Identifying the Influential Factors Enriching the Experiences of Visitors of Touristic Religious Sites: The Case Study of Al-Khandaq Battle Site

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ABSTRACT

Enriching visitors' experiences at religious, historical sites (RHS) is getting more attention than before. This research aims to identify and investigate the influential factors enriching the visitors' experience at such a site, using Al-Khandaq battle site as the case study. Forty-two respondents were interviewed at the site and NVivo 12 pro software was used to code and analyze the responses. The study explored tourist motivations, expectations, and perceptions as the guiding constructs in detailed qualitative analysis. Foremost, learning, reliving the experience of the events of the battle, and Islamic values were the primary motivation to the historic site visitation. Next, findings reveal the extent to which tourists' expectations can be met through the availability of an open museum, accessibility, and the spatial and experiential simulation of the ancient Al-Khandaq path. Lastly, the need to reconstruct the historical site in spatial planning and experiential dimensions formed the main thrust of the element of visitors' perception. Based on the foregoing, the study recommends that Al-Khandaq site should be developed traditionally as an open museum, displaying both religious and historical elements of the battle with emphasis on the visual connection to the Prophet's mosque.

1. Introduction

Travel is essential for economic, social, and religious activities and tourism resulting from travel plays a significant role in countries' prosperity (Baggio, 2008; Frias *et al.*, 2015). Many countries aim to support their economies by enriching tourists' experiences to attract more visitors and repeats from satisfied visitors. Enriching the tourist experience is positively related to improving tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Al-Ghamdi *et al.*, 2021)**.** Tourism also integrates a wide range of stakeholders (Costa & Baggio, 2009; Frias *et al.*, 2015)**.** Budeanu (2007) and Moscardo & Murphy (2014) suggest that tourism is a product that aims to fulfill tourist needs; therefore, it has been studied from providers and consumers (tourists) point of view.

In this regard, enriching the tourist experience will benefit all stakeholders. Identifying some basic concepts such as tourist destination, tourism product, and point of interest is essential. Tourist destinations are tourist attractions that refer to a set of economic, cultural, and social events complemented by a set of supported infrastructures (Cohen *et al.*, 2014). The complexity of tourism attraction can be reflected through a focus on the process of tourists' decisions. However, not enough research has been conducted on developing tourism attractions based on these decisions. Cohen *et al.* (2014) reviewed several studies about tourist behavior in the process of decision-making, and they suggest that tourists' decision process takes place independent of other consumption decisions. The tourists' decisions can only be elicited through less-structured methodologies involving narrative accounts of actions and activities (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, several have suggested conducting more studies on tourists' decisions.

Much of the tourism research appears to rest on the assumption that tourists' decisions are previously planned (Hyde & Lawson, 2003; Bargeman & Poel, 2006). As most existing research on tourists' decisions assume previously planned decisions, their decisions and their implications for enriching tourists' experiences are in urgent need of research. Therefore, this study investigates the influential factors on enriching visitor experiences of touristic religious sites.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is blessed with many of the distinctive historical religious sites associated with events of the biography of the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH). However, many of these sites are not adequately included among the visiting places. For example, given the numerous positive contributions of Al-Khandaq battle as highlighted in both the religion and history of Islam, the site where the battle took place is however, not substantially captured in the list of the preferred sites by many.

This study's main objective is to identify the influential factors that enrich the tourists' experience at religious, historical sites by investigating tourists' motivations, expectations, and perceptions of Al-Khandaq battle site. The investigation of these factors helps identify the key issues influencing tourists' decisions to visit religious, historical sites in Saudi Arabia, particularly around Makkah and Madinah cities.

Many researchers investigated various factors that influence tourists' decisions, which in turn helps enrich their visiting experiences at war heritage sites (Alabau-Montoya & Ruiz-Molina, 2020) and touristic religious sites (Correia & Kozak, 2016; Hassani & Moghavvemi, 2019; Juhanda, 2019). Previous studies show that three dominant factors influencing tourists' decisions: motivations, expectations, and perceptions. This study reviews the definitional issues for each factor for the essential contemporary factors impacting tourists' experience.

Visitors Motivations

Motivation is an essential factor in marketing decisions and environmental developments. Therefore, academics, researchers, and developers give great attention to understanding visitors' motivation (Correia & Kozak, 2016; Giddy & Webb, 2018; McIntosh & Thyne, 2005; Paker & Vural, 2016). Motivation refers to an individual's psychological and biological needs that drive a person's behavior and activities (Cohen *et al.*, 2014; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Yawson *et al.*, 2009). Due to the importance of motivation, several studies have developed several theories or models to explain the concept of motivation (Cohen *et al.*, 2014). For example, in 1997, Gnoth precisely differentiates between motives and motivations, where motives refer to the persons permeant activities, recurring on a cyclical basis (behaviorist approach), and motivations refer to preferences of a specific object (cognitivist approach) (Gnoth, 1997). In contrast, McCabe (2001) suggested that a visitor's motivation is characterized by a combination of behaviorist and cognitivist approaches (McCabe, 2001).

However, to date, there is no general agreement about the concept of motivation, and scholars still view the two concepts of motivation as one (Cohen et al., 2014). The push-pull is a simple and intuitive approach that is most commonly applied for explaining motivations to profile visitors (Said & Maryono, 2018). Visitors are pushed by their needs and pulled by destination characteristics (Battour *et al.*, 2017). This process is influenced by several factors such as involvement, perception, expectation, and emotion (Battour *et al.*, 2017; Pestana *et al.*, 2019; Said & Maryono, 2018). Most studies that discuss theories of visitors' motivations were either conceptual or limited in scope and sample size (Battour *et al.*, 2017; Fernández-Morales *et al.*, 2016; Juhanda, 2019; McCabe, 2001; Said & Maryono, 2018). Researchers in tourism have also been adopting the motivation theories with four structural factors, including personal seeking, intrapersonal seeking, personal escape, and intrapersonal escape. These factors function as a salient intrinsic for tourism motivational behavior (Cohen *et al.*, 2014; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Lai, 2011).

However, the relationship between motivation and visitor's behavior, such as expectation and perception, has been conceptualized and validated (Cohen *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, some studies focus on the formation of motivation, such as values, in order to understand what motivates visitors (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Karban *et al.*, 2017; Rosyada *et al.*, 2018). The relationships between motivation and values and affective constructs such as expectation and perception remain the cornerstone of developing tourism activities and locations (Zakariya *et al.*, 2020).

Visitors Expectations

Understanding consumer and visitor expectations play a vital role in satisfying their desires (de Rojas & Camarero, 2008). Expectation refers to consumers' predictive needs and what consumers feel, wish or perceive to get from the provider (Cohen *et al.*, 2014; Pons *et al.*, 2016). In other words, the expectation is what the consumer wants to get. Also, consumer expectations represent the quality anticipated by customers when assessing service and product attributes (Allen, 2016; de Rojas & Camarero, 2008). Expectations can, therefore, be of different types, such as outcomes, predictive, ideal, and experience-based expectations (Cohen *et al.*, 2014). All these types are somehow intertwined with each other and are widely applied in tourism. Therefore, the

researchers will use some of them as an approach to understanding the visitors' expectations for the Al-Khandaq battle.

For instance, outcomes expectation refers to the estimation of outcomes when assessing a given behavior (Cohen *et al.*, 2014), while predictive expectations are the consumer's prediction about what they perceive to get based on their actions or behaviors (Thai, 2015; Zeithaml **et al.**, 1993). Thus, expectations may be fulfilled or unfulfilled or exceeded what is expected, influencing visitor satisfaction and enriches their experience. Therefore, the expectancy theory can be considered to positively enrich the visitor experience, which meets or exceeds visitors' expectations (Hassani & Moghavvemi, 2019; Lunenburg, 2011; Rahman, 2014).

Notable omissions in tourist literature is the investigation of the consistency of visitor expectations over time by analyzing the service, which is met and influenced by visitor demographics, which has also been discussed in this paper.

Visitors Perceptions

Perception refers to what consumers expect or imagine. It is usually shaped or generated by familiarity, experience, values, and motivations (Cohen *et al.*, 2014; Correia & Kozak, 2016; Kala, 2008). According to the perception theory taken from cognitive psychology, work on customer preferences attempts to examine cognitive elements in the perceptual phase, often at the cost of affective elements, without proper recognition of the interplay between cognitive and affective aspects (Bian & Moutinho, 2015; Dimanche & Havitz, 1995; Poor, 2014; Rahman, 2014).

Variances of perceptions contribute to differences in cognitive or behavioral motivational values; a core consequence for tourism is that beliefs such as motivation and actions are vital to creating tourist interest, the identity of destination and quality of service. Destination perception appears to be a significant area of study in perceptions-related tourism and customer behavior research (AlsInI *et al.*, 2019; Qurashi, 2018; Rahman, 2014; Stylidis *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the quality of perceived services is considered an essential factor in understanding visitor perception in tourism research (Cohen *et al.*, 2014).

Thus, the researchers can differentiate between visitors expected and perceived quality. Recently, several studies in heritage and religious tourism, perceptions research in tourism often focus on examining ethical, historical, and religious perceptions of visitors (Griffin & Raj, 2017; Juhanda, 2019; Raj & Bozonelos, 2015). For example, Alsini *et al.* (2019) concentrate on tourists' perceptions of religious tourism in Saudi Arabia. The impacts of Islamic life and beliefs, provided services, destination quality, and Religious tourist loyalty are factors that could exploit event attributes to form positive consumer perceptions (Alsini *et al.*, 2019).

However, various studies indicate that understanding and considering visitor perceptions would contribute to better social, political, environmental, technological, and service-related issues (Al-Ghamdi *et al.*, 2021; Cohen *et al.*, 2014)). Therefore, this research seeks to understand the perception of Al-Khandaq battle

visitors to provide a proper environment and services that exceed their expectations.

Heritage and Religious Tourism

Heritage and religious tourism refer to tourism services or locations that provide historical, cultural, and heritage experiences that are mostly rooted in religious sources. The concern of studying religious heritage tourism stems from the importance of this type of tourism to provide visitors' needs and expectations and the importance of these visitors to the local economy. According to Chandler & Costello (2002), the importance of heritage tourism stems from the visitors' revenues to the local economy. Thus, visitors to historical sites are considered very important to the tourism and recreation industry (Chandler & Costello, 2002; Griffin & Raj, 2017), as these visitors to historical and religious sites tend to vary somewhat from visitors to new cities or nature (Li & McKercher, 2016; Sharpley, 2018).

Visitors of historical and religious sites are also more likely to participate in passive recreation activities such as worshipping, welfare practicing, sightseeing, learning, wildlife watching, and relaxing (Ahmed, 1992; Chandler & Costello, 2002; Mujtaba, 2016; Karban *et al.*, 2018) Juhanda, 2019). As Chandler & Costello (2002) reported, historic sites' visitors are mostly older people who tend to spend more money and are more likely to use different sources to gather information about trip planning and destination selection.

2. Methodology

2.1   Description of Study Area

The study area is Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah, located in the Eastern Part of Al Hijaz Region in the northwestern part of Saudi Arabia at latitude 24.28 06°E and longitude 39.36 6°N. The city is about 150 km away from Yanbu city on the Red Sea coast to the west. The latter is the sea gate for the visitors of the city. Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah is 400 km away from Jeddah, the main port, and 980 km away from Riyadh, the capital of the Kingdom (Figure 1). It is located in a hot tropical region and is influenced by the Mediterranean region in the north and the south's tropical season region. Madinah is surrounded mostly by mountains and its height above sea level is between (590-620 meters). The Medina area is about 589 square kilometers, of which 99 square kilometers are occupied by the urban area (Bob et al., 2016).

Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah is considered the second most important Islamic city after Holy Makkah. Its importance is derived from the presence of the Prophet's Mosque; Al-Madinah is also one of the holy cities that non-Muslims are not allowed to visit. Al-Madinah occupies a natural hillside basin more than 600 meters above sea level. The city is surrounded by a group of volcanic mountains, except for its northern sides.

The Battle of Al-Khandaq is considered one of the most important events of the Prophet's biography, which embodies the most important meanings of patience and sacrifice. The site is filled with

lessons and sermons; its events are glossy pages, which are passed on from generation to generation (Figure 1).

The victory in the hearts of Muslims is linked to the location in which it occurred. The trench area is one of the legitimate places to visit and features Al-Fateh Mosque, from which Prophet Mohammed, (PBUH) called for victory over various groups.

Today, it is called the seven mosques area. One of the most critical landmarks, it contains a small group of mosques whose exact number is six, not seven; however, it is famous due to the addition of the Qiblatan Mosque within these mosques, because whoever visits it also visits that mosque on the same trip, bringing the total number to seven.
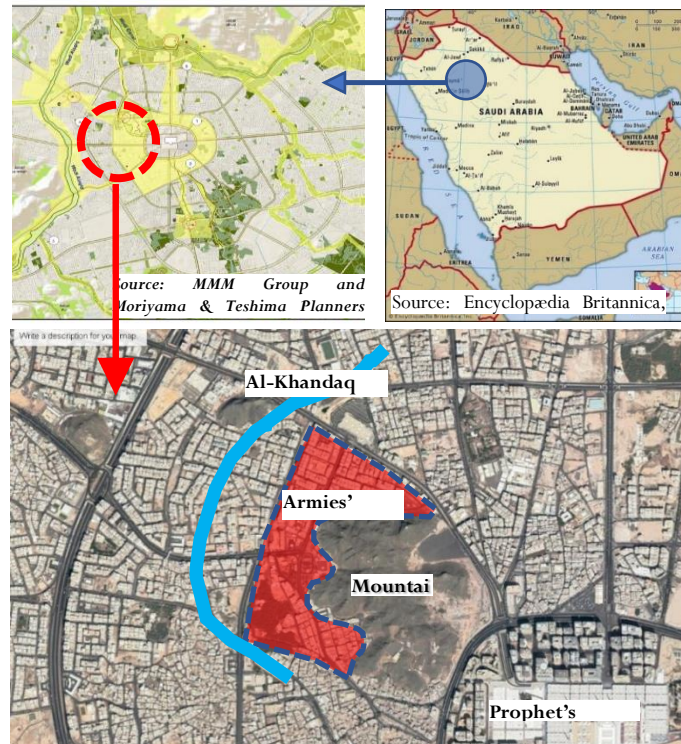
Figure 1 Location of Al-khandaq Battle in Saudi Arabia (Source: Google Earth December 2019)

2.2   Data Collection

People's motivations, experiences, and perceptions are the central core of this paper. In this regard, the researchers have conducted semi-structured interviews to get the visitors' perceptions. As argued by many (e.g., Cobbinah & Aboagye, 2017; Wehrmann, 2012), semi-structured interview conversations create an opportunity for researchers to examine the phenomenon under investigation in detail, thus presenting sufficient flexibility in addressing various dimensions of the research. Interviews involved 42 persons from several countries, including Saudi Arabia, Yamen, Egypt, Jordan, Nigeria, as well as Malaysia. The interviews were conducted by the five authors of this research from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Nigeria. The interviews were collected during the fieldwork from 2nd to 22nd December 2019. They were guided by a list of open questions that focus on the perception about the site of the battle and the values that motivate them to visit Al-Khandaq site and what they expect to see if they will explore the site after the development. Participants were interviewed using the face-to-face approach, which clarifies the purpose and objectives of the research and galvanizes their interest and relevant responses. A checklist of questions guided the interviews. It also integrated some semi-

structured interviews with investigating questions (Al Jarah et al., 2019).

A pilot study has been conducted from 18th to 28th November 2019. The authors of this research administered the interview to all participants, in which an initial semi-structured interview was carried out with ten people to gauge their understanding of the questions. The feedback was essential to develop the questions before the meetings with all participants was carried out. Two questions have been developed regarding the frequency of visiting the seven mosques site and Al-Khandaq battle area in order to investigate the reliability of the results. During the interviews, the answers and discussions were recorded in a notebook (Wahyudi, 2017).

2.3   Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted in Arabic and English languages. Thus, the obtained data were transcribed and documented according to the respondents. The interview conversations were analyzed using NVivo 12 pro software (NVivo qualitative data analysis software) to generate themes and categories and ensure that the interviews' findings reflected the respondents'

perspectives. Efficacy and reliability were ensured by arranging and contrasting the results from all respondents. According to (Cobbinah & Aboagye, 2017), this process is useful in addressing gaps and inconsistencies that occur in the data analysis process.

3.   Results and Discussion

Interviews involved 42 participants from six countries, namely Saudi Arabia, Yamen, Egypt, Jordan, Nigeria, as well as Malaysia. The respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 55 years old. The male represented 81% and the rest were female. Foremost, the study reveals that only 40% of respondents had visited the Al-Khandaq battle site before. Some of the respondents have misperceptions or incorrect information about the battle location. For example, when the researcher asked a respondent about the location of the battle, he said: "It is located far away from the prophet's (PBUH) Mosque, I mean out of the city boundary."

Some of the respondents who claimed they had visited Al Khandaq site could not identify the battle site, and some of them could not distinguish between Al-Khandaq and another battle named Uhud located in the north of Al-Haram.

On the other hand, 57% of the respondents stated that they had previously visited the Seven Mosques' site. This implies that several participants do not know the location of Al-Khandaq

battle site, as well as the history of the Seven Mosques, which is located in the center of Al-Khandaq battle site.

The respondents refer to the three following reasons for their not visiting the site of Al-Khandaq battle: the lack of arranged tours to this place, the inadequacy of signages leading to this site, and outright ignorance of the location.

3.1   The Motivation To Visit The Site

In this part, the primary intent is to address the first objective, and to achieve that, the following research question was posed: "What motivates you to visit the battle site?". In view of this, (Figure 2-a) shows that a total of 70 codes were created from the answers. From the analysis of the coding reference in NVivo, 38.6% of respondents were of the view that learning purpose was the main reason behind the visit. For example, one of the interviewees reported that "learning through exploration is to move from fiction and stories to reality." A further 31.4% and 30% were of the view that experiencing the events of the battle, and Islamic values, respectively, were the main motivations to their visiting the site. On the other hand, using the words coded analysis tool, the Islamic values got the highest priority with 42.9%, followed by experiencing the events of the battle with 29.4%, and finally, learning purposes with 27.8% (see Figure 2-b).
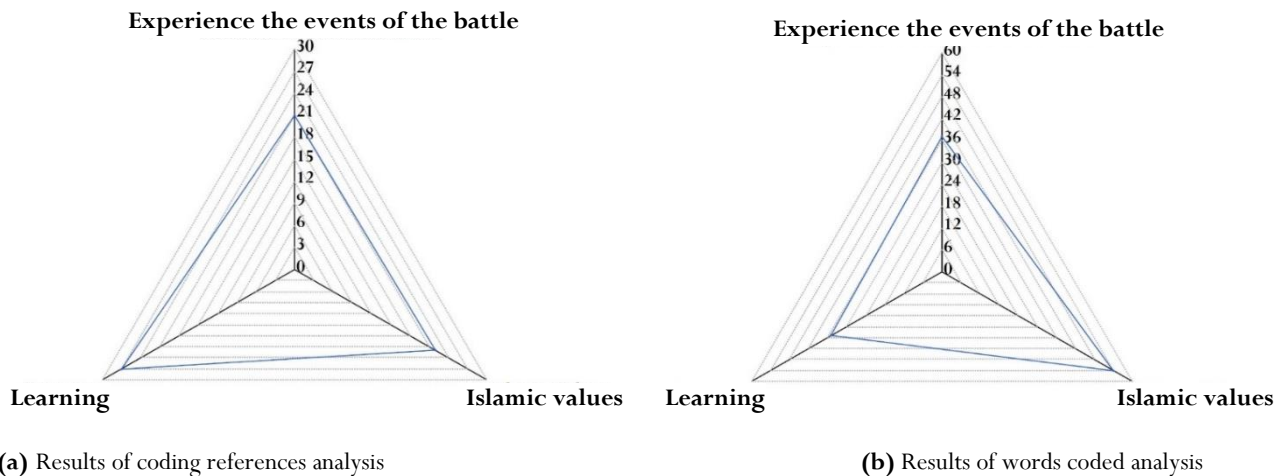

(a) Results of coding references analysis

(b) Results of words coded analysis

Figure 2 Visitors' motivations to visit the site

From the previous results, learning purpose code ranked first based on code references, whereas Islamic values got the highest level on word coded test, which means the interviewees gave much explanation on the importance of Islamic values. There is no conflict between the results from both tests, as people are concerned about visiting the site in order to acquire more knowledge in terms of Islamic perspectives. This is a significant finding in understanding what motivates people to visit Al-Khandaq battle site.

3.2   Visitors Expectations

This section tries to identify the expectation of the visitors to the site. The following question was designed, "What would you expect to see there?". Given this, Figure 3-a illustrates that a total of 50 codes were generated from the visitors' responses. Among them, 50% were expecting that the site would have contained a historical museum. One of the visitors pointed out that "I expect an open museum showing events of the foray, the tents of the polytheists' army, and the types of weapons have been used in the battle." A significant 28% expected the body of Al-Khandaq path, and the rest (22%) highlighted the accessibility to the site from the Prophet Mosque. Using words coded analysis has

corroborated similar trends of the open historical museum, which scored 57.6% followed by the accessibility to the site with 27.1%, then Al-Khandaq path with the lowest rate of 15.2% (see Figure 3-b).

The historical open museum code has taken a significant proportion (i.e.50%) of the code words from the visitors' respondents. They suggest developing the site as an open-air museum reflecting the real actions of the battle flow as they studied in books. Even though the path of Al-Khandaq is considered a vital part of the museum, from the interviewees' point of view, they shed light on it and emphasized on the need for it to be reconstructed. Accessibility to the site is the third expectation of the visitors. Considering their answers, especially

those who did not visit the site, they said they did not know that the site is nearby AL-haram, as no signage offered guidance to the site. It is worth noting that many of those who had visited the seven mosques did not realize that the location is the Al-Khandaq battle site. Besides, they had to walk through low-quality residential areas and cross some not walk-friendly roads to reach the site. The foregoing's lateral imports are that the primary desire to learn more about the battle's religious history can be achieved by transforming the site into an open museum.
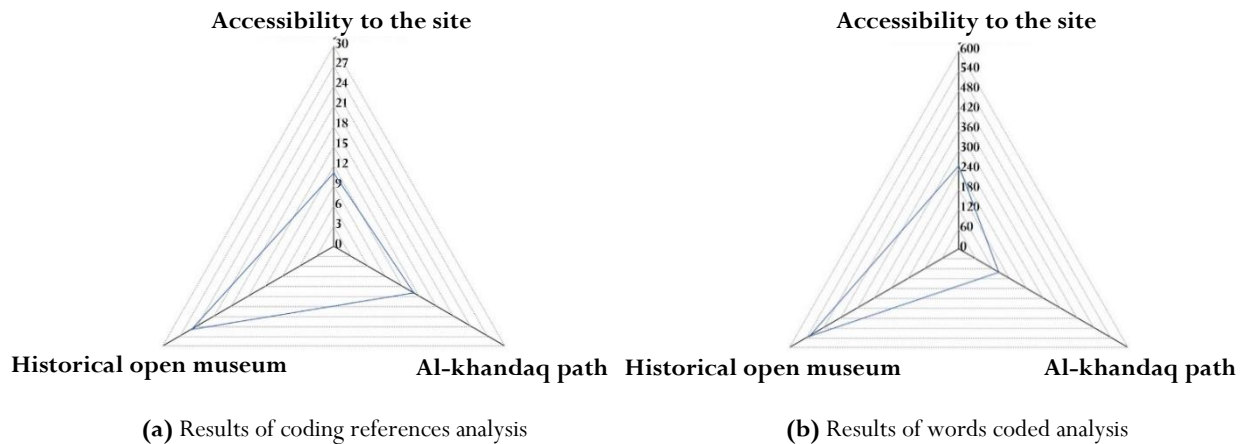

(a) Results of coding references analysis   **(b)** Results of words coded analysis

**Figure 3** The visitors' expectation about the site

3.3   Visitors Perceptions

This part aims to understand the visitors' perceptions of the proper way to rehabilitate the site. The question was designed as thus: "What is your perception of the ideal way to develop the site?" The results from the analysis of the coding references show that (see Figure 4-a) most visitors thought Al-Khandaq Path needed to be dug up again. This factor scored 30.8% out of the total codes. One of the interviewees said: "I would like to see the body of the trench, as it is a crevice in the ground of great length and width that horses cannot easily cross." The next factor, which weighted 23.1%, is the historical site, as the visitors emphasized that the importance of the pattern of the site should be developed traditionally to reflect the spirit of the battle. Then, the Army Camps scored 17.9% of visitor interest, as they were keen to see the exact spots of the Muslims' tents as well as the non-Muslims' camp. The fourth factor is the tourist attractions, with 15.4%. The respondents mentioned the importance of tourist attractions services (e.g., souvenirs markets, hotels, and traditional cuisines)—lastly, the vast land and Mountain with 12.8%. The interviewees underlined the significance of paving the

battleground and the role of the Mountain, which was used to shield the Muslim armies back.

There is some modification of the results noticed when using the words coded analysis. Figure 4-b displays that the Al-Khandaq path still has priority with 30.7%, whereas the army camps were the second element with 24.6%. Finally, 21.5%, 18.7, 4.6% were of the view that historical sites, tourist attractions, and vast land and Mountain, respectively, were significant.

The figure shows that the most significant components of the open museum consist of three main sections. The first one is the Al-Khandaq path, which should be developed as it used to be during the prophet era. Second, army camps for both Muslims and nun-Muslims follow a separate route to the tents. Third, the border of the battle site, including the Mountain situated on the opposite side of the Al-Khandaq path, played an essential role in the battle's Muslim army strategy. Next, the tourist attraction spots should be included as they are considered a vital component for attractive destinations. Finally, all these developments should have unique characteristics by involving the historical and traditional dimensions in planning and design levels.

(a) Results of coding references analysis   **(b)** Results of words coded analysis
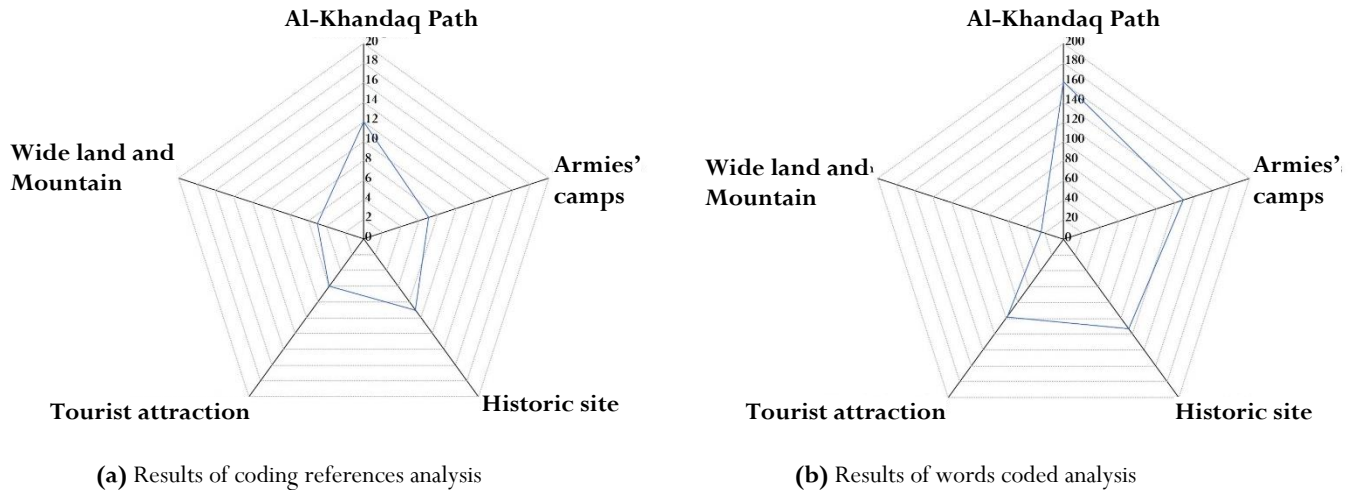
Figure 4 The visitors' perception of the site development

4.   Conclusion

Regarding the research aim and objective, which are to identify and investigate the influential factors enriching the tourists' experience at Religious Historical Sites (RHS), the findings and conclusions asserted that the visitors to the religious and historical places, specifically Al-Khandaq battle site, are motivated by three significant factors, which are learning purposes, Islamic values, and the need to experience the events of the battle. It was found that three significant factors enriched the Visitors' experience when they visited the RHS. Through their expectations, as the site witnessed many significant events since the earliest years of Islam, the site development plan should propose the elements reflecting the spirit of the place, utilizing the physical path of the Al-Khandaq, open museum with secure access to the site from the prophet's mosque. The visitors also acknowledge that the site has the potential to become an attractive tourist religious place in the Al-Madinah tourist attraction map. It is one of a kind, which has the characteristic of describing a critical period of Islamic history. According to the interviewees' perception, the battle site should be appropriately developed to reflect the experiences of preparing the battle and action during the battle and the implications of the outcome to enrich the visitors' experiences no matter where they come from and their languages. Building the actual body of Al-Khandaq alongside the camps of both the Muslims and non-Muslims considering the site boundary, which includes the Mountain behind the Muslim camp, could be useful in reproducing the place's memory. The connection between the site and Al-haram should also be developed and paved with traditional and local landscape elements connected with tourist attractions.

Lastly, these research findings fill the knowledge gap in developing tourism attraction sites based on the tourists' decisions in Al-Madinah and all the RHS.

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