

A THEMATIC TOURIST ROUTE PROPOSAL BASED ON SELJUK ARCHITECTURE AND MEVLEVI HERITAGE IN ANATOLIA ¹

ANADOLU'DA SELÇUKLU MİMARİSİ VE MEVLEVİ MİRASINA DAYALI TEMATİK BİR TURİST ROTASI ÖNERİSİ

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ABSTRACT

Mevlevi belief, rooted in Sufism, continues to influence many people through its rituals, architectural patterns, stories, and legends, offering a rich thematic potential for tourism. This study aims to develop a thematic route by focusing on Mevlevi heritage sites that emerged during the Seljuk period, as well as other Seljuk-era structures that share similar characteristics and locations. The primary objective is to promote and enhance one of Turkey's distinct religious and cultural traditions in an effective and sustainable manner. To achieve this, a qualitative research method was adopted, and secondary data from the last ten years were collected through Scopus and institutional databases. These data were analyzed using document analysis. The findings were thematically categorized based on Mevlevi-related structures, architectural elements, and associated narratives, which collectively formed the foundation of the proposed route. As a result of the analysis, Mevlevi heritage sites, architectural themes, and related narratives were compiled to construct a tourist-oriented route. The proposed route provides a practical application for showcasing Turkey's cultural and religious heritage. Starting from Ankara and extending through Tokat, Sivas, Kayseri, Niğde, Karaman, and Konya, the route offers tourists the opportunity to explore both Mevlevi culture and architectural works from the Seljuk period. A total of 47 sites are included in the itinerary, allowing participants to gain historical insights and experience Mevlevi rituals firsthand. Such thematic tours contribute not only to cultural preservation and tourism diversification but also to local economic development. In conclusion, this study has compiled significant religious structures in alignment with its objectives and presented a thematic touristic route as a contribution to the literature.

ÖZET

Mevlevilik, tasavvufa dayalı bir inanç olup, ritüelleri, yapı desenleri, hikâyeleri ve efsaneleriyle pek çok insanı etkilemekte ve turistik bir tema sunmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Selçuklu döneminde doğan Mevlevi eserlerinden ve benzer konumu paylaşan diğer Selçuklu eserlerinden tematik bir rota oluşturulması hedeflenmektedir. Böylece Türkiye'nin farklı inanç ve kültürlerinden birinin etkin ve verimli bir şekilde tanıtılması ve geliştirilmesi amaçlanmaktadır. Bu amaçla nitel araştırma yöntemi benimsenmiş, Scopus ve kurumsal veri tabanlarından elde edilen son 10 yıla ait ikincil veriler doküman analizi yoluyla incelenmiştir. Bulgular, Mevlevi inancına ilişkin yapılar, mimari temalar ve anlatılar etrafında tematik olarak gruplandırılmış ve rota bu doğrultuda yapılandırılmıştır. Analiz sonucunda, Mevlevi eserleri, yapısal temalar ve hikâyeler derlenerek turist temalı bir rota oluşturulmuştur. Önerilen rota, Türkiye'nin kültürel ve inanç mirasını tanıtmak için pratik bir uygulama sunmaktadır. Ankara'dan başlayıp Tokat, Sivas, Kayseri, Niğde, Karaman ve Konya şehirlerini kapsayan bu rota, turistlere Mevlevi kültürünü ve Selçuklu dönemi eserlerini tanıma fırsatı vermektedir. Tur sırasında ziyaret edilecek 47 farklı eser, katılımcılara hem tarihi bilgi edinme hem de Mevlevi ritüellerini deneyimleme imkânı sunmaktadır. Bu tür tematik turlar, yerel ekonomilere de katkı sağlayarak turistik faaliyetlerin yaygınlaşmasına ve çeşitlenmesine olanak tanımaktadır. Sonuç olarak, çalışmanın amacına uygun olacak şekilde inanç yapıları derlenerek tematik bir turistik rota oluşturulmuş ve literatüre kazandırılmıştır.

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1. Introduction

Anatolia, or Asia Minor, has always been of great importance in history due to its role as the home to the earliest civilizations. With its fertile land and strategic geographical location, Anatolia has hosted many different civilizations over the ages. The region has maintained its significance for civilizations such as the Urartians, Assyrians, Sumerians, Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, and Ottoman Empire. One of the most important civilizations established in Anatolia was the Anatolian Seljuk Sultanate, or the Rum Sultanate. Only six years after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, where the Great Seljuk Empire defeated the Byzantine Empire and captured Central Anatolia, the Anatolian Seljuk Sultanate was established in 1077, separating from the Great Seljuk Empire (Laurent, 1988). As a Muslim dynasty, the Anatolian Seljuk Sultanate played a crucial role in shaping the architectural and cultural landscape of Islamic Anatolia.

Although the use of human and animal figures in Islamic art is limited, the monuments and structures built by the Anatolian Seljuk Sultanate were decorated with human, animal, and mythological figures. This unique stylistic expression was a result of the fusion between newly adopted Islamic principles and the Seljuks' Persian and Shamanistic heritage. The Seljuks built many structures across Anatolia, including mosques, caravanserais, madrasas, hospitals, tombs, palaces, castles, and bridges.

Among the notable figures who emerged during the Seljuk period in Anatolia was Mevlâna Celâleddîn Rûmî. His teachings and influence led to the formation of the Mevlevi Order, making him one of the most prominent spiritual and cultural figures of the era. Mevlevilik (the Mevlevi Order) is a belief system founded by Sultan Veled, the son of Mevlâna, in Konya during the Seljuk period. The term "Mevlâna," attributed to Celâleddîn Muhammad, who was born in Belh, means "our master." Mevlâna was born in 1207 in the city of Belh, Afghanistan, and spent his early years learning about Islam. After meeting Shams of Tabriz, he adopted the Mevlevi belief system and embarked on a deep inner journey. Following Mevlâna's death, the Mevlevi Order spread throughout Anatolia, with Konya at its center, and deeply influenced social life for centuries (Küçük, 2000).

Mevlâna's approach to Sufism was not based on the esoteric practice of Esma and asceticism, but rather on love and ecstasy. This approach offered a profound spiritual experience, incorporating music, poetry, and the Whirling Dervishes' ritual (sema). Though Mevlâna did not initially intend to establish a sect, his followers later organized his teachings into a specific set of principles, forming a structured order (Küçük, 2000).

In Mevlevilik, mysticism and tolerance replaced legalism and religious dogma, and places of worship were known as mevlevihane instead of mosques. Sema replaced prayer, and music and hymns replaced the call to prayer. The Mesnevi, rather than the Qur'an, became central in spiritual practices (İrdelmen, 2016). Mevlevilik holds a unique position among Sufi traditions, especially within Turkish Sufism, with its rich spiritual and material culture (Bölükbaşı, 2011, p. 15).

Mevlâna's emphasis on culture and art is reflected in the Mevlevi monuments, structures, and rituals. While Mevlevilik shares many architectural and cultural features with Seljuk-era works, it leaves a distinct impression. Beyond the physical structures, Mevlevilik represents a unique, intangible cultural heritage, including its rituals, stories, legends, teachings, and even its cuisine and souvenirs. One of the most widely studied topics in the relationship between Mevlevilik and tourism is its culinary tradition (Ertaş et al., 2017; Yılmaz et al., 2018). The culinary culture is largely based on symbolic, cultural, and religious rituals. Yılmaz et al.

(2018) refer to a famous saying by Mevlâna: "I was raw, I was cooked, I am burned." This reflects how the spiritual dimension of Mevlevilik also influences its culinary practices. Moreover, Konya, the capital of the Seljuk Empire and Mevlâna's home, is highlighted as one of the most significant gastronomic cities. In addition to its culinary culture, Mevlevi culture encompasses various rituals, traditions, and stories. The sema performances, Şeb-i Aruz ceremony, therapeutic effects, Mesnevi stories, hymns, and music all contribute to Mevlevilik's appeal as a tourism theme (Türker & Çelik, 2012; Yozcu et al., 2019; Özen, 2020). Given its rich cultural and spiritual elements, Mevlevilik serves as a meaningful foundation for developing experience-oriented tourism products that resonate with modern travelers.

With the advent of postmodernism, tourist expectations have evolved, especially after the pandemic, with tourists now seeking more personal, meaningful, and unforgettable experiences (Kotler et al., 2021). As a result, the creation of thematic routes has gained increasing importance. Offering tourists different but meaningful experiences is essential for creating lasting memories. Given tourists' increasing interest in preserved, untouched natural environments and cultural heritage sites, tourism product diversification has been pursued to enhance the overall experience. In this context, the concept of "tourism routes" has emerged as a way to provide sustainable competitive advantages and attract more tourists (Kervankıran & Çuhadar, 2014, p. 578). Thematic routes make it easier for tourists to navigate regions based on cultural, historical, or environmental features. These routes can differ in size, scale, and the level and type of information and services provided (Olsen, 2003). Destination managers and travel agencies increasingly seek to develop themed routes, focusing on gastronomy, beliefs, culture, and mythology to enhance destination marketing (Aksakallı & Bayraktar, 2018, p. 211). The Turkey Tourism Development and Promotion Agency, established on July 15, 2019, works to convert Turkey's values into themed routes, including bike routes, Mesopotamia routes, Trans-Anatolian Rally routes, and gastronomy routes. The agency's focus on themed routes demonstrates its commitment to promoting these unique experiences (TGA, 2021).

The development of thematic routes has become essential for promotional and development activities in tourism across Turkey. The theme of belief, in particular, attracts a wide range of audiences. Therefore, utilizing the Mevlevi belief as a thematic experience route represents a significant product diversification strategy. One of the most important Mevlevi rituals, the Şeb-i Aruz, attracts thousands of tourists to Konya every year between December 7th and 17th. In fact, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the region was visited by 158,000 tourists during this period in December 2019 (Doğan, 2019). For this reason, the study focuses on using the widely popular Mevlevi belief as a theme, with the goal of creating a tourist route. The study is significant as an example of Turkey's new promotional and development strategy in tourism through thematic routes.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Themed Tourist Route

Themed tourist routes constitute a strategic and multidimensional framework within contemporary tourism development, whereby cultural, historical, and environmental narratives are systematically interwoven to form cohesive and immersive travel experiences. These curated itineraries not only facilitate sustainable tourism practices but also enhance visitor engagement and contribute significantly to the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage assets. By providing travelers with structured yet flexible pathways through

diverse regions, thematic routes offer meaningful opportunities for deeper exploration and cultural connection.

The importance of thematic consistency in crafting compelling tourism experiences is well documented. Martens (2022) underscores that well-developed narrative structures are foundational in shaping the emotional and cognitive dimensions of tourist engagement. Furthermore, the incorporation of customized experiences—such as personalized sub-routes and activity-based modules—has been shown to reinforce tourists' attachment to the overarching themes, fostering a heightened sense of involvement and satisfaction. This conceptualization aligns with the findings of Dayoub et al. (2020), who emphasize that thematic routes promote a self-paced, reflective mode of travel that allows tourists to engage deeply with the socio-economic and historical significance of each site. Such a "slow tourism" paradigm resonates strongly with the core principles of sustainable tourism, where the integration of cultural meaning into tourist experiences is essential for both destination stewardship and visitor fulfillment.

Moreover, the role of technological innovation in enriching themed tourism routes is increasingly prominent. Smart tourism systems, for instance, enable adaptive itinerary design through real-time data and user preferences, thereby enhancing interactivity and personalization (Torabi et al., 2022). These technologies facilitate context-sensitive exploration, offering tourists tailored recommendations that align with their interests, motivations, and travel behaviors. Consequently, digital tools not only elevate the experiential quality of themed routes but also support their scalability and adaptability across diverse tourist profiles.

Effective development and management of themed tourist routes also necessitate adherence to a set of foundational principles. According to Auttarat et al. (2021), elements such as transparent communication strategies, institutional and political backing, and continuous monitoring mechanisms are vital for sustaining the integrity and functionality of such routes. These operational components ensure that thematic narratives are coherently conveyed, stakeholders remain aligned, and long-term cultural and economic benefits are realized.

Themed tourist routes represent an integrative and forward-thinking approach to tourism planning—merging cultural storytelling, sustainability, and technological facilitation into a unified experience model. By fostering meaningful interactions between visitors and destinations, these routes contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage. Future advancements in this domain will benefit from increased community participation, adaptive technologies, and a continued focus on sustainable development principles, ultimately elevating both the tourist experience and the resilience of destination ecosystems.

In Turkey, recent years have witnessed an increase in studies proposing thematic tourist routes that center around cultural, literary, or gastronomic elements. For instance, the "Author Tombs Route" proposed by Işık and Balcı (2023) focuses on literary tourism and cemetery heritage, while another study highlights olive oil culture as the central narrative for a thematic route encompassing gastronomic and heritage values (Büyük & Can, 2020). Both cases emphasize narrative coherence, cultural embodiment, and emotional connectivity as key components of route development.

In contrast to these examples, the present study offers a more layered narrative structure that intersects personal memory with collective cultural heritage. Moreover, by employing a participatory methodology, this route is positioned not merely as a physical itinerary but as an

immersive framework that integrates local identity, emotional heritage, and historical consciousness, offering a holistic travel experience.

3. Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative research method. This method is defined by Yıldırım and Şimşek (2008, p.39) as "a study in which qualitative data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, and document analysis are used, and a qualitative process is followed to reveal perceptions and events in their natural environment in a realistic and holistic manner." In addition to the Seljuk period works, Mevlevi belief-related structures, and stories, thematic tourist routes were also examined through document analysis. Document analysis is a type of qualitative data analysis based on the detailed and systematic examination of historical written sources (Wach, 2013; Kozak, 2018, p.88). For secondary data, a search was conducted in the Scopus database, limited to the last ten years, using keywords such as "Mevlevi," "Seljuk," "works," "thematic routes," and "Mevlâna." Additionally, tourism reports (TÜİK, Booking, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Turkish Tourism Promotion and Development Agency, UNESCO, UNWTO) were used as secondary data. The data were collected in April 2024. In the obtained data, the selected works were examined, and a specific route was designed around architectural works and stories.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, multiple strategies grounded in qualitative research methodology were employed. Initially, the authors conducted individual analyses of the data and later synthesized their findings through collaborative discussion and consensus-building. This dual-phase analysis process contributed to the internal validity of the interpretations. Furthermore, peer debriefing was conducted with two external researchers, both of whom provided feedback on the coherence and relevance of the identified themes. To strengthen the study's reliability and limit researcher bias, methodological triangulation was adopted by incorporating the perspectives of a third field expert with academic experience in tourism heritage and cultural route development. This expert independently reviewed the findings and confirmed the thematic consistency and interpretative logic. Given the nature of the research—document analysis—no participant data or coding tables were used. However, comprehensive referencing of all analyzed sources was provided, ensuring transparency in the analytical process. To enhance the explanatory depth of the proposed route model, detailed narratives were constructed, supported by researcher memos and field-specific observational insights. These procedures, including data source triangulation, expert validation, peer debriefing, and reflexive note-taking, collectively reinforce the study's methodological rigor, ensuring both confirmability and transferability within the qualitative research paradigm.

4.Result

Cultural tourism is defined as a tourism phenomenon that involves direct and indirect activities related to experiencing, learning, and gaining information and experiences about the tangible and intangible values of modern and historical cultures, and is dependent on the purchase of related products and services (Gülcan, 2010, p.102). In addition to its income-generating effect, cultural tourism helps in the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural values by transforming them into tourist products. For this reason, it is an important form of tourism (Öztürk & Yazıcıoğlu, 2002, p.189). Mevlevi ceremonies are considered intangible cultural heritage by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey. Additionally, in 2007, they were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List of sites that need to be protected (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2008). Therefore, the theme of the proposed route is shaped by the belief system of Mevlevi Sufism. In the route, along with the

Mevlevi culture and works, important Seljuk period monuments from the time of Mevlâna's birth are also included. Other Seljuk structures sharing the same period, such as mosques, tombs, and madrasas, have been added to the route with a focus on not deviating from the belief theme.

Mevlâna Celaleddin Rumi, Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, Ahi Evran, and Nasreddin Hoca are known as the four major figures who shaped the culture of the Seljuk period (Özsavaşçı & Özçelik, 2022). Therefore, Mevlâna and the belief in Mevlevi Sufism were among the most influential factors in shaping the culture during the Seljuk period. One of Mevlâna's most significant features is that he introduced a new belief system to the Anatolian culture. This Sufi belief contributed to the social culture in various fields such as art, architecture, sociology, cultural life, and others. Thus, a value centered in Anatolia was imparted to humanity that affected the world both materially and spiritually for centuries. This belief system also brought along certain rituals, teachings, and discussions. All these unique activities led to the emergence of a new culture. The Mesnevi, ghazals, and rubaiyat are the most important works left behind by Mevlâna. These works are the most valuable tools for transmitting the culture they created. The Mevlevi belief and culture emphasize the training of both the soul and the body. Therefore, people who believe in this system are tested through 1001 days of hard work. It is also known that there are separate culinary rituals during this test process. Those who complete the examination process are entitled to become Mevlevi. Every person who earns the title of Mevlevi must carry out the rituals of this belief system. The most important of these rituals is the sema ceremony, which is defined as reaching the absolute Creator (Milliyet, 2008). Known culinary rituals have themselves become a gastronomic theme. Many studies on this topic can be found in the literature (Aksoy et al., 2016; Azsöz, 2016; Ertaş et al., 2017; Ceylan & Yaman, 2018; Seçim, 2020). Sema ceremonies, Şeb-i Aruz (Mevlâna's death anniversary), Mevlevi discussions, hymns, and music performances are other rituals that are used for tourism purposes. In tourism research, topics such as marketing, brand cities, cultural heritage, preservation, branding, travel motivations, religious tourism, development, tourist behaviors, travel intentions, eco-tourism, and sustainability are commonly discussed (Tapur, 2009; Görkemli & Solmaz, 2012; Özdemir, 2013; Başoda & Aylan, 2014; Eşitti & Kınkır, 2015; Altun & Çınar, 2019; Korkmaz, 2021). In parallel with the ritualistic and symbolic richness of Mevlevi culture, the architectural and spiritual legacy of the Seljuk period has also been widely discussed in tourism studies, particularly in relation to cultural heritage, sustainability, and thematic experience design.

The Seljuk period and its monuments are associated with tourism in the literature. In the studies reviewed, topics such as religious tourism, niche tourism, marketing, sustainability, gastronomy, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, tourism-focused redevelopment, economy, destination management, rural tourism, thermal tourism, and conference tourism are discussed (Akış, 2007; Tapur, 2009; Dinç & Öztürk, 2013; Yenice, 2014; Büyükşalvarcı et al., 2016; Karabulut & Kaynak, 2016; Üzümcü et al., 2017; Atasoy et al., 2018; Çiftçi & Öğretmenoğlu, 2018; Kapan, 2018; Yılmaz & Ulusoy, 2018; Yenil & Akyazı, 2019; Özav & Ersöz Tügen, 2020).

In this study, cities important for the Seljuk period, where Mevlevi Sufism originated, have been identified. The closest destinations were selected from the cities identified for creating a tourist route. Mevlevi Sufism is widespread in Konya, Tokat, and Istanbul (Mevlevi Biography, 2022). Although Istanbul is far from the other two cities, the latter are close to each other. Therefore, a tourist route from Tokat to Konya has been planned. The route includes six cities: Tokat, Sivas, Kayseri, Niğde, Karaman, and Konya. The created route is

shown in Figure 1 below. The route includes not only Mevlevi works but also significant Seljuk-era structures.

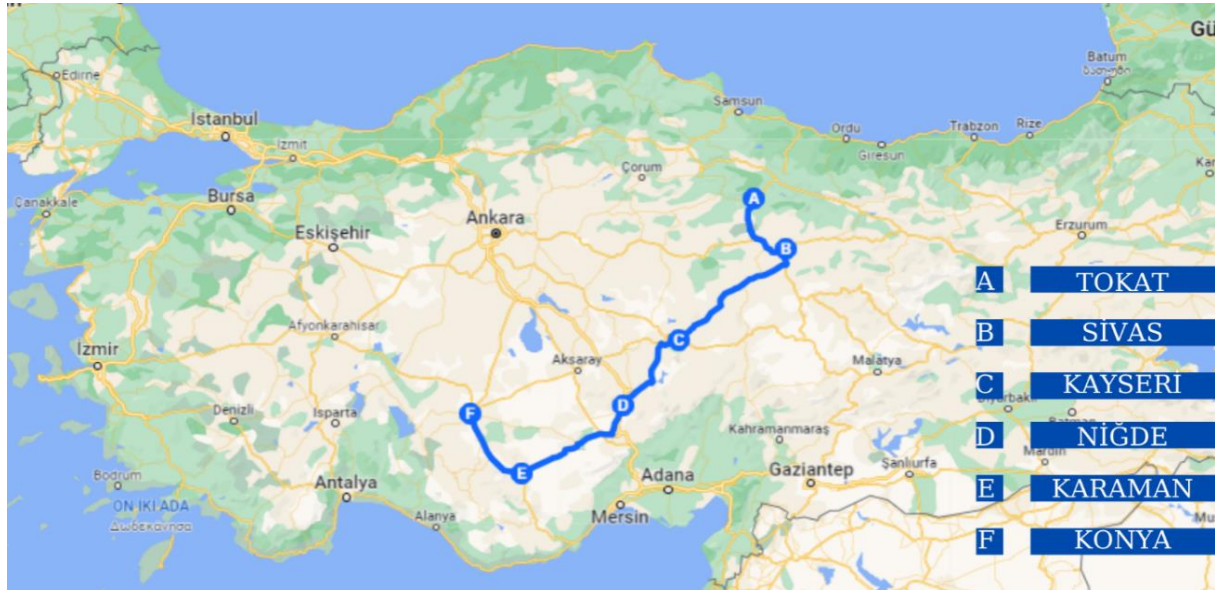


Figure 1 Themed Tourist Route Map

Source: Created by the authors

The Mevlevi lodges and Seljuk monuments in the selected destinations have been compiled. A total of 47 works are listed in Table 1 below. These works have been arranged based on the Mevlevi belief system, without deviating from the focus of the belief theme, and have been added to the route.

The distance between Tokat and Konya is 737 kilometers. Although the distance between the selected destinations is this far, the tour will start from Ankara, the closest center. The total length of the route, which includes 47 works, is 2098 kilometers. A total of 30 hours has been allocated for visiting the sites. The tour is planned for a total of eight days and seven nights, with five nights in hotels and two nights on the bus. Accommodation will be provided on the bus for the journey from Ankara to Tokat and from Konya to Ankara. Other accommodations will be one night each in Sivas, Kayseri, and Niğde, and two nights in Konya. According to the annual data of TURKSTAT (2023), the average number of overnight stays in Turkey is 7.7. Based on this data, it can be said that the number of overnight stays in the planned tour is in line with the average.

Table 1 Mevlevi Lodges and Other Seljuk Works

TYPE	DESTINATIONS					
	<i>Tokat</i>	<i>Sivas</i>	<i>Kayseri</i>	<i>Niğde</i>	<i>Karaman</i>	<i>Konya</i>
Mevlevihane	Sultan Divan Mevlevi Tomb Mosque (Asitane)	Sivas Mevlevi Lodge	Kayseri Mevlevi Lodge	Niğde Mevlevi Lodge Bor Mevlevi Lodge	Karaman Mevlevi Lodge	Konya Mevlana Lodge
						Piri Mehmet Pasha Lodge
						Cemal Ali Dede Lodge
						Ateşbaz-i Veli Lodge
						Fahrunnisa Lodge

Mosque	Silahtar Omer Pasha Mosque	Divrigi Great Mosque	Haci Kilic Mosque Han Mosque	Hudavend Hatun Tomb Aladdin Mosque	Aktekke Mosque Ilisra Great Mosque	Shams-i Tabrizi Mosque Aksehir Grand Mosque Esrefoglu Mosque Aleaddin Mosque
Madrasa	Yağlıbasan Madrasa Gök Madrasa	Buruciye Madrasah Double Minaret Madrasah Şifaiye Madrasah	Giyasiye and Şifaiye Madrasa Avgünlü Madrasa Sahabiye Madrasa	---	---	Sircali Madrasah A madrasah with a beautiful minaret Karatay Madrasah
Museum	---	Asik Veysel Museum	Museum of Seljuk Civilization	---	---	Mevlana Museum Sahib Ata Foundation Museum Ethnography Museum
Caravanserai	Mahperi Hatun Caravanserai	---	Sultan Caravanserai Karatay Caravanserai	---	---	---
Bridge	Hidirlik Bridge	---	---	---	---	---
Social Complex	---	---	Hunad Hatun Complex	---	---	---
Castle	---	---	---	---	Karaman Castle	---
Hill	---	---	---	---	---	Alaeddin Hill

There are many story contents belonging to the Seljuk period Mevlevi Order. The relevant contents are shown in Table 2 below. These stories are expected to be effective in the marketing of the thematic route, in the context of image management and tourist experience.

Table 2 Mevlevi and Seljuk Period Storytelling Contents

Mevlevi Order	Seljuk Period
Sand of Hijaz	The Legend of Alaeddin Hill (Konya)
Unseen Realm	The Legend of Kilistra (Konya)
Sacrifice Story	The Legend of İplikçi Mosque (Konya)
Murder Legend	The Legend of Konya Plain (Konya)
Burial Chamber Legend	The Legend of Varvara (Tokat)
Rumi's Tomb	The Legend of Cast Metal (Sivas)
	The Story of Dev Ali (Kayseri)
	The Legend of Kayseri Castle (Kayseri)
	The Legend of Güllü Baba (Niğde)
	The Story of Karaman Sheep (Karaman)

Source: Created by the authors

5. Discussion and Conclusion

A thematic route has been created by compiling belief structures in accordance with the purpose of the study. Although the theme of the route is Mevlevi, it also includes Seljuk works from the period it belongs to. The proposed route is important in order to meet the changing tourist expectations after the pandemic. Especially individuals seeking

psychological support will turn to faith tourism to feel strong again (İmıl, 2020; Fırıncı, 2021). For this reason, it is important that the determined thematic route is based on faith. This thematic route is expected to appeal to both local and foreign tourists. Its appeal is reinforced by the universal call embedded in Mevlana's famous message, "Gel, ne olursan ol, yine gel - Come, whatever you are, come", which, despite debates regarding its precise textual origin, has come to epitomize Mevlana's open and inclusive spirit. This powerful sentiment resonates with diverse audiences—even those outside the Muslim community—thereby enhancing the tour's international allure.

To increase the feasibility of the proposed route, concrete recommendations for implementation must be considered. These include improving physical infrastructure (e.g., signage, rest stops, and digital mapping), training and deploying professional guides with expertise in both Mevlevi culture and intercultural communication, and ensuring that the sites are accessible to individuals with disabilities and those using public transportation. Without addressing these operational aspects, the route's conceptual potential may not fully translate into practical tourism development.

When compared to similar conceptual route studies, such as the olive oil heritage routes (Büyük & Can, 2020) and author tomb-based literary routes (Işık & Balcı, 2023), the current proposal distinguishes itself by integrating spiritual depth with architectural storytelling, creating a multi-sensory and multi-layered experience. While previous studies have tended to focus on either gastronomy or literary identity, this work brings together belief, space, narrative, and ritual in a cohesive tourism product. This integration offers a more holistic tourism experience.

The study's original contribution lies in its development of a faith-based thematic route centered on Mevlevi cultural heritage, contextualized within the architectural landscape of the Seljuk period. This interdisciplinary blending of cultural memory, ritual practices, and heritage interpretation presents a novel framework for spiritual tourism in Anatolia.

Future research can explore the empirical validation of this model through pilot implementations and visitor feedback. Moreover, interactive technologies could be tested for enhancing visitor engagement with ritual narratives and spatial symbolism. The study's limitations—such as reliance on secondary data and lack of field implementation—have been transparently stated, yet the proposed framework sets a strong foundation for further applied work.

5.1. Practical Implications

The increasing importance of thematic route studies conducted by the Turkish Tourism Promotion and Development Agency (TGA) (TGA, 2022) provides a guiding framework for travel agencies in the process of transforming cultural and religious heritage into tourist products. Our research supports the positive effects of thematic routes on local economies and the promotion of cultural heritage, as mentioned in the literature. The proposed route has the potential to contribute to the development of local economies and the preservation of cultural heritage (Arslanoğlu, 2019). As in the literature, the importance of thematic routes is growing every day. In Turkey, studies on this subject are being carried out quickly and effectively by TGA. Academic studies that provide improvement suggestions to guide the sector facilitate the work of both promotional organizations and travel agencies. The study presenting a thematic tour suggestion can be used by travel agencies. Agencies wishing to use the resulting route can adjust the days and cities based on their target market. Additionally, it is

recommended to extend the tour duration during the Şeb-i Aruz period to allow participation in the ceremony.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study demonstrates that creating a thematic tourist route based on Seljuk period Mevlevi works can make significant contributions to the promotion of cultural heritage. This route, which integrates Mevlevi beliefs and rituals with Seljuk architecture, offers a new perspective to the literature on cultural tourism, gastronomy tourism, and religious tourism. Cultural tourism is of critical importance for the preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural values and their conversion into economic gain.

The proposed thematic route presents a practical application for promoting Turkey's cultural and religious heritage. Starting from Ankara and covering the cities of Tokat, Sivas, Kayseri, Niğde, Karaman, and Konya, the route provides tourists with the opportunity to explore Mevlevi culture and Seljuk period works. Throughout the tour, the 47 different sites to be visited offer participants the chance to acquire historical knowledge as well as experience Mevlevi rituals. Such thematic tours will also contribute to local economies, enabling the expansion and diversification of tourism activities.

5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the study is limited to secondary data analysis and does not involve a primary data collection process. Additionally, logistical and operational challenges that may arise during the implementation of the proposed tourist route have not been taken into account. It should not be overlooked that practical obstacles may arise in terms of tour duration and route planning.

Future studies should include primary data collection methods to expand on the findings of this study. For example, surveys or focus group studies could be conducted to understand the perceptions and motivations of local and foreign tourists planning to participate in the Mevlevi-themed route. This would help deepen our understanding of tourists' special motivations, such as their search for spirituality, cultural curiosity, or expectations for psychological support. Comparative analyses measuring how tourists from different age groups and belief systems respond would also be valuable. Additionally, economic impact analyses can be conducted to assess the effects on local businesses and economies in the cities along the route. This research would analyze the economic activity in sectors such as local accommodation, food and beverage, and handicrafts associated with the route, helping to determine the route's contribution to local development. Field studies could be conducted to identify logistical and operational barriers that may arise in the practical implementation of the proposed route. Analyzing issues such as ease of access to the sites, accommodation capacity, visitor congestion, and lack of signage will be informative for thematic tour operators. To increase the feasibility of thematic tours on Mevlevi culture and Seljuk period works, collaborations with local governments could be established to overcome logistical and operational challenges. Integrating such projects with sustainable tourism policies will contribute both to the preservation of cultural heritage and the development of local economies.

Ethical Statement: Since this study adopts a research method based on secondary data, an ethical statement is not required.

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