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Digital revitalization of cultural and historical experiences in the van lake basin with augmented reality: A conceptual approach

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Abstract

Augmented reality (AR) applications can support tourism through the reconstruction of historical structures in their original forms, interactive tour guides, and digital information systems. The aim of this study is to explore how the cultural and historical heritage of the Van Lake Basin can be digitized using AR technology and how a more interactive experience can be offered to visitors. Creating a conceptual framework in this research was conducted by reviewing the literature and considering the resources available in the region evaluates the impacts and feasibility of augmented reality in the regional tourism sector. The findings reveal that implementing AR applications at historical and touristic sites in the Van Lake Basin can contribute both to the local economy and to the region's potential to become a sustainable tourism destination. However, it has also been observed that certain infrastructure and technical requirements must be met in order to effectively implement such applications. It is anticipated that this study will increase academic interest in the region within the context of augmented reality and provide guidance for local authorities and the tourism sector, making AR applications a more attractive option.

Keywords: *Augmented reality, Digital revitalization, Van Lake Basin*

1. Introduction

Augmented reality (AR) has gained significant popularity in the tourism industry in recent years due to its potential to create enhanced tourist experiences. The widespread adoption of this technology has increased the importance of designing and adding value to visitor experiences by tourism enterprises (Cranmer, 2019). With the rapid advancement of digital technologies, the tourism sector is undergoing a major transformation. Innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality are making tourist experiences more interactive and personalized, thereby enhancing both individual travel processes and the overall efficiency of the tourism industry. In this context, the future of augmented reality in tourism appears to be highly promising. It is anticipated that evolving AI models will allow for more precise analysis of tourist needs, leading to the widespread adoption of personalized travel experiences. Similarly, AR technology is expected to play a more effective role in the promotion of tourist destinations and better meet visitor expectations.

The Van Lake Basin, one of Turkey's prominent tourist regions, stands out with its rich historical and cultural heritage. Hosting numerous civilizations from the Urartian period to the present day, the region is home to significant historical structures such as Van Castle, Akdamar Church, and Hoşap Castle. The integration of digital technologies into tourism can significantly enhance the preservation and promotion of this cultural heritage. In this context, it is believed that augmented reality technology, by offering visitors an interactive experience, can increase the region's tourism potential. Specifically, AR holds the potential for immersive storytelling, transforming visitors from passive observers into active participants in historical narratives (Tussyadiah, 2014). In this way, the emotional and cognitive connection that visitors establish with the site can be strengthened, creating a more memorable experience. The aim of this study is to explore how the cultural and historical heritage of the Van Lake Basin can be digitized through augmented reality (AR) technology and how a more interactive experience can be provided to visitors.

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2. Augmented Reality (AR)

Augmented reality (AR) is defined as a digital extension of a person's visual and auditory senses (Rehrl et al., 2008) and is typically accessed through smart glasses (head-mounted displays), laptops, tablets, and mobile phones. AR is described as an application that supplements the real world with computer-generated virtual objects coexisting in the same physical space (Azuma et al., 2001). Although AR research in the field of computer science dates back to the 1960s (Wahba, 1965), technological and infrastructural limitations have still restricted the widespread public use of AR. With the release of the iPhone in 2007, smartphones became a key tool for accessing AR applications and gradually exerted a dominating influence on the mobile device market (Carmigniani et al., 2011).

Augmented reality (AR) is one of the latest technologies offering new ways to deliver education effectively and engagingly. Considering the increasing popularity of mobile devices and new user interfaces worldwide, the use of AR on mobile devices has the potential to become a highly significant form of education. Augmented reality is a method of displaying digital content over a view of the real world, allowing possible interaction with the environment and the user. Unlike virtual reality, augmented reality does not isolate the user by requiring a headset to cover the eyes — it preserves the full perception of the world and is only enhanced by a distinguishable digital layer containing information via advanced ICT. AR is not confined to a laboratory or room setting; it is a concept that can be used without restrictions both indoors and outdoors (Kysela & Štorková, 2015). Augmented reality is a technology that combines physical reality with virtual elements. Through mobile devices, AR glasses, and tablets, users can experience digital content added to the physical environment in real time. AR is widely used in the tourism sector, particularly to showcase the original states of historical structures, create virtual guides, and offer interactive learning experiences.

3. Tourism and Augmented Reality

The tourism industry has historically developed largely in parallel with technology and has built its activities around attracting tourists' attention, sparking curiosity, and meeting expectations. Advances in information technology enable destinations to offer new opportunities and activities, thereby gaining a competitive advantage (Cibilic et al., 2021). One such technology, augmented reality, has the potential to enhance the tourist experience and help tourists access relevant information. In doing so, it increases tourists' knowledge about the destination while also enhancing their level of entertainment throughout the process (Fritz et al., 2005).

Tourism researchers and industry leaders recognized the potential applications of Augmented Reality (AR) in tourism as early as the 2000s, which led to the emergence of a new research focus. Researchers such as Moro et al. (2019), Wei (2019), and Yung and Khoo-Lattimore (2019) have conducted studies on both Virtual Reality (VR) and AR within tourism research. However, placing a particular emphasis on AR can be especially valuable. Although AR and VR may sound similar, the key difference lies in the nature of user interaction: AR allows users to interact with the real environment (requiring physical presence and travel), whereas VR is primarily based on computer-generated virtual environments. This distinction suggests that AR may be better suited for enhancing (co-creating) rather than replacing visitor experiences (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014). Augmented Reality has the potential to improve the tourist experience and assist tourists in accessing relevant information, thereby enhancing their knowledge about tourist destinations while also increasing their level of enjoyment throughout the process (Kečkeš & Tomičić, 2017). A key innovation offered by AR technology in this context is its support for the 'co-creation of value' process. Through AR applications, visitors interact with content based on their own interests and knowledge levels, thereby creating their own personalized tourist experiences. This moves beyond a standard tour package, making the experience unique for each individual (Neuhofer et al., 2014).

Augmented Reality also encompasses outdoor navigation, which demonstrates the use of AR for collaborative navigation and information retrieval tasks in urban environments, directly impacting the field of tourism. Information is presented to users through a head-mounted display, overlaying the real world with a combination of text, graphic objects, 3D models, and images. This setup supports the combination of both navigation and information browsing functions (Reitmayr & Schmalstieg, 2004).

In the context of tourism, some studies on augmented reality have focused on aspects of usability and cognitive issues. However, there is also research that explores the expected user experiences and actual experiences resulting from the use of augmented reality technology (Swan & Gabbard, 2005; Olsson & Salo, 2011; Olsson et al., 2009). In their research, Olsson et al. (2013) identified several relevant characteristics of the expected user experiences with augmented reality technologies, including enchantment, motivation, engagement, and a sense of novelty.

Ramos et al. (2018) argue that augmented reality applications represent a growing industry playing an essential role in redefining traditional tourism, making it more exciting through the overlay of data on tourists'

mobile screens. The purpose of augmented reality applications is to enhance the tourism experience and maximize entertainment levels, while also helping tourists access information and improve their understanding of destination attractions (Kounavis et al., 2012). Moreover, AR applications present unfamiliar areas as fun and interactive tourism activities. As usage increases, they offer destinations and tourism organizations the opportunity to improve the visitor experience (Dieck & Jung, 2015). Augmented Reality (AR) is revolutionizing the tourism and hospitality industry by providing immersive experiences and creating more engaging, informative, and accessible travel experiences that attract tourists from around the world. From virtual tours and immersive historical site recreations to navigation assistance and cultural education, AR technology is transforming how destinations are explored and experienced (Jalilvand & Ghasemi, 2024).

Research has demonstrated that augmented reality (AR) technology offers numerous benefits in the context of tourism, indicating that integrating this technology into the tourism sector is crucial for its development. The continuous advancement of technology and artificial intelligence tools has made the application of these innovations within tourism both inevitable and necessary. The benefits of AR technology in tourism are summarized in Table 1. An examination of Table 1 reveals that AR provides advantages in various areas, ranging from learning and entertainment to marketing, interaction, environmental engagement, and access to high-quality information. Therefore, the impact of augmented reality on tourism is an undeniable fact.

4. Areas where Augmented Reality Technology can be Applied in the Van Lake Basin

Historical Revitalization of Van Castle: Van Castle, a monumental citadel from the Urartian period, offers a prime opportunity for historical revitalization through augmented reality. Using a mobile device or AR glasses, visitors could point their cameras at the existing ruins

Table 1. Uses and Benefits of Augmented Reality in Tourism

Subject	Usage and Benefits
Reaching the target audience	AR provides content that is fine-tuned to different levels of knowledge, giving organizations more scope to reach and connect with wider audiences.
Usability	Anytime, anywhere access to information.
Competitiveness	Technology is seen as a way of attracting tourists and thus increasing AR competitiveness.
Context-aware experiences	Based on real-world locations, it provides information about objects, places or points of interest placed directly in context.
Differentiation	It creates ways for targets to differentiate themselves.
Participation	It can meet the needs of and engage new, modern and young tourists by combining leisure and educational elements from all demographics, especially young and 'modern' tourists.
Enhanced experience	AR creates a more enhanced tourist experience.
Improving the environment	Adding elements to real-world environments and offering different versions of information helps tourists explore their surroundings smoothly and efficiently.
Enjoyment	Creates a more enjoyable experience
Entertainment	AR can incorporate elements of leisure and entertainment into the tourist experience
Interaction	It enhances users' interaction with the physical world by adding additional information to revive memories or complete existing stories.
Learning	AR goes beyond enhancing the senses by contributing to learning. Discovery-based learning adds another layer to the learning experience.
Marketing	Market tourism services; catalogs, brochures and paper-based promotional materials can come alive and give a better idea of what the customer is buying
Mobile Commerce	Mobile Augmented Reality apps can support functionalities for mobile commerce
Mobility	Mobile Augmented Reality applications are practical and useful to improve mobility and portability, accessibility
Navigation	Tourists have little or no information about their environment and need precise information. AR allows tourists to explore their surroundings in a natural and realistic way.
Orientation	Ability to replace tour guides, signboards and maps.
Personalization	It can create a more personal experience by filtering information tailored to the needs and desires of the traveler, personalizing content according to specific needs, knowledge levels, interests, age and occupations, aspirations and expectations.
Quality information	It helps prevent information overload caused by out-of-profile information, easier access to information while traveling, and access to accurate information.
Sharing and connectivity	Adds value by providing instant sharing and connectivity, combining information from the web, social media and streaming techniques, allowing tourists to share, update and exchange information instantly
AR Tour Guides	AR travel guides are being developed to be animated in real time.
Value	AR creates a more valuable tourist experience and increases satisfaction.
Visualization	Knowledge about the world is increasingly expressed visually. Therefore, one of the main strengths of AR is that it allows tourist destinations to enhance and re-envision the experience by visualizing information.

***Source**: Cranmer, 2017*

and see a digital reconstruction of the castle as it stood in the 9th century BC. This application could superimpose the original formidable walls, towers, and inner structures over the current landscape, providing a powerful then-and-now comparison. Interactive hotspots could offer information about the function of different areas, such as the royal quarters or storage facilities, and animate scenes from daily life during the Urartu Kingdom. This method of in-situ visualization makes the historical significance of the archaeological remains more tangible and comprehensible. This approach directly mirrors the concepts demonstrated by pioneering systems like the Archeoguide project, which proved the immense potential of AR for visualizing lost structures directly within their physical, archaeological context, thereby revolutionizing the visitor experience at heritage sites (Vlahakis et al., 2002).

Digital Restoration of Akdamar Church: The Akdamar Church on Akdamar Island is famed for its intricate stone reliefs and the remnants of interior frescoes. Over time, many of these frescoes have faded or been damaged. Augmented reality can be used to digitally restore these artworks to their former glory. Visitors could view the walls and see a vibrant, complete version of the frescoes overlaid on the faint originals, with details and colors meticulously researched and recreated. Audio narrations triggered by looking at specific scenes could explain the biblical stories they depict and discuss the artistic techniques used by the original creators. This approach not only enriches the visitor experience but also serves as a digital preservation method. The methodology for undertaking such a digital restoration—from 3D reconstruction of damaged heritage to its final presentation as an interactive virtual exhibition—is well-documented, providing a complete framework for transforming fragile physical artifacts into robust and engaging digital experiences (Bruno et al., 2010).

Interactive Maps and Digital Guides: Navigating the expansive Van Lake Basin and understanding the connections between its various historical sites can be a challenge for tourists. An AR-powered application can function as an interactive map and dynamic tour guide. When a visitor points their device's camera at the horizon, the application could identify distant sites like Hoşap Castle or other landmarks, overlaying them with labels and directional arrows. This "AR view" would provide real-time, context-aware information, offering interactive narratives and historical facts as visitors travel through the region. Such a system enhances orientation and transforms the journey itself into an engaging part of the cultural experience. The integration of navigation with dynamic, location-based information exemplifies the evolving and expanding role of augmented reality in the broader tourism sector, a significant trend that has been extensively reviewed and confirmed in recent academic literature (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019).

Augmented Reality Experience at Van Museum: The Van Museum houses a rich collection of archaeological artifacts from the Urartu period and other civilizations. While these objects are impressive, their original context and use are often difficult for visitors to imagine. Augmented reality can bring these artifacts to life. For example, a visitor could view a display case containing pottery shards, and through their device, see the complete, assembled pot in 3D. They could rotate the virtual object, examine it from all angles, and even see an animation of how it was used in ancient times. This application turns the museum from a static collection into an interactive learning environment. Ultimately, the success of such an application hinges on positive visitor reception. Therefore, its design must be guided by established principles of technology acceptance, focusing on factors like perceived usefulness and ease of use to ensure visitors are not only offered the technology but are also motivated to adopt it for a more meaningful engagement with heritage (Tom Dieck & Jung, 2018).

There are the following requirements for the realization of augmented reality projects in the Van Lake Basin:

Hardware Infrastructure

The foundation of any mobile AR experience is the hardware in the hands of the visitor. This extends beyond simply having a smartphone or tablet. The quality of the experience is directly dependent on the device's capabilities, including a powerful processor (CPU/GPU) to render complex 3D models of sites like Van Castle without lag, and a high-resolution camera to clearly capture the real world. Crucially, for a geographically dispersed area like the Van Lake Basin, devices must have accurate and responsive sensors, particularly a Global Positioning System (GPS) for location-based AR and an Inertial Measurement Unit (IMU) for stable tracking of the user's orientation. Furthermore, significant consideration must be given to battery life, as AR applications are notoriously power-intensive and must function for the duration of a tourist's visit. These hardware prerequisites and their limitations are consistently identified as primary challenges in deploying effective AR solutions in real-world tourism settings (Kounavis, Kasimati, & Zamani, 2012).

Software and Development Platforms

The software layer is the engine that drives the AR experience. This involves selecting a robust

development platform, such as Google's ARCore for Android or Apple's ARKit for iOS, which provide the fundamental tools for tracking, environmental understanding, and rendering. The development team must build a mobile application that integrates these AR functionalities with a user-friendly interface. A critical, often overlooked, component is the back-end Content Management System (CMS). A well-designed CMS is essential for historians and project managers to easily update historical information, add new points of interest, or modify narratives without requiring a complete update of the application itself. The entire software architecture must be meticulously planned to handle tasks like recognizing specific locations, fetching relevant data, and overlaying digital content onto the real world in real-time, a set of challenges central to the definition and implementation of AR systems since their inception (Azuma, 1997).

3D Modeling and High-Fidelity Content Creation

Content is king in cultural heritage AR. The digital reconstructions of historical sites must be both visually stunning and historically accurate. This requires a specialized workflow and a multidisciplinary team. Technologies like photogrammetry and LiDAR scanning can be used to capture the precise dimensions of existing ruins, which then serve as a foundation for 3D artists. These artists, working in close collaboration with archaeologists and historians, must recreate the structures, artifacts, and even the environmental ambiance of the past. A significant challenge lies in optimizing these models; they must be detailed enough to be immersive but also efficient enough to run smoothly on mobile devices. The process of creating authentic virtual reconstructions for on-site AR experiences is a well-established field, proving essential for allowing visitors to "see" the invisible heritage of a location (Vlahakis et al., 2002).

User Experience and Interface Design

A technologically brilliant application will fail if it is difficult or confusing to use. The primary goal of UX design in this context is to make the technology feel invisible, allowing the visitor to focus on the cultural heritage, not the device. This involves creating an intuitive user interface (UI) with clear icons, simple navigation, and minimal "cognitive load" on the user. The initial onboarding process, which guides a first-time user, is critical. The design must also consider the diverse range of potential users, from tech-savvy children to older adults who may be less familiar with AR. Rigorous user testing is not optional; it is essential to identify points of friction and to refine the experience based on real visitor feedback. The ultimate aim is to create an experience that is not just novel, but also engaging, enchanting, and motivating for the user, aligning with core research on what constitutes a positive user experience in mobile AR services (Olsson et al., 2013).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study conceptually examined the potential of augmented reality (AR) technology to promote the cultural and historical heritage of the Van Lake Basin. The findings of the literature review and conceptual framework suggest that AR applications can enhance tourists' experiences by providing immersive, interactive, and informative encounters with historical sites. Augmented reality technology is an innovative approach to strengthen the promotion of cultural and historical heritage in the Van Lake Basin. Digital reconstruction of historical buildings can increase tourism revenues by providing visitors with a more immersive experience. In order to successfully integrate AR applications, technical infrastructure needs to be strengthened, content needs to be meticulously prepared and user-friendly solutions need to be developed. Augmented reality can make tourism not only more immersive, but also more informative and sustainable.

AR can offer great opportunities for regions with rich historical and cultural heritage, such as the Van Lake Basin. More interactive experiences in tourism with augmented reality: Tourists can interact directly with history instead of just watching it. Accessibility and fun learning: Complex information becomes easier to understand and more attractive for children and young people. Contribution to the local economy: AR-based digital tours and apps can increase tourism revenues in a region. Sustainable tourism: Thanks to AR, many positive changes are possible, such as virtual exploration without damaging natural and historical sites.

Based on this information, several recommendations can be offered to both tourism stakeholders and researchers. Therefore, tourism stakeholders should conduct studies to effectively implement augmented reality in the region. This study is conceptual; however, future research could explore more concrete approaches by measuring tourists' perceptions of the topic using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Furthermore, measuring the perceptions of local tourism investors and local residents is believed to be effective in assessing interest in the topic.

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Author statement: Author(s) declare(s) that All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. **Declaration of Conflicting Interests:** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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