



Mersin's Tourism Potential: A Qualitative Research on Mersin University Students

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive qualitative analysis of Mersin's tourism potential, drawing on the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of students from the Department of Tourism Management at Mersin University's Faculty of Tourism. Utilizing a phenomenological design as the qualitative research methodology, data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted during the spring semester of the 2023–2024 academic year (February–April 2024) with 28 carefully selected students representing all grade levels of the department. The data were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings compellingly demonstrate that students perceive Mersin as a destination endowed with rich natural and cultural resources, yet its tourism potential remains largely untapped. They identified the city's notable strengths alongside critical shortcomings, particularly in promotional and marketing strategies, urban transportation, infrastructure, superstructure facilities, and the diversity of available tourism activities. Moreover, students underscored significant opportunities in gastronomy, adventure tourism, and ecotourism, presenting actionable recommendations for harnessing this potential effectively. In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of integrating university students' insights into the strategic development of Mersin's tourism. Their perspectives offer invaluable and constructive contributions that could pave the way for the effective and sustainable enhancement of the region's tourism potential.

1. Introduction

Mersin, strategically located on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, holds significant potential as a tourism destination due to its rich historical heritage, diverse natural beauty, and developing infrastructure. The region's tourism profile encompasses not only sea-sand-sun tourism but also alternative tourism types such as cultural, highland, and gastronomy tourism. This diversity presents significant opportunities for sustainable tourism development (Timur & Getz, 2008). However, despite these rich assets, Mersin's share of the national and international tourism market is believed to be below its potential, suggesting the need for various strategies to enhance the destination's competitiveness. In this context, a detailed analysis of the region's current tourism status and future potential is critically important for developing effective tourism policies.

Accurately identifying and evaluating a destination's tourism potential enables the efficient use of resources, the achievement of sustainable development goals, and the acquisition of regional competitive advantage (Gunn & Var, 2002). Tourism potential is a dynamic concept that encompasses not only existing attractions but also new

tourism products that can be developed, infrastructure improvements, and market opportunities. Unveiling this potential allows local governments, investors, and other stakeholders to make informed decisions, thereby laying the groundwork for enhancing the region's overall performance in the tourism sector (Kozak & Rimmington, 1999). Therefore, for developing destinations like Mersin, a comprehensive analysis of tourism potential is a fundamental step in future tourism planning and strategy development.

University students, as a significant stakeholder group in the tourism sector, play a key role in the development and image formation of destinations, both as current and future potential tourists (Downie & Möller, 2002). Young people's travel motivations, expectations, and destination perceptions can differ from the general tourist profile, and this group actively shares their destination preferences and experiences, especially through digital platforms and social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). For this reason, understanding the perceptions, criticisms, and expectations of university students studying in a destination concerning the city they live in and experience provides valuable data for increasing that destination's appeal, particularly in the youth tourism market, and for more effectively utilizing its tourism potential.

This study, in light of the foregoing, aims to assess Mersin's tourism potential from the perspective of Mersin University students, who can be a significant indicator and shaper of this potential, using a qualitative research method. Students' current perceptions, their views on Mersin's tourist attractions, its weaknesses and strengths, tourism types that can be developed, and marketing strategies will shed light on the region's tourism future. While numerous studies exist in the literature on destination image and youth tourism the lack of a qualitative potential analysis focusing specifically on Mersin and the in-depth views of university students constitutes the primary problem and justification for this research (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006).

Mersin, with its strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean, rich cultural heritage, and diverse natural attractions, possesses significant tourism potential, including alternative tourism types such as culture, nature, and gastronomy, in addition to sea-sand-sun tourism (Timur & Getz, 2008). Despite ongoing efforts to increase the city's share in the tourism sector, it is stated that a deeper understanding is needed for this diversity and potential to reach a fully competitive position (Kozak, 2021). Scientifically determining a destination's tourism potential plays a vital role in formulating sustainable development strategies, efficiently utilizing resources, and enhancing regional competitiveness (Gunn & Var, 2002; Kozak & Rimmington, 1999). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of a region's tourism potential in all its dimensions is essential for shaping policies that will guide its tourism future.

In this analysis process, university students, representing a dynamic segment of the young population, are of strategic importance for the tourism sector as both current and future tourists (Carr, 2003). Students typically stand out for their openness to new experiences and their potential to disseminate travel experiences and opinions about destinations, especially through digital channels (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The perceptions, satisfaction levels, and expectations of university students living and studying in a city regarding that city offer valuable insights for developing tourism products specifically for young people, shaping promotional strategies, and improving the overall destination image. Therefore, examining the perceptions of Mersin University students regarding Mersin's tourism potential in this study will provide important clues for the city's tourism future.

1.2. Research Problem

Although the significance of Mersin's tourism potential and the understanding of this potential have been previously emphasized, it is noted that in-depth studies addressing this potential through a qualitative approach,

specifically focusing on the experiences, perceptions, and expectations of university students, are limited (Doğan, 2024). While quantitative data are valuable for identifying general trends, the richness and depth offered by qualitative methods are indispensable for understanding the underlying reasons for individuals' experiences, perceptions, and complex emotional responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Accordingly, the main research problem is that Mersin's tourism potential has not been sufficiently understood through the subjective perspectives of Mersin University students who live and study in the city. Although studies on students' general travel motivations or destination image perceptions for different destinations exist in the literature (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Ekinçi & Hosany, 2006), there is a clear need for a qualitative study focusing specifically on Mersin that delves into the detailed views of this target group and offers student-based recommendations for potential development.

The primary justification for this research is to fill the aforementioned knowledge gap, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of Mersin's tourism potential. The findings obtained from the perspective of university students are expected to provide actionable recommendations to local governments, tourism businesses, policymakers, and the Mersin University administration regarding improving the city's tourism opportunities, developing marketing strategies, and enhancing the quality of life for students. Furthermore, this study also aims to offer a methodological contribution to the relevant literature by highlighting the value of qualitative research methods in tourism, especially in understanding young people's destination perceptions and potential assessments (Riley & Love, 2000).

1.3. Research Aim

The primary aim of this research is to deeply explore Mersin city's tourism potential through a qualitative approach, focusing on the perceptions, experiences, evaluations, and expectations of Mersin University students who are studying in the city. Furthermore, the study aims to derive student-based implications for developing this potential. The research seeks to understand Mersin's current status as a tourist destination from the students' perspective and to provide data for future strategies.

1.4. Research Questions

In line with the primary aim and objectives of this research, responses will be sought for the following central research question and its detailing sub-research questions:

Central Research Question:

- How do Mersin University students perceive Mersin's tourism potential, what are their evaluations regarding this potential, and what experiences, expectations, and suggestions do they have for its development?

Sub-Research Questions:

- How do Mersin University students define Mersin's existing natural, cultural, historical, and recreational tourist attractions, and what is their level of awareness regarding these attractions?
- How do Mersin University students evaluate Mersin's tourism infrastructure (e.g., transportation, accommodation, food and beverage facilities) and superstructure (e.g., quality, variety, and service standards of tourist establishments); what are their satisfaction levels, encountered problems, and criticisms concerning these aspects?

- According to Mersin University students, what are the tourism potential areas in Mersin that are not yet sufficiently utilized, remain hidden, or are open for development (e.g., specific tourism types, regions, experiences, events)?
- How do Mersin University students perceive Mersin's general image as a tourism destination, and what are the main factors they believe influence this image positively or negatively (e.g., city atmosphere, safety, attitude of local people, promotional activities)?
- What concrete suggestions, expectations, and solutions do Mersin University students offer to local governments, tourism businesses, and university administration for more effective evaluation, promotion, and development of Mersin's tourism potential?
- How do Mersin University students describe their individual touristic experiences (if any) acquired as "temporary residents" in Mersin, and what are their thoughts and intentions regarding visiting Mersin as a tourist themselves or recommending it to others in the future?

1.5. Scope and Limitations of the Study

Scope of the Study

This qualitative research aims to examine Mersin's tourism potential through the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of a total of 28 students selected from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years of the Tourism Management Department at Mersin University's Faculty of Tourism. The study delves into students' in-depth views regarding the city's existing tourist attractions, infrastructure and superstructure, image, marketing activities, and untapped potential areas. This student group was chosen because, given their education in tourism and their lived experience in Mersin, they are expected to offer analytical and rich perspectives. The study is geographically limited to the Mersin province, and data were collected during the Spring semester (February-April) of the 2023-2024 academic year.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several key limitations. The research was conducted exclusively with students from the Tourism Management Department of Mersin University's Faculty of Tourism, meaning the findings are specific to this group and cannot be generalized to other stakeholder groups or the broader population. Since a qualitative research design was adopted, the study's goal is not to achieve statistical generalization but rather to offer in-depth understandings and rich descriptions of the subject. In this context, while the sample of 28 participants is adequate for exploratory purposes, it inherently restricts the generalizability of the findings (Dömbekci & Erişen, 2022; Karahan et al., 2022). Furthermore, due to the inherent nature of qualitative research, the researcher's interpretations and the analysis process may influence the findings. Additionally, data were collected during a specific timeframe, the Spring semester (February-April) of the 2023-2024 academic year, which means the results reflect perceptions unique to that period and could change over time; however, validity and trustworthiness strategies (e.g., member checking, expert review, audit trail) were consistently employed to minimize these potential effects.

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

This section will examine the core concepts that form the theoretical foundation of the research and review significant studies related to these concepts in the literature. First, the concept of tourism potential will be

discussed, followed by destination perception and image, and finally, existing information regarding Mersin's tourism resources and characteristics will be presented.

2.1. The Concept of Tourism Potential

Tourism potential is a multifaceted concept that refers to a region's or destination's capacity to attract, develop, and sustain tourism activities. Its accurate definition and analysis form the bedrock of tourism planning and policy development processes (Vengesai, 2003). This potential is not merely an assessment of the current situation but also allows for strategic decisions by anticipating future opportunities and threats. In the literature, it is generally defined as the ability of a geographical area to transform its natural, cultural, human, and artificial resources into a tourist product and offer it for tourism movement (Gunn & Var, 2002; Inskip, 1991), or as the totality of all resources and facilities a region possesses that can meet tourism demand and generate socioeconomic benefits (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

The elements forming the basis of this potential include: natural resources and attractions such as climate, geographical structure, and biodiversity (Butler, 1991); cultural and historical resources like historical artifacts, museums, traditional ways of life, and culinary culture (McKercher & du Cros, 2002); general tourism infrastructure such as transportation, communication, and basic services (Hall, 2000); tourism superstructure including accommodation, food and beverage, and recreation facilities (Cooper et al., 2008); ease and cost of access to the destination (Prideaux, 2000); and the quality of human resources in the tourism sector and the hospitality of the local population (Chon & Sparrowe, 2000). The existence and quality of these elements play a critical role in determining the level and type of a destination's potential and should be evaluated with a holistic approach.

A tangible indicator of a destination's tourism potential and a primary factor in stimulating tourism demand are its attractions. Destination attractions are a collection of elements that create a tourist's motivation to visit a place, promising them specific benefits and experiences (Lew, 1987; Formica, 2002), and ensuring the destination is perceived as "worth visiting." These attractions can be primary or secondary, as well as natural, cultural, or specially created (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981), and their diversity, authenticity, and quality directly influence the destination's market position.

Destination attractions are also a significant component of a destination's competitiveness. Competitiveness is a destination's ability to attract more tourists compared to others in the market, offer them more satisfying experiences, and generate sustainable tourism revenues (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). This strength is shaped not only by the existence of resources but also by the complex interaction of many factors such as effective management and marketing of these resources, service quality, price level, safety, and image (Heath, 2003). Therefore, while possessing rich potential and attractions is an important starting point for competition, effectively managing these assets with robust strategies, transforming them into tangible tourism products and experiences, and successfully delivering them to target markets are critically important for competitive advantage.

2.2. Destination Perception and Image

Destination perception, which critically impacts the success of a tourism destination, refers to the totality of impressions an individual acquires about a place through sensory and cognitive processes. Destination image, on the other hand, is the sum of beliefs, ideas, and emotional impressions attributed to a destination, formed in an individual's mind after these perceptions have been filtered (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Tasci et al., 2007). These two concepts directly determine tourists' destination choices, decision-making processes, and satisfaction, with a

positive perception and image significantly enhancing a destination's competitiveness (Chen & Tsai, 2007). The formation of destination image is a complex process. It is shaped by the interplay of individuals' organic (e.g., word-of-mouth from friends), induced (e.g., advertisements), and autonomous (e.g., online user reviews) information sources about the destination, the individual's socio-demographic and psychocultural personal characteristics, and the tangible and intangible attributes offered by the destination, exhibiting a dynamic structure over time (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Gartner, 1994; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003).

University students, in particular, tend to seek more authentic and independent experiences, often outside traditional tourism patterns, viewing travel as an opportunity for learning and personal growth, driven by their life-cycle specific desire for exploration (Pearce & Foster, 2007; Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002; Richards & Wilson, 2003). In this dynamic group's process of acquiring information about destinations and forming their perceptions, digital technologies, especially social media platforms, play a central role, profoundly influencing holiday planning and image formation processes (Fotis et al., 2012; Amaro et al., 2016). Studies conducted in the Turkish context also confirm that factors such as social environment, cost, safety, and the variety of activities offered are important in the destination choices of young people and university students (Ünal, 2020). Therefore, a detailed understanding of how a destination like Mersin is perceived by this segment and the factors influencing this perception is critically important for developing effective and target-oriented tourism strategies.

2.3. Mersin's Tourism Resources and Characteristics

Mersin province, with its geographical location dominated by the Mediterranean climate and its rich historical and cultural heritage, possesses significant tourism resources and characteristics. These resources form the foundation of the province's tourism potential and play a crucial role in shaping students' destination perceptions. Mersin's tourism assets can be examined in three main groups: natural attractions, historical and cultural heritage, and tourism infrastructure and superstructure.

Among the province's natural attractions, there are numerous beaches and bays stretching along approximately 321 kilometers of coastline, including popular spots like Kızkalesi and Yapraklı Bay; some of these beaches hold international standards such as the Blue Flag (TÜRÇEV, 2024; Zengin & Yamaçlı, 2023). Highlands like Gözne and Çamlıyayla, located at the foothills of the Taurus Mountains, offer significant potential for nature and highland tourism with their rich flora-fauna and cool climate (Özdemir & Yılmaz, 2023). The karstic landform has allowed for the formation of numerous caves such as the Sinkholes of Heaven and Hell (Cennet ve Cehennem), Astım Cave, and Aynalıgöl (Gilindire) Cave, as well as canyons like Göksu and Lamos (Akdağ, 2013). Furthermore, internationally important wetlands such as the Göksu Delta and other natural assets like the Yerköprü Waterfall support the city's ecotourism and special interest tourism potential (Akkaya, 2005).

Mersin boasts a rich historical and cultural heritage, having hosted many civilizations throughout its thousands of years of history, from the Hittites to the Ottomans. Ancient cities like Soli-Pompeiiopolis, Elaiussa Sebaste, Kanytelleis, Uzuncaburç, and Anemurium contain important archaeological remains from the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods (Yıldırım, 2017; Aydınoglu, 2022). The district of Tarsus, with its values such as St. Paul's Well and Cleopatra's Gate, is an important center for faith and cultural tourism. Medieval castles like Kızkalesi and Mamure Castle, and Alahan Monastery, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List (UNESCO, n.d.), are among the region's other significant monumental structures. Institutions like the Mersin Archaeology Museum and Tarsus Museum showcase this richness. The city's cultural vibrancy is also supported by events such as the Mersin

International Music Festival and intangible cultural heritage elements, particularly those deeply influenced by the nomadic Yörük culture (Yıldırım & Karaca, 2023). The unique flavors of Mersin cuisine, such as tantuni and kerebiç, are also significant attractions for gastronomy tourism (Karaca, et al., 2015).

In terms of general infrastructure and tourism-specific superstructure facilities, which play a critical role in a destination's tourism development, Mersin has national and international access via Adana Şakirpaşa Airport and a developing road network (Saarinen, et al., 2019). While there are accommodation facilities of various standards concentrated in coastal areas and food and beverage establishments offering local cuisine, it is believed that increasing the number of thematic and international standard facilities will enhance the destination's appeal (Saraç & Türkay, 2019). Improving tourist information services and intra-destination transportation opportunities is also important for enhancing the overall tourism experience.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the scientific methods and procedures followed to achieve the research's primary aim: to gain an in-depth understanding of Mersin's tourism potential through the subjective experiences and perceptions of university students. The study adopted a qualitative research design, which focuses on examining phenomena within their natural settings holistically and understanding the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences and events (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consistent with the exploratory and descriptive objectives of this design, phenomenology was chosen as the specific research method, focusing on grasping the essence and meaning of lived experiences regarding a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The core phenomenon was defined as "university students' perceptions of Mersin's tourism potential." The study's working group consisted of a total of 28 students (seven from each of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years) enrolled in the Tourism Management Department of Mersin University's Faculty of Tourism during the Spring semester of the 2023-2024 academic year, selected using the criterion sampling strategy within purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). Participants' demographic characteristics (e.g., year of study, gender, age, duration of residence in Mersin) showed diversity.

The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview form, developed by reviewing relevant literature and considering expert opinions in line with the research's aims and questions. This form included open-ended and exploratory questions designed to elicit students' in-depth views on Mersin's tourist attractions, infrastructure/superstructure, image, experiences, and potential (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Data were collected between February and April 2024 through one-on-one in-depth interviews, typically lasting 15-20 minutes, conducted face-to-face in quiet environments, usually on the university campus, after obtaining necessary ethical permissions and informed consent from participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data, aiming to identify significant themes and patterns within the data. This process encompassed the stages of familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To enhance the scientific rigor and trustworthiness of the study's findings, trustworthiness criteria recommended for qualitative research were considered. Accordingly, strategies such as credibility (member checking and expert review), transferability (rich and thick description), dependability (systematic research

process and audit trail), and confirmability (researcher reflexivity and support of findings with data) were applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1. Distribution of Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristic	Category / Range	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Year of Study	1st Year	7	25.0
	2nd Year	7	25.0
	3rd Year	7	25.0
	4th Year	7	25.0
Gender	Female	16	57.1
	Male	12	42.9
Age Range	18-19 Years Old	8	28.6
	20-21 Years Old	10	35.7
	22-23 Years Old	7	25.0
	24+ Years Old	3	10.7
Duration of Residence in Mersin	1 Year	7	25.0
	2 Years	6	21.4
	3 Years	5	17.9
	4 Years	4	14.3
	5+ Years (incl. Mersin locals)	6	21.4
Geographical Region of Origin	Mediterranean Region	12	42.9
	Other Regions	16	57.1

As shown in Table 1, the students in the study group had an equal distribution across year levels, with a predominance of female participants (though close to a balanced distribution), and their ages were concentrated within the typical undergraduate student age range. There was also diversity in their duration of residence in Mersin and their geographical regions of origin. This demographic diversity allowed for the capture of different perspectives and experiences regarding Mersin's tourism potential.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings obtained from the thematic analysis of data gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with a total of 28 participants (1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th-year students) enrolled in the Tourism Management Department of Mersin University's Faculty of Tourism during the Spring semester of the 2023-2024 academic year (February-April 2024). The findings will be conveyed under the main themes structured in accordance with the research questions and will be enriched with direct quotations from participants' statements supporting these themes. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, codes (e.g., P1: 1st Year Participant, P8: 2nd Year Participant) will be used in the quotations.

4.1. Findings Related to Mersin's Current Tourism Perception

The perceptions of university students who participated in the research regarding Mersin's current tourism status and how it is perceived as a tourist destination have been grouped under various sub-themes. These sub-themes include the first tourist elements that come to mind when Mersin is mentioned, and evaluations concerning the city's strengths and weaknesses from a tourism perspective.

4.1.1. First Tourist Elements That Come to Mind When Mersin is Mentioned

When participants were asked, "What are the first things that come to your mind in terms of tourism when Mersin is mentioned?", the responses generally concentrated around the city's geographical and natural characteristics and some iconic structures. The most frequently recurring elements were "sea," "coastline," "Kızkalesi," "port," and "citrus/orange groves." Some participants also emphasized the city's warm climate and "tantuni" as a gastronomic item.

- **P1 (1st Year):** "When Mersin comes to mind, I immediately think of the sea, and also that famous Kızkalesi, you know, that one."
- **P15 (3rd Year):** "Definitely the sea and the coastline. Its status as a port city is also important, I think. And of course, the orange and lemon groves, that smell..."
- **P22 (4th Year):** "Heat! I don't know how relevant it is to tourism, but that's the first thing that comes to mind. And tantuni, of course, my friends from outside always ask about it."

These initial associations offer important clues that form the basis of the Mersin image in the students' minds and indicate how it is identified with the city's most distinctive features.

4.1.2. Perceptions Regarding Mersin's Tourism Strengths

When participants were asked to state the aspects of Mersin they considered strong from a tourism perspective, the diversity of natural beauties, the richness of historical and cultural heritage, ease of transportation (especially intercity), and the appeal of certain local delicacies came to the forefront. Students particularly viewed the city's long coastline, highlands, and as yet undiscovered coves as significant potential.

- **P5 (1st Year):** "I think its biggest advantage is its sea and natural beauties. Its highlands are very beautiful, ideal for escaping in the summer. And it has a lot of historical places, like Tarsus for example..."
- **P12 (2nd Year):** "I think transportation is quite good, at least I came here easily compared to bigger cities. Its proximity to Adana is also an advantage. The food is also good, especially the local flavors."
- **P28 (4th Year):** "Mersin's strongest point is definitely its cultural and historical diversity. From Soli to Anemurium, there are traces of many civilizations. If these were promoted correctly, it would attract a lot of tourists."

While these strengths form the fundamental pillars of Mersin's tourism potential, participants also agreed that this potential is not being adequately exploited.

4.1.3. Perceptions Regarding Mersin's Tourism Weaknesses

When asked about Mersin's weak points or areas needing improvement from a tourism perspective, participants' statements generally focused on issues such as lack of promotion and marketing, urban transportation problems, insufficient environmental planning and cleanliness in some areas, limited variety of

tourist activities, and particularly the scarcity of social opportunities for young people. Additionally, some participants expressed concerns regarding the perception of safety and the quality of tourism personnel.

- **P2 (1st Year):** "I think its promotion is very lacking. I learned that Mersin has such beautiful places only after coming here. More advertising should be done."
- **P10 (2nd Year):** "Urban transportation can sometimes be really challenging, especially to get to tourist sites. And honestly, I'm hesitant to walk alone in some places at night."
- **P18 (3rd Year):** "It feels like there aren't many activities to do, especially for young people like us. It would be great if there were more concerts, festivals, different events. Also, some beaches and their surroundings could be better maintained."
- **P25 (4th Year):** "Tourism personnel can sometimes be insufficient, especially regarding language or providing information. Service quality needs to be improved."

These criticisms point to key problem areas that need to be addressed first for Mersin to fully utilize its tourism potential.

4.2. Student Perceptions Regarding Mersin's Tourism Potential

In addition to participants' perceptions of Mersin's current tourism status, their thoughts, expectations, and views on how the city's future tourism potential could be better utilized emerged as a significant theme. Under this theme, discussions included unexplored or underdeveloped potential areas, tourism types that could be enhanced, and expectations regarding infrastructure and superstructure development.

4.2.1. Perceptions Regarding Unexplored/Underutilized Potential Areas

Students believe that beyond Mersin's well-known tourist attractions, there are significant potential areas that have not yet been sufficiently unearthed or effectively integrated into tourism. These areas can be both natural and cultural. Participants frequently mentioned less-known canyons, hiking trails, untouched highland regions, and specific cultural heritage elements (e.g., local handicrafts, traditional nomadic "Yörük" life).

- **P7 (1st Year):** "Mersin isn't just about its coast; there are so many beautiful places inland... For example, I learned about Saklı Cennet Canyon by chance, but its nature is amazing, and there's no promotion for it at all."
- **P16 (3rd Year):** "I think the Yörük culture could be highlighted much more. Not just as a folkloric element, but as a living experience. Like authentic tents, local dishes, handicraft workshops."
- **P23 (4th Year):** "There are some ancient cities where only the signboards remain, with no information or proper arrangement. In fact, each of them could be a separate story, a separate attraction."

These statements indicate that students perceive Mersin's tourism potential to extend beyond its current offerings and believe there are values awaiting discovery.

4.2.2. Perceptions Regarding Tourism Types That Can Be Developed

Participants stated that Mersin's current tourism approach is generally centered around sea-sand-sun and, to some extent, cultural tourism. However, they highlighted that the city's geographical and cultural structure allows for the development of a much wider variety of tourism types. Significant potential was emphasized particularly

in gastronomy tourism, adventure tourism (e.g., nature sports, canyoning, paragliding), ecotourism, more organized and diversified highland tourism, and water sports.

- **P4 (1st Year):** "Mersin cuisine is incredibly rich. It's not just tantuni. Gastronomy tours, tasting events, cooking workshops based on these flavors would attract a lot of interest."
- **P11 (2nd Year):** "The Taurus Mountains are tailor-made for adventure sports. Rafting, mountain biking, climbing... If there were facilities and promotion for these, it would be very appealing, especially for young tourists."
- **P20 (3rd Year):** "Highland tourism should move beyond just a summer retreat concept. It could be enriched with ecotourism villages, nature education, bird watching, and similar activities."

These views reveal that students possess concrete ideas for diversifying Mersin's tourism portfolio and appealing to niche markets.

4.2.3. Expectations Regarding Infrastructure and Superstructure Development

Students expressed that significant developments are needed in both general infrastructure and tourism-specific superstructure for Mersin's tourism potential to be fully realized. Among these expectations were: improving public transportation options, especially to tourist areas; increasing the diversity and quality of accommodation facilities (particularly options suitable for young people and different budgets); developing tourist information and wayfinding systems; expanding recreational and social activity areas; and placing greater emphasis on cleanliness and environmental management throughout the city.

- **P9 (2nd Year):** "Even if you want to go to Kizkalesi or Cennet Cehennem, public transportation is very limited and difficult. This is a big problem, especially for students like us who don't have cars."
- **P17 (3rd Year):** "There should be more affordable, yet safe and clean, accommodation options for young people. Like hostels, thematic boutique hotels."
- **P27 (4th Year):** "The city should have more green spaces, bicycle paths, walking trails, and safe social places where we can spend time in the evenings. Tourism shouldn't be confined to just a few specific areas."

These expectations reflect the students' desire for a more livable and tourist-friendly Mersin and point to concrete improvements needed to realize the city's potential.

4.3. Perceptions and Suggestions Regarding Mersin's Tourism Marketing and Promotion

Among the significant findings are the perceptions of university students regarding marketing and promotional activities, which play a critical role in realizing Mersin's tourism potential, as well as their suggestions for improving these activities. The general consensus among students is that despite Mersin's rich potential, it is not being effectively promoted at national and international levels.

Most participants stated that they found Mersin's tourism promotion efforts to be insufficient. They specifically noted that Mersin's visibility as a tourist destination on digital platforms and social media is low, and existing promotions typically target a traditional and limited audience. Students believe that the city's diversity and unique values are not adequately reflected in promotional materials, and that a promotional approach revolving around a few well-known spots tends to dominate.

- **P3 (1st Year):** "I can't really say I've seen much advertising for Mersin. Especially on Instagram or elsewhere, it doesn't have active promotion like other popular holiday destinations. What's there is always standard stuff."
- **P13 (2nd Year):** "I think Mersin lacks a brand identity in tourism. I mean, a strong, common image doesn't come to mind when you say 'Mersin.' The promotions seem fragmented."
- **P21 (3rd Year):** "There might be a website or something, but how up-to-date or user-friendly it is, is debatable. Young people research everything online now; your presence there is very important."

Students offered various concrete suggestions for improving promotional activities. These recommendations include, first and foremost, the creation of a comprehensive and modern destination marketing strategy for Mersin, the much more effective utilization of digital marketing tools (e.g., social media, influencer collaborations, content marketing, virtual tours), the organization of customized promotional campaigns targeting specific audiences (especially young people and different interest groups), and promotions that "tell a story," highlighting not just the sea-sun aspects of the city but also its diverse facets like culture, gastronomy, and adventure. Furthermore, it was suggested that students themselves could be involved in these promotional processes, for instance, by contributing to Mersin's promotion through student projects, competitions, or volunteer ambassadorship programs.

- **P8 (2nd Year):** "Definitely more social media content should be produced. Short videos, engaging photos, maybe shares from travelers and influencers experiencing Mersin... These are very effective."
- **P19 (3rd Year):** "Thematic routes could be created to showcase every aspect of Mersin, supported by digital maps and apps. For example, a gastronomy route, a history route."
- **P26 (4th Year):** "I think we students could also be a part of this. We study tourism at the university, and we know our city. Projects that present Mersin from our perspective could be developed; that would be more sincere and effective."

These evaluations and suggestions from students provide significant data on current perceptions and future expectations regarding Mersin's tourism marketing and promotion. It is understood that an effective promotional strategy is a key factor in realizing the city's tourism potential and enhancing its competitiveness.

4.4. Findings Regarding Students' Tourist Experiences in Mersin and Future Intentions

This section examines how much university students who participated in the study experienced Mersin "through a tourist's eyes" during their studies, the impressions they gained from these experiences, and their intentions to visit Mersin as a tourism destination or recommend it to others in the future, either after graduation or at a later time. These findings are important as a reflection of the students' connection to the city and their overall satisfaction.

Participants' tourist experiences in Mersin varied. Particularly, students from outside the city expressed a greater willingness to explore Mersin's well-known historical and natural beauties in their first years, but this interest could decrease in later years due to course load or different social circles. Students who were originally from Mersin or had lived in the city longer generally tended to explore beyond the well-known places or seek out different activities. Overall, while students had experienced Mersin's tourism potential, especially in coastal areas and historical regions like Tarsus, they sometimes stated that the variety of tourist activities offered by the city and the quality of these experiences did not meet their expectations.

- **P6 (1st Year):** "When I first arrived, I was very excited; my friends and I immediately went to Kızkalesi, Cennet Cehennem. I also toured Tarsus. They are truly impressive places."
- **P14 (3rd Year):** "Honestly, I don't explore as much as I did in my first year anymore. We mostly stick to places we know and hang out at. But when I have guests, I definitely take them to the tourist spots."
- **P24 (4th Year, Mersin local):** "We already know these places, but looking at it from an outsider's perspective, yes, we have beautiful places, but the presentation and organization sometimes fall short. If you came as a tourist, you might not easily find everything."

Students' intentions to visit Mersin as a tourism destination or recommend it to others in the future were generally positive, but also came with some reservations. Many participants stated that they would likely visit the city in the future, especially with family or friends, to experience Mersin's natural and cultural beauties. Regarding recommending Mersin to others, while they generally used positive language, highlighting the city's potential and specific attractions (e.g., gastronomy, some historical sites), they also expressed that they could recommend it much more strongly if certain existing shortcomings (promotion, infrastructure, variety of activities) were addressed.

- **P1 (1st Year):** "I will definitely come back after graduation, especially for the sea in summer. I'd like to bring my family too."
- **P18 (3rd Year):** "I tell my friends about Mersin; I especially praise its food and some historical places. But for me to say, 'you absolutely must go,' some things need to be better, it feels like."
- **P27 (4th Year):** "If it were better marketed and developed in terms of tourism, yes, I would definitely recommend it. As it is now, I say, 'it has high potential but needs a bit more work.'"

These findings indicate that students generally harbor sympathy for Mersin but have clear expectations for the city's tourism potential to be managed and developed with a more professional approach. Their future intentions to visit and recommend will be shaped by the extent to which these expectations are met.

4.5. Student Suggestions for Enhancing Mersin's Tourism Potential

In addition to their current assessments of Mersin's tourism potential and their future perceptions, students from Mersin University's Faculty of Tourism offered various concrete suggestions for more effectively realizing and enhancing this potential. These recommendations primarily focused on improving promotion and marketing strategies, developing infrastructure and superstructure, increasing the diversity of tourism products, and strengthening stakeholder collaboration.

Suggestions for Promotion and Marketing Strategies:

A large majority of students emphasized the need for more modern, target-oriented, and creative strategies in promoting Mersin's tourism potential. In this context, they recommended more active and professional use of digital marketing channels, especially social media, the production of content appealing to young people, and collaborations with influential national and international influencers. Furthermore, they stated the importance of creating a strong destination brand for Mersin and consistently using this brand in all promotional activities.

- **P5 (1st Year):** "Mersin needs to be much more visible on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Up-to-date, energetic videos, engaging visuals should be shared. Maybe competitions could be organized among students, and their content could be used too."

- **P20 (3rd Year):** "Instead of just saying 'we have a sea, we have a castle,' Mersin's story should be told. The life here, the culture, the flavors... Promotions that create a more emotional connection should be made."

Suggestions for Infrastructure and Superstructure Development:

Participants highlighted the importance of improving infrastructure and superstructure elements that directly affect the quality of the tourist experience. Frequently voiced suggestions included facilitating and expanding public transportation to tourist areas, increasing the number of accommodation facilities catering to different budgets and expectations (especially hostels and thematic boutique hotels for young people), paying more attention to cleanliness and environmental management throughout the city and in tourist areas, and ensuring that information and directional signs are adequate and multilingual.

- **P12 (2nd Year):** "Minibuses or buses going to ancient cities and highlands should be more frequent and have clear schedules. If you don't have your own car, transportation is really a big obstacle."
- **P28 (4th Year):** "There should be more resting areas, public toilets, and trash bins in the city center and along the coastline. They are small things, but very important for tourists."

Suggestions for Product Diversification and Events:

Diversifying Mersin's existing tourism products and enriching the year-round event calendar were also among the students' key suggestions. Ideas such as gastronomy tours, wine tasting events, water sports centers, adventure tourism trails (rock climbing, canyoning, paragliding), ecotourism and agritourism activities, and increasing the number and quality of culturally themed festivals came to the forefront. Additionally, they requested that existing historical and cultural sites be made more interactive and experience-oriented.

- **P10 (2nd Year):** "Mersin has the potential to attract tourists not just in summer, but also in spring and winter. For example, special festivals and gastronomy events could be organized during citrus harvest season."
- **P25 (4th Year):** "Museums could be made livelier. Reenactments, workshops, technological presentations could be added. People want to immerse themselves in the story, not just look at objects."

Suggestions for Collaboration and Participation:

Finally, students stated that there should be stronger collaboration and coordination among local governments, the university, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations in developing Mersin's tourism potential. They specifically noted that involving students studying tourism in these processes, soliciting their ideas, and enabling them to take an active role in projects would contribute to both the creation of more innovative solutions and an increased sense of belonging to the city among students.

- **P19 (3rd Year):** "The municipality should undertake joint projects with the university's tourism department. We also have ideas, and we have energy. For example, we could volunteer to work on promoting the city."

These suggestions demonstrate that Mersin University Tourism Faculty students possess a constructive and visionary perspective on the city's tourism future. All codes and themes are shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Main Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes Emerged in the Research

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Codes	Theme/Sub-Theme Description
1. Mersin's Current Tourism Perception	1.1. First Associations and General Image	"sea/coastline," "Kızkalesi," "port," "warmth/climate," "local delicacies (e.g., tantuni)," "citrus," "developing"	The initial and general impressions that come to students' minds when "Mersin" and "tourism" are mentioned.
	1.2. Perceived Strengths	"natural attractions (sea, highlands)," "historical/cultural heritage," "gastronomy," "transport accessibility (partially)," "potential exists," "affordable price (for students)"	Positive characteristics and advantages that students believe Mersin possesses as a tourism destination.
	1.3. Perceived Weaknesses/Problems	"insufficient promotion/marketing," "transportation problems (intra-city/to tourist areas)," "infrastructure/facility deficiencies," "lack of activities/youth opportunities," "environmental/cleanliness issues," "safety concerns (some situations)," "service quality/staff inadequacy"	Negative aspects, deficiencies, and areas needing improvement in Mersin's tourism as observed by students.
2. Evaluations and Expectations Regarding Mersin's Tourism Potential	2.1. Unexplored/Underutilized Potential Areas	"unknown natural areas (coves, canyons)," "less known historical sites," "Yörük culture/handicrafts," "underwater potential"	Natural, cultural, or experiential potentials in Mersin that students believe are not yet sufficiently utilized beyond the current tourist offerings.
	2.2. Tourism Types That Can Be Developed	"gastronomy (more comprehensive)," "adventure/nature sports," "ecotourism/agritourism," "water sports," "thematic cultural tours," "organized highland tourism," "health/congress (potential)"	Tourism types that students believe can be developed or diversified in line with Mersin's existing resources.
	2.3. Expectations for Infrastructure and Superstructure Development	"prioritize/improve tourist transportation," "diverse/affordable accommodation," "thematic/modern facilities," "increase green spaces/recreation," "digital infrastructure (Wi-Fi, apps)," "improve information/wayfinding"	Concrete improvements and innovations students expect in Mersin's infrastructure and superstructure to better support its tourism potential.
3. Perceptions and Suggestions Regarding Tourism Marketing and Promotion	3.1. Evaluation of Current Promotional Activities	"promotion lacking/ineffective," "traditional methods," "target audience mismatch," "low digital visibility," "weak brand identity," "lack of narrative"	Students' critical evaluations of Mersin's current tourism promotion and marketing efforts.
	3.2. Concrete Suggestions for Improving Promotion	"active social media/digital marketing," "influencer utilization," "original content creation (video, blog)," "Mersin brand/slogan," "target audience-specific campaigns," "promotion with student participation," "marketing of festivals"	Specific ideas and strategies proposed by students to make Mersin's tourism promotion more effective.
4. Individual Tourist Experiences and Future Intentions	4.1. Personal Tourist Experiences in Mersin	"opportunity to visit some places," "limited experience/lack of opportunity," "positive/negative experiences," "exploration with friends," "safety perception (various)"	Personal experiences (or lack thereof) students had "as tourists" during their studies in Mersin and their impressions of these experiences.
	4.2. Future Visit and Recommendation Intentions	"desire to revisit (conditional/unconditional)," "tendency to recommend (conditional/unconditional)," "would prefer if developed," "emphasizing its potential"	Students' tendencies to revisit Mersin as a tourist or recommend it as a tourism destination to others in the future, and the factors influencing these tendencies.
5. General Solution Suggestions for Enhancing Tourism Potential	-	"stakeholder collaboration essential," "student opinions valuable," "sustainability principle," "professional management approach," "service quality training," "strengthening safety perception," "local community awareness/participation," "appropriate investment incentives"	More comprehensive and strategic solution proposals and expectations from students for enhancing Mersin's overall tourism potential.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to deeply understand and evaluate Mersin's tourism potential through a qualitative approach, focusing on the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of students enrolled in the Tourism Management Department of Mersin University's Faculty of Tourism. The thematic analysis of data obtained from semi-structured interviews with 28 students, conducted between February and April 2024, yielded significant findings regarding Mersin's tourism potential. The primary results indicate that university students generally perceive Mersin as a destination with natural beauties and historical richness, but one that has not yet fully utilized its tourism potential. While the city's diverse natural attractions, rich cultural heritage, and gastronomic values stand out as its tourism strengths, key weaknesses identified include insufficient promotion and marketing, urban transportation problems, inadequate environmental planning and cleanliness in some areas, and a limited variety of social and tourist activities, particularly for young people. Students believe Mersin possesses significant development potential in areas such as gastronomy tourism, adventure tourism, ecotourism, and more organized highland tourism. In light of these findings, comprehensive answers were generated for the central research question posed at the beginning of the study ("How do Mersin University students perceive Mersin's tourism potential, and what experiences, expectations, and suggestions do they have for its development?"); students' perceptions, potential evaluations, experiences, expectations, and suggestions provide guidance for concrete steps towards the city's tourism future.

Based on these findings, various recommendations can be offered to different stakeholders for the more effective development and evaluation of Mersin's tourism potential. For Mersin's local administrations and tourism planners, it is recommended to restructure the city's tourism promotion and marketing strategies, especially by focusing on digital platforms and youth-oriented content; increase infrastructure investments to facilitate access to tourist areas; raise environmental management and cleanliness standards city-wide; and develop policies that support diverse tourism types (e.g., gastronomy, adventure, culture). For tourism businesses in Mersin, it is suggested that they improve their service quality, offer innovative products and experiences tailored to the expectations of young people, highlight local culture and gastronomy, and utilize digital marketing tools more effectively. For Mersin University and other educational institutions, it is recommended to create platforms that enable students' active participation in tourism development processes, support student projects, and organize training and events aimed at increasing tourism awareness. Finally, for future research, it would be beneficial to examine Mersin's tourism potential from the perspectives of different stakeholder groups (e.g., local residents, business operators, different tourist segments), to support the qualitative findings with quantitative studies, and to conduct more detailed feasibility studies for the identified niche tourism types.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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