

The Mental Image of the Tourist City via Digital Platforms: An Analytical Study of Tourist Reviews of the Casbah City on the Booking.com Application

Dr. Boudiaf Fatma¹

¹Lecturer A, University- Algiers 2 : Abou El Kacem Saadallah, Algeria. E-mail:

fatma.boudiaf@univ-alger2.dz

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Abstract:

The mental image of the city is one of the pivotal concepts in urban tourism studies, as it forms the frame of reference upon which tourists build their impressions and make their decisions. This article addresses the theoretical framework of the city's mental image as a tourist destination, reviewing its cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions. This topic was examined using a mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) approach, employing content analysis of reviews on the Africa Casbah Hotel page on the Booking.com platform. The results demonstrated the significance and symbolic value of the ancient city of the Casbah as the primary factor driving positive reviews. Consequently, investing in the preservation of the Casbah's urban space is a key requirement for the sustainability of urban tourism and for maintaining a positive mental image among tourists seeking the authenticity lost in such historic cities.

Keywords: City, Mental Image, Tourist Destination, Digital Reviews, the Casbah.

1. Introduction

The concept of the city's mental image emerges as an important topic in urban tourism studies, especially given the accelerating pace of developments in the digital realm. Digital technology plays major roles in tourism by offering guidance services that shape tourist behaviour, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of cities and facilitating their marketing across all currently available platforms and applications.

The mental image of the city formed through tourist comments on digital platforms and applications has become extremely vital. It is the product of the interaction between visitors' tourist experiences and the various components of urban space. Urban studies have demonstrated the importance of understanding and interpreting the opinions and impressions tourists leave online, leveraging them to improve the city's tourist appeal and support sustainable tourism development efforts.

At the same time, urban tourists exhibit multidimensional perceptions. Some express admiration for the architectural features and strategic location of the city, while others view local culture, customs, and traditions as a unique model that makes cities actual points of attraction. Furthermore, some tourists are drawn by psychological and behavioural factors found in daily interactions and intimate human relationships that still persist despite rapid advancement and modernization. All these perceptions manifest in the reviews left following the tourist experience on social media platforms or tourism applications via hotel web pages in these cities.

2. Statement of the Problem

Through this study, we seek to investigate the dimensions of the mental image formed about the Algerian tourist city by examining the tourist-generated data available for analysis and sociological re-interpretation based on comments left after their tourism experience. Accordingly, the core research problem can be formulated through the following main question:

Main Question: *How is the urban mental image formed among visitors to the Africa Casbah Hotel through digital review applications, and how does the duality of the physical reality of the hotel facility and the symbolic dimensions of the urban realm reflect on the nature of this image and their final evaluations of the tourist destination?*

Sub-questions:

1. What are the visual and symbolic indicators in the ancient city that most significantly influence the formulation of a positive mental image of the hotel among visitors?
2. How do the structural and architectural deficiencies of the ancient building affect the stability of the tourist mental image of the hotel facility?
3. What is the direction of the final mental image (positive/ negative) formed by digital tourists regarding the hospitality space and its surrounding urban environment?

3. Theoretical Framework: Dimensions of the Mental Image of the Tourist City

First and foremost, we point to the concept of "image": it denotes a relative cognitive-psychological process with cultural roots, based on individuals' selective perception- both direct and indirect- of the traits and characteristics of an object (a company, institution, individual, group, or society) and the formation of affective attitudes toward it (positive or negative), along with the resulting behavioural orientations (overt or covert) within a specific society (Ayman Mansour Nada, 2004, p. 29).

Philosophers have viewed the image as a prior and posterior perception; the prior perception precedes experience, whereas the posterior refers to the meanings derived from experience (Kammoush Mourad & Malik Mohamed, 2017, p. 80).

As for the concept of "mental image", according to Kevin Lynch, it is the image or personal perception that an individual forms in their mind about a specific place, whether a city, neighbourhood, or another location. The mental image relies on a person's experiences and prior knowledge of the place, encompassing factors such as architecture, streets, landmarks, and key places (Mohamed A. Al-Majdoubi & Eman M. Ghanem, 2025, p. 390).

Regarding the mental image of a tourist destination, early Tourism Destination Image (TDI) research defined the concept of destination image as the overall impression people hold about a place. It was later refined to represent a set of individuals' beliefs, ideas, and impressions about the destination. As research progressed, scholars recognized that, beyond evaluating functional and psychological attributes, greater attention should be paid to the composite image consisting of a cognitive image and a holistic vision (Huang, S., Lu, X., Lu, J., & Zhang, J., 2026, p. 03).

In proposing a single foundational theory regarding tourist destination image, Gartner (1993) developed a hierarchical cause-and-effect model based on three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioural images. This model was also supported by numerous researchers and has been used to understand how tourists' behavioural intentions are formed (Shaohua Yang, Salmi Mohd Isa, Yiyue Yao, Jinyuan Xia, & Danping, 2022, p. 03).

According to San Martín and Rodríguez del Bosque (2008), factors such as the "natural environment", "cultural heritage," "tourism infrastructure," or "atmosphere" underlie the cognitive structure of destination image. As they argue, the cognitive component of destination image derives from tourists' beliefs about the place and is thus linked to destination attributes (cited in Kladou & Mavragani, 2015, pp. 187–190).

Alongside the psychological aspect, emotions not only serve as a primary driving force for tourism consumption but also offer an important channel for exploring the construction of tourism-friendly cities (Huang, S., Lu, X., Lu, J., & Zhang, J., 2026, p. 02). Studies have considered tourism experiences to be socially produced individual events shaped by cognition and emotions; emotions can be regarded as the core component of tourism experiences. Furthermore, the generation of tourism experiences can be explained as a process through which tourists perceive various environmental stimuli, which, considering several personal determinants, trigger affective and cognitive reactions, thereby influencing their attitudes, memories, and behaviour (Reif & Schmücker, 2021, p. 278).

Finally comes the behavioural aspect, as the analysis of numerous studies confirms that destination image is consistently linked to tourists' behavioural intentions, including the intention to revisit. Recent empirical studies in diverse tourism environments- including parks, museums, and scenic areas- show that the Theory of Planned Behaviour supports how destination image underpins revisit intention alongside factors related to attitudes and social norms. In line with this evidence, an overall positive evaluative impression is expected to produce a stronger intention to revisit and return (Elvera, 2026, p. 140).

Ultimately, the formation of destination image is a dynamic process influenced by personal psychological and social factors as well as information about the destination. Destination image is created through the continuous assimilation of the destination via various channels (Xinxin Guo & Juho Antti Pesonen, 2022, p. 373).

4. Field Study: Content Analysis of Reviews by Visitors to the Africa Casbah Hotel

4.1 Definition of the Field of Study:

Our study encompasses both the general domain (the tourist city) and the specific domain (the hotel). Thus, we present both domains to provide the reader with a full understanding of the study's empirical scope:

A. The Historic City of the Casbah:

As the historic core of Algiers, the Casbah holds a prominent position within the capital's urban realm. It cannot be reduced merely to a collection of historic buildings or a heritage site of tourist value; rather, in light of its morphological structure and historical trajectory, it presents itself as a complex urban space where physical, social, and symbolic dimensions intersect. The urban fabric of Algiers formed more fully during the Ottoman period, characterized by a distinct spatial distribution of neighbourhoods, populations, and functions- where each quarter had its own market, mosque, and water fountains, while the market network covered a vast area of the city, reflecting the intersection of economic, religious, and social functions in shaping urban life at the time (Raj'i, 2013, pp. 444–445). The Casbah of Algiers- or the citadel from which the old city derives its moniker- is considered the largest and grandest historic monument in Algeria, owing to its diverse components in terms of construction, usage, ornamentation, form, and spatial symmetry, as well as its historical

significance tied to key political events (Khalasi, 2007, p. 08). The structure of the housing unit further reveals a socio-cultural spatial organization: entrances oriented toward narrow alleys, rooms arranged around a central courtyard, arcades, wells, and cisterns, along with dedicated spaces for cooking and laundry. This demonstrates that traditional architecture in the Casbah was intrinsically tied to modes of living and social relations as much as to residential functionality (Raj'i, 2013, p. 447).

Consequently, the contemporary Casbah can be viewed as a space where layers of historical memory juxtapose with the remnants of urban and social transformations, endowing it with a symbolic density that contributes to shaping diverse representations among residents and visitors alike.

Accordingly, the Casbah serves as an apt setting for studying the mental image of the tourist city. Its image is grounded not only in its architectural attributes or historical value, but also takes shape through the visitor's lived experience within the space, along with the interactions, symbols, and practices encountered during the visit. The tourism discourse surrounding the Casbah indicates that some visitors arrive with preexisting images and expectations, subsequently reconstructing this image in light of their empirical experience. For instance, studies note that visitors are often eager to visit the Casbah based on prior knowledge, and that touring sites associated with historic figures and eras further reinforces their impressions (Ramdani, 2026, p. 6).

In this context, tourist reviews on digital platforms- such as Booking.com- hold particular analytical significance. They can be treated as everyday discourses through which visitors construct their own representations of the place and evaluate elements of their tourist experience. Thus, the value of these reviews extends beyond measuring satisfaction with accommodation or services; indirectly, they reveal what captures the tourist's attention within the urban space and how they translate the Casbah's historic, architectural, and cultural characteristics into descriptions, impressions, and judgments. Consequently, examining these reviews through a digital ethnographic lens enables researchers to trace how the mental image of the Casbah is produced, reformulated, and circulated in digital space, while highlighting the degree of convergence or divergence between the Casbah as an established historic urban realm and how tourists digitally represent and evaluate it.

B. The Hotel Domain:

The Africa Hotel Algiers is located in the heart of Algiers, in close proximity to the ancient Casbah and numerous historical and cultural landmarks. The hotel offers comfortable accommodation in a strategic location that facilitates easy access to traditional markets, the waterfront, public transit, and key tourist attractions, making it a convenient choice for both leisure and business travelers (<https://casbahtrips.com/ar/hotels/afric-hotel-casbah-alge>).

4.2 Study Methodology:

This study primarily adopts a qualitative approach across most analytical dimensions, while also incorporating quantitative methods where necessary to calculate frequencies of comments and key keywords relevant to the topic.

4.2 Study Techniques

In this study, we relied on the Content Analysis technique in both its quantitative and qualitative dimensions- an established tool in the social sciences used to deconstruct the content of social representations and actors' (tourists') opinions, converting them into categories to enable

sociological interpretation, analysis, and measurement. We established the following primary analytical categories:

1. **Category of the Mental Image of the Urban Realm and Physical Environment** (location and urban environment).
2. **Category of the Mental Image of Social Interaction and Human Communication** (the network of social relations within the hotel establishment).
3. **Category of the Mental Image of Hotel Service Quality** (infrastructure, breakfast, structural deficiencies).

4.3 Study Sample

We employed a purposive sample consisting of hotel reviews left by tourists (both domestic and international) on digital platforms, documenting their stay conditions at the Africa Casbah Hotel. The sample comprised 100 randomly selected reviews on Booking.com from various domestic and international origins. Statistical processing of the content analysis data was conducted using a sample size of 100 items to calculate percentages according to the following formula:

$$\text{Percentage} = 100 \times F \frac{\text{the frequency of individuals repeating the category}}{N \text{ the total sample size}}$$

Each category was calculated individually.

5. Presentation and Analysis of the Sample's Reviews Content

Table 01: Display of Reviews by Visitors to the Africa Casbah Hotel

Main Analytical Categories	Indicators & Signifiers	Direction	Indicator Frequency (F)	Percentage (P)	Distribution of Visitors' Comments
1. Spatial Dimension (Location & Urban View)	"Very close to the Casbah/Metro" "Charming panoramic view" "Breathtaking rooftop" "Strategic location in the heart of the capital"	Positive	85	85%	"The location is more than wonderful, just a few steps from the Casbah and the metro station." "The view from the top terrace overlooking the sea and the roofs of the old city is breathtaking." "The best starting point for exploring the historic capital."

2. Social Dimension <i>(Quality of Relations & Hospitality)</i>	"Warm reception/ refined treatment" Mention of specific names: (Ahmed, Omar, Redouane, Soufiane, Farida, Malika...) "Cooperative staff / providing guidance and safety"	Positive	78	78%	"The staff are extremely polite and professional, especially Ahmed and Redouane." "I felt like I was among family; Soufiane and Farida gave us all the guidance to walk around safely." "Excellent service and a smile that never leaves the staff's faces."
3. Structural Dimension <i>(Accommodation Conditions)</i>	"Comfortable bed / quiet sleep" "Excellent cleanliness" "Effective air conditioning / hot water available"	Positive	65	65%	"The room is very clean, and the beds are comfortable after a long day of walking." "The AC works perfectly and hot water is continuously available."
4. Deficiencies & Physical Barriers <i>(Physical Constraints)</i>	"Lack of elevator / Pas d'ascenseur" "Tiring stairs / heavy staircases" "Narrow rooms and bathroom"	Negative / Neutral	40	40%	"The only issue is the lack of an elevator; carrying luggage up the stairs is tiring." "The rooms are somewhat small, but that is expected in an old building."

					"The staircases are narrow and unsuitable for the elderly."
5. Weakness in Supplementary & Digital Services (Catering & Connectivity)	"Very ordinary/ repetitive breakfast" "Absence of local products at breakfast" "Weak Wi-Fi network/ unstable internet"	Negative	35	35%	"Breakfast is very ordinary and repetitive; we ask for a traditional local touch." "Weak internet connection and fluctuating Wi-Fi in some corners of the rooms."

Source: Prepared by the researcher.

Based on the preceding data, the following observations can be drawn:

First: The Mental Image and Symbolic Value of the Urban Realm

The 85% proportion recorded for the spatial dimension demonstrates its paramount importance in shaping the mental image of the traditional city and its cultural symbolism. This is reflected in the hotel's spatial proximity to the ancient city of the Casbah and its panoramic views. Consequently, the hotel is not perceived merely as a service venue or a purely physical building, but rather manifests as a "Symbolic Space." This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "Symbolic and Spatial Capital." Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as:

"A property, a physical strength, a wealth, or a military value that social actors- equipped with categories of perception and appreciation that enable them to apprehend, know, and recognize it- perceive as such, making it symbolically effective and a true magical power." (Pierre Bourdieu, 1966, p. 222).

Analyzing visitors' comments reveals that the hotel's location within the ancient city of the Casbah endows it with a distinct spatial character and historic symbolic value, transforming it from a mere lodging facility into a space for the production of cultural symbols. Social actors (tourists and visitors arriving at the hotel) possess cultural backgrounds and cognitive categories regarding the historical importance of the Casbah and the appreciation of visual beauty. Using the rooftop or terrace to observe the city's aesthetics and seaside views completes the "magical power" of the mental image perceived by the tourist, which is then translated into explicit recognition in digital reviews. These online reviews, in turn, act as symbolic messages and invitations to tourists worldwide.

In this context, John Urry and Jonas Larsen (2011) emphasized the importance of "visual consumption." The tourist act is viewed as a fundamentally visual activity; spatial, natural, and

architectural landscapes are consumed not merely physically, but are also oriented toward visual consumption. The eye captures images, converting sites and spaces into "signs and signifiers" that translate into a cultural tourism experience derived from observing and photographing the place.

Currently, documenting this experience is further reinforced by endorsing tourist visits with reviews and comments on social media and travel platforms- a crucial factor in tourist attraction.

Thus, the mental image of the urban realm and its attractive location plays a crucial role in driving tourism demand, particularly given the advancement of digital media that brings the urban landscape closer in the mind, thereby motivating tourists toward the physical, real-world experience.

Second: The Social Dimension- Quality of Social Relations (Hospitality and Reception)

Statistics reveal that the 78% proportion in the comments table confirms the density of indicators related to the quality of warm, interpersonal relations within the hotel establishment. This underscores the crucial role of the human element in forming the mental image of the city's inhabitants. It is well known that urban life is characterized by complexity, alienation, and indifference among individuals, as described by Georg Simmel in his thesis *"The Metropolis and Mental Life."* This image becomes even more ambiguous for tourists- especially foreign visitors- who find themselves strangers to the place and its customs. Consequently, the network of social relations built by the visitor within the interactive space of the hotel establishment functions as an "urban buffer," transforming an ambiguous space into a safe, desirable one while mitigating the tension that accompanies tourists upon their initial entry into the alleys of the Casbah.

Sociological studies emphasize the importance of social capital in building social relations at a time when material relations dominate interactions in the contemporary city. Nevertheless, social capital remains present in most aspects of life because, as Ibn Khaldun observed, human beings are social by nature.

In this regard, we review James Coleman's perspective, who defines social capital as follows: *"It is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: they all consist of some aspect of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure."* Thus, social capital appears as a collective good through which actors can obtain individual benefits.

Coleman's economic view of society rests on the idea that individuals are rational actors making decisions based on self-interest. He argues that individuals constantly engage in a process of exchange, offering resources in return for other resources; these resources may be material, such as money or goods, or immaterial, such as information or social support (Mariem Zaoui, 2024, p. 475).

This broad definition paved the way for subsuming a number of distinct- and even contradictory- processes under the concept of social capital. Coleman himself initiated this expansion by incorporating mechanisms that generate social capital (such as reciprocal expectations and group enforcement of norms), the consequences of possessing it (such as privileged access to information), and "appropriable" social organization that provides the context for the embodiment of both sources and effects. From the recipient's perspective, resources obtained through social capital take on the character of a gift (Alejandro Portes, 2019, p. 125).

Hence, interaction within the hotel establishment shifts from a dry, material-economic model to an interaction grounded in face-to-face relations. Here, we observe the reproduction and reconstruction of social capital: when comments repeatedly mention the personal names of hotel

employees and highlight their positive guidance throughout city tours (providing information, hospitable treatment), it signals a deconstruction of commercial commodity logic in favour of the logic of hospitality and human relations. This infuses the tourism experience with social value while enhancing the tourist's sense of safety and social integration.

Third: Deficiencies and Physical Barriers

The 40% proportion reflected a series of physical obstacles and impediments encountered by tourists inside the hotel establishment, including "the lack of an elevator, narrow spaces..." which are characteristic features of traditional hotels- particularly those situated in ancient, Islamic-style cities.

Nevertheless, such hotels enjoy significant demand from international tourists. This is because tourists- especially those from Western societies- are perpetually searching for a lost authenticity. In the words of Dean MacCannell, the crisis of modernity lies in the loss of meaning resulting from the fragmentation of social life, where individuals perceive only limited fragments of the social world and cannot grasp its totality. From this perspective, the tourist becomes a tragic figure seeking a lost authenticity in the lives of others, yet remaining trapped in a web of tourist attractions that reproduce that very loss of meaning. Here, tourism is not merely entertainment, but an existential attempt to compensate for the spiritual and social void created by modernity.

Under this conceptualization, tourists expect their journey to yield communities that differ fundamentally from their lives in modern society. Accordingly, what we observed in visitor comments regarding the Casbah in upper Algiers allows us to read these perceptions through the nature of the mental image formed at two levels:

1. **A Negative Image:** Viewing the absence of an elevator as a waste of time and a hardship when measured against modern standards of hotel luxury.
2. **A Positive Image:** Finding the lost authenticity preserved without artificiality or alteration in traditional, historic architecture. Here, the tourist accepts these conditions and demonstrates respect for the architectural identity of the historic realm, enduring the physical effort of climbing up and down stairs as an experiential journey back to the Casbah's historic golden age. Thus, deficiencies are embraced in exchange for a unique tourism experience that transports them to a pre-modern era, where intimate relations endure within traditionally constructed space- endowing it with authenticity that persists through time amidst modernity and rapid development.

Fourth: Weakness in Supplementary and Digital Services (Catering and Connectivity)

Results showed a 35% proportion regarding deficiencies in supplementary services related to internet connectivity and food quality. Tourists live out moments of their unique tourism experience through digital presence, by which they seek to capture and archive these exciting moments in their lives- particularly if we accept the notion that tourists seek lost authenticity and wish to document their journey back in time. Moreover, digital presence aids in promoting these historical sites characterized by their distinct cultural heritage.

Manuel Castells, in his theory of the Network Society, asserts that the latter is founded upon a continuous tension between two interdependent dimensions: the *space of flows* and the *space of places*. He defines the *space of flows* as "the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows," where flows represent "a sequence of purposeful, repetitive,

programmable exchanges and interactions between physically disjointed positions held by social actors within the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society" (Castells, 1996, p. 412).

Here, the importance of place in shaping the tourist's mental image is reconfirmed, and the significance of flows in organizing the tourist experience and preserving tourism memory across spaces of distinct cultural specificity becomes plainly evident.

In this regard, Margaret Mead notes concerning food as a reflection of societal culture that food habits are choices made by individuals or groups in response to socio-cultural pressures aimed at selecting, consuming, and utilizing a portion of available resources. This creates a gap between cultural evaluation and physiological need- a trait unique to humans that defines the very origin of their existence (Benmeghnia Kaddour, 2026, p. 749).

Contemporary sociology and anthropology explain food as a cultural and symbolic system that transcends its biological function of satisfying basic needs, becoming a medium for producing social meanings and crafting individual and collective identity. This is emphasized by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who views dietary practices as systems rich in symbolic signifiers reflecting a society's culture before being merely a biological necessity- where the process of food preparation shifts from a natural state to a cultural state in the form of meals aligned with social values, rules, and norms. In the same vein, Pierre Bourdieu demonstrates that individual food preferences are not purely personal choices, but are shaped through *habitus* and cultural capital, making food a tool for reproducing social distinctions and symbolic differentiation between classes.

Building on this, the concern expressed by tourists regarding the importance of highlighting traditional culinary styles becomes clear: through food, they connect with values, customs, rituals, and collective memory. Food acts as a bridge of communication and interaction among diverse guest groups residing in the hotel, particularly amid the transformations taking place in the contemporary culinary world.

Table 02: Mechanisms of "Symbolic and Spatial Compensation" in Shaping the Final Image

Analytical Categories	Symbolic & Social Signifiers	Compensation Mechanism in the Tourist Mindset	Final Digital Rating Result
Absence of elevator and heavy architectural staircases	Strategic location in the heart of the historic Casbah and a panoramic terrace	Physical exertion from climbing stairs is compensated for through "symbolic visual consumption" enabled by the strategic location (rooftop). The tourist perceives the hardship of stairs as an inevitable price for experiencing the authentic Casbah lifestyle.	8/10 to 9/10 <i>(Rating: Excellent, taking into account the unique character of the building)</i>
Narrow rooms and restrooms	Exceptional human treatment, flexibility, and humanization (mentioning staff members by name)	Spatial physical narrowness is transformed into "family warmth and social inclusion." The human staff offsets the tight walls with smiles and personalized service, making the tourist feel at home rather than in a cold space.	8/10 <i>(Rating: Very comfortable due to the efficiency of the human staff)</i>

Simplicity of breakfast and lack of (cultural) variety	Safety, reliable tourist guidance, and providing advice for navigating city alleys	The tourist's need for psychological and cognitive security in an ancient, complex urban environment outweighs the need for culinary luxury. Warm reception and accurate guidance compensate for the simplicity of the morning meal.	8.5/10 <i>(Rating: Excellent overall services that outweigh catering deficiencies)</i>
Weak and fluctuating internet network	Urban accessibility and proximity to transit networks (metro and train)	Despite weak digital services, the ease of physical mobility in external space and urban freedom of movement compensate for this temporary digital deficiency inside the rooms.	8/10 <i>(Rating: Highly practical and mobile location)</i>

Source: Prepared by the researcher.

The central question arising from this table lies in how tourists form a positive mental image on the hotel platform- reflected in high ratings (8/10- 9/10)- despite existing deficiencies in the accommodation facility.

Based on this table detailing visitor ratings for the hotel situated in the upper Casbah of Algiers, it is evident that ratings were consistently good to excellent, ranging between 8 and 9 out of 10 despite structural drawbacks unfamiliar to tourists. Consequently, the final mental image emerges as the product of a complex, dynamic evaluative process relying on a "compensation mechanism," outlined in the following points:

1. **Prioritizing Symbolic Value over Material Utility:** Contemporary tourists favour this type of accommodation (historic neighbourhood hotels), thereby placing greater value on "authenticity and human interaction" over "technological and architectural luxury."
2. **Humanization of Space:** Transforming technical deficiencies (such as the absence of an elevator or a repetitive breakfast) into secondary details occurs courtesy of the "social capital" embodied by the hotel staff. The affective impression left by employees permeates the tourist's memory, prompting a high digital rating (8/10 or 9/10) as a form of social recognition and gratitude for Algerian hospitality, transcending the architectural drawbacks of the ancient building.

Through in-depth analysis, we conclude that tourists employ a "Compensation Mechanism," balancing symbolic and human value (the strategic location in the Casbah + exceptional human treatment by hotel staff) against physical and technological shortcomings (absence of an elevator, basic breakfast, weak internet connection). Indicators of symbolic and human dimensions prevail in the form of positive comments, culminating in a positive final mental image grounded in a unique tourism experience deep within the historic Casbah- enriched by cultural customs and values that reflect the warm social relations among urban Algerian society.

What renders the mental image of the old city positive is tourists' prior awareness of the significance of cultural authenticity and the value of human connections, which they may lack in contemporary societies. This is precisely what tourists coming from advanced societies seek to

discover and experience away from the bustle of megacities and world-renowned hotel chains. Thus, a dynamic compensatory image takes shape, shifting from representing place as a physical and architectural space to representing it as a communicative and cultural space- which explains the competitive appeal of the hotel establishment within the metropolitan urban core.

6. Study Results

Data gathered from the field analysis indicates that the significance and symbolic value of the ancient city's location serve as the primary factor driving positive evaluations of the hotel establishment. Most indicators and verbal signifiers focused on geographic proximity to historic landmarks and urban mobility hubs, with reviews repeatedly highlighting the hotel's location in the heart of the ancient Casbah neighbourhood and the opportunities it affords for immersion in the cultural space and the consumption of authentic architectural heritage. Furthermore, the visual apparatus- represented by the terrace and panoramic rooftop overlooking the city (as expressed by tourists)- received wide attention, becoming an effective tool for the visual consumption of the external realm and the shaping of the mental image of the destination. General satisfaction was also linked to urban accessibility and ease of transit via transportation networks. As a final result, we find that the Casbah, through its traditional architectural character, contributed significantly to forming a positive mental image of the visitors' tourism experience.

In the same context, hotel practice is not limited to being a commercial physical structure; rather, a network of social relations based on face-to-face interactions takes shape within it. In this type of hotel, interactive relationships built on solidarity and intimacy are reproduced, as manifested through the personalization of service provided- reflected in the explicit and repeated mention of hotel employees' names. The human factor in the hotel also contributed- by providing city guidance and directing the tourism experience- to reducing tourist anxiety regarding urban alienation. Thus, the relationship established within the hotel stems first from the mindset of staff working in heritage accommodations and second from their professionalism in attracting tourists and marketing the city's aesthetic appeal, thereby enhancing the positivity of the overall mental image.

In addition, tourists' comments revealed varying degrees of emotional-spatial satisfaction versus material-technical satisfaction. While basic facilities- such as sleep quality, comfortable beds, and effective air conditioning- received positive appraisals for fulfilling biological needs, negative comments surfaced regarding physical and technical shortcomings, such as the absence of an elevator and limited room space. These factors are beyond management control given that the building reflects a traditional style dating back to a historical era. Nevertheless, many visitors appreciated the experience as symbolic of a lost authenticity. Despite further comments regarding the breakfast style and weak internet connectivity, the city's symbolic-cultural realm ultimately prevailed over these deficiencies.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to uncover the mechanisms shaping tourists' mental images of the city and to highlight the intertwined relationship between the heritage urban realm, the physical hotel establishment, and the network of social relations. Results demonstrated a shift in contemporary tourist behaviour: visitors no longer merely seek luxurious lodging, but rather pursue immersion in a tourism experience cantered around spaces endowed with unique cultural and historical symbolism.

The core conclusion of our study is that the historic Casbah- as a distinctive and rare heritage asset- constitutes the single most critical factor in formulating a positive mental image.

Analytical results proved that the visual consumption of the historic urban realm forms the bedrock of tourist impressions and perceptions, while the hotel establishment serves both as a shelter and as a symbol embedded within the ancient city. Furthermore, the social relations woven within the hotel spring from the authenticity of Algerian society, positioning the hotel as an accessible gateway to discovering and experiencing the historic space. Consequently, we conclude that the primary influence in shaping the mental image derives from the symbolism of the ancient city, which firmly anchors itself in the tourist's mind and leads them to overlook structural and service deficiencies within the accommodation facility.

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