

# Distant local-guided tour perceptions and experiences of online travellers

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## Abstract

This paper investigated travellers' perceptions and experiences of using distant local guided tours during the COVID-19 pandemic utilising a qualitative methodology. The reviews' content of online travellers regarding distant local-guided tours offered by a sharing economy platform – Withlocals – in different destinations was analysed. The results demonstrated that travellers' distant local-guided tour experiences include celebration, togetherness and socialising, escape and relaxation, memorable, educational, and hedonic components. Additionally, travellers perceived distant local-guided tours as an alternative travel type, preparation for an actual visit, and inspiration for face-to-face experiences. Therefore, distant local-guided tours can be defined as engaging alternative travel types that provide multidimensional experiences and help explore a destination before the in-person visit. Apart from playing a guidance role for scholars and practitioners, this research fills the gap of research on distant local-guided tours in the literature. However, future attempts could shed more light on the subject.

## Keywords

Distant local-guided tour, tour experience, alternative travel type, COVID-19, online traveller, sharing economy

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly limited the mobility of people, and amongst the most impacted industries was travel and tourism, with its massive fall in international demand (Seyitoğlu and Costa, 2022). Although the situation has been improving lately with the vaccines and health precautions, in the initial phases of the pandemic, service providers of the tourism and hospitality industry strived for alternative ways (e.g., virtual products or services) to recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic (El-Said and Aziz, 2021). As a result, online tours, enabling potential travellers to obtain distant experiences, became used by a number of destinations, locals, and potential travellers during the pandemic. We termed such online

tours “distant tours” since the travellers are away from the touring destination, thereby emerging a new type of travellers' experience (i.e., distant tour experience). Furthermore, since the travellers participating in distant online tours are not in an actual visit, we termed these travellers as “online travellers”.

Destinations utilise distant tours to introduce their natural and cultural attractions to inspire

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and encourage potential travellers to visit their destinations (Lu et al., 2021). From the supplier's perspective, distant tours have been seen as a chance to survive in the travel and tourism industry (World Economic Forum, 2021). These tours are generally non-immersive and enable people to visit the destinations or attractions in a simulated environment utilising computers and mobile phones (Koutsoudis et al., 2007). Further, distant tours allowing people to exchange and share their knowledge for a fee or free were mostly offered on sharing economy platforms (Zhu and Cheng, 2021).

Online activities and services were accepted as a recovery strategy for sharing economy platforms (Batool et al., 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021). As an essential part of the sharing economy platforms, tourism and hospitality services have followed the same procedures to overcome the pandemic challenges. For instance, many local guides organise their tours online via phone (360° live video) or computer (presentation). Distant tours differ from non-immersive virtual tours because they are guided in a live broadcast environment with a local guide. Therefore, they offer participants a real-time experience compared to non-immersive virtual tours (Nassani et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

Studies on local-guided tours in the sharing economy platforms have become popular. In this context, some scholars attempted to explore travellers' family experiences (Atsız, 2021), street food experiences (Cifci et al., 2021), and shopping experiences (Atsız and Seyitoğlu, 2022). However, there is scant research on online distant local-guided tours of sharing economy platforms, which enable individuals to obtain distant tour experiences. Although limited studies focus on distant local-guided tours of sharing economy platforms, some scholars examined these tours with different approaches. Zhang et al. (2021) investigated these tours through live-streaming tourism by exploring the motivations and impacts of participation in these tours. Besides, Nassani et al. (2021) named these tours "video conferencing systems" and reviewed the importance of using these tours. Zhang and Qiu (2022) were also the first researchers to reveal a virtual guided tour experience process. In addition, Zhu and Cheng (2021) concentrated on the potential impacts of peer-to-peer online tours on tourist experiences and destinations by focusing on hosts' specific features such as "host profile, price, description, rating, number of reviews and geographic location". It can be inferred that Zhu and Cheng's (2021) study discusses COVID-19 impacts on participants and hosts through these features. Their study does not attempt to focus on

travellers' distant experiences from a dimensionality perspective while putting forward significant knowledge on distant tours. They claimed that these tours would transform the tourism and hospitality industry, and there will be a surge in these tours in the post-pandemic epoch (Zhu and Cheng, 2021).

Though some studies illustrate the importance of distant tours, to the best of our knowledge, no research focuses on the experiential side of these tours in the literature. Existing studies also neglected participants' perceptions of these tours. The current paper aims to bridge the gaps mentioned by exploring distant local-guided tour perceptions and experiences in the COVID-19 era. More specifically, this article seeks to (i) explore how travellers perceive distant local-guided tours and (ii) unveil which dimensions constitute travellers' experience in the distant local-guided tours. Following these aims, the current paper has theoretical and practical contributions that can open new doors for future studies and help service providers. First, existing literature neglected to examine the experiences and perceptions of travellers participating in a distant local-guided tour organised by a local on the sharing economy platform. Hence, this paper tries to bridge this gap by focusing on the subject. Our research findings will also help scholars investigating travellers' experiences formulate tourist experience models or theories. In this aspect, a clear framework of the travel experience is likely to be put forward by further studies.

## Literature review

### *Local-guided tours through sharing economy platforms*

Daily local-guided tours are activities that last less than 24 h and are mentored by a professional guide who knows the destination and attractions. Travel agencies or tour operators mainly organised, prepared, and offered these tours (Caber and Albayrak, 2018). With the advent of technology, locals started to provide these tours through different platforms for travellers visiting the destination (Atsız, 2021). In this respect, sharing economy platforms allow locals to use their knowledge to gain extra revenue by accompanying tourists. Sharing economy platforms, known as economy or business models that use information technology to benefit from sharing goods and services between peers (Wirtz et al., 2019), organise a wide range of activities. They are

used by travellers to interact with local culture and authentic cues (Melián-González et al., 2019). The goods and services used in sharing economy models are generally under-utilised and shared by individuals rather than companies (Mody et al., 2021).

According to Strielkowski (2020), the first form of sharing economy launched in the 1990s with two pioneering companies, eBay and Craigslist. These platforms enabled buyers and sellers to contact directly without another physical intermediary (Strielkowski, 2020). Since then, the sharing economy has seen exponential growth worldwide, particularly in different tourism and hospitality service areas such as accommodation (Airbnb) and transportation (Uber) (Kuhzady et al., 2021). Additionally, sharing economy models are well-researched by scholars in the contexts of accommodation (Guttentag, 2015; Kuhzady et al., 2021), transportation (Rosenblat and Hwang, 2016), and food and beverage (Atsız et al., 2022; Mhlanga, 2020). However, local-guided tours have received limited attention from scholars (Cifci et al., 2021; Melián-González et al., 2019; Poon and Huang, 2017). In this regard, some researchers (i.e., Kuhzady et al., 2021) emphasised that forthcoming studies should concentrate on other sharing economy platform services, such as local guidance.

Although interest in local-guided tours through sharing economy platforms has increased, growing attention in this research field has not been observed as in other sharing economy services such as accommodation, transportation, and food and beverage. Even so, some scholars have examined these tours under two main categories. The first category deals with tours' characteristics offered in the peer-to-peer local guiding platforms (Melián-González et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016). According to this research stream, "excursions/walks" and "workshops" are the most preferred tours and activities in the sharing economy. The second classification has examined the experiential side of peer-to-peer local-guided tours. These studies mostly explored which components form travellers' experiences during the tours. For example, Cifci et al. (2021) focused on travellers' experience in the local-guided street tours, while Atsız (2021) concentrated on families' experience in the daily-local guided tours of sharing economy in the destination. Besides, Atsız and Seyitoğlu (2022) focused on shoppers' experiences in peer-to-peer local guided tours finding that guide, shopping companion, learning, hedonic experience, memorable experience, local interaction, and shop characteristics are significant dimensions of their

experience. It is evident that each research is specific and covers different contexts to frame tourist experience literature. However, further research is needed to complete the main framework of local-guided tour experiences in sharing economy platforms, primarily from distant experiences contexts.

### *From in-person tour experiences to online distant tour experiences*

Customer experience can be explained as a holistic concept comprising multiple interactions across touchpoints involving the customer's cognitive, emotional, sensory, and social elements (Bolton et al., 2018). As a crucial part of businesses, customer experience refers to a notion separate from services and goods and built upon a chain of memorable events managed by the service provider (Pine and Gilmore, 1998); thus, its management is vital. Service providers form markets by delivering unique experiences to customers, which help to gain a competitive advantage (Bolton et al., 2018). Therefore, sometimes service innovations are needed to differentiate the service and contribute to the experience (Vakulenko et al., 2019); especially in times of crisis, service innovations or new service developments may be beneficial for both the supply and demand sides. Additionally, understanding the service experience from the customers' perspective is critical for successful service design and management (Halvorsrud et al., 2016).

Any crisis may re-structure consumer behaviours or the potential market, which will cause the need for redesigning/creating products or services (Seyitoğlu et al., 2022). In connection with this, the COVID-19 health crisis can create opportunities for tourism and hospitality service providers to be innovative in the market (Seyitoğlu and Ivanov, 2020). In this context, distant local-guided tours provided through sharing economy platforms have emerged as alternative travel types during the pandemic. With the distant tours, a new traveller type which we identified as "online traveller", referring to travelling online without an actual visit, has emerged.

Before the pandemic, many travellers participated in in-person tours, which had become one of the most important tourist activities in the sharing economy (Melián-González et al., 2019). However, the pandemic has strictly hit these tours, and the negative impacts of the crisis were felt since these tours are contact-intensive services. According to Zhu and Liu (2021), sharing economy

providers and users are worried about sharing their goods and services due to the current health crisis. Batool et al. (2020) recommended that service providers in sharing economy platforms market their assets in the online environment because online platforms prevent human interaction. During COVID-19, many peer-to-peer local guiding platforms such as Withlocals, Airbnb and Showaround offered their services online, and many people across the globe joined in their local-guided tours. Hence, service providers providing in-person tours transferred their operations into the online, virtual, or live stream environment, which we termed distant tours. Some scholars also concluded that the role of these distant tours is evident in reducing psychological stress caused by the COVID-19 health crisis (Yang et al., 2021).

Distant tours provide real-time experiences to people who desire to see and experience a destination from a distant place. Thus, the concept of “nowness” is vital in these tours (Buhalis and Sinarta, 2019) because real-time video and audio content are required to offer for participants who are from a thousand miles away (Deng et al., 2019). Furthermore, during the distant virtual tour, participants and guides can communicate and have dialogues synchronously. These synchronised tours make the distant experience immediately interactive and co-created, thus providing participants with real-time interaction and multi-way communication (Zhang et al., 2021).

Nassani et al. (2021) examined these tours under the concept of virtual tours, and a case study approach (ShowMeAround) was adopted to investigate the concept. According to this study, these platforms are video conferencing systems that allow individuals to be involved in tours of live 360-video. A host presenter enables people to experience the destination remotely through a live stream of 360-video views. As we stated above, Zhu and Cheng (2021) examined the impacts of these tours on the tourist experience and destination. Finally, Zhang and Qiu (2022) is the first study that explored which processes included a virtual guided tour experience. Consequently, three main processes occur during the tour experience: experience encounter (interpretation quality, host credibility, tourist-host social contact and peer interaction), experience evaluation (experience benefits and satisfaction) and behavioural intention (online and offline behavioural intention) (Zhang and Qiu, 2022).

It has been reported that more than half of individuals who have participated in online

experiences state they would keep booking after they resume in-person activities (Airbnb, 2020). Hence, distant tourism products and services can be considered alternatives when travellers cannot travel in person to a destination but act as online travellers in the (post-)pandemic world.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore online travellers’ perceptions and experiences of distant local-guided tours. A qualitative approach is more appropriate for a new research subject and helps researchers obtain in-depth insights into a specific phenomenon. In this vein, as this paper is the first attempt to understand the perceptions and experiences towards distant local-guided tours offered by a sharing economy platform, this method is deemed more appropriate for this research. In doing so, concepts that depict distant local-guided tour experiences will be derived from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This paper utilised the case study approach among the various qualitative research approaches since it allows us to reveal individuals’ experiences in their social context (Veal, 2011).

This qualitative case study examines the contents of online reviews generated by users participating in distant local-guided tours on a well-known sharing economy platform. Since researchers can hardly reach travellers participating in peer-to-peer local-guided tours to collect the research data, the best way to understand the experiences of travellers participating in these tours is to use user-generated content which depicts overall users’ experiences, opinions, and feelings. In addition, previous studies proved that online reviews could help scholars understand travellers’ experience dimensions, components, and perceptions. For example, prior research used online reviews to explore travellers’ shopping experiences (Atsız and Seyitoğlu, 2022), heritage tourism experiences (Gursoy et al., 2022), and visitors’ cultural experiences (Simeon et al., 2017). These studies have emphasised that travellers’ online reviews mostly represent their overall experiences. Thence, the present research also utilised online reviews to address research purposes.

As an online community area (i.e., sharing economy platform), Withlocals was selected due to its popularity and preference by international travellers. This platform is “extended all over the world, in more than 100 cities, in

Europe, Africa, Asia, North, and South America” and offers travellers a wide range of local tours that help them to explore the destination and enhance their knowledge with a local guide (Withlocals, 2021). Before the pandemic, the in-person tours on the platform were heavily preferred by travellers. Nevertheless, after the pandemic, the platform hosts started to organise their tours virtually. So, the platform enabled people to explore destinations from their homes. Individuals participating in these distant tours share their experiences on local guides’ profiles. We purposefully selected these experiences as a research unit.

We only included individuals’ English distant travel reviews in the local-guided tour of sharing economy platform. All user reviews were gathered between 6–10 December 2021. 306 distant local-guided tour experiences posted during the COVID-19 were transferred to a spreadsheet in Microsoft Word. In qualitative research, the depth of analysis of the data is more important than the quantity of the research sample since there is not a common and correct answer for how many research units (i.e., interviews, reviews, or responses) are adequate for such research approaches (Czernek-Marszałek and McCabe, 2022). Thence, we have focused on the analysis of each experience of individuals. Since the platform only shares the users’ experience, other information, such as demographics, was not provided. We have concentrated on the distant travel experience and individuals’ perceptions of the tours in this aspect.

The collected data was analysed through content analysis, and researchers followed a coding procedure. Accordingly, the researchers applied all phases independently. First, the coders read the research data to check whether there was any mistake in the text. Then, they read the whole text several times. After this stage, they coded the text by breaking the big data into smaller pieces. Following this procedure, the codes explored by researchers were brought together to reveal meaningful themes. Finally, coders came together online to compare and discuss the final themes. All steps the authors followed to reach the research purpose during data collection and analysis are illustrated in Figure 1.

## Findings and discussion

Seeing that the present study includes two main aims, the findings are divided into two sub-

sections: (i) distant local-guided tour perceptions of travellers and (ii) dimensions of the distant local-guided tour experience. The first section includes three main themes: ‘an alternative travel type’, ‘preparation for an actual visit’, and ‘inspiration for face-to-face experiences’. Furthermore, the second section comprises six main experience dimensions: ‘celebration’, ‘togetherness and socialising’, ‘escape and relaxation’, ‘memorable’, ‘educational’, and ‘hedonic’. All findings were illustrated, and direct quotations were used to reinforce the data’s reliability. Additionally, participants were named “T” owing to their anonymity.

### *Distant local-guided tour perceptions of travellers*

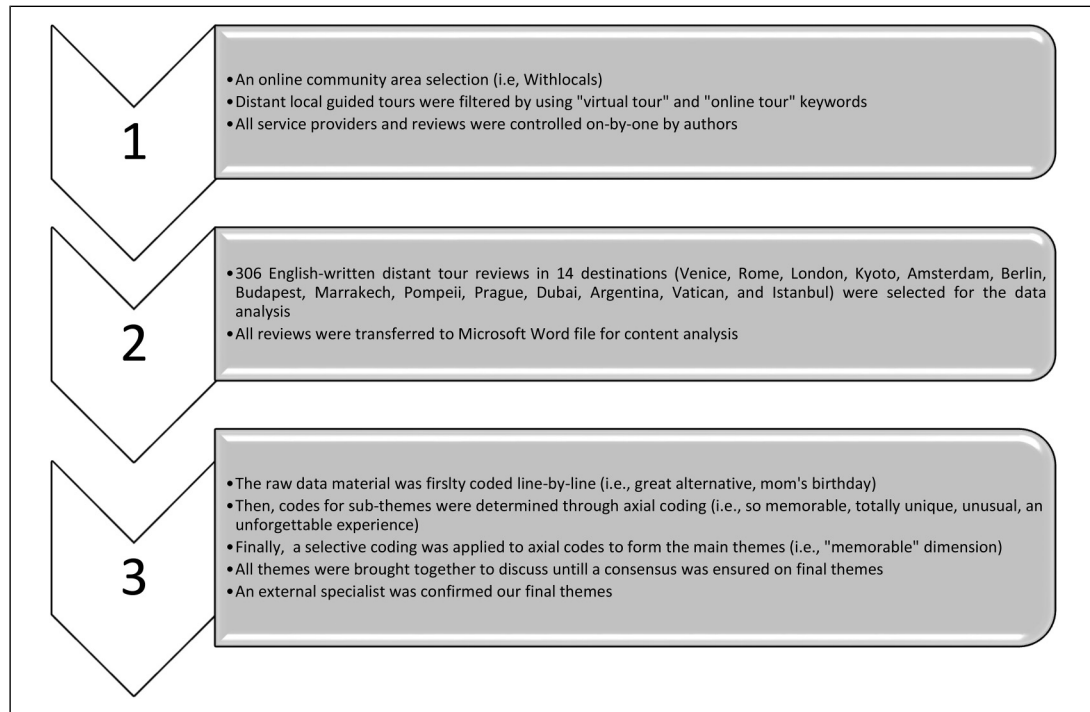
The findings demonstrate that travellers’ perceptions of the distant local-guided tours through a sharing economy platform include three main themes: an alternative travel type, preparation for an actual visit, and inspiration for face-to-face experiences.

*An alternative travel type.* Online travellers think that distant local-guided tours offered in the sharing economy platform during the COVID-19 era can be considered *an alternative travel type*. The statements in the reviews of online travellers contain significant supportive hints such as *an alternative, a diversion from being stuck at home, a creative response to the current restrictions, and an alternative travel model in the pandemic*. Moreover, travellers underline that due to the barriers (i.e., cancellations, restrictions, inability to travel, fear of being infected) caused by COVID-19, they preferred these distant local guided tours because they are the only available risk-free alternative travel choices. Some related comments of travellers can be presented as:

“... What a pity we could not physically be present due to the pandemic, but this has been a great, original alternative!” (T168)

“My family and I miss travel so much, and we’ve had so much fun exploring the new virtual online tours ... We learned a lot and felt like we got a little piece of travelling again. We applaud the tour guide ... trying this alternative model ....” (T234)

During or after any crisis, consumer behaviours may change, or the potential market may need new alternative products or services



**Figure 1.** Overall research material and data analysis phases.

(Seyitoğlu et al., 2022), which are required to be explored by companies to re-design their products or services to survive in the market. In this respect, distant local-guided tours provided through sharing economy platforms have emerged as alternative travel types. Thus, this study empirically approved that the COVID-19 pandemic has already created different services or products for the tourism market that address new demands or expectations.

*Preparation for an actual visit.* The reviews of online travellers illustrate that they considered distant local-guided tours as preparation tools for actual travel. For this reason, we named this theme "preparation for an actual visit". The statements that highlight the travellers' perceptions are revealed as *a great appetiser or teaser for the city, a taste of what to expect, a preview of a city before you visit, a perfect way to prepare for a real-life visit, excellent preparation for a real visit, a prelude to a visit, pre-tasting the destination, research before actually travelling to a new city, and helped prepare us for an in-person trip.*

"I feel like I've gotten a great appetiser or teaser for the city and cannot wait to visit the city ..." (T90)

"We signed up for this experience as a prelude to a visit to Istanbul when the pandemic is over." (T303)

Most travellers, who think distant local-guided tours provided in the sharing economy platform are tools to prepare for an actual visit, indicate that these tours are advantageous in terms of being comfortable, risk-free and a way of learning about a place. In this respect, for example, one of the travellers (T89) hints that "... we will also use it as research before I actually travel to a new city. Of course, I would rather be there in person, but on the bright side, I travelled to Europe without the jetlag!!!!".

*Inspiration for face-to-face experiences.* Travellers attribute these tours as inspiration for face-to-face experiences. The expressions such as left me with an inspiration to visit Budapest someday, it makes me want to visit Marrakech, made us want to travel, and made us interested in a visit to Prague can be given as clues supporting travellers' perceptions. Consequently, the virtual tours organised by local guides through the sharing economy platforms are essential to attract travellers to destinations in the post-viral world.

"I thought this was awesome and very interesting. It makes me want to visit in person." (T256)

“My girlfriend and I just had a tour of Pompeii from our living rooms ... It definitely made me want to visit in person.” (T197)

In the motivational context, inspiration is explained as driving a person to transform a newly obtained idea into action (Thrash et al., 2014). Since even user-generated content is considered an inspiring source indicating people’s diverse tastes and preferences (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016), it is not by coincidence that distant local-guided tours are perceived as vital tools inspiring travellers to have face-to-face experiences. Besides, a study (Dai et al., 2022) proposes that travel inspiration can shorten tourist decision-making. They claimed that as it influences early destination awareness, the inspiration signifies the successful transition into an individual’s intention to visit (Dai et al., 2022). Therefore, distant local-guided tours through sharing economy platforms can be used as promotional tools to attract tourists in the post-pandemic era.

### *Dimensions of the distant local-guided tour experience*

According to the findings of this study, six dimensions of the distant local-guided tour experience have emerged: celebration, togetherness and socialising, escape and relaxation, memorable, educational, and hedonic.

**Celebration.** Celebration is a significant dimension contributing to participants’ distant local-guided tour experience. Participants of online tours purchased these tours as a present to celebrate their partners, friends, or family members’ special occasions (i.e., Mother’s Day, birthdays, Thanksgiving, Christmas and Father’s Day). Thanks to these distant local-guided tours, travellers purchased gifts for their beloved ones and enjoyed celebrating their special occasions distantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, T170 states, “After receiving a virtual tour of Pompeii ... as a birthday gift, we liked it so much that we decided to give the same gift to my in-laws for Christmas. They equally enjoyed being able to travel to this amazing archaeological site with an expert ... without having to leave their home.”

“It was a most enjoyable time for us and enhanced our celebration of American Thanksgiving.” (T141)

“This was a perfect Father’s Day gift since we were in separate households and needed to celebrate virtually.” (T180)

The findings verified that as COVID-19 has been a barrier to seeing their friends, family members, and beloved ones on special occasions, distant local-guided tours permitted participants to experience a distant celebration while touring a place online. In addition, these tours play a remedy role for people as they cannot celebrate their special days psychically because of lockdowns, precautions, or personally not taking the risk of being infected. The celebration is a significant dimension of the distant local-guided tour experience of participants included in the present study. In this aspect, T72 explains that “I booked the “Amsterdam without the crowds” virtual tour for my mother-in-law’s birthday. She joined from North Carolina, and we joined from Florida as (our guide) walked and skate-boarded us to various spots in the city centre and gave us a great overview while also answering all our questions.”

**Togetherness and socialising.** The findings indicated that “togetherness and socialising” is another significant component that helps form the overall distant local-guided tour experiences. Travellers assert that their experiences related to this category included gathering and socialising with family members, friends, and colleagues. Nevertheless, gathering with family members and friends is the main factor that boosts the togetherness and socialising experience of travellers participating in distant local-guided tours through the sharing economy platform in the current pandemic. Thanks to these distant local-guided tours, participants can reunite and do an activity with their friends and family members to fulfil their social needs. For example, T34 hints that “... This was a team-building event at the Bank, and we were 14 people. All of us work from home and could be together for 1 h walking through the beautiful streets of Rome and listening to secret stories/ legends that are hiding in the city ... We had a great time together.” Some more comments can be presented as follows:

“We are really enjoying taking family “trips” online. It is a great way for us to connect from afar (we have spread out over 5 states in the U.S.), and especially since our mom is isolated, the chance to

get together for a fun hour or two has been great.” (T236)

Some travellers also think the local-guided online tours are fun to be together remotely with their old friends or family members. From this point, T294 states, “I purchased this for my mother as a gift. My parents, sister, niece and I participated, and we all live in different cities. It was such a fun way to be together remotely. Great family experience ...” Furthermore, T8 hints, “We usually meet every few months since we no longer work together ... This was a fun way to reconnect with old friends during the Shelter in Place mandate”.

Togetherness and socialising are well-known concepts in tourism research, especially in the motivation studies context (Yuan et al., 2005). They are significant motivational factors in enhancing the quality of travel experiences (Yeap et al., 2020). In the present study, it is empirically approved that togetherness & socialising are possible distantly without existing in any destination through local-guided tours on sharing economy platforms. Further, it is confirmed that togetherness and socialising are crucial factors in distant travel experiences.

**Escape and relaxation.** The distant local-guided tours through the sharing economy platform during COVID-19 were considered a way of escaping and relaxing for many online travellers. The results portray that the distant local-guided tour experience is helpful to escape from the psychological pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic and relax for some time. In this vein, T273 asserts that “... it takes you away from all the worries about the pandemic for a few hours.” The statements such as *couldn't believe how fast an hour had gone by, felt like I was walking with him, a break during this time, we felt we were there in Italy, we were taken away from our homes, got the feel of moving through the narrow streets of Rome, a great escape in COVID times, like a breath of fresh air, we truly felt transported by what we saw, a wonderful way to escape without leaving the couch, being outside virtually, and a great break from COVID quarantine* can be highlighted as hints that demonstrate this experience dimension. Some quotations which show that distant local-guided tours contain the escape and relaxation experience dimension are given below:

“We have been exploring the world remotely with friends during the pandemic.

It provides a nice escape to the world.” (T209)

“It was a beautiful blend of history and his life and really made us feel like we were back there. I was floating for days, dreaming I had been able to escape lockdown and head to Europe!” (T88)

Escape and relaxation are crucial elements of the tourist experience that can contribute to the sense of authenticity and memorability of experiences (Wang et al., 2020). They are significant motivational push factors (Silkes, 2012). Moreover, the research of Lewis and D'Alessandro (2019) revealed that escape and relaxation are vital motivations for rural tourism.

**Memorable.** The memorable experience has significantly contributed to distant local-guided tour experiences. The indicators for the memorable experience were extracted as so memorable, totally unique, unusual, an unforgettable experience, memorable online tour, a unique perspective, a unique opportunity, will never forget, a really special memory. Consequently, T203 implies that “I still feel like I am in Italy and have been floating all day ... A really special memory for us – I haven't seen my parents or sister since Jan, but now we have such special memories.” Some additional comments are given below:

“That was a spellbinding tour none will forget soon, and we couldn't have had a better time.” (T276)

“We had 3 different small groups of people logging on during quarantine, and we enjoyed the memorable experience.” (T178)

Memorable experiences are explained as recalled, and remembered experiences after the event have emerged based on individuals' assessments (Kim et al., 2012). New, unique, and unusual events or experiences are better remembered than ordinary ones (Seyitoğlu and Ivanov, 2022). In addition, the memories of individuals are considered the most reliable sources that can guide their post-purchasing behaviours (Zhang et al., 2018). Finally, memorable experiences will likely result in positive word of mouth among consumers (Seyitoğlu, 2021).

**Educational.** The educational experience is one of the most critical dimensions determining the travellers' distant local-guided tour experience. Travellers found distant local-guided tours



through the sharing economy platform educational and informative. Hence, travellers had a chance to learn about various aspects of cities (e.g., history, local life, lifestyle, culture, language, religion, architecture, art and artists) through these distant local-guided tours. In this vein, for example, T170 expresses that "... use of graphics and video in his presentation helped immerse us in the history of the area including understanding the original architecture of the buildings, the decorative motifs and even the daily lives of the people there at the time of the Vesuvius eruption ...." Regarding educational experiences, travellers mentioned:

"He made our experience ... extremely educational. He was detailed in his description of the events that took place in 79AD, as well as life before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The people were smart, inventive as well as artistic and must have had a wonderful life enjoying all the beauty around them!" (T186)

"... (Our guide) was answering all our questions perfectly and showing us Ancient and current Rome in an educational way". (T283)

In the tourism experience context, learning is regarded as a cognitive process, and the origins of travels are chiefly concentrated on learning about places, people, and culture (Falk et al., 2012). In addition, the educational experience is approved to be a significant dimension of the tourist experience in the guided culinary tour (Seyitoğlu, 2021) and museum experience (Seyitoğlu and Alphan, 2021) contexts.

**Hedonic.** The findings implied that hedonic experience is crucial in forming distant local-guided tour experiences. Travellers identified their hedonic experience of the distant local-guided tours with these expressions: *a wonderful virtual experience, charming and fun, amazing experience, fantastic online experience, magical, delightful experience, absolutely incredible, a fabulous tour, an amazing walking tour, a great alternative way to experience virtual travelling, fascinating virtual tour, a fantastic tour, a terrific way for us to travel together during COVID-19, an incredible virtual experience, an awesome travel experience at a distance, a marvellous experience, the best online experience, a super nice experience, a welcome treat during our quarantine at home,*

*and an excellent virtual tour.* Example comments from travellers indicating their hedonic experiences are presented as follows:

"Even though we had to cancel our family trip his summer, we got to be together after all and had a wonderful and fun experience with Miha on his driving tour of Berlin!" (T93)

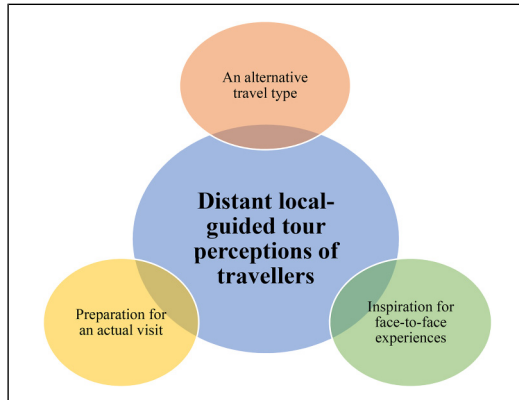
"... an excellent virtual tour of the Hagia Sophia to my workgroup. Thoroughly enjoyed by all ..." (T306)

Hedonic experience refers to the positive emotional experience, the feelings of happiness, and intrinsic pleasure and enjoyment (Io, 2016). As a critical satisfaction factor in tourism consumption, hedonic experience seeking is also the pursuit of happiness (Io, 2016). Besides, hedonic consideration is a vital indicator of consumer purchase decisions (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000). The hedonic aspect is empirically supported as a solid motivation to visit a destination (Bruwer and Rueger-Muck, 2019).

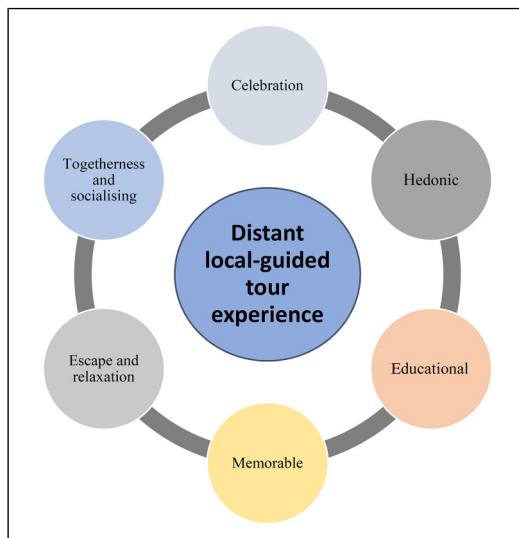
## Conclusion and implications

### Contribution

This research contributes to the literature by exploring the distant local-guided tour perceptions and experiences of travellers who participated in distant online tours organised by a sharing economy platform-Withlocals. First, according to the findings, distant local-guided tour perceptions of online travellers emerged as three main themes (see Figure 2): *an alternative travel type, preparation for an actual visit, and inspiration for face-to-face experiences.* Second, analysing the reviews of online travellers, who experienced distant local-guided tours in popular destinations worldwide, a dimensional model of the distant local-guided tour experience (Figure 3) is presented. Six main dimensions were revealed: *celebration, togetherness and socialising, escape and relaxation, memorable, educational, and hedonic.* These results could help destination managers and practitioners understand the contributions of a new form of local-guided tours, which we termed "distant local-guided tour". In this regard, knowledge of distant local-guided tour experiences and consumers' perceptions of these tours can be beneficial to providing new tourism products and services in destinations.



**Figure 2.** Distant local-guided tour perceptions of travellers.



**Figure 3.** Dimensions of the distant local-guided tour experience of travellers.

The findings of this study are also beneficial for academics measuring or investigating distant local guided tours and consumers' perspectives of these tours. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to explore distant local-guided tour experience in a UGC context and focuses on tours offered in a sharing economy platform from different perspectives (travellers' experience and perceptions). Therefore, this study is original to the existing literature in terms of providing an opportunity to advance and contribute to the understanding of the growing area of research by exploring the main components of the distant local guided tour experience and the perspectives of travellers towards these tours.

Distant local guided tours and online experiences have been offered on various sharing economy platforms (i.e., Airbnb, Withlocals,

Eatwith, etc.) for individuals wishing to see a destination in the pre-visit phase. It is expected that some potential travellers will continue to use distant tours and experience the post-COVID era (Airbnb, 2020). Considering the future state of distant tours, scholars likely to continue digging into these tours as a research area. Thus, our research implications will shed light on understanding these tours from the experiential perspective.

### *Theoretical implications*

This research has several critical theoretical implications for academia and practitioners. First, the activities offered in the sharing economy platforms are becoming crucial for travellers' experiences. Nevertheless, no research has explored which components form travellers' experience of distant local-guided tours organised through sharing economy platforms. Only a few studies (Melián-González et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016) indirectly mentioned the tour types organised through sharing economy platforms. The results reveal that the travellers' distant local-guided tour experience is an integral concept consisting of different components. Moreover, there is a lack of a robust theoretical framework for online local-guided tour experiences and travellers' perceptions of local-guided tours in sharing economy context. Therefore, the present study will serve as a base for future research to provide a multi-dimensional distant local-guided tour experience model and travellers' perspectives toward distant local-guided tours.

All experience dimensions are original for this research and emphasised in the previous tourism and hospitality field. The distant local-guided tour experience model presented in Figure 3, can help as the basis for future inquiry into the individuals' online tour experience during a crisis. Finally, this study empirically approved that celebration, togetherness and socialising, escape and relaxation, memorable, educational, and hedonic experiences are also possible virtually without existing in any destination through local-guided tours organised on sharing economy platforms.

Eventually, since any crisis may impact consumer behaviours, tourism companies should work on alternative products or services to address the emerging needs of travellers (Seyitoğlu et al., 2022). In this sense, distant local-guided tours provided through sharing economy platforms have emerged as alternative

travel types. Thus, this study empirically approved that the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to create different services or products for the tourism market (Seyitoğlu and Ivanov, 2020) that can address travellers' expectations.

### *Practical implications*

This study has important practical implications for service providers. First, the results of this study will be helpful for practitioners, destination planners and managers to understand that various local-guided tour experience dimensions can be provided not only through face-to-face products but also through online ones distantly. These attempts may help diversify the products and widen the potential market in the post-COVID era to help revive tourism and obtain a competitive edge in the longer term. In this vein, service providers can develop distant local-guided tours or similar tourism products/services to attract consumers and recover the lost revenues in crises. Such distant tourism products/services can also be beneficial in regional and broader crises when travelling in person to a destination is risky or not possible.

Additionally, since the travellers experiencing distant local-guided tours think these tours are an alternative travel type, preparation for an actual visit, and inspiration for face-to-face experiences, destination managers and practitioners should focus on these findings. Accordingly, they should use these or similar distant tours as promotional tools to attract tourists in the post-viral world. Therefore, providing a satisfactory experience with these tours would be beneficial in attracting travellers to destinations. However, the opposite situation may harm the destination's attractiveness.

As most participants purported that distant tours are advantageous in terms of being comfortable, risk-free and a way of learning about a place, service providers should consider these results when designing their products and services. Especially for the tourist profile having high-risk perceptions, seeking comfortable experiences, and having high motivation for learning, distant tours can be advantageous tourism products.

Another significant practical implication is that distant tours can also be advantageous for physically challenged or elderly tourists who cannot physically travel to far destinations. In this regard, practitioners should consider this tourist segment and structure their products and services more conveniently to address their needs. For instance, hard-of-hearing online

travellers should be provided with a voice-to-text translation or a sign language interpreter.

Finally, from a practical viewpoint, the research findings can aid local guides in developing and structuring their services or products. Guides can comprehend which components can enhance the distant tour experience with the guidance of our findings. Hence, distant guided tour providers who desire to develop and/or improve their distant tours can benefit from this research findings. More specifically, as the educational experience was revealed to be one of the most critical dimensions determining the travellers' distant local-guided tour experience, service providers should have rich knowledge about the tour content they offer. In this vein, knowing the aspects such as culture, history, local life, religion etc. and having good communication skills will help them to provide educational experiences through their distant tours.

### *Limitations and future directions*

Though this study contributes to the current tourism literature by revealing the distant local-guided tour perceptions and experiences of online travellers, it also has some limitations that can be advantageous in providing directions for future academic endeavours. Initially, this paper focuses on online reviews to understand participants' distant local-guided experiences through online tours. Consequently, future research can implement face-to-face interviews with individuals participating in online distant local-guided tours to capture the main construction of the distant local-guided tours.

This research concentrated on travellers' distant local-guided tour experiences through a sharing economy platform, neglecting service providers' perspectives in the same context. Therefore, future studies may investigate such online experiences from the views of service providers (local guides). In this respect, future efforts may focus on exploring local guides' motivations in the entrepreneurship context. Finally, in the post-viral era, the value and attractiveness of distant local-guided tours can also be topics that need to be investigated from strategic management and marketing perspectives.

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