

Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change

ISSN: 1476-6825 (Print) 1747-7654 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rtcc20

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To cite this article: Duygu Yetgin Akgün, Ozan Atsız & Fadime Demir (01 Apr 2026): Exploring memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experience: the role of guide performance in Istanbul, Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, DOI: 10.1080/14766825.2026.2652503

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2026.2652503

Published online: 01 Apr 2026.

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JOURNAL OF TOURISM AND CULTURAL CHANGE
https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2026.2652503

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Exploring memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experience: the role of guide performance in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

Although the importance of peer-to-peer tours is well-established in research, the academic community and destination planners have given limited attention to the aspect of memorable experiences in relation to tour performance. Addressing previous calls for research on this matter, this paper aims to explore memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experiences in the context of guide performance in a developing destination (Istanbul). For this purpose, a qualitative approach was employed in this research, utilizing reviews posted by travelers on a peer-to-peer platform. A total of 2,956 narratives, regarding thirty-nine local guides, were included in the data analysis, representing travelers' overall memorable experiences. The analysis revealed five key components: cultural connection, travel companionship, crowd avoidance, personalized experience, social interaction, and challenges in peer-to-peer interactions. This paper provides significant insight for the stakeholders involved in the development of local guiding, as well as for academics seeking to structure their research logic on peer-to-peer guiding services.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 5 April 2025
Accepted 27 February 2026

KEYWORDS
Sharing economy; ToursByLocals; memorable tour experience; tour guide; tour guide performance; Istanbul

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of peer-to-peer online platforms (i.e., the sharing economy) has had a significant impact on tourism in many different areas, including accommodation, hospitality, travel, entertainment, and leisure activities (Atsız et al., 2022; Forno & Garibaldi, 2015; Tussyadiah & Park, 2018). Peer-to-peer travel through sharing economy platforms enhances tourist experiences by enabling direct interaction between tourists and individual local providers (Qiu et al., 2021). In previously published works, research on the business models of online travel platforms has mainly focused on accommodation services (for example, Airbnb) in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Zervas et al., 2017) or transportation services (for example, Uber) (Lee et al., 2018).

The sharing economy provides various benefits to tourism services and tourists, with significant potential for change and development inherent in tourism (Kromidha et al., 2023). In particular, with the rise of peer-to-peer online platforms, the tourism sector has been significantly reshaped by the sharing economy. This economic model, which

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has become increasingly popular in recent years, not only transforms the tourism sector but also offers an alternative to the traditional industry structures (Gruemman, 2018). Moreover, events and tours offered on peer-to-peer platforms have rapidly expanded globally, with companies such as Airbnb, GetYourGuide, and Viator dominating the sharing economy (SE) by providing tourists with a wide range of tours and activity experiences (Pung et al., 2022). However, in recent years, new platforms have emerged that directly connect tour guides with consumers, where tour guides are listed for selection. These are known as peer-to-peer locally guided tours organized by a local or professional guide who knows the destination and its attributes. Thanks to travelers' preferences for using these platforms while exploring and experiencing various tourist attractions, evidence-based studies have also started to understand users' experiences (Seyitoğlu & Atsız, 2024).

There has been a significant increase in tourists' tendency to travel in small groups or individually, focusing on local cultures and authentic experiences rather than traditional destinations (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). In Kromidha et al.'s (2023) study, peer-to-peer travel users state that having personal and genuine experiences with guides is an important advantage. Peer-to-peer platforms allow individual tour guides to promote themselves through online profiles, and travelers to seek more authentic experiences by immersing themselves in local cultures rather than visiting traditional tourist destinations. These platforms not only connect locals and travelers, but also provide guides with the opportunity to improve their professional skills and offer tourists more authentic experiences, thereby contributing to the overall quality of the industry.

Tour guides play a crucial role in both group and individual tourism as they significantly influence tourist satisfaction, a destination's attractiveness, and image (S. (Sam) Huang et al., 2015; Tu et al., 2020). As key figures in the tourism industry, they maintain close contact with tourists (Yetgin & Benligiray, 2019) and are directly involved in managing tourists' experiences, including their satisfaction and complaints (Syakier & Hanafiah, 2022). Further to this, tour guides are an important component of the tour performance (Geva & Goldman, 1991; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006) and tourist experiences (S. Huang et al., 2010) as they represent the visited region and its culture.

Although research on the impact of the sharing economy on the tourism system continues to develop, there is limited research on tour guiding services in the sharing economy. For instance, Yetgin Akgün (2025) examined family experiences in guided food tours offered through sharing economy platforms in Istanbul, while Seyitoğlu and Atsız (2024) investigated online travelers' perceptions and experiences of remote local guided tours, and Shang et al. (2023) analyzed tour guides' self efficacy and resilience on sharing economy platforms. Kromidha et al. (2023) examined authentic tour guide services on a sharing economy platform, and Cifci et al. (2021) focused on street food experiences in local-guided tours. Additionally, Pung et al. (2022) studied tourists' motivations and constraints in sharing economy platforms, and Demirdelen Alrawadieh and Cifci (2021) studied tour guides' performance.

A memorable tourism experience, which is positively remembered after the events (Kim et al., 2012), is critical for achieving a competitive advantage in tourism (Slåtten et al., 2011). These are chosen and recalled based on an individual's evaluation of the experience (Kim et al., 2012), and numerous studies indicate that these experiences have a significant impact on tourists' future behavior (Chandralal et al., 2015). While extensive

research has been conducted on memorable experiences in tourism, limited attention has been given to peer-to-peer local-guided memorable experiences, particularly regarding the role of guide performance. Evaluating the performance of tour guides is essential for improving service quality. Both positive and negative feedback highlight the areas where tour guides are successful and where improvement is needed. Understanding travelers' experiences is crucial to improving customer satisfaction. These comments also provide insight into their perceptions of tour guides' knowledge, personal characteristics, communication skills, and overall behavior.

Analyzing comments regarding tour guides is critical for improving service quality and ensuring customer satisfaction. While previous research emphasizes the importance of interaction between customers, there is a need for further research on this type of interaction. From this point of view, the limited attention on this matter in the literature serves as the foundation for this study. As one of the first studies to explore peer-to-peer local-guided tour experiences and tourists' perceptions of these tours, this study aims to provide valuable insight for academics, practitioners, and future studies, as well as to shed more light on the subject.

2. Background

2.1. The sharing economy and local-guided tours

The sharing economy, often associated with platforms such as Airbnb and Uber, continues to evolve with a focus on social responsibility and sustainability. According to Böckmann (2013), the sharing economy is defined as a business model that facilitates the sharing of required resources among peers. Hamari et al. (2016) define the sharing economy as the temporary sharing, renting, buying, or exchanging of both physical goods and non-physical services and information through various online platforms.

The sharing economy benefits both tourism services and travelers through the potential for change and development inherent in tourism (Kromidha et al., 2023). In this context, travelers are increasingly seeking authentic and experience-oriented opportunities that encourage more meaningful interactions with local communities (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). This development allows tourism to go beyond being merely an economic activity that emphasizes cultural interactions and individual experiences. This shift in tourist preferences has led to the popularity of peer-to-peer local tour guiding in recent years, which promotes memorable and transformative experiences. Unlike traditional tourism services, where the traveler has a more superficial relationship with the service provider, peer-to-peer tours foster deeper one-to-one communication with local guides and travelers, and they usually become friends (Shang et al., 2023). The tours on these platforms within the sharing economy differ from traditional guided tours by offering tourists more personalized and flexible experiences.

Several popular digital peer-to-peer tour guide platforms around the world, such as ToursByLocals, ShowAround, GetYourGuide, and Withlocals (withlocals.com), are among the most recognizable sharing economy-based tour guiding companies. These platforms mainly focus on branding, marketing, and promoting tours to potential customers. They also organize tours, manage groups of tourists at meeting points, control bookings and sales, and recruit guides (Jørgensen & Danieli, 2024). Sharing

economy models are innovative and interesting, offering faster access to tourism services, lower prices, opportunities to engage with the local community, better fulfillment of their individual needs, and a wider range of services (Navickas et al., 2021). Furthermore, these platforms often provide travelers with a deeper and more authentic understanding of local cultures (Pung et al., 2022), allowing them to have memorable travel experiences (Mao & Lyu, 2017).

The role of the tour guide extends beyond mere information giving; they act as 'cultural mediators' who have the power to shape the tourist's perception of the destination. As Cohen (1985) argues, the modern guide creates a 'communicative component' that interprets the site, often treading a fine line between 'authenticity' and 'fabrication'. In the context of the sharing economy, this mediation becomes even more complex. Salazar (2005) highlights how guides adapt their narratives to global tourists ('glocalization'), manipulating discourse to bridge the local and the global. Furthermore, considering MacCannell's (1973) concept of 'staged authenticity,' P2P guides often use their 'local friend' persona to offer access to 'back regions' of the city. However, this study critically acknowledges that the high sociability and friendship in P2P tours may sometimes compensate for, or even mask, the rigorous attribution of truth and institutional trust, creating a socially negotiated experience rather than an objectively authentic one.

2.2. Travelers' memorable experiences in the sharing economy

Memorable tourism experiences (MTE) have attracted considerable attention from both researchers and practitioners in recent years. Research has shown the importance of developing and maintaining a competitive advantage to provide memorable experiences (Kim et al., 2012). Travelers want to have unforgettable and unique experiences that combine culture, education, entertainment and authenticity (Garrod & Fyall, 2000). Given that travelers' behavior and intentions are strongly influenced by memory, there is a need for a deeper examination of the factors that contribute to the memorability of tourism experiences (Kim et al., 2012). Moreover, travelers are increasingly motivated by the desire to make meaningful social connections and have authentic travel experiences (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). In this context, one of the most memorable aspects of peer-to-peer tour guiding is the opportunity it provides to experience authentic local culture.

Studies on MTE have increased significantly over the last decade (Kim et al., 2024), but research on memorable traveler experiences in the sharing economy has been limited. Memorable traveler experiences in the sharing economy have recently become an important focus in the tourism literature, including the emotional and cognitive dimensions that make travel experiences memorable. Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto (2018) examine the memorable guest experiences of tourists using the Airbnb platform. Their study aimed to understand why guests' experiences become memorable and highlight how the unique experiences offered by Airbnb are shaped by hospitality and personal interaction. Memorable Airbnb experiences were associated with social interaction with the host, the host's attitude, and the location of the accommodation. Sthapit et al. (2022) further explored the activities that guests perform while staying at Airbnb, the emotions associated with these experiences, and the components that make Airbnb stays memorable.

In particular, the components of memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experiences are central to this concept. These experiences often involve authentic interaction with local guides, offering travelers a unique, personal connection to the destination's culture and significantly enhancing the memorability of the experience. While the research community and destination planners widely recognize the importance of peer-to-peer tours, the role of tour performance in creating memorable experiences has received limited attention. In response to previous calls for research in this area, this paper explores the memorable aspects of peer-to-peer local-guided experiences, focusing on guide performance, particularly in the context of an emerging destination.

3. Research methodology

With the rapid development of technology, tourists are increasingly using websites, digital platforms, and social media channels that offer the opportunity to share their experiences. These platforms have a significant impact on individuals' purchasing and decision-making processes, making online customer reviews more important than ever. These reviews not only measure satisfaction levels, but they also influence potential customers' preferences (Mittal & Agrawal, 2022). Vo Thanh and Kirova (2018) emphasize that online reviews play a crucial role in shaping tourists' understanding of their experiences and guiding their service choices. Considering this, our paper aims to understand guide performance and memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experiences in the context of an emerging destination. To achieve this, the research sample was selected from international travelers' comments regarding their local guide experiences in Istanbul, commented on ToursByLocals, a sharing economy platform. ToursByLocals, founded in 2008, is a platform that connects travelers with local guides to offer customized tours. The platform offers cultural, historical, artistic, and natural experiences in over one hundred and ninety countries, supports the freedom of guides to set their tour details, and improves guide selection processes through traveler reviews. By prioritizing licensed tour guides, the platform supports the professionalism of local guides in the tourism industry and creates unique travel opportunities by offering a user-friendly experience. The choice of the ToursByLocals platform in this study provides valuable insight for service providers and destination managers in terms of understanding and improving tourist experiences.

A total of one hundred and sixty-three tour guides offer service in twenty-two regions in Türkiye, with Istanbul having the highest number of tour guides (thirty-nine) on ToursByLocals. Istanbul also offers the widest range of tour programs (two hundred and seventy). These two indicators highlight Istanbul's central role in Türkiye's tourism industry and provide important perspectives on tourist experiences throughout the country. Therefore, this study examines the online reviews of thirty-nine local tour guides in the Istanbul region. Since the researchers were unable to directly contact the travelers who participated in these tours, the study mainly relies on analyzing user-generated content to capture the experiences, opinions, and feelings of users in general. Moreover, previous research claims that reviews posted by travelers are extremely useful in understanding their memorable experiences (Murray et al., 2024).

In this context, 2,956 online comments reviewed between September 2010 and December 2023 were examined using the deductive technique, with coding and

categorization processes then being applied to the data. It is important to acknowledge the limitations regarding the reviewers' profiles. The data source (ToursByLocals) provides limited demographic information (e.g. age, gender, nationality) unless voluntarily disclosed in the review text. Therefore, the analysis predominantly focused on the 'content of the narratives' and the 'type of tours purchased' rather than correlational analysis based on user demographics. Furthermore, English served as the primary language of the reviews. While this allows for a broad analysis, it is recognized that nuances in expression may be lost for non-native English speakers, and cultural specificities in 'satisfaction' expression may vary.

Qualitative research, in general, is a process guided by an intention and purpose to reveal perceptions and events in a realistic and holistic way in a natural environment. Therefore, such studies are highly functional as qualitative research enables a better explanation of socio-political issues (Creswell, 2009). From this point of view, the information in the data set was manually analyzed and words in the comments in regard to the tour guides were coded. Although software tools like NVivo are often used in qualitative research, a manual approach was deliberately chosen for this study. This method allowed the researchers to engage more deeply with the nuances of the travelers' narratives and to interpret the context of the reviews more effectively without the constraints of automated coding. Given the large volume of data (2,956 reviews), the analysis process followed the principle of theoretical saturation. The coding process continued until no new codes or themes emerged from the data, ensuring that the identified dimensions comprehensively represented the memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experiences.

First, all online reviews written in various languages from the ToursByLocals website were prepared for analysis. Second, short, descriptive codes were assigned to each piece of data, and similarities and differences between descriptive codes were examined. Six main themes were identified through thematic coding: (1) cultural connection, (2) travel companionship, (3) crowd avoidance, (4) personalized experience, (5) social interaction, and (6) challenges in peer to peer interactions. Following the development of these themes, they were integrated into a theoretical framework through a process of selective coding. Finally, the data were reviewed within the framework of the conceptual model and a code tree was structured in the form of main themes and category relationships. As a result of the content analysis, coders grouped the main components of tourists' memorable experiences into themes, sub-themes, and indicators. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, inter-coder reliability was prioritized. Initially, two researchers independently coded a random sample of the reviews to develop the initial coding scheme. Subsequently, they met to compare their codes and resolve any discrepancies through discussion and negotiation until a 100% consensus was reached (investigator triangulation). Finally, an external expert in tourism marketing reviewed the final code tree and thematic structure to confirm that the themes accurately reflected the data.

4. Findings

In this section, the authors attempted to illustrate the research findings (please see Figure 1 and Table 1) based on quotations regarding memorable experiences of travelers participating in peer-to-peer guided tours. Moreover, the research outputs were discussed to support previous studies.



Figure 1. Overall themes and sub-themes of 'memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experience with guide performance'.

4.1. Cultural connection

This study explores the critical role of tour guides in building cultural connections. The guides helped tourists gain a deeper understanding of the destination by sharing information regarding local people's traditions, lifestyles and cultural details specific to the

Table 1. Components of a memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experience.

Main Category	Key Elements & Details
Cultural Connection	Transfer of cultural and historical context; presentation of daily life and local values; bridging the gap between tourists and local culture; experiences related to local cuisine and culinary traditions.
Personalized Experience	Unique route design, authentic and hidden spot recommendations, creating unique and personal experiences; and flexibility and adapting to individual needs.
Crowd Avoidance	Time management and efficient trip planning; avoiding crowded and busy places; alternative routes and unexplored places; delivering an authentic and peaceful experience; and strategies for the tour guides to cope with crowds.
Travel Companionship	Shared experiences; mutual support and cooperation; trust and safety; and emotional support.
Social Interaction	Connection with group members; building lasting friendships; group cohesion; empathy and understanding; and strengthening social bonds.
Challenges in P2P Interactions	Commercial pressure, role ambiguity and cultural complexity

region. The participants indicated that the narratives provided by the guides allowed them to engage not only with the physical locations but also with the cultural and historical contexts of these sites. In particular, the guides' enthusiastic approach in presenting scenes from daily life and conveying local values increased the tourists' interest in the region and created an emotional connection with the destination. In this context, the guides are not only a source of information but also a bridge between the tourists and the local culture. They help visitors have more meaningful interaction with local people, increasing the authenticity of their travel experiences and contributing to a deeper understanding of the communities visited. The interaction between the tourists and local residents, coupled with the opportunity to engage in daily routines, explore regional culinary traditions, savor street foods, visit local markets, and participate in activities such as traditional handicraft workshops, emphasizes the creation of deeper connections and the formation of lasting memories. The qualitative analysis identified several key indicators representing the 'Cultural Connection' theme, which include: the transfer of a cultural and historical context; the presentation of daily life and local values; bridging the gap between tourists and local culture; local experiences; and experiences related to the local cuisine and culinary traditions. Furthermore, to substantiate this evidence, two significant quotes shared by international travelers are presented below.

R356 '*Our tour guide not only gave us a tour of the Bazaar and Spice Bazaar but also helped us understand the habits of the Turkish people, what they buy and why, and the local culture. We had the opportunity to gain a thorough understanding of local traditions, tastes and daily life. She was an extremely knowledgeable and friendly guide. It was a wonderful experience to tour with her*.'

R489 '*The local guide made our trip unforgettable by combining the hidden streets, markets and historical details of Istanbul with a fascinating cultural story. We experienced 'A Journey through Time and Culture in Istanbul'*.'

Tour guides provide interpretation and promotion of the local traditions, living culture and cultural identity of a particular city or country (Atsız et al., 2022). Studies have shown that the sharing economy plays a crucial role in introducing tourists to the history, cultural heritage, traditions, and undiscovered values of a region through local guides (Pung et al., 2022). Moreover, a number of studies indicate that these platforms allow tourists to explore the daily habits of local people and learn about local food culture, as well as enrich tourist experiences by creating a sense of authenticity (Mhlanga, 2020). Moreover, such sharing economy-based interaction have been found to contribute to tourists' deeper connections with a destination and make their experiences memorable. Other studies emphasize that guides facilitate physical access by providing visitors with opportunities to appreciate the host culture, and share and experience local stories, music, and food (Weiler & Yu, 2007). It has also been argued that guides enrich tourist experiences by providing specialized knowledge in regard to local culture (Al-Okaily, 2022), traditions (Mossberg, 1995), and lifestyles of the host community (Düz, 2023). These interactions have been shown to enhance tourists' understanding of the local community and its values on a more profound level.

4.2. Travel companionship

In this study, travel companionship is considered as one of the most important components for peer-to-peer local-guided tour experiences. The participants emphasized

that throughout the tour, the local guides helped them visit cultural attractions in a welcoming and approachable manner. Furthermore, the tours enabled participants to explore the destination in a short period, thanks to the guidance and instructions provided by local guides. This is referred to as 'assistance' in this article. In particular, emotional support was also given to travelers participating in tours. The findings highlight specific dimensions that characterize the perception of 'Travel Companionship' among travelers. These dimensions encompass: shared experiences, mutual support and cooperation, trust and safety, and emotional support. Moreover, to support this evidence, two major quotations reviewed by international travelers are shown below.

R180. '*What made our tour unforgettable was Hakan, who started as a tour guide and ended as a true friend. He accompanied us not only with his knowledge but also with his friendliness and sincerity. He sipped wine with us and helped us savor the moment and added a whole new meaning to our vacation*.'

R600. '*Our guide was so friendly and smiling, it felt like a friend showing you around Istanbul*.'

A number of scholars highlight that travel companionship plays a major role on tourists' experience by providing support during their visit to any destination (Atsız & Seyitoğlu, 2023). Moreover, according to Su et al. (2022), it creates a greater effect on tourist satisfaction and their subjective well-being. In addition, it can produce a sense of a memorable destination experience for travelers (Vada et al., 2022). Although previous studies state that friends, family members, couples, or even local people can be traveling companions, our study explores travel companions as other participants of tours and local guides as evidenced in prior research on peer-to-peer local guided experiences (Atsız & Seyitoğlu, 2023). These companionships can create a long-term relationship for them (White & White, 2009). Therefore, in our study, it was seen that travel companionship is the most mentioned theme that arouses memorable moments for travelers.

4.3. Crowd avoidance

In this study, crowd avoidance is considered as a prominent element of peer-to-peer local-guided tour experiences. Tourists tend to avoid crowds in busy destinations. Guides facilitate tourists' experiences by reducing waiting times and crowd experience in areas such as Sultanahmet and Hagia Sophia, which are among the most popular places to visit in Istanbul. The participants emphasized that local guides direct tourists away from crowded and busy spots to quieter and more authentic places. In addition, thanks to the guides, tourists have the opportunity to visit lesser-known and undiscovered parts of a region outside of popular tourist areas. This approach allowed tourists to explore the destination more comfortably and made their trips more enjoyable. It was particularly stated that these alternative routes and suggestions offered by the guides contributed to both physical and mental relaxation for the travelers. In this context, the guidance offered by the local guides allowed travelers to enjoy a more authentic and peaceful experience by escaping the crowds. 'The "Crowd Avoidance" theme is comprised of distinct strategies and perceptions,' specifically: time management and efficient trip planning; avoiding crowded and busy places; alternative routes and unexplored places; and delivering an authentic and peaceful experience and strategies for the tour guides to cope with

crowds. In addition, to further support this evidence, two key quotes from international travelers are presented below.

R648 '*Kahraman was a great tour guide. He knew how to avoid the crowds and provide easy access to the museums. He made our tour unforgettable by making us visit quiet and undiscovered places*.'

R780 '*Hakan managed to get us through the lines quickly and was very flexible with the itinerary. He used the time very efficiently and we were able to see every place on the tour route*.'

Tourist crowding is characterized by an overwhelming concentration of tourist traffic in a specific space and time, which can hurt the tourist experience (Westover, 1989). Seasonal changes and spatial concentrations lead to tourist congestion in popular destinations, especially during peak tourism seasons (Zhang & Liang, 2020). A few research studies suggest that high volumes of tourist traffic can harm both tourist experiences and local infrastructure. Perceived crowding has a significant impact on experience quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and visitor reactions (Stemmer et al., 2024). Moreover, a number of studies have shown that, in the context of crowding, avoiding crowds offers significant advantages in terms of time management and comfort, while also having an impact on intentions to revisit (Pradhan et al., 2023). In their study, Kearsley and Coughlan (1999) found that when visitors are disturbed by crowds, they shorten their stay, prefer quieter times and seek alternative destinations. It can be concluded that tour guides should develop new strategies for crowd management and improving the visitor experience, especially on package tours. Brito and Carvalho (2024) also emphasize in their study that tour guides should develop new skills to effectively manage crowded situations.

4.4. Personalized experience

The findings indicate that 'Personalized Experience' is a significant theme emerging from this study. Personalized experiences create unforgettable memories that stay with tourists for a long time. In relation to personalized experiences, respondents mostly emphasized the flexibility of local guides and their ability to adapt to individual needs. In addition, the guides' ability to shape itineraries, taking into account tourists' interests and physical conditions, enabled customization of tours and turned each tour into a unique and personalized experience. Making arrangements, especially for people with limited mobility, determining the pace that appeals to participants from different age groups, and meeting special requests were among the elements that made this experience memorable. The participants also noted that the hidden spots and authentic experiences suggested by local guides turned the tours into unforgettable journeys of discovery. The analysis reveals several core elements that constitute a 'Personalized Experience' for travelers, namely: (1) unique route design; (2) authentic and hidden spot recommendations; (3) create unique and personal experiences; and (4) flexibility and adapting to individual needs. Sample comments from travelers indicating their personalized experiences are presented below:

R14 'We had a wide age range in our group and our guide prepared a program that would interest each of us. So, we were all happy.'

R950 '*My guide was really excellent! She was extremely knowledgeable, passionate and flexible. She adapted the itinerary to our wishes and needs and made us feel her energy at every moment. I highly recommend a tour with Mine*!'

The tourism industry has experienced a notable shift towards personalized experiences, driven by the increasing demand for authentic and immersive engagements that create lasting memories for travelers. A significant contributor to this trend is the emergence of peer-to-peer tours, which enable hosts to share their local environment, daily lifestyles, and unique hidden gems with tourists (Liu, 2020). Personalized experiences have emerged as a key factor in shaping tourist perceptions and satisfaction, as they move away from traditional standardized tours by offering tailored activities that cater to individual interests (E. Cohen, 2010). Active participation of travelers in these experiences enhances the quality of their engagement, fostering a deeper connection with the destination (Prebensen & Foss, 2011). The level of personalization is directly linked to interactive experiences, which have been identified as one of the most influential factors in determining the quality of the tourist experience (Zatori et al., 2018). Research underscores that personalized experiences significantly boost tourist satisfaction and loyalty, as they make travelers feel their preferences and needs are being addressed, thereby enhancing the perceived value and memorability of the experience (Kahraman & Tanrıverdi, 2021). A study by Munanura et al. (2024) further supports this, revealing that tourists participating in customized activities reported higher satisfaction levels compared to those participating in standard package tours. This emphasizes the importance of understanding individual preferences and designing experiences that cater to them. Overall, personalized experiences have transformed the tourism landscape by offering more authentic, immersive, and fulfilling engagements, ultimately enriching the traveler's journey (Alexandra Gkoulgkoutsika et al., 2022).

4.5. Social interaction

This article identified social interaction as a major determinant for peer-to-peer local tours. The participants stated that they felt better thanks to the connection that the tour guide established with group members of all ages, which contributed to an unforgettable experience. In addition, the group members stated that thanks to the professionalism of the tour guides, they were in constant communication as group members and established lasting friendships among themselves. They stated that they made friends on this tour that they will continue to meet in the future. In particular, the majority of travelers have emphasized that the tours involved enabled them to have a memorable experience and suggest it for potential travelers who desire to visit the destination through peer-to-peer local-guided tours. For example, a reviewer posted the following comment regarding his/her memorable experience:

R17: '*Thanks to the professionalism of our tour guide, we, as group members, were in constant contact with each other and established a lasting bond between us. We made good friendships on this tour and we will continue to meet in the future*.'

After analyzing the overall research data, certain vital indicators that describe the overall social interaction of participants are listed as follows: connection with group members; building lasting friendships; group cohesion; empathy and understanding; and strengthening social bonds. Considering these indicators, it was seen that the experience gained by them has led to memorable moments for them. Therefore, this component is regarded as a critical factor for such tours, as it facilitates meaningful interaction among participants as well as with the tour guide. Therefore, providing

participants with a social interaction atmosphere is important. Two reviewers commented on their experiences as shown below:

R57: '*An art history expert who plans perfectly with German discipline, lives every moment with Turkish and Spanish energy and has a magical connection with the children. We learned a lot and laughed a lot; two truly unforgettable, magical days*!'

R830: '*My son immediately warmed up to our tour guide Safiye, and by the end of the day, they were joking around like old friends. Over time, we also bonded with the other group members, creating a warm and friendly atmosphere*.'

The tourism literature acknowledges the importance of social interaction for the tourist experience. In particular, a number of authors mention that social engagement in daily life provides individuals with a sense of belonging and connection with other people (Bernstein et al., 2018). Moreover, connecting with others can give individuals good physical and mental well-being by reducing stress and boosting positive feelings (S. Cohen et al., 1986). According to Lin et al. (2019), engagement with other tourists can increase tourist satisfaction. Wei et al. (2019) state that a memorable tourism experience is related to social interaction. Therefore, creating social interaction can enhance tourists' memorable moments. This is confirmed by Kim et al. (2012) and they explored it as a key component of a memorable tourism experience.

4.6. Challenges in peer-to-peer interactions

Although the overwhelming majority of the analyzed narratives were positive, a closer examination of the 'deviant cases' reveals specific tensions inherent to the sharing economy. The shift in power relations, as noted in the literature, became evident when the 'local friend' persona conflicted with professional service expectations.

First, commercial pressure emerged as a key friction point. Some tourists felt that their trust was exploited when guides steered them towards specific vendors or carpet shops against their wishes, creating a sense of obligation rather than genuine hospitality. For instance, one reviewer noted feeling 'steered to places she had to take us' and 'pressured to buy' [P487], while another expressed feeling 'a little conned' after being taken to a sales room [P278].

In guided tours, taking participants to shopping stops as part of the tour program and forcing them to spend time at these locations is among the most common complaints from tourists. The addition of mandatory shopping stops to the tour itinerary disrupts the flow of the experience and creates dissatisfaction (Erkiliç et al., 2025; Yetgin Akgün et al., 2022). This is not merely a matter of directing tourists to make purchases; it is also directly related to the protective role and responsibility of building trust that the guide should assume. The tourist's sense of security is possible through their trust in the guide's impartiality and good intentions. When this trust is undermined, the problem becomes not just shopping pressure, but a breach of role. In contrast, according to Cetin and Bilgihan (2016), such difficulties encountered on tours are a natural part of the tour. Although some are clearly negative, tourists perceive them as part of the experience. Tourists in Istanbul are completely foreign; language, norms, and cultural codes can be different and complex. Therefore, the authors emphasize that these difficulties should be considered an integral part of the experience.

Second, the blurred lines between friendship and professionalism sometimes led to role ambiguity and over-familiarity. While casual interaction is desired, some tourists

reported dissatisfaction when guides became too casual, such as spending excessive time on personal phone calls during the tour [P935] or insisting on their own agenda rather than the guests' preferences [P71]. These instances highlight that while the P2P model democratizes tourism, the lack of institutional oversight can sometimes leave tourists with limited recourse when the 'performance' of friendship fails to meet professional standards.

5. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

This paper has a number of theoretical implications that could open new doors for future research directions as well as having sound contributions in terms of completing main framework of peer-to-peer local guiding literature. In the body of knowledge, memorable experience has been partially covered and explored as a significant dimension of peer-to-peer local guided services (Atsız & Seyitoğlu, 2023). Until now, there has been limited works that examine the empirically memorable experiences of travelers and approach peer-to-peer local-guided services in a memorable dimensionality. This article advances the existing literature in terms of creating dimensions regarding the memorable experiences of travelers during their peer-to-peer local-guided service offerings. Moreover, memorable tourism experience literature has been neglected in regard to its application to various types of hospitality and tourism activities. Therefore, adopting it to peer-to-peer local-guided services will aid tourism scholars who desire to create a theory and model concerning memorable tourism. This article also serves a literature in creating appropriate themes in terms of dimensionality. Accordingly, the findings of this research may provide valuable insights for scholars aiming to investigate the relationship between travelers' memorable peer-to-peer local-guided experiences and other variables, such as tour satisfaction or behavioral intentions regarding the purchase of tour services. Moreover, those who are interested in developing a measurement tool could benefit from the research findings and their indicators to create an item pool.

5.2. Practical implications

The findings of this study offer significant implications for destination planners, peer-to-peer platform managers, and tour guides. Platforms such as ToursByLocals, Withlocals, and Showaround represent a few of the most innovative applications of the sharing economy in tourism. The quality of services offered through these platforms is closely tied to the platforms' reliability and long-term sustainability. According to the findings, the tour participants value forming cultural connections, developing a sense of companionship with their guides, avoiding crowds through effective time management, experiencing personalized activities, and engaging in meaningful social interactions. Creating memorable tourist experiences is essential for enhancing traveler loyalty and strengthening the long-term marketing strategies of destinations (Seyfi et al., 2020).

P2P tours offer highly customized and immersive experiences of local culture (Zhang et al., 2025). Kapa et al. (2022) examined the skill sets necessary for delivering memorable guided experiences and emphasized the importance of honesty and trustworthiness,

ethical conduct, time management, customer service, health and safety, and communication skills. Personality traits of tour guides significantly influence tourist satisfaction during tours and play a critical role in encouraging behavior such as recommending or revisiting a destination (S. (Sam) Huang et al., 2015).

This study identifies the key components for designing memorable tourism experiences. Accordingly, peer-to-peer tour guides should design their tours with these components in mind and update their online profiles to gain a competitive advantage. Emphasizing flexibility, personalization, and knowledge of local culture within their profiles can assist travelers in selecting the most suitable guide. Support from professional social media managers is recommended when optimizing these profiles. Regular profile updates are particularly important for appealing to travelers with diverse interests, and platform managers should encourage such updates to improve overall user satisfaction and platform efficiency. Additionally, analyzing user feedback systematically to identify preferred guide behavior can help develop training materials for new guides. Continuous improvement of services and exceeding traveler expectations are crucial for the success of these platforms and for promoting standardization in service quality.

Tour guides operating on peer-to-peer platforms must adapt traditional guiding competencies to the dynamics of the sharing economy. Research indicates that tourists value strong interpersonal communication skills, such as sincerity, helpfulness, and empathy, and high levels of knowledge and expertise in this context (Weiler & Black, 2015). Consequently, training programs for guides should incorporate not only destination-specific knowledge but also communication, intercultural interaction, and empathy-related social skills. When guides engage with tourists in a friendly and emotionally aware manner, more satisfying experiences are generated (Pond, 1993). In one-on-one or small-group peer-to-peer tours, adopting the role of a travel companion becomes particularly important. Creating shared memories, offering support throughout the journey, and fostering an authentic atmosphere enhance a guide's competitive edge. These memorable interactions often translate into higher ratings and positive reviews on the platform, which in turn strengthen a guide's online reputation and attract more future travelers.

To enhance the quality of peer-to-peer guided tours, tour guides should develop crowd-avoidance strategies and optimize time management to provide a more relaxed and enjoyable discovery experience. Knowing peak visiting hours at popular attractions and offering alternative, quieter routes are among the strategies that contribute to greater tourist satisfaction. According to Akhshik et al. (2023), as travelers become more aware of the environmental, cultural, and socio-economic impacts of tourism, their perception of the destination's meaning and value deepens. Therefore, guides should incorporate sustainability themes into their tours and actively encourage participants to engage in responsible practices.

Destination marketers can strategically utilize these findings to attract travelers interested in cultural and heritage tourism. Peer-to-peer guiding platforms have the potential to increase the economic benefits of local guides, direct visitor interest to lesser-known areas, and support a more sustainable tourism model (Veen, 2019). Local governments can strengthen this domain's role within the tourism industry by supporting the integration of local guides' knowledge and experience into international visitor interactions. Furthermore, developing sustainable tourism policies requires collaboration among local governments, tourism enterprises, and local communities. Such cooperation will not only

help preserve the destination's unique heritage but also diversify its tourism offerings. Ultimately, strategic coordination among stakeholders will enhance tourist satisfaction and support a destination's long-term competitiveness.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although the findings of this study contribute to the existing literature, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The research focuses exclusively on user reviews of tour guides operating in the Istanbul destination on the ToursByLocals platform. This narrow sample limits the generalizability of the results. Future studies are encouraged to explore a broader range of destinations and include themed tours such as culinary tourism and faith-based tourism, thereby offering a more comprehensive perspective on the topic. Another limitation of the study lies in the relatively short data collection period of approximately two months. Longitudinal studies may yield deeper insight into trends and shifts in consumer behavior over time. Moreover, while data were collected over a short period, the reviews analyzed were based on experiences from varying recall periods. To minimize potential inconsistencies in future research, it is recommended that tourists be interviewed immediately after their tour experiences.

Another limitation pertains to the nature of post-trip feedback. Since reviews are written after the event, there is an inevitable time lag between the actual experience and the written feedback. This subjects the data to issues of memory reconstruction, where travelers may recall 'peak' moments (positive or negative) more vividly than the routine details of the tour. Consequently, the findings represent the 'remembered utility' of the experience rather than real-time satisfaction.

Another limitation concerns the nature of the data source. This study primarily focuses on tourists' positive unforgettable experiences with guides. However, it is important to acknowledge the potential 'positivity bias' inherent in user-generated content. In peer-to-peer platforms, the close social interaction and travel companionship established between the guide and the tourist may create a sense of empathy or social obligation, discouraging travelers from posting negative reviews. Consequently, the analyzed narratives may predominantly reflect 'best-case' scenarios, potentially underrepresenting average or dissatisfaction experiences. However, negative unforgettable experiences also hold significant value for identifying service quality issues and improving industry standards. Future research should address these negative experiences to provide a more balanced and actionable understanding of tour guide performance. Additionally, evolving consumer preferences and marketing strategies have given rise to the concept of masstige, initially defined by Silverstein and Fiske (2003) as 'prestige for the masses', offering premium quality and exclusivity at accessible prices for the middle classes. Although this study analyzes the consumer reviews of tour guides, it does not delve into masstige consumption values in depth. Atsız et al. (2024), for instance, quantitatively examined travelers' perceptions and behavioral outcomes related to destinations perceived as luxury consumption spaces within the masstige framework. However, perceptions of prestige and accessible luxury may also play a crucial role in the selection of tour guides. Future research could investigate how masstige values influence guide selection and service expectations, offering valuable insight for guides in developing their brand strategies.

This study should be viewed as a scoping paper that problematizes the shifting power dynamics between guide and tourist in the sharing economy. The transition from institutional to personal and intimate interactions creates a conceptual space that requires further investigation. Future research should critically examine the authorship of narratives; specifically, who 'owns' the story of the destination when the guide acts as a 'local friend' rather than an official representative?

Furthermore, scholars should address the challenges of presenting multivocality and cross-cultural meanings in a 'post-truth' world. As noted in the literature on glocalization and staged authenticity, P2P guides act as cultural mediators who tailor their narratives to global audiences. However, in the unregulated space of the sharing economy, there is a risk that 'truth' becomes secondary to 'rapport.' Therefore, future studies need to analyze how intergenerational meanings and historical facts are negotiated or compromised in these highly personalized, review-driven exchanges. The question remains: Does the 'sociability' of the P2P experience enhance cross-cultural understanding, or does it merely validate the tourists' pre-existing imaginaries through a commoditized performance of friendship?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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