism's ability to enhance shopping, restaurant offerings, and entertainment opportunities (4.21), coupled with financial support for the preservation of the Old Bazaar (3.78). This positive evaluation aligns with the common trend of appreciating tourism's role in incentivizing heritage protection and conservation (Jimura, 2011).

Despite a moderate influence of all negative socio-cultural impacts of tourism (3.23), two findings stand out for their strong negative effects. Respondents highlighted concerns about "Facilities with a modern outlook (cafeterias, housing, etc.) destroying traditional values of the Old Bazaar" (4.07) and noted that "Tourism increases illegal building construction (shops, cafeterias, restaurants...)" (4.19). These findings raise important issues for discussion and warrant serious consideration in the formulation of tourism development policies. Additionally, there is a cluster of negative socio-cultural effects with low to moderate influence, encompassing concerns about an unsafe environment and changes in working styles.

An intriguing perception emerged during the analysis of the negative environmental impacts of tourism. Specifically, items such as pollution with solid waste, destruction of green areas, and the noise generated by tourists, are identified as having low to medium impact, with a mean value of 2.78. Consequently, respondents appear to be less concerned about the degradation of the natural environment, viewing it as the least important issue and not a matter of serious concern.

In general, the findings suggest that further mass visits to the Old Bazaar could potentially lead to even higher levels of socio-cultural degradation (3.23), negative economic impacts (3.12), and degradation of the natural environment (2.78). This raises critical questions about the sustainability of this historical heritage. Such concerns are often prevalent in developing countries with early stages of tourism development, where awareness of the need to protect cultural heritage is low (Látková & Vogt, 2012).

On the other hand, the overall positive perception is very high (4.31), indicating that respondents express extreme satisfaction with owning, managing, or working in a local shop in the Old Bazaar. This signifies a surplus value for personal identification (Jeon et al., 2016). Conversely, the lowest mean value of only 1.72 is linked to negative overall perception. This implies that local supply-enablers are not in favor of imposing a day limit for visitors (1.13), thereby not perceiving the Old Bazaar as a congested and unpleasant site due to tourist activity (2.31).

Moreover, an in-depth analysis of the transformation of the Old Bazaar is presented based on the personal observations of the authors and photo imaging.

Fig. 3 visually depicts a significant and rapid increase in the number of catering facilities along the central core of the Old Bazaar. These establishments are primarily dispersed along the main walking path, indicating a notable growth in the presence of such facilities in this area. This illustrates a significant change in the Old Bazaar concerning both physical alterations and anthropogenic pressure resulting from tourism. Particularly during the high season (May-October), when the daily flow of tourists and visitors is substantial, the Old Bazaar undergoes a complete transformation. Uniqueness, traditionalism, and authenticity are replaced by mass-produced, commercialized souvenirs lacking additional value, inexpensive industrial products imported from China, modern cuisines devoid of local traditional tastes, and the neglect of valuable architectural features embedded in the Old Bazaar. This clearly indicates a tourism-oriented economic attitude.



**Fig. 3:** Current outlook of the Old Bazaar

Source: Original photos of Biljana Petrevska (co-author)

Contrasting Fig. 3 (current outlook) with Fig. 4 (past outlook) highlights that the Old Bazaar is under significant stress in terms of socio-cultural and aesthetic pressure. Local supply-enablers prioritize the economic benefits of tourism over concerns about socio-cultural and environmental damage. This prioritization of economic advantages over the preservation of the cultural identity of the Old Bazaar raises the question of re-evaluating the current monitoring system for safeguarding cultural heritage.



**Fig. 4:** Past outlook of the Old Bazaar

Source: Postcards from Biljana Petrevska (co-author)

As a result, the Old Bazaar has undergone a transformation, evolving from a purely authentic cultural heritage site into a market area predominantly offering tourism and hospitality services. This shift prompts the need to reconsider tourism patterns, emphasizing a reorientation from quantity to quality and moving away from the objective of ever-increasing number of tourists and visitors to sustainable increase.

It is crucial to recognize that conservation and preservation are not accidental outcomes but require consistent and strategic developmental planning for the Old Bazaar. As highlighted by

Seraphin et al. (2018), both local and national governments must implement policies to ensure the social sustainability of the site, going beyond merely advocating for a reduction in tourist activity.

### **Development Perspective of the Old Bazaar in Skopje**

During the interviews, respondents were tasked with identifying and describing challenges for the further development of the Old Bazaar, delving into the who, what, and why of these obstacles. Through direct questioning, they briefly shared their firsthand insights on the sustainability of the Old Bazaar, focusing on its unique cultural experience, the sense of place it imparts, and its authenticity. Additionally, respondents were prompted to explain the development perspective in terms of managing practices and policies to sustain the cultural identity of the Old Bazaar.

Respondents acknowledged the significant transformation that the Old Bazaar has undergone over the years. Despite these changes, it continues to draw visitors and tourists, primarily due to its unique cultural experience, identified as a key attraction (Hall & Mitchell, 2000), adding an extra layer of value (Patuelli et al., 2012). They passionately argued that the sense of place embedded in the Old Bazaar acts as a fundamental trigger, fostering a sustainable tourism experience within this cultural heritage site.

Simultaneously, respondents engaged in a discourse on the authenticity of the Old Bazaar, deeming it a fundamental concept and criterion for conservation (Hassan & Ekiz, 2021; Katahenggam, 2020). They pinpointed private tourism initiatives and government support as a foundation for reinforcing the conservation efforts of the Old Bazaar. These initiatives open vast opportunities to enhance tourism dynamics by introducing new experiences to tourists and providing benefits to service providers as integral components of the tourism value chain. More precisely, respondents proposed approaches to attract visitors, such as narrating legends, myths, and stories, thus enhancing the overall visitor experience.

Finally, respondents emphasized the imperative to enhance site management by adopting efficient and effective practices and policies, all revolving around maintaining and sustaining the uniqueness, sense of place, and authenticity of the Old Bazaar. They highlighted the absence of a comprehensive monitoring policy at all levels, resulting in unguarded spatial expansion of the bazaar, over commercialization, and a lack of sustainable practices. While acknowledging a few short-term measures and management actions supporting local communities in defining tourism-oriented development, respondents underscored the pressing need for more comprehensive strategies for sustainable tourism development. These findings align with those of Xu and Deng (2020), who argue for the creation of strategies that inevitably include the protection of cultural sites in the pursuit of sustainable tourism development.

Being aware of the advantages that the Old Bazaar for tourism development empowered respondents to fully agree that it embraces culturally, socially, and environmentally unsustainable forms of mass tourism. Without less destructive forms of tourism, the Old Bazaar may face the paradox of tourism jeopardizing the very essence that attracts tourists (Aggelos & Pisano, 2021). In the absence of significant change, the Old Bazaar is poised to lose either cultural balance or authenticity, and likely both. In addition to preserving its economic benefits, the monitoring of the Old Bazaar must shift towards qualitative growth.

### **Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

The research focuses on the Old Bazaar in Skopje, North Macedonia, as a specific and valuable structure of the Ottoman cultural heritage. Since 2008, it has held the status of a cultural heritage of special importance under permanent protection by the state. However, over the years, it has faced numerous tourism-related challenges, some of which persist and pose a threat to its cultural significance and identity.

By examining the perspectives of local supply enablers, the study delves into two key aspects related to the Old Bazaar and tourism impacts.

Firstly, it explores the three sustainability pillars (social equity, environmental preservation, and economic efficiency) along with assessing the overall perception of the structural, aesthetic, and functional transformation of the Old Bazaar resulting from tourism.

Through the quantification of standardized indicators, the study reveals that the Old Bazaar strives to align with sustainability principles while recognizing the impacts of tourism. Notably, positive economic impacts emerge as the most dominant, providing evidence-informed guidance for authorities in formulating appropriate policies (McLoughlin et al., 2020). It was also found that the cultural values of the Old Bazaar are of exceptional significance and importance for both, present and future generations. This means that positive economic opportunities of tourism impacts may be taken in serious consideration but also as a responsibility to maintain, protect, and preserve the Old Bazaar's cultural identity.

Regarding socio-cultural impacts, respondents expressed strong positive perceptions, citing benefits such as improved shopping, expanded restaurant options, and enhanced entertainment opportunities resulting from tourism. However, concerns arise about the potential erosion of traditional values due to the proliferation of modern facilities, including cafeterias and housing. This underscores the necessity for a thorough reconsideration in the development of conservation policies.

Interestingly, the research identifies the negative environmental impacts of tourism as the least prioritized concern among respondents. This finding raises concerns about the sustainability of the cultural heritage, particularly if further tourist visits lack appropriate measures for protection and conservation.

On the other hand, respondents demonstrate a high overall identification with the Old Bazaar, indicating satisfaction with owning, managing, or working in local shops within the area, thus adding substantial value.

Through personal observations and photo analysis, the paper concludes a profound transformation of the Old Bazaar. Recent photos of local shops (Fig. 3) compared to old postcards (Fig. 4) reveal a significant penetration of industrial commercialization in this cultural site. It was found that the Old Bazaar failed to properly address and manage its growth and its concentration over time and space, facing challenges from the growing number of tourists and visitors. The analysis confirms a shift in the Old Bazaar's identity from a cultural point of interest to a purely economically-oriented one, resulting in a diminished understanding of its cultural and intrinsic values (Aleksova & Miranda, 2017).

The research, secondly, explored the challenges impeding further development by drawing insights from respondents to sustain the unique cultural experience, sense of place, and authenticity of the Old Bazaar. Through firsthand data, the study explored the creation of a strategic policy to sustain tourism while effectively monitoring, protecting, and preserving the cultural essence of the Old Bazaar. The analysis revealed that despite existing legislation and an institutional framework aimed at safeguarding the core elements of cultural identity, numerous concerns persist as threats to the values of this cultural heritage.

Moreover, the research identified that the Old Bazaar faces significant challenges due to the lack of effective systems and policies, elements crucial for ensuring sustainability, particularly upon rapid tourism development. Respondents affirmed that strategic documents designed for the preservation and protection of the authenticity and aesthetic cultural value of the Old Bazaar have only yielded short-term impacts, lacking adequate monitoring and management at the local level. Ensuring the long-term viability of the Old Bazaar as a tourism heritage site necessitates the implementation of responsible policies for future-oriented cultural site management (Bernardo & Pereira, 2020).

The study found a transformative shift in the focus of this cultural site over the years, moving from its emphasis on aesthetic, traditional, and architectural values to a more objective sustainability dimension, a notion already explored by Labadi (2013). The research brought to light that tourism has reshaped the outlook of the Old Bazaar, posing a serious threat to the delicate balance of cultural identity (Schmutz & Elliott, 2016). This implies that the current efforts to reconcile the protection of the Old Bazaar are inadequate. Drawing from a supply-side perspective, the conclusion was drawn that enhancing the protection of the Old Bazaar stands as the primary requirement for developing and maintaining sustainable tourism in this historical site. This involves creating synergies for a more holistic range of values (Cameron, 2020).

However, the study acknowledges several limitations that could be addressed in future research. They are as follows.

- Firstly, data collection took place at the end of the tourism season (September), potentially neglecting the perceptions of respondents during peak visitation months such as May (start of the season) and July (midseason), when the daily number of visitors is significantly higher.
- Secondly, the interview process involved a relatively limited set of research items, suggesting the potential for further expansion in future studies. The reliability of the research method may also be questioned, as it relies solely on the interviewee's mood during direct questioning. Introducing free-form conversations in an explorative manner could be considered in future work.
- Thirdly, the study had a relatively small sample size, suggesting the possibility of extending the sample for more robust results. The research focused solely on the perception of local supply-enablers, overlooking the perspectives of demand and mediating aspects.
- Finally, the study's sample scope concentrated on only one bazaar, the Old Bazaar in Skopje, as an Ottoman cultural site. Future research could consider a broader range of cultural sites for a more comprehensive understanding.

Despite these limitations, the paper offers valuable insights for future work, and provides a broad context for understanding the impact of tourism on local cultural landmarks and the process of transforming their identity. Within its limitations, the research yields practical findings and suggestions for preserving Ottoman cultural heritage through tourism valorization. The findings have practical implications for all stakeholders in the tourism industry, facilitating a better understanding of the impacts on cultural heritage.

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