Visitors’ Preferences for Interpretation at Heritage Sites

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Research on interpretation at heritage settings commonly centers on the display. The current study highlights visitor preferences for on-site interpretation, an essential element in the management of heritage tourist attractions. This research focuses on the Wailing Wall, a religious “must-see” attraction in Jerusalem. The role of interpretation as a facilitator of emotional experience rather than a means to gain knowledge is explored. Results indicate the need to customize the interpretation to meet visitor preferences and motives. Furthermore, the study reveals the need to capture heritage tourism not only as a search for naïve nostalgia or a simplified romantic version of the past but also as a more complex phenomenon. Implications for marketers and heritage site operators are suggested, highlighting the need to adopt innovative approaches to the management of heritage tourist attractions and provide different interpretations for different visitors.

Keywords: interpretation; personal heritage; perception; preferences; tourist experiences

Heritage tourism, whether defined as visits to cultural settings or visits to spaces considered by the visitors as relevant to their own heritage, is one of the fastest growing tourism sectors (Bonn et al. 2007). Research on heritage tourism sites often focuses on the display rather than on latent heritage (Caton and Santos 2007), a line of research that often highlights the concept of “power,” emphasizing the stakeholders’ impact on the presentation and interpretation. The current study adopts Tunbridge and Ashworth’s (1996, p. 69) approach that the study of heritage settings “must shift from the uses of heritage to the users themselves and thus from the producers (whether cultural institutions, governments or enterprises) to the consumers.” Specifically, the approach presented here focuses on the visitors, exploring the relationships between the visitors’ perception of the site relative to their own heritage and their preferences toward on-site interpretation. The significance of this relationship derives from studies in areas such as environmental psychology, human geography, and sociology of tourism as well as heritage site management and construction of history and commemoration.

The main assertion in this study is that research on tourist experiences in spaces presenting cultural assets should be based on the interrelationships among site attributes, visitors, and presentation. Specifically, in line with the “experientially-based” approach (Apostolakis 2003, p. 799), the current research explores visitors’ perceptions of the site relative to their personal heritage, which may be linked to individual personal characteristics such as gender, age, religious affiliation, and preferences with respect to elements of the on-site interpretation. These interrelationships, especially preferences for interpretation, which are often ignored in heritage tourism literature, are essential to the management of heritage tourist attractions. The study also provides a better understanding of people’s experience of heritage settings by clarifying visitors’ subjective and personal perceptions of the site and their motives for visiting. Thus, the view that only a naïve search for nostalgia or a simplified commoditized past is at the core of heritage tourism is challenged.

Highlighting visitor perceptions and preferences relative to the interpretation is most valuable for the management of heritage attractions. The findings shed light on the need to mass customize visitor experience of heritage settings rather than provide monolithic experiences only; this is specifically the case where there is an interest in attracting visitors and increasing revenues.
Literature Review

Interpretation in Tourism Literature

Although many definitions of interpretation have been proposed in the tourism literature, no single definition has been universally accepted. A review of the literature suggests that interpretation can be defined as the transmission of information from the presenter to the viewer in an attempt to educate the latter. Referring to heritage settings, Howard (2003, p. 244) argues that interpretation “covers the various means of communicating heritage to people.” Focusing on tour guides, Cohen (1985) differentiates between information and interpretation. Alderson and Low’s (1976) definition is of importance as it emphasizes the role of management in the provision of interpretation. They defined interpretation as a “planned effort to create for the visitor an understanding of the history and significance of events, people, and objects” (p. 3). The use of the words planned and create is noteworthy, as it recognizes that there are different heritages “out there” in the public arena and that management of heritage sites decides what to present. Studies dealing with on-site presentation and interpretation often reveal that the information presented is not the truth, challenging the possibility that objective reality exists (Reisinger and Steiner 2006). The differences between the “real thing” and the presentation are the result of two main factors. The first is the fact that the display justifies and validates the version of history as seen by those in power ignoring other versions, an idea derived from a feminist research perspective (e.g., Hall 1994; Poria 2007). This research perspective has an effect on tourism research in general and recognizes the need to provide those without power the opportunity to influence heritage presentations (e.g., Pritchard and Morgan 2001; Pritchard et al. 2007). The second factor refers to managerial considerations arising from the need to attract visitors and raise revenues. However, this factor is often ignored. A possible reason could be its incompatibility with often-cited theories that overestimate the role of “power” in heritage presentation and ignore the role of heritage tourist attractions as a source of income. Heritage settings must compete with other tourist attractions and be profitable. In line with the above, they are forced to present the past as an interesting and appealing “show,” thus introducing modifications and manipulations, distancing the presentation from the “real thing” (i.e., prevailing historical facts). This happens, for example, when tour guides at heritage setting manipulate the narrative to suit the specific audience. Studies suggest that narrative manipulations are geared to increase tips, increase return customers, and enlarge customers’ market share potential (e.g., Guter and Feldman 2006).

Similar to general tourism studies, literature that centers on interpretation also points to the difficulties in defining interpretation. Beck and Cable (2002) argue that interpretation encompasses many possibilities in many different places. Tilden (1977, p. 7) argues that a definition of interpretation is either too inclusive or fails to emphasize that “which we believe is vital.” Instead, in Tilden’s words, “I am prepared to define the called Interpretation” as follows: “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (pp. 7-8). Beck and Cable (2002) defined interpretation “as an informational and inspirational process designed to enhance understanding, appreciation, and protection of our cultural and natural legacy” (p. 1). Based on the above, and in line with conceptualizations from communication theories (Kotler 1984), the working definition of interpretation adopted in this study is the following: Interpretation is the process of the transmission of knowledge, its diffusion, and its reception and perception by the individual.

This definition intentionally implies that interpretation is a process that begins with the information chosen to be presented by heritage site management (whether it is “real,” “objective,” “authentic” or not) and continues through the visitor’s understanding and experience of the interpretation. It is suggested that interpretation is not a one-sided effort but an outcome of an interactive process. In line with Reisinger and Steiner (2006), who adopted Heidegger’s philosophy, the working definition recognizes that visitors play both active and passive roles during the interpretation experience.

The above definition of interpretation includes elements often overlooked in the tourism literature, such as the nature of heritage, the nature of the visitor, and the potential relationship between them. The fact that these elements are ignored is revealed through a review of the literature (see Timothy and Boyd 2003) dealing with the objectives of interpretation and ways of evaluating its quality. Both researchers and practitioners often perceive the objective of interpretation as educating the visitors, aiming at facilitating an understanding of the importance of protection and conservation (Timothy and Boyd 2003). This line of thought is reflected in Tilden’s (1977, p. 38) statement: “Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation protection” Another example is Herbert’s (1989, p. 191) statement that interpretation should “make people more aware of the places they visit, to provide knowledge.” Infrequently, entertainment is mentioned as a means for endorsing learning (Light 1995; Timothy and Boyd 2003). Moreover, the literature that elaborates on the links between power and...
the heritage presented (or hidden) argues for another mission of interpretation (and heritage settings), namely, to sustain the power of the dominant, hegemonic groups in society (e.g., Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000).

Very few attempts have been made to evaluate interpretation quality or to clarify what constitutes “good interpretation,” given the role of interpretation in enriching individuals’ knowledge. These attempts to evaluate interpretation quality measure two different concepts: the knowledge gained (i.e., objective learning) and the subjective perception of knowledge gained (i.e., subjective learning). Objective learning is often evaluated by questionnaires attempting to quantify visitors’ knowledge following the visit (e.g., Prentice, Guerin, and McGugan 1998). Another option for measuring quality of interpretation is to ask for a subjective perception of the learning process on site (e.g., Light 1995). However, very few empirical attempts have been made to assess the link between the visitor and the on-site presentation.

Studies reveal that interpretation is an essential component of the visit experience. Yet, visitors differ in their interests in interpretation (Espelt and Benito 2006; Moscardo 1996). For example, visitors are interested in being exposed to their histories. Gvili and Poria (2005) point to the need to mass customize information on museum Web sites, as people of different religions and different strengths of religious belief have different interests concerning content. Moreover, in studies focusing on interpretation, the underlying assumption is that the main motivation for visiting heritage sites is to gain knowledge. Therefore, most attempts to relate to interpretation quality focus on the cognitive effects and ignore the emotional elements of the heritage experience, which may be at the heart of the visit to heritage settings (Poria, Butler, and Airey 2003).

Interpretation—Monolithic or Polymorphic?

Most studies on the relationship between power and heritage presentation argue that heritage settings provide a single, monolithic interpretation supporting a particular ideological framework (Hall 1994). However, literature dealing with heritage and its construction (e.g., Azoulay 1993; Bruner 1996) indicates that individuals are interested in diverse interpretations, in accordance with the various meanings assigned to the experience of a heritage site. For example, Austin (2002), who interviewed visitors to Cape Coast Castle (a slave trading fortification in the Republic of Ghana), notes that the meanings the site has for different visitors (African Americans, Caucasians, and Africans residing in Africa) affect their expectations of information provided. Scholars who classify heritage sites according to “geographical identity” (Howard 2003, p. 147) highlight the link between concepts such as heritage, place, and space (e.g., Timothy 1997) and the fact that a single location holds, or may hold, a multitude of meanings. These meanings, in turn, affect individual interest in interpretation.

The argument for presenting different interpretational perspectives on site is based on research indicating that visitors seek different experiences at the same heritage site. Beeho and Prentice (1997), who interviewed visitors to New Lanark World Heritage Village in Scotland, showed that visitors differ in their motivations and desired experiences. For example, some expect the visit to be an educational experience while others regard it as an enjoyable and interesting day out or as emotional and thought-provoking. Poria, Butler, and Airey (2004) and Poria, Reichel, and Biran (2006a, 2006b) suggested that there is a need to distinguish among three groups of visitors: (1) those who expect to feel the heritage, (2) those who expect to learn, (3) and those who expect other experiences. In this connection, McIntosh’s (1999) observation should be mentioned, namely, that a visit to a heritage site is an interactive encounter influenced by both the site attributes and the individual cultural background.

Another group of studies that indicates the need for a variety of on-site interpretations is centered on motivations to visit heritage sites. Chen (1998), for example, distinguishes between visitors to heritage sites according to two main motives: pursuit of knowledge and personal benefit (e.g., relaxation, sightseeing, recreation). McCain and Ray (2003) use motivation such as the interest to search for family history to differentiate among subsegments of heritage tourism (attempting to distinguish between legacy tourists and other special interest tourists). Moscardo (1996) argues that the degree of one’s willingness to be educated or entertained at heritage settings can be used to distinguish visitor types. Poria, Reichel, and Biran (2006b) highlight the link between interest in knowledge and motives such as bequeathing the heritage displayed to a younger generation and the willingness to feel emotionally involved. In sum, these arguments add up to imply that interpretation should be planned and implemented to respond to the diversity of motivations that lead people to visit a site.

This conclusion is supported by studies of the duration and content of interpretation. For example, Stewart et al. (1998) identify four types of visitors partially based on the duration of interpretation sought: “seekers,” “stumblers,” “shaders,” and “shunners.” Bruner (1996), who investigated visitors to Elmina Castle in Ghana, noticed that visitors showed interest in diverse aspects of the interpretation. For example, Dutch visitors...
preferred hearing about the period under Dutch rule and visiting the Dutch cemetery, while British visitors were more interested in the period of colonial rule of the Gold Coast. Espelt and Benito (2006) revealed differences in the interest in culture and interpretation among four groups of visitors to a heritage city: noncultural tourists, ritual tourists, interested tourists, and erudite tourists.

Furthermore, studies of the evolution of heritage and the construction of history support the notion that individuals may be interested in different interpretative content. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) highlighted the concept of “dissonant heritage,” suggesting that some prefer ignoring certain components of human history. Based on studies of the construction of collective memory, Poria (2007) argues that individuals are not interested in presenting or watching actions taken by “one’s tribe,” when such actions evoke feelings of shame. This can explain why certain groups of the population are interested in preserving and observing only certain parts of the past.

Research Objectives

This study aims to shed light on tourist preferences for interpretation provided at heritage settings. A review of the literature demonstrates that heritage means different things to different people. Moreover, although studies reveal that visitors to heritage settings are motivated by a variety of reasons and seek different experiences, the interpretation provided tends to be monolithic, presenting one narrative only, often in response to a political agenda (Hall 1994). Specifically, this study explores preferences for various dimensions of interpretation, such as its contents and its mediator. Also, given the nature of the site, it was decided to clarify whether the content of the interpretation should be based on religious sources and, if so, which sources. Moreover, the study challenges several working assumptions reflected in the literature and practice of interpretation, such as offering unified, one-sided interpretation. Tourist preferences of interpretation are investigated by highlighting tourist perceptions of the site, providing greater understanding of tourist experience in heritage settings, as suggested by Poria, Reichel, and Biran (2006a, 2006b) and Timothy (1997).

Research Implementation

Since the research design requires relating to a particular heritage site, one of the first decisions involves site selection. It was decided that the site chosen should meet two criteria. First, it should be known to participants, and, second, it should carry different meanings for different people. The Western Wall, located in Jerusalem in a relatively small area (around 60 m of the wall is accessible to the public), is a highly suitable location. The Western Wall (ha’kotel ha-ma’aravi in Hebrew), also known as the Wailing Wall, is the holiest site for the Jewish people. Its religious importance stems from the fact that it is believed to be the only remnant of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. In addition, it represents a striking visual symbol of Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. The Western Wall also has religious significance for Christians. It is believed that Jesus stood nearby and prophesized the downfall of the Temple, challenging its operation and the way religion was practiced (Schiller 1992). For Christians, the destruction of the Temple symbolizes the need to follow Jesus and his religious ideas. This site is also of importance to Muslims, as according to tradition this is where the Prophet Muhammad tied his horse, named El-Boreq, on the way from Mecca to El-Aqsa (therefore, the Arabic name for the Western Wall is El-Boreq). Moreover, this site is exceptionally well suited for this research because of its additional attributes—it is accessible to all, and there are no entrance fees. The site is known to be visited by a variety of visitors who are believed to approach its history in different ways. This variety is of crucial importance for the purpose of this study. In addition, there is almost no formal interpretation offered. Clearly, being a significant and sacred site may affect the study’s external validity.

The study was conducted in three stages. First, the exploratory stage included semistructured interviews that were conducted with 20 individuals. The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes. To enrich the data, the sample included both people who had visited the site and those who had not visited it; in addition, five tour guides were interviewed. The interviews centered on preferences regarding the interpretation provided at heritage sites in general and at the Western Wall in particular. In addition, participants were asked to indicate the benefits sought from interpretation to be provided at the Western Wall in particular and at historic sites in general. Furthermore, participants were asked to mention reasons for visiting the city of Jerusalem and the Western Wall. The analysis of the interviews utilized the Spider Type Diagram technique (also known as Mind Mapping; Wilson 2003), which aims at identifying themes in transcripts and the links among them. This was done by first identifying the themes and then looking for links among them. This stage was conducted by the authors. Because of the simple nature of the responses, almost no disagreements were found. This analysis resulted in input to be included in a questionnaire. For example, religious duty was added to the list of
motivations. Almost all the questions focusing on preferences of interpretation contents and preferences toward information sources were derived from the exploratory stage. Based on the exploratory stage, a preliminary questionnaire was designed.

In the second stage, a feasibility study was conducted, with the goal of assessing the clarity and the distribution of answers. The feasibility study was conducted in two different locations, Jerusalem as well as the city of Beer-Sheva. Only minor changes were required.

The third stage, the main data collection, took place from November 2005 to mid-December 2005 (6 weeks). The questionnaire begins with a series of questions regarding tourists’ perceptions of the site in relation to their own heritage (adopted from Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2006a, 2006b). Another set of questions was designed to clarify preferences toward various aspects of the interpretation, such as the narratives and the sources of interpretation. This set of questions was based on the exploratory stage as well as a previous study (Poria, Biran and Reichel 2007). In addition, participants were asked about possible motivations for the visit. The statements were based on previous studies clarifying tourist motivations for visiting heritage settings by individuals perceiving the site as part of their personal heritage as well as those regarding the site as an historic site only, with no link to their own heritage (Poria, Butler, and Airey 2004; Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2006a, 2006b). Attention was paid to motivations related to on-site emotional aspects of the visit. Furthermore, the willingness to visit the site was investigated. The Cronbach’s alpha of all statements in the questionnaire measuring perceptions, motivations, and attitudes was very high (.895). Finally, individuals’ sociodemographic characteristics were addressed. The results of the main fieldwork were analyzed by means of exploratory factor analysis to identify common dimensions of tourist preferences of on-site interpretation. In addition, t-tests were carried out to investigate whether significant differences existed among groups (complying with a $p < .05$ level of significance). Finally, Pearson’s $r$ correlation was utilized to explore the links between tourists’ motivations and their preferences for interpretation.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted by graduate students trained by the authors. To reduce the likelihood that they might lead the interviewees to specific answers, the interviewers were not informed of the specific objectives of the study. Data collection was conducted at several locations in two cities in Israel (Jerusalem and Beer-Sheva). At each location (shopping centers and the central bus station in each city), every nth individual was approached. This was done to avoid a situation in which interviewers, sometimes unconsciously, prefer interviewing those who are similar to them (Malhotra and Birks 2003; Veal 2006).

All participants were older than 15, as cognitive abilities at this age are developed enough to participate in such a study (Apter et al. 1998). Also, individuals who had never heard of the Western Wall were excluded from the sample. Approximately 30% of those approached asked not to participate, stating that they were either busy or interested in visiting other sites. It should be noted that it is common for tourists visiting Jerusalem, a city rich in heritage sites located in close proximity to each other, to rush from one site to the next. In total, 227 interviews were conducted. However, given the nature of the research objectives and the sample’s religious affiliation distribution, it was decided to include only Jewish participants in the analysis (who composed most of the sample; $n = 173$). Therefore, 44 participants stating that they were Muslim, 9 participants identifying themselves as members of other religions, and 2 participants who preferred not to report their religious beliefs where excluded from the final sample. Second, those unfamiliar with the site (an additional 3 participants) were excluded from the final sample. This was done as awareness is considered to be an essential component involved in the creation of attitudes, perceptions, and behavior (McClellan 1998). Finally, to avoid sample bias, those stating they had not previously visited the site were excluded from the analysis (an additional 3 participants). In total, 61 respondents were excluded from the analysis, and the final sample was composed of 166 observations.

The gender distribution of the relevant sample was 41% female and 59% male. Of the sample, 43.3% had completed an undergraduate course and 11.5% had completed a postgraduate course. Participants were asked to state to what extent they regarded themselves as religious. Most of the respondents (53.1%) identified themselves as secular, 26.9% referred to themselves as traditional, and 20.0% considered themselves religious. Among those who indicated their age group, the modal answer was 21 to 40 (57.8%).

Findings

Tourists’ Perceptions

Participants were first asked to indicate their level of agreement with three statements on a 6-point scale (0 = disagree, 5 = agree). The statements were based on previous studies in which tourist perceptions of the site were measured (Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2006a, 2006b). The statements referred to participants’ perception of the Western Wall relative to their own heritage: (1) “the site is
part of your own heritage”; (2) “you feel a sense of belonging to the site”; and (3) “this site has symbolic meaning for you.” Most participants graded their answers 4 or 5, suggesting that most of them perceive the site to be part of their own personal heritage. Cronbach’s alpha was relatively high (α = .749), suggesting that the statements measure the same theoretical concept. These statements serve as a basis for constructing a classification method that distinguishes among visitors. Previous studies indicate that there is no widely recognized visitor classification method. Yet two classification methods were used based on statements measuring tourist perceptions: division into three equal groups (by dividing the scale into three equal sections; e.g., Poria, Butler, and Airey 2003, 2004) and division into two unequal groups, such as that implemented by Poria, Biran, and Reichel (2007). Given that most participants tended to see the Western Wall as their personal heritage, it was decided to classify tourists into two unequal groups: (1) those who perceive the Western Wall as part of their personal heritage (average score 4 or 5) and (2) those who do not perceive the Western Wall as part of their personal heritage (average score less than 4).

**Interest in Interpretation**

Participants were asked to state their overall interest in having interpretation during their visit. They were provided with a 6-point scale indicating their level of interest (0 = not interested, 5 = interested). The two statements used were derived from the exploratory stage. Table 1 presents visitors’ interest in interpretation relative to their perception of the site as part of their personal heritage.

As seen in table 1, visitors generally favor interpretation during their visit. Also, those who perceive the site as part of their personal heritage (Group 2) indicated greater interest in receiving interpretation than those who do not perceive the site as part of their personal heritage (Group 1). Furthermore, all participants demonstrated moderate levels of interest in the option to choose a specific interpretation from among alternative versions.

**Preference Toward Components of Interpretation**

Several findings relate to the links between the perception of the site and preferences toward various components of interpretation. First, participants were presented with a list of items referring to their preferences for the interpretation (see table 2). Participants were provided with a 6-point scale, where 0 indicates do not prefer and 5 indicates prefer. The statements were derived from the exploratory stage and a previous study by Poria, Biran, and Reichel (2007). To examine underlying common dimensions of preferences, a factor analysis was undertaken. Given the exploratory nature of this study, and as often done in social studies (Malhotra and Birks 2003), principal component analysis was employed using oblique rotation. This is based on the assumption that the extracted factors might be correlated. Only two items had communalities lower than .5. Given the fact that Measure of Sample Adequacy (MSA) exceeded .5 (for all items as well as the overall test), and based on the result of the Bartlett Test, it was decided to include all items in the analysis. Furthermore, following Hair et al.’s (1998, p. 131) advice to evaluate variables for possible deletion depending on “the variable’s overall contribution to the research,” it was decided to include the two variables in the analysis as they are meaningful for this study.

The number of factors was determined according to Eigenvalue (> 1) and scree plot. Following Stevens (1992, cited in Field 2000), only items loading with an absolute value higher than .4 were included in the factors. Table 2 presents the loading values of the various interpretation preferences. All items were loaded on one factor only. It should also be noted that no item was deleted, so all items are assigned to the two factors extracted. The two factors account for 63.07% of the variance.

The results presented in table 2 reveal a clear distinction between the two factors. The first factor, “own heritage,” relates to tourists’ preferences for the interpretation to present their own heritage and allow emotional involvement with respect to their personal heritage. The second factor, “other’s heritage,” highlights participants’ interest in information about other people’s or groups’ heritage. Relatively high levels of Cronbach’s alpha were observed, suggesting high levels of reliability. As can be seen, preferences for the interpretation to provide an entertaining experience are linked with interest in information on other’s heritage. This implies that although the individual’s own heritage is perceived as eliciting an emotional reaction, other’s heritage is perceived as a source of entertainment and an enjoyable visiting experience. Also of interest is that the role of interpretation as enriching one’s knowledge of the site is included in the first factor (“own heritage”).

To clarify possible links between tourist perceptions of the site and their preferences for on-site interpretation, t-tests were employed. Table 3 presents differences between the two categories of tourists based on their perception of the site and their preferences for the interpretation while referring to the two factors identified above.

As seen in table 3, statistically significant differences were found between the two groups relative to their desire for the interpretation to highlight their own heritage. Visitors perceiving the site to be part of their own
### Table 1

**Interest in Interpretation Relative to Site Perception**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (n = 60)</th>
<th>Group 2 (n = 106)</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving interpretation at the Western Wall</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing a specific interpretation out of several alternative versions offered</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Group 1: Do not perceive the site as part of their own personal heritage; Group 2: Perceive the site as part of their own personal heritage.

*Significant at the $p < .05$ level.

### Table 2

**Factor Analysis of Preferences for Interpretation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1: Own Heritage</th>
<th>Factor 2: Other's Heritage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highlight the connection between you and your personal heritage</td>
<td>.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide you with an emotional experience</td>
<td>.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you about your own religion</td>
<td>.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you about your nation’s history</td>
<td>.775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen the understanding that the site belongs to your heritage and not to the heritage of other groups</td>
<td>.721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrich your knowledge of the site</td>
<td>.559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you about another nation’s history</td>
<td>.922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you about other religions</td>
<td>.900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide you with an enjoyable and entertaining experience</td>
<td>.553</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eigenvalue: 3.966
% of variance: 44.069

Cronbach’s $\alpha$: .843

Note: Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: promax with Kaiser normalization; rotation converged in three iterations; Cronbach’s alpha of all items = .802.

a. Statements based on the exploratory study.

b. Statements based on previous studies.

### Table 3

**Preference for Interpretation Relative to Perception**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (n = 60)</th>
<th>Group 2 (n = 106)</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own heritage factor</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlight the connection between you and your personal heritage</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide you with an emotional experience</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you about your own religion</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you about your nation’s history</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen the understanding that the site belongs to your heritage and not to the heritage of other groups</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrich your knowledge of the site</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other’s heritage factor</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you about another nation’s history</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach you about other religions</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide you with an enjoyable and entertaining experience</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Group 1: Do not perceive the site as part of their own personal heritage; Group 2: Perceive the site as part of their own personal heritage.

**Significant at the $p < .01$ level.
heritage show greater preference for the interpretation to present information relevant to their own heritage, allow them to feel connected to their personal heritage, and generate an emotional visiting experience. Differences were not found with respect to preferences for the interpretation to enrich knowledge about other’s heritage or provide an entertaining experience. Furthermore, though all participants are interested in being exposed to other’s heritage, no differences were found between the two groups. This, as illustrated later, is of importance to the management of interpretation.

Participants were also asked to indicate their preferences for the source of the interpretation (on a 6-point scale, where 0 indicates do not prefer and 5 indicates prefer). Given that this research focuses on a religious site, participants were presented with the options that the interpretation would be based either on various religious or on secular sources. The results are presented in table 4.

Several issues emerging from table 4 are noteworthy. First, there seems to be a trend, although not statistically significant, of differences between the two groups in terms of their interest that the interpretation be based solely on secular sources. Those who do not perceive the site as part of their own heritage are more interested in interpretation based only on archeological and historical evidence. Second, it can be seen that there is a general preference for the interpretation to be based on the Old Testament as opposed to the New Testament or the Quran (paired-samples t-test indicates that those differences are significant). This could be because of the fact that the sample includes only those who state they are Jewish. In addition, it is interesting to note that tourists display greater interest for the interpretation to include a variety of information sources rather than to be based on one source only. As a paired-samples t-test indicates, both groups significantly prefer an interpretation based on both religious and secular sources over an interpretation based solely on secular sources (Group 1: \( t = 5.92, \) sig. = .000; Group 2: \( t = 11.58, \) sig. = .000).

Participants were also asked about their preferences toward the religious content of the interpretation (on a 6-point scale, where 0 indicates do not prefer and 5 indicates prefer), specifically highlighting the connections between the site and its three relevant religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism). The results are presented in table 5.

As indicated in table 5, in terms of content, participants preferred the Jewish narrative. In addition, tourists perceiving the site as their personal heritage display greater interest in highlighting the connection between the site and Judaism than their counterparts. However, those who do not perceive the site to be part of their own heritage showed greater interest in having the interpretation present the connections with Islam and Christianity in comparison to their counterparts.

### Motivation for the Visit and Interpretation Preferences

To better understand visitor preferences regarding the interpretation, motivations to visit the site were explored. Participants were provided with a list of possible motives, including the wish to feel connected to the heritage presented, and reasons linked to a quest for leisure and education (on a 6-point scale, where 0 indicates do not motivate me and 5 motivate me). As the site is a famous, must-see tourist attraction, a reason relating to this issue was also included.

To identify common dimensions of motivations for visiting among tourists, a factor analysis was conducted.

---

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferences for Information Source Relative to Perception</th>
<th>Group 1 (n = 60)</th>
<th>Group 2 (n = 106)</th>
<th>t-Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only secular sources (archeological and historical)⁺</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both religious and secular sources⁺⁺</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only the Old Testament⁺⁺</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only the New Testament⁺</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only the Quran⁺</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Group 1: Do not perceive the site as part of their own personal heritage; Group 2: Perceive the site as part of their own personal heritage.

a. Statements based on the exploratory study.
b. Statements based on previous studies.

**Significant at the \( p < .01 \) level.
using oblique rotation. Following Stevens (1992, cited in Field 2000), only items loaded with an absolute value higher than .4 were included in the factors. All items were divided between two factors, and no item was loaded on more than one factor. In addition, no items fell out during the analysis. The first factor (Eigenvalue of 4.945, explaining 44.95% of total variance) is composed of motives linked to the quest for a heritage experience. This factor was composed of reasons such as “you visited the site because the site is connected to your identity” and “you visited the site because you are interested in an emotional experience.” The second factor (Eigenvalue of 1.725, explaining 15.68% of total variance) is composed of reasons not directly linked to the heritage attributes of the site. For example, statements such as “you visited the site because you wanted a break from your daily routine” were included. To explore the role of the interpretation in the heritage visit experience, the correlations between tourist motivations for the visit and preferences regarding on-site interpretation (as were revealed in table 2) were calculated.

Several issues emerge from table 6. First, strong relationships (Pearson’s $r = .620$, sig. = .000) were found between the “own heritage” factor and the “heritage motives” factor. Looking into specific items of the “heritage motives” factor shows, for example, that the more participants wanted the interpretation to focus on their own heritage, the greater interest they expressed in having an emotional experience ($r = .450$, sig. = .000) and providing knowledge of the site to their offspring ($r = .541$, sig. = .000).
and it is not we who belong to the past.” This statement in Oz’s (2006, p. 63) words, “The past belongs to us and we are in having the interpretation focus on their heritage. The more participants regard the content of interpretation. The more participants regard the site as part of their personal heritage, the more they are interested in visiting the heritage site because it is located on the way to another site (r = .380, sig. = .000). Interestingly, relationships were found between willingness to learn something new and the two preferences for interpretation factors.

Discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the current study. First, interpretation is indeed a significant factor in the visit experience to a religious heritage site. Second, the results indicate that potential visitors prefer the information provided on site to be customized in line with their interests and pursuits, as different visitors are interested in a variety of narratives. Third, it was found that in addition to the common view of interpretation as a means of educating, participants showed interest in having the interpretation generate emotional involvement and strengthen the links with the site. Fourth, links were found among the preferences for interpretation, motivation to visit, and perception of the site in relation to the visitor’s own heritage.

The study also revealed several issues concerning the content of interpretation. The more participants regard the site as part of their personal heritage, the more interested they are in having the interpretation focus on their heritage. In Öz’s (2006, p. 63) words, “The past belongs to us and it is not we who belong to the past.” This statement is relevant to visitors’ experience of heritage settings in general and the interpretation at such sites in particular.

As can be seen in this study, people would prefer to control and choose the past to which they want to be exposed. Consequently, we can manipulate and capitalize on our past. Also, in line with Howard’s (2003, p. 150) statement that different identities “nest together like Russian dolls,” it seems that different tourists create different “dolls.” Individuals have different “Russian dolls” to begin with, and they are able to decide how many dolls and which dolls to assemble, according to the meaning they assign to the heritage presented.

In spite of the aforementioned association between the individuals and their “pasts,” the current research findings contradict the assumption that individuals visiting a heritage site are interested only in “seeing themselves” (Golden 1996). Specifically, though the pattern identified indicates that the more individuals perceive the site as part of their own heritage the more they are interested in being exposed to their own heritage, all participants were interested in other heritages as well. Furthermore, clarification of the relationships between the motivation for the visit and interpretation preferences indicates that visitors seek a variety of experiences. These findings support the idea that visitors to heritage settings are not exclusively “heritage tourists” (Poria, Butler, and Airey 2003). Clearly, this finding is crucial to the management of interpretation offered at heritage tourist attractions.

Aitchison and Reeves (1998, p. 51) argue that “identity, meaning and behavior are constructed, negotiated and renegotiated.” Based on their line of thought, two groups of tourists can be identified. The first group is the identity reinforcers, those visitors who perceive the site as part of themselves and are primarily characterized by their interest in maintaining and strengthening their identity. Because they are involved in “identity work” (Griswold 2004), their primary interest is exposure to their own heritage. The second group is the knowledge seekers, visitors who are more interested in an educational experience than an emotional one and would like to be provided with different on-site interpretations. Although the heritage displayed is not necessarily their own, they are curious about other cultures, religions, and ethnic groups.

This research suggests that while a site may carry various important meanings for some visitors, at the same time it may have no significant meaning to others. Snepenger et al. (2007) noted that a tourist destination composed of numerous sites is essentially an amalgamation of places, each of which carries a different meaning. The findings of the current study may even indicate that the view of Snepenger et al. is applicable to a single site being an amalgam of various meanings. This study confirms a finding by Reisinger and Steiner (2006), that for
some visitors a specific heritage site may have only min-
imal symbolic meaning, perhaps because they are not
familiar with the site and its history. This could be con-
gruent with previous studies (Poria, Butler, and Airey
2003) suggesting that for some tourists a heritage site is
simply a “must-see tourist attraction.”

Heritage site experience is often perceived as a serious,
monolithic experience rooted in the past. For example,
Caton and Santos (2007, p. 384) emphasize the heritage
tourist experience as a search for nostalgia or a particular
version of the past. Accordingly, individuals with strong
feelings about the setting participate in “an ongoing,
dynamic cultural legacy, which is rooted in the past but
continues to spur new.” Other studies approach heritage
tourism as mainly (and often only) an educational experi-
ence meant to establish and intensify the visitor’s sense of
identity (Prentice and Anderson 2007). Apparently, a her-
itage site experience is not monolithic. Some visitors
might be interested in the visit affecting their identity and
also expect an emotional heritage experience. In contrast,
other visitors might have different expectations, echoing
Bruner’s (1991) observation that not all tourist experi-
ences are necessarily associated with identity issues.
Moreover, it can be argued that the same individual may
be interested in several simultaneous experiences. A visi-
tor, for example, may be interested in a search for nostal-
gia (which he or she may regard as naïve), educational
experience, and revalidating his or her identity, although
the former may be a means to achieve the latter.

There is a rich body of literature focusing on the rela-
tionships between power and heritage presentation. Most
studies are based on the assumption that interpretation at
heritage sites usually represents and supports the interests
and ideologies of groups and individuals who established
the site as a heritage tourist attraction (e.g., Azoulay
1993; Goldstein 2003; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996).
The “power approach” to the study of heritage sites advo-
cates a more “fair” presentation of history, ignoring the
fact that there is a vested interest in the very creation,
establishment, and management of a heritage site.

Innovations in technology affect visitor experiences at
heritage settings. These effects could lead to conflicting
expectations between heritage site management and visi-
tors. These possible conflicts derive from the visitors’ abil-
ity to choose specific interpretations from external sources
to the site (i.e., the Internet) and have them compared with
the “official” on-site interpretation. This scenario is sup-
ported by the current study’s finding on the growing active
role of the individual visitor in the heritage experience.
Obviously, this scenario is not compatible with the inter-
ests of heritage site managements, who often perceive
their mission as teaching, conveying a specific narrative to
the visitors. Consequently, heritage site management will
have to face an ethical concern and a dilemma—they may
be forced to choose between providing visitors with expo-
sure to a plethora of narratives and interpretations as
opposed to a single version only. Clearly, there is an ethi-
cal concern arising from the aforementioned scenario. It
can be argued, however, that heritage interpretation design
is not a democratic process and that, on entering a heritage
space, the individual is being exposed to a specific narra-
tive based on his or her interests and ideological frame-
work (Hall 1994; Lowenthal 1985). Accordingly, visitors
must acknowledge the privilege of the founders of a her-
itage attraction to be loyal to their traditions, tenets, and
heritage and their right to present them to the public—
especially if entrance is free of charge.

This study’s focus on people’s attitudes and expecta-
tions of a visit to a religious sacred site raises some
religious issues. The effect of religious belief on human
behavior emanates from two main sources (Bailey and
Sood 1993; McDaniel and Burnett 1990). First, there are
the taboos and obligations that people have to follow.
Second, religion contributes to the formation of culture,
attitudes, and values. Therefore, the religious attributes
of the site may have an effect on tourist behaviors (whether
they are religious or not; Howe 2001; Rinschede 1992).
Religious sacred sites are characterized by specific codes
of behaviors. Those codes are regulated by either the site
management or social norms. For example, site manage-
ment may require visitors to dress a certain way and also
to comply with visiting hours. In addition, at sacred reli-
gious sites (e.g., famous churches) the norms call for visi-
tors to show considerate behavior to not disturb the
prayers, even if they are interested in the architecture
only. It may be that those site attributes have an affect on
people’s attitudes and preferences of the visit experience
and the interpretation provided. For example, the findings
indicate that the visitors are not searching for fun and an
enjoyable experience. It could be attributed to the nature
of religion, possibly disassociated with fun and entertain-
ment. The possible effect of the site’s religious attributes
supports the notion, not adopted in this study, that site
attributes per se are at the core of the tourist experience.
This approach, as advocated by Garrod and Fyall (2001),
emphasizes that the site attributes are important to the
management of heritage tourism rather than the subjec-
tive perception of the attributes by the visitors.

As far as the management of interpretation is con-
cerned, this study highlights several issues worthy of
emphasis. As was presented in the literature review, it
is common to approach interpretation as a means for
providing visitors with knowledge and to educate (e.g., Light 1995). The findings reveal that visitors view interpretation to be a tool to enhance an emotional experience as well as to gain knowledge. This finding is in line with Timothy and Boyd’s (2003, p. 195, based on Hammitt 1984) view of interpretation as a mechanism to “assist tourists and other visitors in experiencing a resource or event in a way they might not otherwise experience it.” To conclude, the current relationship between the interpretation and the visitor at heritage sites can be compared to the relationship between a strict teacher and a passive student. The teacher decides what to present and how to interpret it, and the student listens and hopefully remembers something. However, contemporary visitors are not passive students but are active and curious and expect the interpretation to provide specific knowledge and reinforce their identity. These new “students” demand that the teaching—and teachers—meet their expectations.

Managerial Implications and Suggestions

Heritage site management generally designs one narrative influenced by its own sociocultural positioning and interests, and it is usually not managed according to market and profit consideration (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). That said, the findings imply that if the mission of a heritage site is to attract visitors and be economically sustainable, the interpretation should be mass customized as visitors are interested in different experiences. For example, some visitors are interested in only enriching their knowledge, while others are also looking for an emotional experience. Moreover, as different visitors are interested in different narratives, heritage site management should present information relevant to the visitor. It is suggested that management adjust the interpretation to the meaning assigned to the site as well as to the experience sought by the visitor. With respect to the Western Wall, for example, it would be appropriate to provide Jews, Muslims, and Christians with history that is of relevance for them. It is suggested that the interpretation attempt to highlight the specific concerns and expectations of each of these segments differently.

Regarding interpretation, it is commonly thought that “the more the better” (Howard 2003). However, the findings of this study indicate that this approach should not serve as a rule of thumb. Specifically, the results suggest that the interest in interpretation is related to the individual perception of the site. This means that the “quantity” of interpretation an individual receives at heritage settings should vary and that the sources of the information or the narratives are more important than quantity. Moreover, as some visitors are not interested in the heritage displayed but visit the site as a “must-see” tourist attraction only, perhaps only cursory interpretation, if at any, should be provided.

This study revealed that visitors to heritage sites differ in their motivation for the visit and that these differences are related to the preferences for interpretation. Therefore, heritage settings should be marketed differently according to interpretation preferences. For example, for one particular segment, the message could be of strengthening identity. For other segments, the focus of the marketing effort could be on the site as a means to enrich one’s cultural equity.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study has several limitations. First, the site chosen has unique attributes as it is a major religious site. In addition, this site is considered to be sacred. This may have an effect on people’s attitudes and perceptions of their future behavior as people assign special significance to religion. Future research should explore differences in terms of “less serious,” “less sacred,” or “less religious” historic sites to validate the current research findings. Second, preferences toward the interpretation provided were studied relative to a site that has paramount symbolic meanings. Future studies should focus on sites that do not have considerable symbolic meanings linked to people’s personal identity.

Drummond (2001) suggested that heritage site management should “talk and listen” to their visitors. Also, Bonn et al. (2007) argued that heritage sites should have their emotional uniqueness. This research illustrated additional dimension: different preferences for the interpretation. It is recommended that researchers go one step further and investigate what visitors are interested in as well as the type of emotional involvement they seek. Specifically, researchers should explore and examine the type of emotions (e.g., pride, sense of belonging, sadness, etc.) visitors desire at heritage sites. Such studies may reveal not only whether there is a need to “tell a story” or “communicate knowledge” (Schouten 1998) but also what knowledge and what narratives should be presented. Such findings can enrich our understanding of visitors’ experiences of heritage settings, providing implications for other aspects of heritage site management. For example, such findings can contribute to the guidance provided by advanced technologies, creating an innovative interactive and personalized on-site experience (e.g., iPods and PEACH—Personal Experience with Active Cultural Heritage—technology).

The literature commonly highlights the role of the heritage suppliers in the design of the interpretation.
Research indicates that different heritage agencies manipulate the heritage presented in line with their interests and ideological framework. Examples of heritage suppliers are the local population (Santos and Buzinde 2007) and the state (Belhassen and Santos 2006). The present study suggests, however, that the tourist also manipulates the data. Future research should capture the visitor’s interpretation of the heritage presented. Future research should also investigate a crucial and unexplored element of visitor experiences at heritage settings—the impact of the interpretation, an investigation that moves from such questions as “How much do visitors learn at heritage sites?” to questions such as “What do they learn?” Research on this issue may challenge the common thought that visits to heritage settings are a means for educating the public.

References


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