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Strategic Spaces vs. Tactical Places: A Qualitative Analysis of Foreign Tourists' Perceptions of Morocco through Tripadvisor Reviews

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ABSTRACT

The dynamic interplay among strategic design, tactical adaptation, and the transformation of spaces into lived places through tourist experiences shapes tourist destinations. This study examines how foreign tourists perceive Morocco as a tourism destination by analyzing 400 TripAdvisor reviews of four key sites: the American Legation in Tangier, Jamaa El Fna in Marrakech, the old medina of Fez, and the Merzouga desert. Using a qualitative approach and NVIVO for thematic analysis, this study explores the concepts of “place” versus “space” and “strategy” versus “tactics” in tourism. Findings reveal that official tourism strategies construct Morocco as an exotic and culturally rich space. At the same time, tourists’ lived experiences transform these spaces into personalized places through spontaneous interactions, local encounters, and unexpected discoveries. Moreover, the study highlights how tourists’ tactical behaviors, such as navigating crowded markets or engaging with street performers, reject the structured strategies of tourism officials. These insights contribute to the theoretical understanding of tourist spatial behavior and offer practical implications for destination management in Morocco and elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that involves both institutional, structured planning from governments and spontaneous, individual experiences from international tourists. Tourism ministries, tourism officials, and tourism businesses design strategic spaces to attract visitors, boost economic growth, and promote national identity (Lefebvre, 2014). These spaces are carefully designed, often mirroring an idealized and exaggerated image of a destination, which is communicated through official tourism campaigns, social media posts, and structured itineraries (Martins, 2015). However, tourists have never been merely passive consumers of these spaces; rather, they actively reinterpret, negotiate, and personalize their experiences, engaging in tactical place-making (De Certeau, 1984).

The distinction between strategic spaces and tactical places, as explained by Michel de Certeau (1984) in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, provides a useful theoretical angle for investigating how tourists experience a given destination in their “own way”. Strategies are used by institutions to create predictable and structured spaces, while tactics come from visitors who navigate and interact with these spaces in ways that may subvert their intended meanings and change them into new forms. In this study, the terms *strategic spaces* and *tactical places* are used as an analytical extension of De Certeau’s distinction between place and space, rather than as direct equivalents of his original concepts. This dynamic is relevant in tourism studies, where there has always been a coexistence of structured tourism offerings such as guided tours, cultural attractions, official narratives, tourists’ spontaneous behaviors, and alternative decisions (Yen, 2021).

Morocco, standing as one of the rising tourism destinations in recent years, provides a good case for exploring the tensions between strategic tourism planning and tactical tourist experiences. As one of the leading tourist destinations in Africa, Morocco’s tourism industry is heavily shaped by government strategies that promote its cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and historical sites as key attractions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018).

Destinations such as Jamaa el Fna in Marrakech, the Fez medina, the American Legation in Tangier, and the Merzouga desert are carefully designed and marketed to highlight exoticism, authenticity, and heritage (Lamzah, 2024). However, the way visitors navigate these tourist sites often differs from official settings, as shown in user-generated content (UGC) on international platforms like TripAdvisor, where travelers share personalized narratives, exciting stories, and alternative routes. With the important role digital platforms play in shaping tourism perceptions, online travel reviews have become a fundamental source of information for understanding how tourists navigate their way through destinations beyond the official narratives.

TripAdvisor, in particular, serves as a discursive space where tourists document their impressions, offer recommendations, and negotiate the meaning of the place (Fiorentino & Compagnone, 2018). By analyzing these reviews, it is possible to understand the dynamic interplay between tourism strategies and tourists’ experiences.

De Certeau’s conceptualization of “place” and “space” as demonstrated in the practice of everyday life (1984) has gained momentum in tourism and hospitality research. thus, (Emmanouil & Aggeliki, 2014) Conducted

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exploratory walks and activities within Hyde Park and sought to develop new methods for interacting with and understanding urban spaces, challenging traditional perceptions and uses of these environments.

(Chandramukhee & Leder, 2013) Offers a feminist reading of De Certeau's work on urban space and narrative. The author discusses how walking in the city serves as a form of storytelling that challenges traditional power structures and gender norms, transforming the city's "place" into a personalized "space."

De Certeau's work has been applied to the Moroccan context as well, Newcomb (2006) Investigates how women in Fez navigate and contest urban spaces traditionally dominated by men. By analyzing women's interactions in streets, cafés, exercise clubs, and cyberspace, Newcomb demonstrates how their everyday practices challenge societal norms, transforming these 'places' into personalized 'spaces'. Whereas Studer (2014) examines the interplay between urban development and everyday practices in Kasba Tadla, Morocco. The author stresses how local groups, including those with tribal backgrounds and women, engage with urban planning processes

To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has investigated the everyday practices of international tourists across multiple tourist sites through an examination of user-generated content in Morocco or elsewhere.

By examining 400 TripAdvisor reviews as a form of tourist discourse, this study highlights how international travelers act as active participants in the meaning-making of destinations, rather than merely consuming pre-defined images and navigating already existing routes.

This study seeks to explore how foreign tourists tactically reinterpret and navigate Moroccan tourism spaces through their online reviews. It applies the strategic space vs. tactical place framework to TripAdvisor reviews on four key Moroccan tourist sites: Jamaa el Fna (Marrakech), the Fez medina, the American Legation (Tangier), and the Merzouga desert to address the following research questions:

1. How do foreign tourists engage with Moroccan tourism spaces beyond official narratives?

2. What key themes emerge in tourists' perceptions, and how do they align with or contradict strategic representations?

3. In what ways do tourists' experiences reflect tactical place-making, as opposed to passive consumption of structured tourism spaces? The study ultimately stresses the changing nature of tourist perceptions, offering insights into how Morocco's tourism industry can respond to the complexities of contemporary travel behavior.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Four Moroccan tourist sites were chosen to collect reviews from: the American Legation in Tangier, Jama Lfna Square in Marrakech, the old Medina of Fez, and the region of Merzouga.

The four chosen spots encompass a diversity in the kind

of cultural aspects they reflect:

1. The American Legation in Tangier is "the only US National Historic Landmark located in a foreign country." It houses a museum, research library, and cultural center. the well-preserved building represents a living reminder of the deeply rooted political and cultural relationships between Morocco and the USA, visitors to this spot express diverse kinds of ideas about their visit ranging from a total surprise to a total pride, this amalgam of emotions felt towards a "piece of America in Morocco" is benefic to the study since it will represent the core for a "place and space" analysis according to de Certeau's range of thoughts.

2. Jama Lfna is an "unavoidable spot" for tourists in Marrakech; it is the ultimate incarnation of Moroccan cultural diversity, and the whole city constitutes a "gateway to Morocco"; therefore, tourists' reviews about that particular place and how they "see" it are fundamental to the work.

3. The old Medina of Fez is one of the oldest in the world, with more than twelve centuries in its history. Visitors express divergent emotions when visiting it; some find it exotic and timeless, while others see it as a lively, vibrant place full of energy.

4. The desert area of Merzouga has been picked because of its relatively remote location in Morocco, the previous three spots are all located in big cities, they are easy to access and offer more comfort to international tourists, the desert area is different, some tourists find there "peace and calm" when others see the opportunity to sound "prehistoric" in time or could see the desert as a "historic site where many events have occurred".

The disparities in tourists' reviews after visiting these four tourist destinations make them interesting to investigate. De Certeau highlights the fact that people "see" the same place differently because they have different cultural backgrounds, motivations, and interests.

Additionally, De Certeau stresses that people interpret and create meaning from what they see and experience. The goal is to designate how foreign visitors interpret the same tourist destination differently; besides, tourists' personal experiences with these "spaces" are crucial in understanding the kind of image they have built of that place.

Another aspect that the reviews are made to investigate is the "strategy vs tactic" concept of De Certeau's, while the destination managers seek to project a certain image of the destination through promotions and campaigns, the tourist may reject this "imposed strategy" by applying certain tactics like straying from guided tours to "see the real place" or mingling with locals instead of using luxurious hotels and Riads.

Data Collection

The reviews were collected manually. The reason behind using this method is that it is the only way to "filter" reviews before using them; it is a "purposeful method" that tests the value of the comment before deciding to

use it. The random method is useless for this kind of research since it ends up collecting tons of irrelevant data.

Sampling

The same number of reviews (100) was collected for each tourist destination to get a relatively balanced set of findings; the number was determined due to the “repetitive and redundancy criteria” that were felt when approximately that number was reached.

Data Analysis

A thematic coding method was used to analyze the data; NVivo’s text search feature was used to find common phrases (e.g., “beautiful,” “overcrowded,” and “authentic”) and assign them to codes that were specified for each theme. Reviews were collected between January

and March 2025 from TripAdvisor. Only English-language reviews containing substantive descriptions of tourist experiences were retained. Duplicate entries, advertisements, and reviews consisting solely of ratings or very brief comments were excluded. Coding was conducted iteratively using NVivo 14 and reviewed several times to ensure consistency in thematic classification. This method is powerful when it comes to establishing a framework of thematic ideas about the texts. To enhance trustworthiness, coding procedures were conducted iteratively using NVivo, themes were continuously refined during analysis, and comparisons across four destinations were used to ensure consistency and robustness of interpretation. The thematic codes were structured as follows:

Table 1: Main Themes, Codes, and Sub-Codes Identified through NVivo Analysis

Main themes	codes	Sub-codes
Perception of “place” and “space”	Place (fixed, structured elements of the site)	Architecture, History, Environment, Infrastructure
	Space (Lived and dynamic interactions)	Exploration, Cultural Interaction, Personal Reflections, Unplanned Discoveries
Cultural insights	Cultural insights	Local Traditions, Heritage, Storytelling Local Guides
Tourists’ experiences	Positive experiences	Hospitality, Aesthetic appreciation, Adventure, Cultural enrichment
	Negative experience	Overcrowding, Commercialization, Safety Concerns, Language Barriers
Tourists’ behaviors	Tourists’ behaviors	Spontaneous Actions, Social Media Usage, Interactions with Locals; Photography
Site-specific insights	The American legation	History, Diplomacy, Artistic Elements.
	Jamaa El Fna	Performances, Souks, Food, Noise.
	Old Medina of Fez	Labyrinthine Streets, Artisans, Historical Landmarks
	Merzouga Desert	Dunes, Camel Rides, Desert Camps, Solitude.

The 400 TripAdvisor reviews were meticulously analyzed to get every statement relevant to each sub-code. Then NVIVO produced representations to clarify the understanding of “place” vs “space” and “strategies” vs “tactics” through the codes and sub-codes attributed to each theme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Strategic Narratives in Tourism

The strategic narratives in tourism refer to the officially constructed, promoted, and institutionalized representations of a destination. These narratives are often developed by governments, travel agencies, and local businesses to frame a destination in a particular space that appeals to potential visitors.

Strategic narratives can be taken as what is there for the tourists to follow, and how the tourist destination is

publicized through the media to visitors (Santos, 2013, p. 35). It encompasses the set of rules, itineraries, and must-see tourist sites that a destination is famous for.

The Role of Strategic Narratives in Moroccan Tourism

Vision 2020 strategies and cultural identity

Morocco’s tourism strategy is heavily shaped by national branding campaigns, such as Vision 2020, which aimed to position the country as a leading global destination.

One of Vision 2020’s strategic goals was to focus on “improving Morocco’s competitiveness of all links” in the tourism chain, including deepening the service culture and developing a “compelling offer.” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018) Furthermore, Willahan (2014) Emphasizes that this vision mainly relies on “cultural identity” to promote

Moroccan tourism (p. 19).

Since the encounter between hosts and tourists constitutes the core of a touristic system (Nash *et al.*, 1981), and tourists do describe these encounters with locals as

“memorable.” (Egmond, 2007, p. 85). The first criterion that was analyzed was whether or not the visitor-resident encounters are important to international tourists as part of their immersive trips.

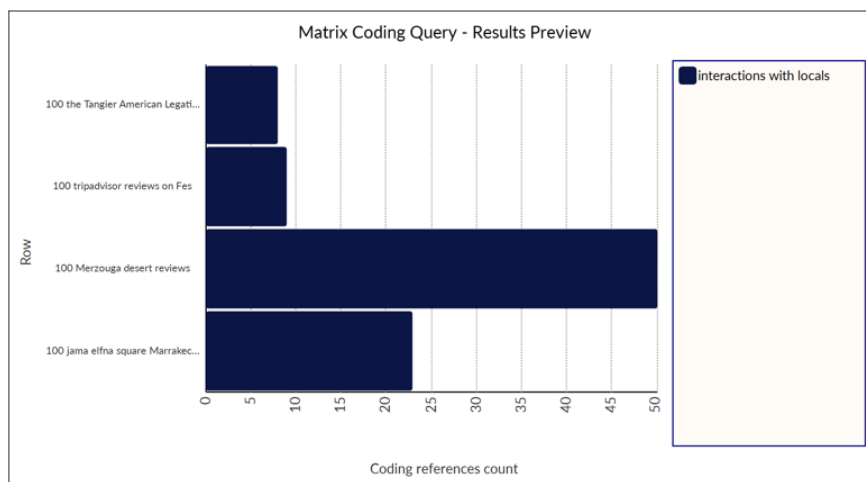


Figure 1: Tourists’ interactions with locals on all sites
(Source: Author’s analysis using NVivo)

The matrix coding query concerning all four sites indicates that there has always been an interaction between international tourists and residents in Morocco’s tourism sites. This emphasizes that tourists value the cultural aspect of their travels to a great extent and seek to “know the place through its inhabitants,” as Reviewer 12 put it.

The NVIVO output aligns with Morocco’s official strategies, stressing the “cultural intersection” as one of the pillars of the country’s tourism appeal (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). Besides, it serves as a good predictor for Morocco’s image, given the fact that positive tourist-local interactions often generate a good destination image (Stylidis, 2022, p. 3).

Morocco as an exotic destination

Morocco has always been marketed as a place of exoticism, heritage, and adventure, emphasizing its imperial cities that make international tourists step back into time and experience the “thousand and one nights,” as Reviewer 35 put it.

Thus, Morocco is no different when it comes to traditional strategic narratives; the country has always sought to improve its image at the international level (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018) through many pillars, mainly the focus on

1. The “exoticism aspect” (Boonbaichaiyapruk, 2019, p. 44)
2. Old Medinas (Boonbaichaiyapruk, 2019) To the point of being “obsessed with Medina” p37, along with all sorts of tourist sites “celebrating the past”.

Morocco as a safe tourist destination

Government agencies and travel websites have always sought to picture Morocco as a safe space full of adventure and unexpected discoveries.

Lee *et al.*, (2023) Emphasize that “the excitement factors” that most tourists seek before any others are: food, security, and mobile/internet usage (p. 7), which demonstrates that security issues rank among the first requirements international tourists look for before considering visiting a destination.

Deichmann (2007) Adds that feelings of insecurity can even lead to “negative encounters between tourists and locals” (p. 8).

Thus, Morocco has always invested in security and safety through its tourism campaigns to assure the whole world that it is “a safe and enjoyable tourist destination”; this aspect is felt throughout tourist reviews.

Tourists’ positive narratives focused on the sense of safety they felt in almost all sites regardless of the place, Reviewer 2 expressed that by saying “was told about pickpockets so I hid wallet and phone, but again didn’t feel bad”, similarly, Reviewer 5 emphasized that she “Never felt intimidated or unsafe”, whereas Reviewer 6 summarized it all by stating that “We were told when we arrived to be aware of pickpockets but honestly, we spent 4 weeks in and around this square and never even had a small moment of worry”.

on the other hand, negative feelings regarding safety concerns have been expressed via multiple comments, Reviewer 1 complained about an owner of a horse who “harassed” him and tried to get him “onto the carriage”, and another tourist advises visitors to “be mindful of the

thugs who are out to rip you off”, whereas Reviewer 4 recounts an encounter when he had to physically “yank” his hand away from “one unwanted henna lady”. It is worth mentioning that these “unpleasant encounters” have been mainly felt while in Jama Lfna Square in Marrakech. The following NVIVO sentiment hierarchy

chart of Jama Lfna Square clearly shows that, unlike the other three sites, the insecurity aspect negatively affects tourists’ experiences in Jama Lfna Square and makes the neutral and negative feelings even bigger than the positive ones.



Figure 2: Sentiment analysis (all sites)
(Source: Author's analysis using NVivo)

Morocco as an authentic destination

Authenticity is a cornerstone of Morocco's tourism strategic plans, as it enhances the country's attractiveness by offering visitors “genuine experiences” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018).

By preserving its main tourism appeals such as cultural heritage, traditional crafts, and historical sites, Morocco ensures that tourism development aligns with its rich

identity rather than relying on mass tourism that lacks deep meaning.

Authentic experiences can be experienced through multiple ways, namely staying in traditional Riads, especially in old medinas like Fez and Marrakech, exploring local souks, and engaging with local communities. These experiences not only attract more travelers but also contribute to sustainable tourism by supporting local artisans and businesses.

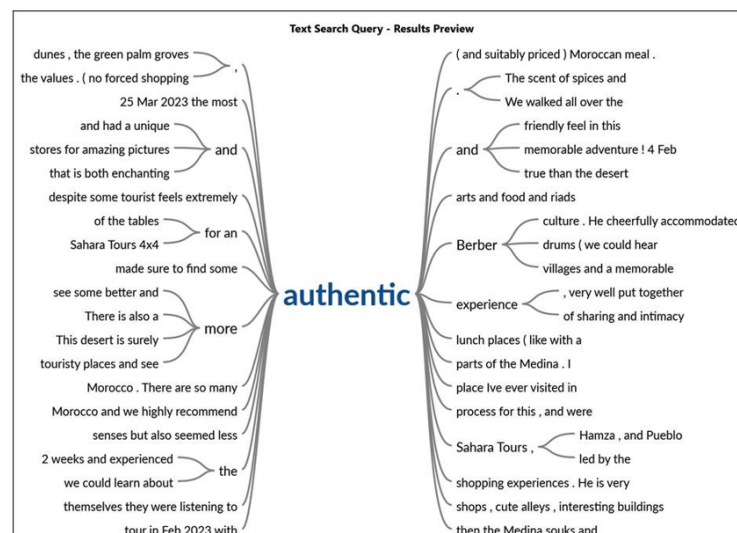


Figure 3: Tourists' feelings of authenticity (all sites)
(Source: Author's analysis using NVivo)

In this word tree regarding the main utterances where the word “authentic” has been repeatedly spotted, international tourists visiting the four already mentioned Moroccan sites display a wide array of statements using this word, which demonstrates that authenticity as a concept is generally important in travel consciousness. Additionally, it seems that judging a tourist site as being “authentic” differs from one human being to another. For instance, while some tourists declared being “annoyed” by the overcrowding and “noisiness” of the Jama Lfna square, others found it a “mere incarnation of Moroccan culture” and a “rare example of a spot that encapsulates what Morocco has to offer in terms of culture and encounters with residents”.

All in all, visiting “authentic” spots in a tourist destination has been proven to increase the quality of the travel experience (Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2021). That’s why the national brand and tourism strategies in Morocco “reflect a reliance on authenticity in tourist schemes” as a way to maintain the country’s “competitive advantage in attracting international tourists” (Willahan, 2014, p. 19).

Emphasizing authenticity would strengthen Morocco’s

global brand, setting it apart as a destination where history, culture, and hospitality are deeply interwoven into the visitor experience.

Tactical Adaptations by Tourists

Tactical adaptations generally refer to tourists’ spontaneous and unplanned actions in response to real-world travel experiences. Unlike strategic narratives, which are imposed from above, tactical tourism emerges from the bottom up, meaning that tourists themselves are the ones who “invent” tactics for negotiating and making sense of a place in their own way.

How Tourists Adapt Beyond Strategic Narratives

Tourists often “deviate” from planned itineraries and often seek to “adjust” their experiences based on real-time observations, local interactions, or personal comfort. The first observation that has been seen through the data is that there appear to be more tactics deployed by tourists than there are strategies implemented by tourism authorities.

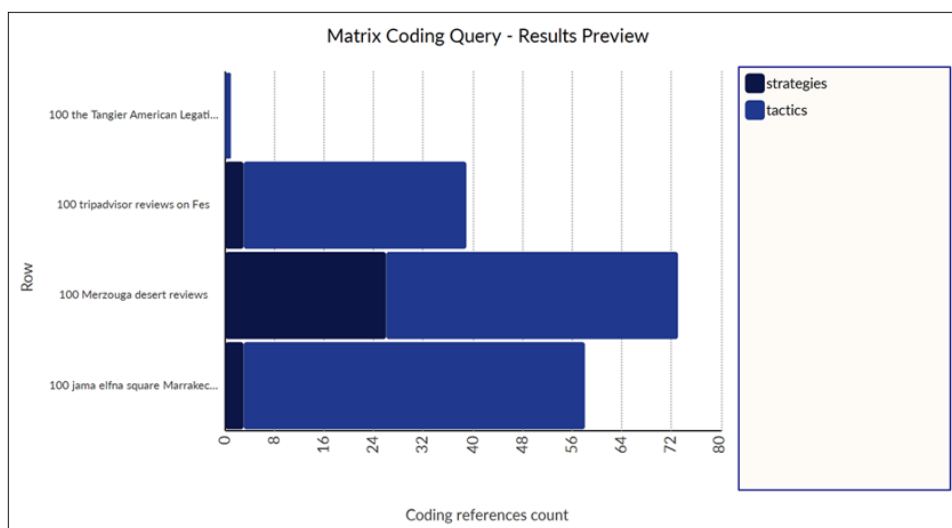


Figure 4: Strategies vs tactics (all sites)
(Source: Author’s analysis using NVivo)

The matrix coding query comparing the two themes even demonstrates that there are many more tactics thought of while writing reviews on Tripadvisor than there are strategies tourists remember encountering in a certain destination.

The reason behind this great difference between the existence of the two concepts in travelers’ comments could be explained by the fact that “strategies” are mainly seen as “general knowledge” that everybody can easily access or “stumble upon,” whereas the set of “tactics” visitors come up with is endless and requires a certain level of intelligence, close observation, and even problem-solving skills.

Tactical Adaptations in TripAdvisor Reviews

The following NVIVO hierarchy chart concerning the different “tactics” tourists deploy while visiting the four tourist sites clearly shows that there are many ways whereby tourists express the “tactics” they use while visiting a destination; tactical adaptations can be seen (among others) in how tourists:

1. Modify their itineraries to include off-the-beaten-path locations.
2. Negotiate with local vendors by “haggling” prices in souks because, as some tourists put it, “Haggling is a must or you’ll get ripped off”.
3. Avoid or escape tourist “traps” by finding alternative

restaurants, shops, or cultural experiences.

4. Avoid overcrowded places and find alternatives like “sitting on the top floor of a café with a cup of coffee and watching the hustle and bustle around” or “Going into one of the restaurants and heading to the terrace or rooftop seating” to “enjoy the crowd without being in the crowd.”

5. Find a way to really “enjoy” the old Medina labyrinth alleyways by “Losing yourself in the intoxicating sights, sounds, smells, and tastes”.

6. Learn how to deal with Jama Lfna stalls by being “really confident” and sure about what you are ordering, and importantly, “the price you are willing to pay”.

7. Carefully choose “the time of the visit” because (in Jama Lfna) the “view in the evening is amazing, especially watching the sunset over the Medina”.

8. Deal with the probable scamming tourists can face with “a polite no, thank you, or a bit of friendly banter” or “The phrase la, shukraan” (no, thank you) will be very useful when approached by anybody annoying you.



Figure 5: Tourists’ tactical aspects (all sites)
(Source: Author’s analysis using NVivo)

Place vs Space in Tourist Perceptions

“place” and “space” have always been two major concepts in the tourism and hospitality realm of research because tourism has always been involved with the movement of individuals from one place to another (Leite & Graburn, 2009).

The distinction between “place” and “space” in tourism research is crucial because it determines how destinations are (on the one hand) “perceived and marketed” by tourism officials, and (on the other hand) how they are “experienced and lived” by tourists.

Tourists do not simply “move” through space as if they were “robots” consuming what is there for them, the way they are told to; rather, they engage with spaces that hold emotional and symbolic significance in “personalized” ways.

Tourists then construct meanings of the spaces they visit through their personal experiences, interactions with locals, and consumption of cultural narratives.

Official Tourism Strategies: Constructing Space

Morocco establishes its tourism sites through official narratives and official tourist platforms in a way that aligns with the overall projected image incarnated in the country’s tourism visions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018).

Tourism officials and online platforms present Morocco as an exotic and culturally rich destination, emphasizing

its architectural heritage and vibrant marketplaces (Boonbaichaiyapruk, 2019, p. 44).

Brochures and tourism websites depict sites like the old medinas of Fez as historical treasures to be explored (Alami *et al.*, 2017), while guided tours in places such as the Merzouga Desert follow predefined routes that frame the desert as an adventure space rather than a lived environment (Gagnol & Landel, 2016). Similarly, the American Legation in Tangier is promoted as a historical monument with diplomatic legacy rather than a place where cultural exchange is possible.

These structured representations shape tourists’ expectations and experiences by positioning Morocco as a “space” designed for exotic discovery, often reinforcing a static image that is totally different from the one lived by local communities in their everyday lives.

Tourists’ Experiences: Transforming Space into Place

Tourists’ interactions and behaviors play a crucial role in transforming abstract, structured “spaces” into personal, lived “places” by loading them with tourists’ experiences, emotions, and personal narratives (Gnoth, 2015).

Rather than passively consuming pre-designed tourist routes, international visitors engage with their surroundings in spontaneous and unpredictable ways, creating unique connections to the places they explore.

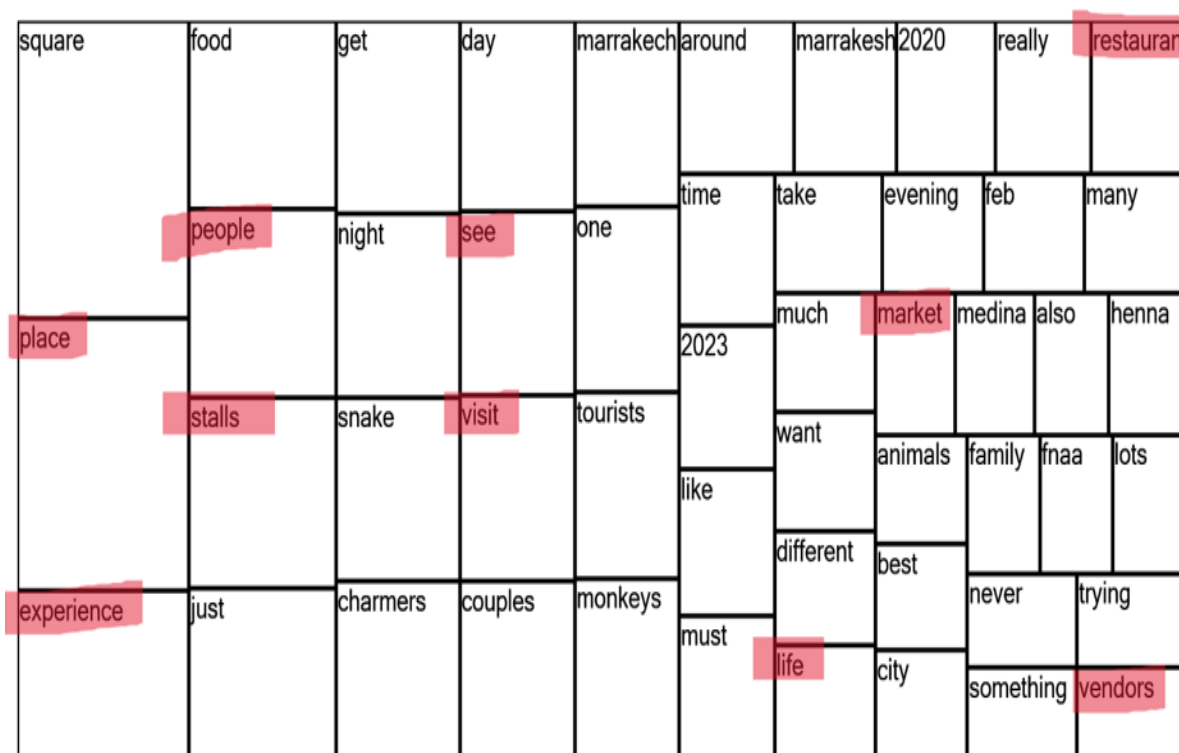


Figure 6: Tourists' tactical aspects (Jamaa El Fna square)
(Source: Author's analysis using NVivo)

The NVIVO analysis demonstrates that, In Jamaa El Fna, for instance, tourists do not merely observe the square as a cultural attraction; rather, they actively participate in locals' daily lives by bargaining with vendors, listening

to storytellers, or dancing to street musicians, turning a commercialized “space” into a dynamic and personal experience.



Figure 7: Tourists' tactical aspects (Fez Medina)

Similarly, the NVIVO word cloud concerning tourists' visits to the old Medina of Fez shows that, while the Fez Medina is marketed as a historical maze, tourists' acts of

getting lost, chatting with shopkeepers, or discovering hidden alleyways transform it into a “place” of personal exploration and memory.

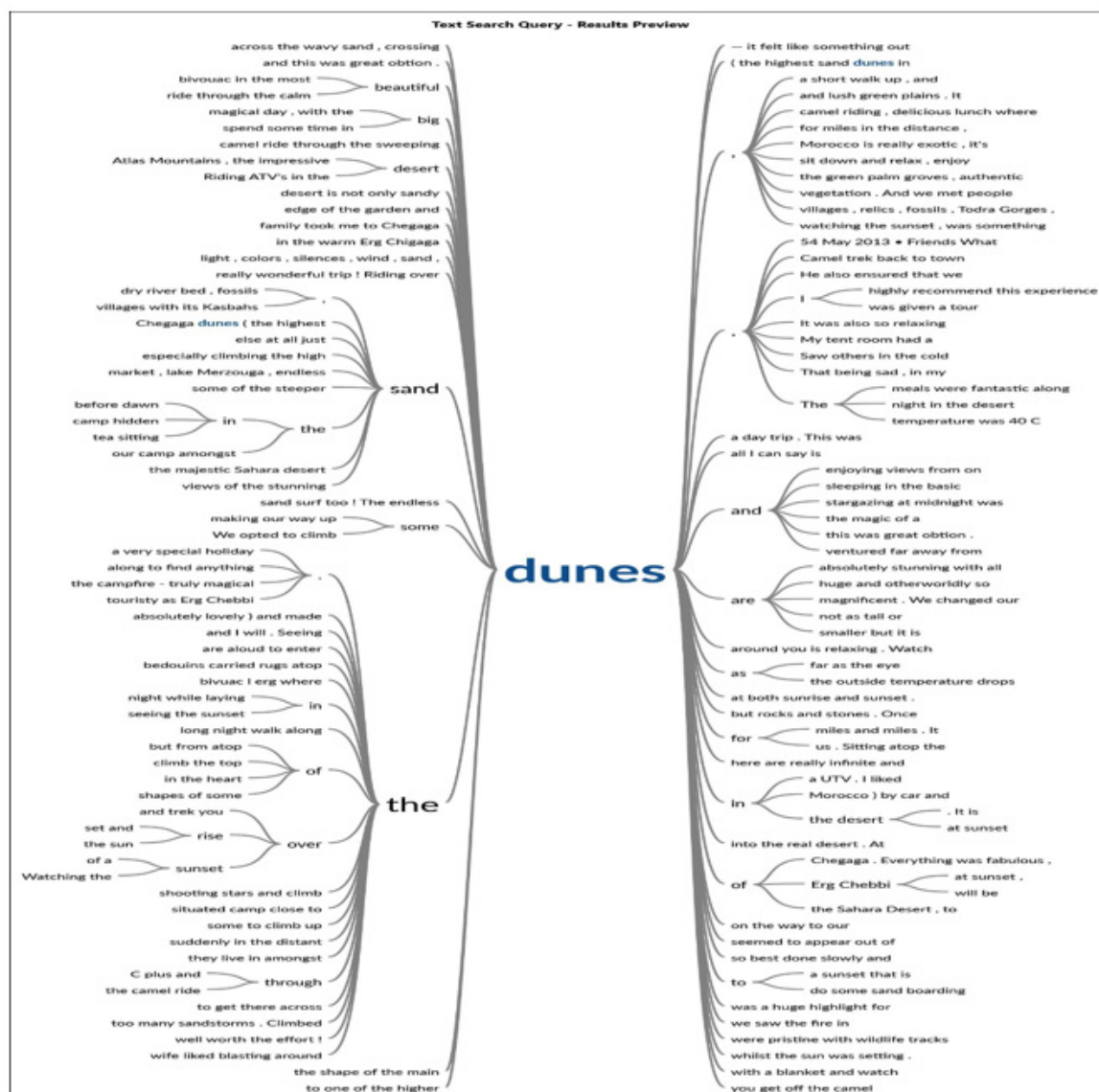


Figure 8: Tourists' tactical aspects (Merzouga desert)

In the Merzouga desert, the word tree reveals that the dunes are not only seen as an exotic landscape when visitors share tea with Berber tribes, ride camels under the stars, or experience the silence of the desert, but also as special “places” with whom they create intimate connections. Through these lived experiences, tourists transform the structured spaces already constructed for them into meaningful places, demonstrating that destinations are not only defined by official narratives but also by the personal stories and interactions of those who visit them.

Tensions Between Space and Place in Moroccan Tourism

Commercialization vs. Authenticity

Tourism officials often impose their strategies on tourist sites and visitors as well by structuring itineraries and must-see attractions, which could harm tourism attractiveness since it prioritizes effectiveness over authenticity and renders visitors as mere consumers who have little to

personalize in their trips.

Guided tours, for example, often follow pre-established routes with limited time at each site, preventing visitors from wandering around, making spontaneous discoveries, or forming any kind of personal connection with locals and places.

In the Fez medina, government-led restoration projects aim to preserve its architectural heritage (Abdullah, 2015, p. 15). But by emphasizing its status as a historical attraction, they risk turning it into a static “space” rather than a living “place” where visitors can freely engage in social encounters and personal discoveries. Similarly, in the Merzouga Desert, highly structured desert excursions where tourists follow predetermined camel trek paths, dine at prearranged campsites, and follow fixed schedules can reduce opportunities for personal interaction with local communities or unexpected moments of solitude in the vast landscape.

Additionally, the commodification of cultural performances in spaces like Jamaa El Fna, where

everything is created for the tourist to “watch”, may create a sense of detachment from the spot rather than immersion within it. As a result, structured tourism strategies, while effective in managing visitor crowds and maintaining order, can sometimes limit the depth of experiences that allow tourists to transform a destination from an abstract “space” into a personally meaningful “place”.

Co-construction of Destination Image

The findings suggest that Morocco’s destination image is not exclusively produced by tourism authorities or destination management organizations but is continuously co-constructed through interactions between strategic narratives and tourists’ lived experiences. While official tourism campaigns portray Morocco as an exotic, authentic, and culturally rich destination, tourists actively reinterpret these representations through their own practices and encounters. This finding supports contemporary destination image research that views image formation as a dynamic and participatory process rather than a one-way transmission of messages from institutions to consumers.

The analysis of TripAdvisor reviews demonstrates that user-generated content has become a powerful arena in which destination meanings are negotiated, challenged, and reproduced. Tourists do not merely confirm official narratives; they also reshape them by highlighting overlooked experiences, unexpected encounters, and practical advice for future visitors. Such findings reinforce the argument that digital platforms increasingly function as spaces of tourism production rather than simple channels for tourism consumption.

Extending De Certeau’s Framework to Digital Tourism Spaces

One of the major theoretical contributions of this study lies in extending De Certeau’s concepts of strategy, tactics, place, and space to the analysis of digital tourist narratives. Whereas De Certeau originally developed these concepts to explain everyday practices in urban environments, the present findings demonstrate their relevance for understanding contemporary tourism experiences documented through online reviews.

TripAdvisor narratives reveal that tourists perform tactical adaptations not only during their physical visits but also through their digital storytelling practices after returning home. Recommendations concerning bargaining techniques, preferred visiting hours, avoidance of tourist traps, and methods for interacting with vendors become forms of collective tactical knowledge shared among travelers. In this sense, online reviews serve as repositories of accumulated tourist tactics that future visitors can mobilize when navigating destinations.

Consequently, tourism spaces are no longer negotiated exclusively on-site but are increasingly shaped through digital interactions that occur before, during, and after travel experiences. This observation expands De

Certeau’s original framework by suggesting that tactical place-making now extends into virtual environments where tourists collaboratively construct meanings and strategies for future mobility.

Implications for Sustainable Tourism Development

The findings also carry important implications for sustainable tourism management in Morocco. Excessively structured tourism experiences may undermine the very authenticity and spontaneity that attract visitors in the first place. Allowing greater flexibility for tourists to explore destinations independently can contribute to richer experiences while simultaneously distributing tourist flows beyond heavily concentrated attractions.

Community-led tourism initiatives, informal cultural encounters, and locally generated experiences may therefore represent valuable complements to official tourism products. Encouraging these forms of engagement could strengthen both visitor satisfaction and local participation in tourism development, ultimately contributing to more resilient and sustainable destination management practices.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that destination managers should not perceive tourists’ tactical adaptations as challenges to official strategies but rather as valuable sources of information about visitors’ needs, preferences, and expectations. Integrating these insights into future tourism planning could enable Moroccan destinations to maintain their competitiveness while preserving the authenticity that constitutes one of their principal attractions.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to tourism literature in three important ways. First, it demonstrates the applicability of De Certeau’s theory of everyday practices to the field of tourism studies and destination image research. Second, it highlights the growing importance of user-generated content as a source of insight into tourists’ spatial practices and meaning-making processes. Third, it proposes that destination image should be understood as a negotiated and evolving construct resulting from interactions between institutional strategies and tourists’ tactical appropriations of space.

Rather than viewing tourists as passive recipients of destination marketing messages, the findings support an understanding of tourists as active social actors who continuously participate in the production, transformation, and circulation of destination meanings.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the complex manner in which Morocco is perceived and experienced by foreign tourists, demonstrating a real negotiation between the strategic representations promoted by tourism authorities and the tactical, lived experiences shaped by tourists themselves. Through a qualitative thematic analysis of 400 TripAdvisor reviews across four well-known Moroccan

tourist destinations, the findings show that tourists do not passively consume spaces as designed; rather, they actively transform them into meaningful places through interactions with residents and personal engagement.

The findings emphasize that while Morocco is strategically framed as an exotic, culturally rich destination, tourists' actual encounters often diverge from these narratives, reshaping space through everyday tactics like bargaining, navigating chaos, or seeking authenticity beyond curated attractions.

By applying the theoretical frameworks of "place vs. space" and "strategy vs. tactics," this research contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of how tourist destinations are co-constructed in practice. It also offers deep insights for Moroccan tourism stakeholders: taking into account the unpredictable nature of tourist behavior can lead to more inclusive and resilient destination management strategies.

Implications for Moroccan Tourism Management

The official strategies in the tourism and hospitality industry need to align with visitors' desires to customize their trips by adding more "space" for them to wander freely and enjoy the unexpected discoveries they might encounter in tourist sites. Balancing structured tourism promotion with place-making experiences requires a flexible approach that takes into account both organized infrastructure and the spontaneity that allows tourists to form personal connections with destinations.

Destination managers in Morocco can foster this balance by designing tourism experiences that encourage exploration and local engagement rather than rigid, pre-determined itineraries. For instance,

In the Fez medina, instead of exclusively offering guided tours, tourism stakeholders could promote personalized experiences supported by digital maps and storytelling apps, allowing visitors to navigate and discover at their own pace.

In Jamaa El Fna, supporting spontaneous street performances and local storytelling traditions, rather than commercializing them for staged entertainment, can help maintain the space's organic cultural role.

Similarly, in the Merzouga Desert, integrating community-led tourism initiatives such as sharing meals with local communities or spontaneous desert treks could create more meaningful opportunities for interaction while preserving the comfort that structured tourism provides. By mixing strategic tourism development with the freedom for tourists to shape their own experiences, Morocco can maintain its attractiveness as an immersive destination at the same time, ensuring that "spaces" remain dynamic and capable of becoming deeply personal "places" for visitors.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Relying on TripAdvisor reviews as the primary source of data constitutes the first limitation of this study since it may introduce biases related to online review behavior.

Travelers who leave reviews on the platform are not necessarily representative of all foreign tourists visiting Morocco, as their perspectives may be influenced by factors such as their motivation to share experiences or familiarity with social media interactions.

The second limitation emanates from the qualitative nature of the analysis because a deep investigation like this one may need backup from a quantitative study as well.

The investigation of "strategic spaces" and "tactical places" is also shaped by the specific contexts of the selected destinations, which constitute the third limitation since four sites might not be representative of all Moroccan tourist destinations.

Future research could complement these findings with interviews or ethnographic fieldwork to provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourists' spatial experiences.

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