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To cite this article: Neda Zarandian & Javad Madani (11 Feb 2026): Gen Z social media storytelling in heritage tourism: the Sheikh Safi UNESCO World Heritage Site, Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, DOI: [10.1080/14766825.2026.2619777](https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2026.2619777)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2026.2619777>



Published online: 11 Feb 2026.



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Gen Z social media storytelling in heritage tourism: the Sheikh Safi UNESCO World Heritage Site

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage tourism has entered a new era with the emergence of Generation Z and their active participation in social media-driven digital environments. This generation has introduced novel opportunities for representing cultural heritage through social media storytelling. This study investigated Generation Z's social media storytelling based on their experiences visiting the Sheikh Safi al-Din Khānegāh and Shrine Ensemble, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Ardabil, Iran. The study employed a qualitative approach using thematic analysis based on Attride-Stirling's framework to identify and categorize key themes. The interviews were conducted with Generation Z visitors until saturation (20 interviews). The interview data were analyzed using a procedure inspired by Braun and Clarke's method. Textual analysis of the interviews resulted in 260 initial codes, 12 organizing themes, and four global themes: local narratives, visual experiences, sensory experiences, and sociocultural experiences. The findings revealed that Generation Z was keenly interested in narrating local stories, capturing the visual aspects of historical sites, and expressed an intention to share their experiences on digital platforms. These insights provide valuable guidance for developing tourism experiences that integrate social media storytelling and foster meaningful engagement with cultural heritage among Generation Z.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 September 2025



Accepted 14 January 2026

KEYWORDS

Generation Z; heritage tourism; social media; storytelling

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage encompasses both physical elements, such as historic structures, monuments, and artifacts, and non-physical elements, including traditions, customs, and practices passed down through generations (Ali & Abdulmaged, 2025; Katyukha et al., 2025; Parenti et al., 2025; Poplawska, 2025; Timothy et al., 2024). Preserving cultural heritage is essential for maintaining the historical and cultural essence of societies and ensuring that future generations can access and learn from these resources (Jawabreh et al., 2024). Heritage tourism is characterized by journeys to discover sites, artifacts, or activities that are considered authentic representations of the past, including historical figures and

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associated cultural narratives (Gordon, 2022). This kind of tourism supports preservation by providing economic benefits that fund conservation efforts and raise awareness of the importance of cultural heritage (Ghose et al., 2025; Opačić, 2019; Thakur et al., 2025).

Cultural heritage tourism is key to safeguarding and transmitting cultural knowledge, as it enables visitors to connect with the historical and cultural narratives of a site (Acri, 2024; Elrawy, 2025; Katyukha et al., 2025; Leong et al., 2024). Storytelling in heritage tourism settings, such as museums, enhances visitors' emotional engagement, imagination, and memorability (Campos et al., 2025). By providing a meaningful context, storytelling deepens visitors' appreciation of local heritage (Chronis, 2012; Leong et al., 2024). Thus, storytelling enriches the tourist experience and contributes to the effective transmission of cultural heritage.

Social media storytelling, as a participatory extension of digital storytelling, has emerged as a powerful means of enhancing tourist engagement with cultural heritage sites. Leveraging the interactive affordances of social media platforms, it enables more immersive and dialogic experiences than conventional digital narratives (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Ranjan & Chaturvedi, 2025). In integrating multimedia content and user-generated contributions transforms tourists from passive recipients to active participants, fostering deeper emotional connections and a stronger sense of belonging (Petousi et al., 2022). Additionally, geofenced storytelling and mobile-based applications support personalized, context-aware narratives that guide visitors to lesser-known cultural sites (Korani et al., 2025; Sun & Dong, 2025). Together, these approaches promote sustainable and inclusive forms of cultural heritage engagement (Briciu et al., 2024; Mo et al., 2024).

Building on the increasing role of social media storytelling, Generation Z (Gen Z), born roughly between 1995 and 2010, represents a digitally native cohort with distinctive behaviors and values that influence their engagement with heritage sites (Berkup, 2014; Goldring & Azab, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Compared to previous generations, they prioritize experiential consumption, ethical considerations, and immersive engagement over material goods (Ho et al., 2022). This generation actively participates in digital storytelling, often creating, sharing, and interacting with content related to cultural heritage (Amer et al., 2023; Dewi et al., 2021; Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Hysa et al., 2021). Understanding Generation Z's engagement is crucial, as their participation shapes perceptions of heritage sites and contributes to the online transmission of cultural narratives (Goldring & Azab, 2021).

Although many studies have examined the role of storytelling in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, few have focused on Generation Z's engagement with digital storytelling in heritage tourism (Akgün et al., 2015). This gap highlights the need to understand how this generation experiences, interprets, and shares heritage narratives on social media. To capture the depth and richness of these experiences, this study adopted a qualitative approach. This study focuses on the Sheikh Safi al-Din Khānegāh and Shrine Ensemble in Ardabil, Iran, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that has recently attracted Gen Z visitors. This study aims to explore how Generation Z uses social media to narrate and share their experiences at this heritage site. To achieve this aim, this study examined Generation Z's experiences across four key dimensions: local narratives, visual experiences, sensory experiences, and sociocultural interactions.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. *Storytelling in tourism*

Storytelling is the practice of creating and sharing narratives that convey meaning, foster audience engagement, and connect people with their experiences and cultural heritage (Hutson & Hutson, 2024). Building on this definition, storytelling can be understood as the communication of intentions through engaging and persuasive narratives (Yang, 2018). Such narratives help individuals make sense of their world, organize their experiences, and share them with others (Cooper et al., 2010; Moore, 2012). Beyond its role in interpreting consumer behavior, storytelling has become a key tool in advertising, branding, and communication because of its strong impact on audiences' perceptions (Delgado-Balaster & Fernandez-Sabiote, 2016). In the context of tourism, storytelling plays a crucial role in destination development and marketing. Dann (2006) describes it as a tour guide's interpretation or narration, highlighting its close connection to the social and linguistic dimensions of tourism. It enhances destination value by motivating tourist engagement and creating personal experiences tied to an attraction's narrative (Choi, 2016; Mossberg, 2008). In recent years, its application in tourism marketing and branding has grown significantly (Ben Youssef et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2023; Ferraro, 2016; Hermawan, 2022; Jo et al., 2022; Kennedy et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2018; Kvítková & Petrů, 2021; Li, 2014; Moin et al., 2020; Pan & Chen, 2019; Papcunová et al., 2021; Parani, 2023; Zins & Abbas Adamu, 2024; Zuzana, 2023). Researchers have also explored the role of digital storytelling in attracting tourists (Abd Mutalib et al., 2017; Bassano et al., 2019; Goli et al., 2021a, 2021b; Setiawan et al., 2024; Singgalen, 2024; Tabuni & Singgalen, 2024a). Studies have analyzed tourists' narratives to uncover their preferences and motivations (Amer et al., 2023; Azariah, 2016; Fareed & Amer, 2023; Goodnow & Bordoloi, 2017; Hsu et al., 2009; Mura, 2015; Owsianowska, 2014; Ozan-Rafferty et al., 2014; Tabuni & Singgalen, 2024b). However, few studies have examined how tourists select and frame narrative content in virtual spaces using self-reported data. This gap is particularly important for Generation Z, the future dominant tourist group, whose digital storytelling practices differ significantly from those of earlier generations.

2.2. *Storytelling and heritage*

Storytelling has deep historical roots, serving as a vital tool for education, entertainment, and social bonding before the advent of written language (Ibrahim, 2019). It has long played a crucial role in preserving and shaping the cultural heritage (Hutson & Hutson, 2024). Numerous studies have explored the connection between storytelling and cultural heritage, particularly in digital contexts. For instance, research on storytelling in museums has garnered attention. Vrettakis et al. (2021) examined how mobile technology enhances museum storytelling. Kidd (2018) analyzed transmedia storytelling in cultural heritage through case studies of the St Fagans National History Museum and the Charles Dickens Museum. Valtolina (2016) proposed a collaborative framework for small- and medium-sized museums to share data and create interactive exhibitions through digital storytelling. Underberg-Goode (2017) investigated how museums can use digital platforms, including videos and augmented reality (AR), to present heritage materials more engagingly. Chenu et al. (2014) explored the Cultural Urban Learning Transmedia

Experience (CULTE) project, which developed digital narratives and gamification strategies to enhance the museum experience at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris.

Urban heritage storytelling has been a key research focus in recent years. Paganoni (2015) examined digital and transmedia storytelling in creating participatory narratives about urban heritage. Udeaja et al. (2021) demonstrated how digital technologies, such as Heritage Building Information Modelling (HBIM) and virtual reality (VR), enhance urban heritage preservation, particularly in Surat. Van der Hoeven (2019) showed how online mapping and digital storytelling foster public engagement in protecting historical urban landscapes. Psomadaki et al. (2019) developed a cooperative model to promote active citizen participation in urban cultural heritage preservation, particularly in Thessaloniki. Similarly, Najjar et al. (2025) demonstrated how digital applications can transform urban heritage tourism from preservation to participation by enhancing visitor engagement and supporting sustainable cultural tourism.

A central theme in storytelling research, whether in urban or museum settings, is education and the transmission of value. Rizvic et al. (2019) explored the benefits and challenges of interactive digital narratives in cultural heritage education, highlighting tensions between education and entertainment. Digital storytelling plays a crucial role in conveying cultural values (Ajitoni, 2024). Some studies have specifically examined their role in value transmission. For example, Shim et al. (2024) analyzed the impact of digital storytelling on publishing and interpreting heritage data, focusing on intangible values at Seonamsa Temple in Korea. Zort et al. (2023) explored how storytelling in virtual environments helps transfer cultural heritage values to younger generations, emphasizing the role of educators and families. Beyond value transmission, research has examined how storytelling fosters public engagement in heritage preservation and encourages interactive content creation (Bonacini, 2019; Podara et al., 2021; Rizvic et al., 2019; Roque, 2022; Wilson & Desha, 2016; Ziku et al., 2024). This aspect is particularly relevant for youth who actively share their heritage experiences in digital spaces (Lin & Rasoolimanesh, 2023; Pavluković et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023; Yun, 2023). Despite extensive research on virtual heritage storytelling, no study has specifically examined how Gen Z engages with cultural heritage content online. This study addresses this gap by providing insights into young tourists' engagement with heritage sites through digital storytelling.

2.2. Digital and social media storytelling

Digital storytelling involves the use of digital media and technology to craft and convey narratives about travel experiences (Clarizia et al., 2017; Li et al., 2024; Pudliner, 2007; Ranjan & Chaturvedi, 2025). In the realm of social media, this form of storytelling is increasingly employed on platforms such as Twitter, blogs, and online reviews (Weissenfeld et al., 2017). Social media storytelling is a distinct type of digital storytelling, marked by its interactive nature, participatory content creation, and platform-specific narrative elements (Choudhury & Mohanty, 2025; Limpah, 2025; Mang et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2025).

Expanding on this, storytelling in tourism can manifest in various forms depending on the medium and context, encompassing not only verbal communication but also written, visual, and audio-visual formats (Lee & Shin, 2015). Social media has revolutionized the way individuals search, share, and consume information, fundamentally altering

tourism communication (Sigala, 2011). Its emergence has profoundly impacted the creation and dissemination of tourism experiences (Amer et al., 2023; Hudson, 2009).

In social media settings, storytelling has evolved from a one-directional process to one that is deeply connected to user engagement and interactions. These platforms allow users to post, share, and exchange information, transforming passive audiences into active communities (Akgün et al., 2015; Roque & Raposo, 2016; Villi & Matikainen, 2016). Consequently, social media storytelling has become an essential element of the virtual tourism experience (Fareed & Amer, 2025; Lund et al., 2018).

However, engagement in social media storytelling is also influenced by technological and platform-specific factors. Research suggests that ease of use, digital literacy, and familiarity with social media platforms affect users' willingness to share their travel experiences online (Bakshi et al., 2019; Ben-Shaul & Reichel, 2018; Bilgihan et al., 2016; Casalo et al., 2010).

2.3. Generation Z, social media and storytelling

Generation Z, defined as those born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), is recognized as a sociological group heavily influenced by information technology, the Internet, and social media. This generation, having grown up surrounded by digital technology such as smartphones, video games, and online platforms, is the first to be entirely digital native (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015; Turner, 2015). Their everyday activities are closely tied to social media, encompassing everything from daily interactions to engaging in multiplayer online games (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). According to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey (2010), Generation Z dedicates more time to social media than any other activity except sleeping, underscoring the pivotal role of digital interaction in their daily lives. As individuals proficient in technology with strong ICT skills, Generation Z travelers increasingly depend on digital resources for planning and making travel decisions (Wong, 2016).

In the realm of tourism, Generation Z primarily uses online media rather than traditional travel agencies for planning and booking trips (Setiawan et al., 2018). They incorporate technology at every stage of their travel experience, from seeking inspiration and gathering information to booking and sharing post-travel experiences (European Travel Commission, 2020; Possamai, 2022). Social media platforms are seen not only as communication tools but also as search engines for consuming tourism-related content, especially on visually oriented platforms such as TikTok and YouTube (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023; Yamagishi et al., 2024). Within this digital landscape, Gen Z favors interactive and genuine media experiences, with influencers playing a significant role in word-of-mouth marketing (Barbe & Neuburger, 2021; Wang & Iahad, 2025). Exposure to social media also influences environmental motivations and encourages the development of sustainable and responsible behavior among tourists (Cismariu & Hosu, 2019; Pitanatri et al., 2024; Utari et al., 2025).

Notably, Gen Z is highly engaged with social media. Their travel experiences are deeply intertwined with storytelling and interactive participation, making them proactive content creators (Duffett, 2017; Fareed & Amer, 2023; Lund et al., 2018; Vițelar, 2019). Their motivations encompass self-esteem, identity development, visibility, self-expression, sharing travel experiences, and building social connections (Duan et al.,

2025; Jeljeli et al., 2025; Jensen et al., 2025; Molefe et al., 2024; Volić et al., 2023; Wang & lahad, 2025). Through these storytelling activities, Gen Z weaves content creation and multimedia interactions into their broader tourism experiences.

Empirical research indicates that social media practices, such as content sharing, photography, food-related posts, and immersive media, are closely linked. Together, they create storytelling frameworks through which Gen Z crafts and disseminates tourism experiences across various contexts. For example, Xian (2022) examined short videos on TikTok and Instagram Stories in Thailand and China, uncovering cross-cultural differences: Chinese users emphasized appearance and filters, whereas Thai users favored authentic everyday depictions. Pitanatri et al. (2024) explored food experience sharing and highlighted generational differences in motivations, satisfaction, sharing intentions, and loyalty. Hanafiah et al. (2019) compared photography and food-sharing behaviors across Generations X, Y, and Z, revealing that all generations – especially Gen Z – tend to document travel experiences using smartphones and share them on social media, particularly in hospitality settings. These practices enhance co-creation and value generation in the tourism sector.

Gen Z's storytelling on social media extends beyond personal actions, having significant social and cultural effects. It plays a role in reinforcing both individual and collective identities, fosters social unity, encourages community involvement, and aids in the preservation of cultural heritage (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). For instance, in the UAE, storytelling through social media enhances family bonds, maintains cultural identity, and upholds cultural values (Jeljeli et al., 2025). These studies collectively illustrate that social media platforms serve as more than just entertainment; they are spaces where values, norms, and meanings are created and perpetuated. This research directly connects social media storytelling practices with the central thesis of this study, which is to engage with heritage tourism.

3. Research context

The Sheikh Safi al-Din Khānegāh and Shrine Ensemble in Ardabil was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010 for its Outstanding Universal Value (UNESCO, 2010). Established in the fourteenth century, the site represents a 'missing link' in Iranian art history, bridging the 14th and 18th centuries through its transformation from a Sufi lodge into a monumental dynastic shrine (Jahani Sham Asbi et al., 2024). Its sacred layout was reportedly designed by Sadr al-Din Musa, inspired by a mystical dream to establish the ensemble's order. At its peak, the complex functioned as a significant social and charitable hub, including a kitchen serving over 3,000 meals daily, and likely occupied more than twice its current area of 135,320 square meters (Jahani Sham Asbi et al., 2024; Shahbazi Shiran, 2015).

Architecturally, the ensemble serves as a prototype of Safavid religious design, distinguished by numerical mysticism and Sufi symbolism. This is exemplified in the 'Allah Allah' dome, whose 16 hexagonal inscriptions create a dialogue between geometry and mystical concepts (Abdollahifard & Seifi, 2024). Key structures include the Haram-khana – the oldest element, dating to 1324 – and the octagonal Jannat-sara, likely intended by Shah Tahmasp as his mausoleum. The site houses the remains of Sheikh Safi al-Din,

Shah Ismail I, and the warriors of the Battle of Chaldiran, representing a definitive integration of aesthetic beauty and spiritual devotion (Shahbazi Shiran, 2015; Visit Iran, n.d.).

Recognized under Criteria (i), (ii), and (iv) – which concern creative genius, cultural exchange, and architectural significance – the site exemplifies a harmonious dialogue between aesthetics and spirituality and remains a major cultural and religious center in Iran.

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative thematic analysis, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants from Generation Z.

4.1. Sampling procedure

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was adopted, given the predefined inclusion criteria: (a) participants had to belong to Generation Z, and (b) they had to have visited the Sheikh Safi al-Din Ensemble and shared or intended to share their experience online. Initial participants were approached among university students who had visited Ardabil, and further participants were recruited through peer referrals and colleagues' networks. This strategy ensured access to individuals with direct and recent site experience. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, which occurred during the 20th round of interviews.

4.2. Participant profile

The final sample comprised 20 individuals (12 women and 8 men) aged 18–29 years. Participants had diverse educational levels (from high school diploma to postgraduate students), varying levels of social media activity, and different visitation frequencies (from a single visit to more than 20 visits). [Table 1](#) presents the participants' demographic and experiential characteristics.

Although most participants were university students, many were simultaneously employed, reflecting that the sample included both studying and working members of Generation Z. This characteristic partially mitigates the limitations of occupational diversity in the study.

4.3. Interview procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences and narratives. An interview guide was designed around four dimensions derived from the research questions: (1) engagement with local narratives, (2) visual representations, (3) sensory experiences, and (4) sociocultural interactions. The interviews included prompts such as the following:

- 'Have you ever seen or heard about the Sheikh Safi al-Din Ensemble in your peers' social media posts? How was it described?'

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

ID	Age	Gender	Education	Number of Visits	Social media activity (hours/day)
1	24	F	BA	3	2–4 h
2	25	F	MA	8	2–3 h
3	25	F	MA	>10	2–3 h
4	20	M	Diploma	1	4 h
5	18	F	Diploma	1	1 h
6	26	F	MA	3	3–4 h
7	20	M	Diploma	5	4–6 h
8	21	M	BA Student	2	1.5–2 h
9	19	M	Diploma	1	2–3 h
10	26	F	MA	>20	3 h
11	20	M	Diploma	1	2–4 h
12	25	F	BA	3	2 h
13	20	M	Diploma	3	2.5 h
14	26	F	MA	1	2 h
15	24	F	MA Student	20–25	2 h
16	23	F	MA Student	5	1 h
17	27	M	MA Student	2	2 h
18	29	F	MA Student	3	2 h
19	24	F	MA Student	2	4 h
20	27	M	MA	7	3 h

- ‘If you were to write a social media post about your visit, how would you describe it and what image would you choose?’
- ‘What feelings did you experience during your visit? Can you translate that into a short post?’
- ‘What cultural or social aspects of Ardabil stood out to you that you would share online?’
- ‘What negative aspects of your visit might you consider posting about?’

Although the participants’ actual social media posts were not accessed, the interview questions explicitly asked them to describe their content creation and sharing practices and narrative structuring on social media. This allowed us to evaluate their digital storytelling behaviors based on their reported actions, intentions, and strategies for presenting and communicating their travel experiences online.

Interviews were conducted over a one-year period between December 2023 and December 2024 in diverse settings (*e.g. university offices, cafés, and online platforms such as Google Meet*), depending on the participants’ availability. All participants had visited the site within the previous year, ensuring that their experiences were recent. Each interview lasted between 23 and 51 min, was audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim.

4.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2021) six-step framework: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. The approach was primarily inductive, with codes and themes emerging from the participants’ narratives. A deductive refinement stage was subsequently applied, aligning the emergent themes with the conceptual framework of storytelling on social media and heritage tourism.

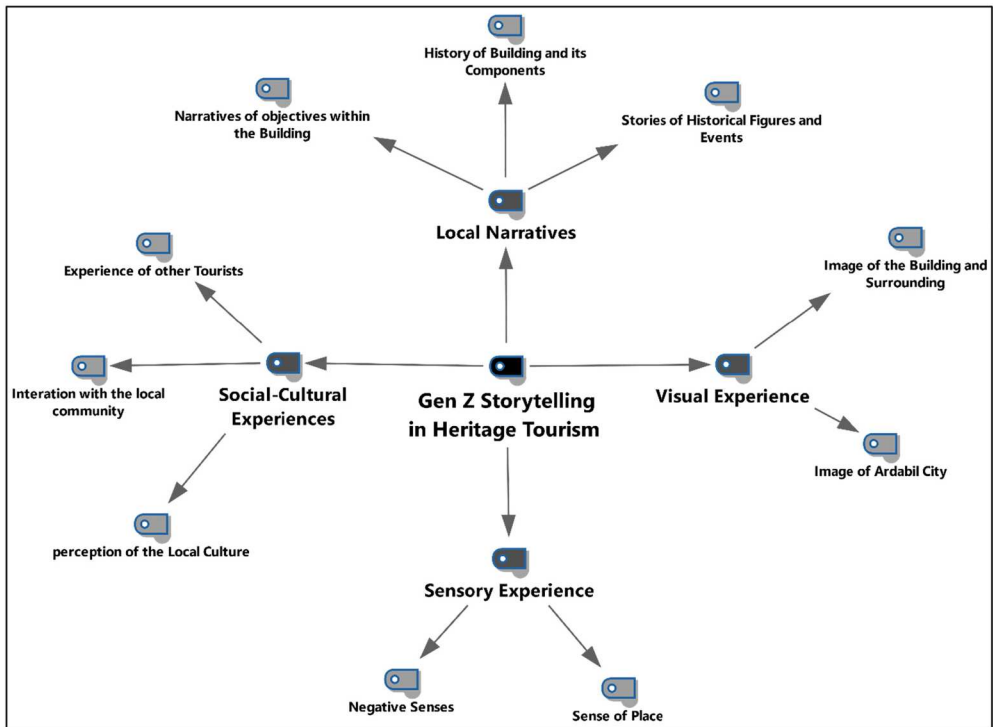


Figure 1. Themes derived from the interviews, created by the authors. These themes along with samples of relevant interviews are presented below.

Following Attride-Stirling's (2001) model, the initial codes were systematically grouped into basic themes, each representing a minimal conceptual unit derived from participants' statements. These basic themes were then aggregated into organizing themes that captured broader conceptual categories, reflecting the recurring patterns across narratives. Finally, global themes were identified, representing the overarching dimensions of Generation Z's experiences at the Sheikh Safi al-Din Ensemble (Figure 1).

Coding was conducted using the MAXQDA software to allow the systematic organization and retrieval of codes. The first author primarily performed the coding, with a peer review of a subset of transcripts to ensure consistency and reliability. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved, enhancing the coding process's dependability and confirmability. This combined approach ensured methodological transparency, analytic rigor, and clear mapping from raw data to high-level interpretation.

4.5. Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability were assessed using Lincoln and Guba's (1982) criteria for credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of perspectives (participants with varying demographics and visitation histories) and member checking, whereby transcripts and codes were shared with participants for verification. Dependability was ensured through external auditing of

the coding and theme development process. Confirmability was achieved by documenting all analytical steps in detail and through peer debriefing with colleagues. Transferability was facilitated by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and detailed quotations from the interviews.

5. Results

Following Braun and Clarke's six-stage method, we began by conducting interviews and carefully recorded and transcribed the data in MS Word. In the second stage, we generated initial codes and then proceeded to identify and categorize the themes. Data confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout all stages, and the participants provided written and verbal consent. In the fourth stage, themes were reviewed and refined in two steps: revising the codes and assessing the credibility of the themes in relation to the dataset. In the next stage, distinct and meaningful names were assigned to each theme. Finally, in the sixth stage, we conducted a final analysis and presented the themes in their core form. The identified themes were classified into basic, organizing, and global themes, based on Attride-Stirling's (2001) approach. First, 260 codes and 103 basic themes were identified in the data. These were grouped into 12 organizing themes, which were consolidated into four global themes: local narratives, visual experiences, sensory experiences, and socio-cultural experiences (Figure 1).

5.1. Theme #1: local narratives (RQ1)

Narratives of an attraction can significantly enhance the appeal and overall travel experience of visitors (Rahayu et al., 2024). In other words, the influence of stories on tourists' perceptions of a destination and their intentions to visit cannot be overstated (Abdillah et al., 2022). Local stories, in particular, hold notable importance, as they are considered intangible heritage and can improve the presentation of tangible, site-based heritage (Jeannotte, 2016). Technologies such as panoramas or QR codes are used to convey these stories and further enhance the allure of destinations (Jareanpon et al., 2014; Tatić et al., 2015).

In our study, we also considered local narratives. Generation Z participants expressed an intention to share their stories in a virtual world. Notably, the interviews revealed several distinct categories of local stories about the Sheikh Safi al-Din Shrine: stories of historical figures and events, the history of the building and its components, and the narratives surrounding objects within the building.

Narratives about historical figures and events in the region, such as the Safavid Dynasty,¹ Shah Ismail I,² the Qizilbash,³ the Battle of Chaldiran,⁴ Sheikh Safi al-Din,⁵ Sheikh Jibrail,⁶ Chilla,⁷ and the Sama,⁸ captivated the interviewees. For instance, interviewee #20 expressed his intention to narrate a story about Qizilbash:

Ardabili folks are famous for their courage and fighting spirit. The Qizilbash cult, a key part of the Safavid army, embodies this vibe. Ardabil is known for its bravery even at the national level. I always wanted to promote Ardabil's cultural heritage by dressing in a Qizilbash costume, horseback riding in the Sergiri region of Meshginshahr, and snapping a photo with Mount Sabalan in the background. This kind of photo could totally symbolize the bravery and culture of Ardabili people, and I'd love to share it as a post.

The younger generation has shown a keen interest in stories surrounding buildings and their various compartments. They are fascinated by their history, the purpose behind their construction, their global recognition, and the different uses of their parts. Among the intriguing tales are the story of the Chini-house,⁹ the mysterious handprint,¹⁰ and the legend that the buildings are secretly connected. For instance, interviewee #3 explained the print as follows:

If I ever write about the Sheikh Safi al-Din Shrine in the future, I'd totally zoom in on the handprint on the main tomb. This is very intriguing because it was used as a state emblem, represents the five principles of the Shiite religion, and might even stand for Al al-Aba. They say this symbol was probably inspired by the verse *Yadullah Faq Idiham*.

Generation Z has shown a keen interest in another particular set of stories: tales about old museum objects inside the building, the theft of some items, and the history of old carpets¹¹ that were taken abroad.

While local stories have been covered in other articles, what stands out is Generation Z's enthusiasm for sharing these narratives online, exploring various aspects such as the characters, the heritage building itself, and even the objects inside. This finding highlights that local narratives not only enrich the heritage tourism experience at the Sheikh Safi al-Din Shrine but also reflect Gen Z visitors' intention to engage in social media storytelling. By expressing their intention to share stories about historical figures, buildings, and objects online, Gen Z participants indicated their potential role in disseminating intangible heritage and enhancing both cultural awareness and the site's visibility on social media.

5.2. Theme #2: visual experiences (RQ2)

The formation of cultural heritage is significantly influenced by visual elements, which in turn allows visual culture to be interpreted as a narrative that reflects identity, political dynamics, and power structures (Watson & Waterton, 2010). Hence, it is not surprising that the visual appeal of heritage is considered an aspect of the tourist experience in some works (Willson & McIntosh, 2007). In addition, the significance of imagery and photographic representation in tourism has been widely acknowledged for extended periods (Scarles, 2009).

Nowadays, thanks to new technologies, tourists share countless photos of attractions and destinations.

In this study, young participants highlighted their intention to share images and posts showcasing the visual appeal of this historical monument and its surroundings. They found the garden and paved entrance path to be captivating. Interviewee #17 clearly expressed this sentiment:

Sure, if I were to post a story, I would story the gorgeous space leading up to the tomb, the stunning garden, and the architecture that really showcased the culture and customs of the time.

Additionally, the building's elements, such as the tiling, colors, Islamic motifs, and various sections like the tombs, the *khanqah*, *Jannat Sara*, the Chini house, and the pond, were particularly attractive to young tourists who enjoyed sharing these features. However,

the Allah Allah dome stood out significantly, with 11 interviewees specifically emphasizing its importance.

Most of the time, people post pictures of the Allah Allah Dome. This is known as the icon of Ardabil. Personally, if I were to share something, I'd definitely post a picture of this dome. (Interview #3)

In addition to the building and its surroundings, Generation Z tourists were also eager to share images of Ardabil City with their online audiences. They were particularly interested in two categories: heritage and natural recreational attractions. In the heritage category, tourists were drawn to the historical texture of the city, the bazaar, old houses, the historical bathhouse, the Friday Mosque, and the Sheikh Jibrail Tomb. Regarding natural recreational attractions, Mount Sabalan, Heyran Road, Sarein mineral springs, Fandoglu Forest, Lake Shorabil, and the region's natural cover captivated their attention and were frequently narrated in cyberspace.

This finding demonstrates that visual experiences are central to Generation Z's engagement with the Sheikh Safi al-Din Shrine in Ardabil, Iran. Participants expressed their intentions to share images of the monument, its architectural details, gardens, and surrounding heritage and natural attractions, indicating their potential engagement in digital storytelling. These visual narratives suggest a possible role in conveying the aesthetic and cultural significance of the site, as well as in increasing awareness of Ardabil's cultural and natural resources online.

5.3. Theme #3: sensory experiences (RQ3)

Most research on the relationship between storytelling and tourists' emotions can be categorized into two main groups. The first group includes those that examine the impact of stories about destinations and attractions on tourists' emotions (Ahmed et al., 2024; Akgün et al., 2015; Hsiao et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2020; Li & Liu, 2020; Ma et al., 2024), while the second focuses on research exploring tourists' feelings during the act of storytelling (Ahmed et al., 2024; Hong et al., 2022; Su et al., 2023). However, the analysis of Generation Z interviewees in this study went further, revealing the emotions tourists were eager to share online about their experiences visiting a heritage site. These emotions were categorized into two main types: a sense of place and negative sensory experiences.

Sense of place refers to individuals' interpretations of their environment as well as the emotions – both explicit and subtle – that they associate with it (Hummon, 1992). Within the context of tourism, place becomes a key concept infused with emotions and values through collective narratives (Chen et al., 2021; Smith, 2015). In essence, as tourists engage with a location, they perceive and experience various sensations that they then share through storytelling. Through this shared exchange, a collective sense of place is formed among community members.

In this study, young interviewees were eager to share feelings of peace, curiosity, spirituality, and national pride associated with their location. A recurring theme in the interviews was the sense of traveling through history. For instance, Interviewee #8 said:

I wanted to share this sense ... When I went there, it felt like traveling back in time. It was as if I had established a connection with my ancestors and could hear their own voices. It was a truly special and unique feeling.

In addition, Generation Z interviewees tended to share their negative experiences while visiting Sheikh Safi al-Din Shrine. Their discomfort stemmed from two main issues: damage to the historical monument and the presence of inappropriate individuals around the historical ensemble. The following are two examples of what interviewees said in this regard:

We must ensure that young people and teenagers do not write on the doors and walls of historical monuments and buildings. Even at the entrance, the historically significant wooden door had writing on it, which greatly upset me ... This issue should be highlighted in cyberspace. (Interview #12)

There were many people present, and unfortunately, some were smoking. There was no one to address this issue. (Interview #13)

This finding demonstrates that sensory experiences are integral to Gen Z's perceptions of heritage tourism. Participants expressed intentions to share emotions such as peace, spirituality, curiosity, and national pride, alongside negative sensory experiences, suggesting potential engagement in digital storytelling. These sensory narratives indicate how emotional attachment to the site and awareness of its condition can be communicated in digital spaces, while also highlighting issues related to heritage conservation and visitor behavior.

5.4. Theme #4: sociocultural experiences (RQ4)

This theme captures the sociocultural dimensions of heritage tourism experiences among Generation Z, focusing on interactions with other tourists, engagement with the local community, and how these encounters are translated into digital storytelling in cyberspace. While the mutual influence of tourists on one another has been addressed in previous studies (Yagi, 2001; Yin & Poon, 2016), the findings of this study highlight Gen Z's interest in documenting and potentially sharing sociocultural encounters through social media platforms.

At the Sheikh Safi al-Din site, visitor interactions were closely intertwined with their lived experiences of the heritage setting. Tourists admired the architectural features and museum objects, exchanged opinions, and articulated a shared sense of connection. Sensory impressions such as peace, surprise, pleasure, and curiosity accompanied these encounters and were selectively emphasized in the online content. However, some participants preferred to foreground the architectural and aesthetic elements of the heritage site in cyberspace rather than interactions with other tourists, reflecting a visually oriented mode of digital heritage storytelling.

The second dimension of this theme relates to sociocultural experiences shaped by interactions with the local community, which are integral to the heritage tourism experience. Communication, as an inherent aspect of social activities, including tourism (Albu, 2015), emerged as a recurring element in the Gen Z narratives. Participants highlighted locals' positive behavior, language barriers,¹² and the availability of interpretive information as aspects they intended or were willing to share online. Moreover, their representations of local culture – encompassing food, handicraft shops, customs, Turkish poetry related to the Safavids, local devotion to the monument, adherence to values, and everyday commuting around the shrine – reflect topics that participants expressed intentions

to share through social media, extending the sociocultural meaning of the heritage site beyond a physical visit.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into how Generation Z engages in globally listed heritage tourism through digital storytelling. Although some aspects align with previous research, others provide new perspectives that deepen our understanding of this phenomenon. In relation to the study's objective of understanding how Generation Z narrates and shares heritage experiences on social media, the theme of local narratives shows that storytelling is a key mechanism through which young visitors communicate heritage meaning online. This theme of local narratives strongly resonates with the work of Mossberg (2008) and Choi (2016), who emphasized the role of storytelling in enhancing destination value and motivating tourist activities. This study expands on their findings by highlighting how Generation Z expresses an intention to share these narratives on social media platforms, such as Instagram. This extends the work of Lund et al. (2018) and Bassano et al. (2019), who explored digital storytelling in tourism by demonstrating how the younger generations use digital tools to amplify the reach and impact of local stories. Additionally, the role of technologies, such as VR and mobile applications, as discussed by Vrettakis et al. (2021) and Udeaja et al. (2021), supports the idea that digital storytelling can enhance accessibility and engagement for younger audiences.

Addressing the study's aim to explore how Generation Z uses social media to represent and communicate heritage tourism experiences, the findings on visual experiences indicate that visual content plays a central role in Gen Z's digital storytelling practices. Regarding visual experiences, the findings align with those of Adami and Jewitt (2016), who argued that visual representation is more effective than written text in conveying personal experiences. This study reinforces their perspective by showing how Generation Z is drawn to visually striking features such as the Allah Allah Dome and the gardens of the Sheikh Safi al-Din Shrine. However, it goes further by demonstrating that these visuals are not merely passively observed, but are subjects that participants expressed an intention to share online, reflecting a sense of identity and belonging among young tourists. This aligns with Jansson (2018), who highlighted the importance of visual content in tourism while also adding a new layer by illustrating how digital platforms transform these visuals into tools for self-expression and heritage promotion. Furthermore, the emphasis on visual experiences as reflections of identity and power structures, as discussed by Zappavigna (2016), provides deeper insight into why visual elements hold such significance for Generation Z.

With respect to the study's focus on how Generation Z interprets and expresses heritage experiences through digital storytelling, the theme of sensory experiences highlights the emotional dimensions that participants expressed an intention to share online. This theme builds on the work of Shim et al. (2024), who examined the role of digital storytelling in interpreting intangible values at heritage sites. While their study focused on educational aspects, this research revealed that Generation Z also expresses sensory experiences that they would share online, both positive and negative, such as feelings of peace or discomfort due to vandalism. This extends the work of Rizvic et al. (2019), who examined interactive digital narratives in cultural heritage by demonstrating how

sensory experiences communicate in digital spaces. Additionally, the concept of 'sense of place,' as introduced by Hummon (1992), provides a useful framework for understanding how these emotions shape tourists' interpretations of heritage sites, further enriching the discussion on sensory experiences in heritage tourism.

In line with the overall objective of this study – examining Generation Z's engagement with heritage tourism through social media – the sociocultural theme illustrates how interactions with others and local culture are expressed as narratives that participants intend to share online. The sociocultural theme aligns with Paganoni (2015) and Psomadaki et al. (2019), who emphasized the importance of participatory narratives and public engagement in heritage tourism. However, this study extends their work by showing how Generation Z expresses these interactions as stories they would share on social media, highlighting cultural exchanges and community building. This complements the research of Roque (2022) and Ziku et al. (2024), who explore cooperative models for heritage protection by showing how digital platforms serve as spaces for sharing sociocultural experiences. Furthermore, the role of cultural symbols, such as customs, traditions, and rituals, in shaping tourists' perceptions, as noted by Ajitoni (2024), reinforces the idea that sociocultural experiences are integral to heritage tourism. In conclusion, while this study confirms many aspects of the existing research, it also provides fresh insights into how Generation Z engages with heritage tourism through digital storytelling, offering new dimensions for future exploration.

7. Theoretical implications

Previous studies have indicated that the relationship between Generation Z and social media can be examined at two levels: passive (influenced) and active (influencing). In the passive context, social media serves as a tool for marketing and content production, capable of influencing Generation Z's purchase decisions and sustainable behaviors (Cismariu & Hosu, 2019; Pricope Vancia et al., 2023; Pitanatri et al., 2024; Utari et al., 2025; Wang & Iahad, 2025). Conversely, in the active context, Gen Z participates in content creation and sharing as part of the storytelling process on social media platforms. In this regard, the Sharing Theory provides an appropriate framework for analyzing the storytelling behaviors of this generation. According to this theory, sharing is not merely the redistribution of a post or image, but a social–interactive act comprising three stages: selecting content based on values and motivations, styling the representation using tools such as images, text, or hashtags, and negotiating through responses and post-publication engagement such as likes, comments, or re-shares (Androutsopoulos, 2014).

This study examines how Generation Z performs the first stage (selection) when storytelling about a historical–cultural experience is concerned. The primary distinction of this research from previous studies lies in the fact that many prior investigations have focused solely on the first stage from the perspective of motivations and drivers of sharing (Duan et al., 2025; Jeljeli et al., 2025; Jensen et al., 2025; Molefe et al., 2024; Volić et al., 2023; Wang & Iahad, 2025). Furthermore, although past research has addressed the sharing of images related to food, restaurants, accommodations, and even cultural and family values (Hanafiah et al., 2019; Jeljeli Et Al., 2025; Pitanatri et al., 2024; Yamagishi et al., 2024), little attention has been paid to how Generation Z represents narrated content with sensory, socio–cultural, visual, and historically–authentic indigenous dimensions

within a registered World Heritage site, and importantly, from the perspective of Generation Z themselves. This offers a novel perspective on the role of Generation Z on social media, one that transcends reductive interpretations such as 'media narcissism' and demonstrates that cultural authenticity in the virtual world is experienced, reinterpreted, and retold through the lens of Generation Z.

8. Practical implications

Heritage site managers and officials can use these insights to attract Generation Z visitors. Based on these findings, the following practical recommendations are proposed:

- Generation Z shows a strong interest in local narratives related to historical buildings, figures, and artifacts. Integrating these stories into the visitor experience enhances visitor engagement.
- Young tourists enjoy capturing and sharing images of cityscapes and intricate architectural details of the city. Creating visually appealing environments can effectively attract customers.
- Enhancing positive emotions, such as tranquility, spirituality, curiosity, and national pride, within heritage sites can enrich their visual appeal.
- Addressing negative aspects, such as repairing damaged structures and improving site security, can enhance young tourists' experience.
- Developing interactive spaces, raising local awareness of tourist engagement, and expanding cultural offerings (e.g. traditions, souvenirs, and local cuisine) can create a more immersive experience for Generation Z. Implementing these strategies can help transform them into digital ambassadors for cultural heritage.

9. Limitations and future research

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study is limited in its generalizability because it focuses on a single age group (Generation Z) and one UNESCO-listed heritage site. Future research should adopt an intergenerational perspective to compare storytelling practices across different age cohorts and examine narratives at various heritage sites. Employing quantitative or mixed-methods approaches could further validate and extend these findings, providing broader insights into the role of digital storytelling in cultural heritage tourism.

Notes

1. The Safavid dynasty, a Shia Iranian ruling house, governed Persia from 1501 to 1736. Founded by Shah Ismail I in Tabriz, it ended with Sultan Hoseyn's defeat by the Hotakis in 1722, followed by Nader Shah's overthrow of the Safavids in 1735.
2. Ismail I (July 17, 1487 – May 23, 1524) was the founder and first ruler of the Safavid dynasty, reigning from 1501 to 1524 as Iran's shah.
3. Qizilbash refers to a group of Shia Turkmen tribes who followed the Safavid order. Present in Anatolia, Syria, Azerbaijan, and the Caucasus, they played a key role in establishing the Safavid dynasty after the fall of the Aq Qoyunlu.

4. The Battle of Chaldiran took place in 1514 between Ismail I and the Ottoman Empire's Selim I. The Ottoman Empire decisively defeated Safavids in this battle.
5. Šāfi ad-Dīn Abolfath Iṣḥāq, renowned as Safi-ad-Din Ardabili, is the ancestor of the Safavid dynasty in Iran and the eighth generation descendant of Firuz-Shah Zarrin-Kolah.
6. Amin al-Din Jibrail is the father of Safi-ad-Din Ardabili and the ancestor of the Safavid shahs in Iran.
7. Chilla (literally "forty") is a specific rite for Dervishes in which the individual engages in forty days of penance and fasting.
8. Sama is a Sufi dance of meditative body rotation for spiritual purposes. With a long history in Iran, it has faced both support and opposition since Islam's advent. It involves group movement influenced by instruments like the Daf, Ney, and Tanbur.
9. The Ardabil Chini-House Museum, located within the Ensemble, features 1,256 compartments displaying 100 Safavid-era porcelain artifacts. These were either gifts from the Chinese Emperor to Shah Abbas I or commissions by the Iranian government.
10. Shah Ismail I's state emblem, a large hand on the wall facing his tomb, carries multiple meanings. It symbolizes the state, the five principles of Shiism versus the three of Sunnism, and the five sacred figures of Al al-Aba ("Family of the Cloak"). Additionally, it represents power, dominance, and an interpretation of the verse "Yadullah Fawqa Aydihim" ("The hand of God is above their hands").
11. The story of the old carpet is linked to the Ardabil carpet, a pair of renowned Persian carpets woven during Shah Tahmasp's reign for his ancestor's tomb. One is housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, while the other is in the Los Angeles Museum of Art.
12. Note that the native language in this region is Azerbaijani Turkey.

Disclosure statement

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

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