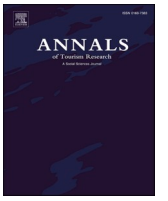
Annals of Tourism Research 115 (2025) 104059

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.journals.elsevier.com/annals-of-tourism-research



Full Length Article

Thickening places: Tourism from below☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Handling Editor: Outi Rantala

Keywords:
Enclavic space
Service workers
Thickening
Stories
Authorised tourism discourse

ABSTRACT

Places and stories shared by the taxi driver while moving through the city, 'thicken' places adding meaning and authenticity. We propose that this thickening is a kind of 'placemaking from below', and as such, our work is critical of an orthodoxy in tourism which privileges the 'thin' authorised tourism discourse of official destination management efforts, social media gloss and brochure narratives. Our research focuses on taxi drivers' local knowledge and histories. We show how they and other tourism workers offer a source of meanings emanating from local and lived narratives otherwise inaccessible to tourists in enclavic destination zones. We thus encourage a celebration of the marginalised voices of myriad service workers, and their important contribution to authentic tourism and placefulness.

We'll be the passenger
We'll ride through the city tonight
See the city's ripped backsides
We'll see the bright and hollow sky
We'll see the stars that shine so bright

Iggy Pop. The Passenger

Introduction

It seems odd to say, but in tourism research there is an over focus on the tourist. Tourists generally drop into an already at-work, moving, lived place. Yet experience of that pre-existing place is coloured, to some extent, in interaction with local service workers. Workers often derived from a local, migrant or seasonal labour population, living in the area. These actors are largely ignored. In cities,

☆ Group research interests/bios.The researchers are all variously concerned with placemaking in tourism contexts, via gastronomy, natural encounters, mobilities, and cultural heritage. All follow post-positivist and post-structuralist inquiry paradigms influenced by critical feminist research and neo-Marxist scholarship urging that attention is paid to marginalised and exploited members and their stories.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2025.104059
Received 17 November 2023; Received in revised form 28 October 2025; Accepted 29 October 2025
Available online 8 November 2025

low-paid workers are active around the clock in a variety of roles and professions – some formally acknowledged, some marginal, and many precarious and/or illegal. There is scant tourism research detailing the world of these workers, and still less focusing on their guiding role in place sharing and placemaking. The voices, knowledges and histories are important for tourism as they form part of the 'ground' upon which subsequent tourist movement, memory, and stories are built. Much tourist experience is co-created deliberately and often curated for selected tourist groups as affective encounters (Rokka et al., 2023). However, our point of departure is that we focus here on the lifeworld and narrative of the service providers, doing the basic functional work of tourist transport, rather than performing purposefully co-created conviviality. Nonetheless, both kinds of work are created against a backdrop of unequal service encounters, precarity and emotional labour and delivered by people with stories to tell.

In attending to the often-ignored voices of taxi drivers, we ask what the role of service workers as cultural brokers might be in the complex, partial and contingent place making phenomenon (Christensen, 2018; Malpas, 2018; Varley et al., 2020). Christiansen challenges us to "take on the role of the radical cartographer in order to map landscapes of imagination and amplify under-projected narratives" (2018:1). We offer a study coloured by "invisible lines of inclusion and exclusion" (ibid), of the historic and local complexity of experience, which contribute to a 'thicker' present. In so doing, we add to conversations in this journal and tourism in general on the topics of authenticity, place-making and wider debates on destination development, global-versus-localised narratives, and marginalised tourism worker agency. Such topics lie at the heart of studies in human geography, sociology and philosophy about people, power and place in studies of tourism and beyond. We allow respondents to articulate their own lifeworld, perspectives, and affective connections to place, recognising the value in unpolished, emotionally resonant, and locally grounded stories. In addition, we propose the concept of 'tourism from below' to explore how grassroots narratives contest and complicate dominant 'Authorised Tourism Discourses'.

The taxi driver is arguably the first extended touristic point of contact in a new place. Furthermore, compared to other transport roles such as train and bus drivers, a taxi driver shares the intimate, closed space of the vehicle along routes of their choosing. Conversation and knowledge sharing are possible. As Waryszak and King (2000, p.319) opine, '(the) significance and impact of taxi drivers and the taxi industry on tourism should never be underestimated' and shows that this tourism work, while acknowledged in the past, represents place-making automobilities that are at once significant and simultaneously relatively underplayed in considerations of tourism. Our provocation is thus that taxi drivers are, perhaps unwittingly, the arbiters and conduits of a local, storied sense of place, and at the same time members of a low-paid precariat barely acknowledged as tourism workers at all. We address this lacuna and build theory on the role of taxi drivers and other workers in destination 'thickening' - adding layers of authentic meaning - to the city via the sharing of particular, personal and lived stories and deep place-knowledge.

We extend social theory on place-making in tourism from the supply side for a change, via the voices of this singular group of service workers, the taxi drivers, in Istanbul. First, we explore the concept of thin and thick places and contribute ideas around the processes of 'thickening' via informal, unplanned interactions. Next, we explain how these ideas emanated from detailed interpretive analysis guided by -structuralist and critical feminist principles paying heed to those voices less often heard in tourism research. Subsequently, we explore how that lifeworld contributes to tourism in revealing an elusive tourist gold: the narration of a lived, local perspective. We propose that such experiences and shared local stories contribute to an invaluable sense of place: accounts and experiences of the real places and secrets of the city. Finally, we contend that further research is needed on the contributions made by these hidden actors in the tourist experience and theorise that this 'tourism from below' serves to thicken and intensify place experience, adding to the existentially authentic memories and stories taken home by the visitors.

Thick and thin places

De Certeau (1984, p.114) perceived trains as "a traveling incarceration". Train passengers are somewhat disconnected from the space through which they move and from their driver, and the movement is linear, confined to the rail system. The taxi's journeys are requested by the tourist yet driven and navigated by the taxi driver, with considerable discretion on route choice. Unlike the fixed routes of trains, the taxicab can weave through backstreets and alleys, and this creative extemporisation affords passengers opportunities to experience alternative rhythms of the city. As Fernald (2014) also points out, moving through the city in a taxi offers the visitor a rare voyeuristic perspective of the streetscape. Initially the taxi acts as a conduit between the point of entry to the city but may also offer alternative ways of exploring and 'knowing' the city - in all of its sins and some of its graces.

Enclavic space is the promoted, managed, iconicised product of tourism destination management organisations and policymakers. As an adjunct to the heterogenous meanderings of the taxi and its occupants, we must revisit the notion of a kind of bounded, enclavic space derived from de Certeau and extended by Edensor (1998). The taxi opens up the possibility of an alternative or complement to these orthodox, spectacularised narratives; challenging or subverting enclavic space. Indeed, for urban taxi drivers, their qualifying professional test is known, colloquially as 'the Knowledge', and their urban mind-maps are both lists of place-facts and storied accounts (see also Waryszak & King, 2000; García-Almeida & Klassen, 2017). In the taxi, spaces and roles are blurred, and the journey must be navigated through the complexities of interdependent relations. The journey can thus be undertaken in uncomfortable silence, be purely transactional and a means to an end, yet can also be viewed not simply as a route from A to B, but rather as a social encounter complicating traditional, objective place narratives. In taxi mobilities, the social relations evolving make sense of what Thrift (2004), following de Certeau, calls "another spatiality" (p.43):

> *The system of automobility has also produced its own embodied practices of driving and 'passengering', each with their own distinctive social etiquette, and histories often still waiting to be written.*

(p.46)

However, we argue here that while self and place are intricately linked, other binaries persist, including consumer/provider, navigator/passenger, poverty/wealth etc.

Casey uses the powerful metaphor of thick and thin places to elaborate on the contrasting densities of places faced, where thick places work to produce belonging through habitual engagement and are "characterised by a greater density of meaning, affect, relations, habit and memories" (De Backer & Pavoni, 2018, p.11) in contrast to thin, or 'non-places' (Varley et al., 2020). We find Casey's approach to be more relevant than the place/non-place paradigm, as the latter suggests absolutes, in which a location is either place or non-place. However, as Varley et al. (2020) demonstrate, even in apparent non-places, people engage in place-work and resistance, securing and personalising enclaves in airports, hospitals and so forth. We would add that this also holds for enclavic spaces. Duff (2010) summarises:

> *Thick places are contrived in the imbrications of affect, habit, and meaning, inviting the self's 'concernful absorption' in place while presenting opportunities for 'personal enrichment' and a deepening of affective experience.*
>
> (Duff, 2010, p.882)

Casey and Duff's accounts of 'thick' places are different, although related. Duff's conceptualisation anticipates recent work here on 'atmospheres' (Chatzidakis & Maclaran, 2023; Goulding, 2023; Paiva, 2023, 2024), with Paiva's work on localism particularly resonant. For Casey, thin places are levelled down, less meaningful, unstructured, non-robust, disembodied, uniform places lacking in rigour and substance. It is suggested that the more places are levelled down (thinned) the more people seek 'thick', meaningful places in which their own personal enrichment can flourish (Casey, 2001, p.685).

A strength of the thick and thin metaphor proposed by Casey is that affective and relational attributes of being in place are brought to the fore. However, the distinction between thick and thin places does serve to reinvigorate misplaced essentialist binaries (De Backer & Pavoni, 2018). It goes like this - thick places are perceived as real, relational and authentic, while in comparison, thin places appear superficial, lacking in substance, structure and meaning - but in no sense are these two absolute, and separate. Rather, 'thin' places may become thickened with congealed practice; performance, resistance, local knowledges, personal narratives and momentary discovery, acts of revelry and/or subversion. Thin places are very much a part of Goulding's concept of "Deadly Theatre" (Goulding, 2023). From theme parks to established tourist hotspots and airports, they are considered superficial and lacking in genuine substance. Yet in all of the crisp, clean 'non-places' of tourism, (Varley et al., 2020) real lives are being lived in the interstices beyond the performances and props of enclavic tourism. Similarly, taxi drivers and curated journeys can reveal nuances of the city and "make visible the invisible" (p.3) exposing tourists to raw, emotional, affective, spontaneous, informal, and potentially less attractive parts of the city with their choices of routes, local knowledge and personal narratives.

The thick places, we might imagine, hold firm; they are places that connect with people and community – yet all places are easily transformed, and are in a constant state of change. For example, the thick, performative places of bohemian quarters of cities often become thin, staged, sanitised and gentrified for tourism; replete with lifestyle shopping brands and casual 'boho' restaurant chains (Varley & Barry, 2025). The endless work of social media sites continually mine the ingredients of meaningful places and dilute them in their reveal, sharing secret spots, special cafes and lovely stories for consumption by a faceless, disconnected audience (Rickly, 2019).

Spatial stories are stories of passage, improvisations, short-cuts, skips, leaps and detours, memories of past movements that haunt and give character to place. However, as noted by Duff (2010), de Certeau's practices of place-making miss the messy affective engagements, atmospheres and dimensions of place. Casey's thick and thin places do therefore provide a useful contribution to tourism discourse when reflecting on the "imbrications of affect, habit, and meaning" encountered in cities and is complemented by Duff's later work. In Duff's (2010) ethnographic study of affective geographies of places it is the voices of young people and their narratives of identity and belonging that structure and convert thin places to thick ones. Duff continues: "place ought never be reduced to a determined set of points on a map … rather, place always already conjures the lived, felt, and relational experience of a thinking, feeling body subject" (Duff, 2010, p.885). In our study, however, it is the service providers, rather than the consumers, who are the focus, along with their emotional connections to places and the accounts generated by them.

In the enclosed space of the taxi, passengers are (initially at least) largely passive, and guided by the driver, who is often native to the city, or, is attuned to it, having traversed its lines and textures at all hours, in all conditions, *ripped backsides* and all (Iggy Pop). The taxi drivers are the wayfinders and place interpreters, as opposed to formal, scripted tour guides. Ingold (2000) points to the practices of indigenous wayfinding in familiar surroundings, through which knowledge of the environment is shaped and formed through movement and written in the context of previous journeys made. He notes that "lives are led not inside of places but through, around, to and from and to places elsewhere" (Ingold, 2010, p.148). The wayfinder's world is "apprehended from within" (Ingold, 2010, p.241); a multi-sensory perception of the environment formed through thick encounters with places, diverse surfaces, objects and happenings. The stories are attached to places: "fragments of stories, telling the journeys, and the incidents that took place along them" (Ingold, 2000, p.233). Laurier and Lorimer (2012) describe this as 'waysharing', noting that by sharing familiar tales of places, routes and experiences, wayfinding becomes a conversational and communal process that directs others (Laurier & Lorimer, 2012).

Meanwhile, for Edensor (1998), comparing enclavic and heterogenous tourist space, enclavic space is organised tourist space - and we might add, 'thin' - while in contrast, heterogeneous space is open, chaotic … thick(er). In enclavic space, tourist itineraries are choreographed around the ability to capture important tourist gazes of historical buildings, landscapes, etc., framing and linking places and creating fixed, coherent, objective place narratives. Here we are reminded of Dean MacCannels' piece on the sacralisation processes leading ultimately to the emergence of formal tourist 'attractions' (MacCannell, 2013, p. 45–46).

Heterogeneous space is quite different. It is not sanitised or static and "is rarely subject to aesthetic control or theming" (Edensor,

1998, p.56). Movement through heterogeneous space is neither smooth nor rapid and "it is often difficult to move in a straight line"; obstacles need to be negotiated, and "passage is marked by disruption and distraction" (Edensor, 1998, p.57). Heterogeneous tourist spaces are therefore not sights specific to or conducive of a managed and scripted tourist gaze, rather they are "enmeshed in its sensuality"; a pungent mix of affective atmospheres, sensescapes and physical geographies are present. It is the unmanageable heterogeny of the people of the city; the lives, the layers of meaning and the stories always unfolding, which create that unscriptable mess. Service workers embedded there, and taxi drivers negotiating it, are part of that mess.

Edensor (1998) explains that enclavic tourist spaces are highly organised and controlled; they resemble total institutions standards remain high and quality and movement is measured and managed. Or else enclavic space might be historical sites, presented with fixed, authoritative narratives about their history, provenance and significance. Movement in enclavic space is imagined as seamless and is tightly controlled, although, as Varley et al. (2020) opine, referring to non-places, there are no absolutes, and it depends upon who you are. For non-places and enclavic ones, there may be barriers to entry socially, physically, psychologically and economically, and locals may even be excluded or discouraged. Concierges, drivers and receptionists may filter access to attractions, often based on one's ability to pay, appearance and dress code. They are places that offer up difference and 'local' in an internationally palatable, predictable, exclusive way (Edensor, 1998).

In the following section we explain the empirical underpinnings for our contributions to tourism theory derived from our research into the lifeworlds of a community of taxi drivers based in Istanbul, Turkey. Yang, Ryan and Zhang (2013) explain that "empirically oriented research requires ethnographic methods and an understanding of local languages and power structures". As such, the research proceeds from an account of the context and setting of the study, to discussions and quotes from key informants in the tightly knit taxi driver community in Istanbul (Kasim & Al-Gahuri, 2015). As this research is concerned with one side of the service-worker/client relationship, the cab drivers, the data are unavoidably gendered (male) voices, culturally specific, and derived only from the drivers themselves. This is quite deliberate. There is a paucity of attention paid in the tourism literature to the local sources of place thickening. In the next section, we focus on the lives, stories and proud placemaking activities deriving from those who live and work in places, generated via ethnographic method. We hear what they do, and how they share their places, with some tourists.

Taxi drivers of Istanbul: people, context and settings

We follow Malpas' Heideggerian roots down into philosophical renderings of place politics and meaning (Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Malpas, 2018; Varley et al., 2020). This research is thus grounded in critical feminist principles, which prioritize the amplification of marginalised voices - in this case tourism service workers. Data from the research proceeds from first-person accounts (in Turkish) and collective memory work dealing with embedded recollections of the past and lived present (Marschall, 2015; Small, 1999) to ethnographically informed, immersive research in a hard-to-access milieu (Kasim & Al-Gahuri, 2015). This was accomplished in a series of semi-structured conversations with the drivers one-to-one and in small groups (Stephenson & Bianchi, 2007). During the process and afterward, the embedded researcher would reflexively 'self-check' and review his positionality and impact in the setting. Initially, as is often the case in such ethnographically informed work, access was partial and fragile (Kasim & Al-Gahuri, 2015). This is a tight-knit and oft-beleaguered community drawn together in precarious, low-paid work, fighting off competition from Uber and other new entrants, as well as occasional bad press (stories of overcharging, 'mystery journeys', sexual harassment and more). In fact, despite his strong familial connection to the scene, the researcher was often still perceived with deep suspicion and caution. However:

> *As I began to gain the trust of the drivers, their honest and spontaneous responses to my queries became richer and more detailed. At the beginning of the research project, I thought I knew my way around the city, but after increasingly being accepted and speaking with drivers in the cafes, I realised the city is complex, with layers of stories, personal meanings and emotions absent from the objective narratives of tourist agencies, brochures and key heritage sites.*
>
> (Researcher)

What follows is therefore an account of the research setting and its context(s), proceeding from the above epistemological principles. Besides the purely scientific reason for contributing to the existing knowledge about place-making and taxi drivers, this research was personally resonant for one of the researchers. Growing up in Istanbul, his father was an occasional taxi driver alongside his professional job. His father was born and raised in Fatih, which is one of the older parts of Istanbul. He learnt how being a taxi driver meant navigating through a congested and confusing maze, smoking cigarettes, drinking heaps of Turkish tea and chatting with fellow taxi driver cronies.

> *"Growing up in this environment, spending time with my father and his friends, I learnt how to blend in with taxi drivers and speak their language and read them. Since I was a kid, I have listened to their laughs, rants, complaints and conversations about sport, politics, money, religion, family or health issues. I was always fascinated by the taxi drivers' knowledge of cities. They seemed to know paths and places in the city not because of maps and textbooks but through implicit learning while they are behind the wheel and from their own life experiences."*
>
> (Researcher)

The interview transcripts are sprinkled with awkward translations, and we have kept the context as near to the original narratives, metaphors and emotional representations as possible. Following solid ethnographic traditions, access was gained to part of the taxi drivers' social worlds: at work, around their cafes, at taxi depots and next to their cabs. Some discussions involved several voices, while other notes were of observed practices at these nodal points, and considered weight was given to certain individuals based on their

perceived contribution to the unfolding conversation (see Foote-Whyte's 'Doc' - Whyte, 2012).

It is important to note that taxi driving is a male-dominated occupation in Turkey. All respondents encountered in this study were Turkish males. In fact, Taxi driving globally is a predominantly male occupation. (Beigi et al., 2020; Brown, 2017). In Istanbul, out of 17,395 taxi plates, only 2249 are owned by women, with the number of female taxi drivers estimated to be between 100 and 150 (DHA, 2020; TRT Haber, 2021).

Taxi drivers serve locals as well as tourists. Consequently, they slip through the heteronomy of destination management and marketing organisations, national tourism bodies, and regional or local governments, which typically constitute and orchestrate touristic gazes of a city.

We found that taxi drivers in Turkey *are* simply drivers; most of them do not own the car nor the taxi licence plate. Taxi licence plates are considered expensive commercial commodities, especially in Istanbul, due to there being a finite number of taxis allowed within the city. The value of a taxi licence plate can be well over 250,000 USD, and so drivers must endure the city traffic for long hours to earn their livelihoods and pay a hefty fee to the owners of the taxi plates in addition to paying for their own diesel and other expenses. After all this, some may go home worse off after a fruitless day in the city, burning fuel and time for little income. This can be precarious, marginal work. In addition, Turkish taxi drivers have a reputation in some quarters as a rude, burnt-out, discontent or simply untrustworthy bunch. Hence, the status of the role is contested, and often not a source of pride. However, the reactions to this iniquitous framing result in obsessive care and pride in the professional accomplishment of the role.

During the data collection, different types of taxi drivers and working patterns were encountered. Some have a monthly contract and do not share their taxi with another driver. For some, this means that they work long hours to maximise returns on their investment even when they are exhausted. Many work every day without a day off. A second type of driver worked in shifts. In this 'relay' model, a taxi vehicle will continuously move in the city, and the drivers work 12-hour shifts: 5 am to 4 pm or 4 pm to 5 am. These drivers pay a daily fee to the taxi plate owners. As an unwritten general rule, and point of pride, at the end of the shift, every driver must fill the tank, clean the car, and check and top up the fluids and tyre pressures. As a result, the most accessible places to conduct the research were the relay points of the drivers: taxi ranks and coffee shops where clusters of drivers were sat chatting between shifts and fares.

The drivers made small talk about life, politics, sport or local gossip over a black tea or Turkish coffee.

There were rituals performed between taxi owners and the drivers finishing and starting their shifts. As soon as the driver who is finishing his shift arrives, he greets his peers and orders a glass of tea. Before they engage in small talk, drivers count their earnings and pay their subscriptions to vehicle owners or the dedicated taxi rank supervisors. Then they begin to chat, generally about the daily news and state of the city traffic, to which every driver can relate and contribute. They discuss which districts or roads to avoid or where there are new obstructions. This changeover ritual is rooted in the harsh socio-economic conditions of working-class life in the dusty streets of Istanbul and is a spectacle imbued with discipline, pride and toil. Before the new driver starts his shift, the owner and both drivers walk around the yellow cab, checking for new dents, damage or scratches. After the inspection, the new driver can take to the streets.

During data collection, drivers were contacted across the city. Each was associated with their own individual taxi rank or company. As such, respondents ranged from the city's touristic heart – Sultanahmet – out to the complex maze of taxis around the airport.

> *As the interview sessions evolved, they became interwoven with my own personal memories and history of my life when my father was a taxi driver.*
>
> (Researcher)

Analysis of the data involved paying attention to the taxi drivers' memories, feelings and experience beyond the clearly observable aspects of their job (Small, 1999). In all, 15 semi-structured interviews of varying length and intensity were conducted, at tea shops and taxi ranks. Taxi drivers were approached and asked if they were willing to contribute to the research through interview. Assisted by the local researcher's first-hand knowledge and familial connections, access to the scene was permitted (Given, 2008; Kasim & Al-Gahuri, 2015). Formal data collection was terminated at the point of apparent saturation, as repeating themes and codes became apparent within the interviews, consistent with what Hammersley (2015) and others have termed thematic saturation. The interview process yielded descriptions of the taxi drivers' own accounts and inferred meanings of their interactions with tourists. Key touchpoints in each discussion included the background and life histories of the drivers, experiences with tourists as a fare, official and local destination narratives and accounts of how respondents perceived the role of the taxi driver. The checklist provided a rough guide to the interview, but it was the taxi drivers that drove most of the discussion. In terms of access, trust was initially an issue with some taxi drivers being suspicious of the implications of the interview; however, on being assured that the questioning was not an audit of their driving competencies, the taxi drivers freely consented to and embraced the research. All participants were made aware that interviews would be used as part of a research project, through which reports and publications would be produced.

Our growing contention was that taxi drivers' contributions to tourist experiences are incidental and functional. The narratives can only be understood in the context of their connections personally and culturally with the fabric of the city, via their personal histories and shared stories. Thus, it made sense to dive back into the data and consider their complex relationships with the city, its people and histories, and how they encounter the 'other population' of the city: the tourists. We were curious about taxi drivers' intentions with the tourists when they get in their cab and how those intentions impact during the course of a short journey. The research was fraught with unexpected, though classic ethnographic challenges as certain aspects of inquiry were clearly 'out of bounds' and not for discussion or record (see, for example, Foote-Whyte, 2012, and Kasim & Al-Gahuri, 2015). Throughout the interview schedule, the researcher occasionally inadvertently fell into asking 'touchy' questions, and taboos emerged regarding discussion of their earnings, values, feelings, insecurities and invisible loyalties. As a result, and in some sessions, it was initially difficult to create trust. However,

as the research progressed, a good rapport was established through personal connection with the scene, and most became less apprehensive.

The semi-structured interview questions began to illuminate city stories provided by taxi drivers that contradicted and moved beyond the normative place narratives promulgated by official tourism agencies. These interviews initially shed light on the taxi driver's social, moral and economic dilemma while navigating the streets. However, emerging from the interviews, access was gained to a wealth of personal shared stories which were valued by the tourists, desperate to secure the privileges of secret and authentic places known only by the locals.

The stories encapsulated taxi drivers' experiences, thoughts, sensations, urges, anxieties and vulnerability. Whether they were factually correct or otherwise, they all counted here as 'data' and representative of a world view and their situated understandings of how things work. These stories, shared over glasses of Turkish tea, were emotionally charged with humour, happiness, hope, care, surprise, fear, avoidance, resistance and even aggression. Perhaps, most importantly, their stories depart from the established authentic official discourses provided for tourists visiting Istanbul, and this is what formed our point of departure during data analysis.

Unsurprisingly, taxi drivers are positioned 'betwixt and between' insider and outsider; passenger, driver and temporary companion; conventional worker and radical citizen. As such, we provide a sketch of the taxi drivers' culture, experiences, beliefs, loyalties, anxiety and expectations that affect their relationship and communication with tourists. However, the key contributions of this study, while rooted in the drivers' stories, go way beyond an ethnographic glimpse of the marginalised culture and working life of the cabbie. It seemed that taxi drivers and their narratives may represent both the messy leakage of ingredients in the tourist experience as well as their participation in enriching, place-thickening secret-sharing.

Negotiating the city

Taxis are a conspicuous feature of city life. However, the literature concerning taxi drivers often shifts attention away from the driver as a person to physiological, criminal or sociological implications of the profession or the impacts arising from it. For example, there are numerous studies analysing the health impacts of taxi cab driving (Poó et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019) or violence experienced by taxi drivers (Burgel et al., 2014). These studies are vital, but understanding taxi drivers as social individuals and their role in society is equally critical. Therefore, we now place these hitherto forgotten service workers into a more significant role in thickening places in intersubjective exchanges with tourists.

When drivers were asked about their origins and experiences working as drivers, the most common themes that emerged were a history of poverty, insecurity struggle and failure, as well as the challenges associated with belonging to a lower socio-economic class. Even though they all work in Istanbul, only five of the drivers were actually born there. For them, the working relationship between taxi drivers and the city is one of constant passage, navigation and sedimented time:

> *"Life? Well, I get in my taxi, get out my taxi and go to bed, then all over again. (Laughs)"*
>
> (Driver 2)

> *"We don't have a personal life. Our life is all about spending time in traffic. Then go home and rest. To be honest some drivers don't even do that."*
>
> (Driver 7)

> *"I started working as a taxi driver at the airport in 1989. I worked for 10 years then I quitted. Ten years ago, I came back again to work as a taxi driver. […] (People think that) taxi drivers are conman; taxi drivers are dirty or whatever. It brands me for no reason at all. That's why I quitted this job long time ago. […] Because I am no man like that. Unfortunately, my new business venture went out of business and I am back in this sector."*
>
> (Driver 12)

Because of the nature of their profession, the drivers put in long hours for minimal pay but also learn to adapt to the city's unique rhythms and patterns (Ross, 2021). One stated that "We know everything about every neighbourhood of Istanbul. We have seen things and we continue to see things." (Driver 2). Similarly, Driver 11 stated that he knows "good quality" places as well as "absurd and filthy places" to take customers. According to Ross (2021), taxi drivers have a significant street knowledge gained via repeated practice. A fundamental understanding of the city and its neighbourhoods, the patterns of traffic, as well as how people dress, what they say during an interaction and where fares may be at any given moment are critical keys for a taxi driver maximising revenue (Ross, 2021). This was echoed in the data. For example, Driver 3 stated that he can identify a tourist fare based on their appearance and posture. In another interview which took place at a taxi stand in the residential part of the city, rather than the central/touristic part, a driver said that "I don't tend to hang around this part of the city. Because it is full of broke people like me (laughs). No business here!" (Driver 7).

Overall, the findings of this section highlight the general socio-economic characteristics of taxi drivers, while drawing attention to varied behavioural differences. Yet despite constrained circumstances, they are in possession of a precious key: access to the hidden flows, patterns and secrets of the city.

In the city in the cab: 'like a spoon in a boiling pan'

Some taxi drivers move tourists from Istanbul airport to the city centre, swept up into the intimate space of the cab, traversing an unfamiliar, and often anxiety-inducing and unruly urban landscape. In negotiating the chaotic city from in a taxi, innumerable cartographies can be drawn that thicken or thin places during the trip. Cars jostle for space, passengers are driven this way and that, as

Thrift (2004) puts it, with constant shifts in mood and emotional resonance, piece together fragments of the destination as the cab passes through. Some passengers have fixed itineraries where trips run smoothly; others find themselves in happenstance, entangled in the weft and weave of alternative routes carved out of traffic jams, diversions and accidents. The opportunity to thicken places through a lived sensation, as Duff (2010) remarks, is about the feel and emotional resonance of place that defines much of the routine and tumult of city life. Therefore, how the passenger interacts with the driver and how in turn places are navigated, using local knowledge to either engineer 'smoother' journeys or by capitalising on the messy striations of the urban grid, determines how the city is felt and gazed upon.

> *"In Istanbul's traffic it is hard to plan anything. You just follow the road. You try to avoid the traffic as much as you can. Obviously, it is good to make money but I would not drive into the traffic just to make a few pennies."*
>
> (Driver 13)

> *"After I pick my car, I will be driving around the Istanbul like a spoon in boiling pan. I will be picking up customers whoever signs me to stop and I will try my best to take them to their destination as quick and safe as possible. That's my life."*
>
> (Driver 5)

We suggest that such volatile, fleeting socialites are constituted in frictions, atmospheres, temporalities and things which, depending on how they are expressed, can lead to thick or thin compositions of manifold stories. As Casey (2001, p.684) notes, the city can be experienced in varying degrees of intensity. Many airport fares will remain glued to their phone messages emails, newly released from the confines of 'flight mode' as they land. Others might want to make conversation; to know more. Place-making therefore is co-dependent on hosts and guests embodied in duration, comfort, cultural differences, boredom, rapture, 'tech savviness' and so on. Appearing helpless, this driver extols the woes of rush hour. However, extended time in the cab with the traveller also presents an opportunity to share local insights about the place:

> *"If a customer gets on my taxi at Beşiktaş during the rush hour and asks for Etiler. Normally, is only 5 km distance. But during the rush hour this takes 30 to 45 minutes. Instead of using the normal (direct) route, I can drive via Ortaköy, which is by the Bosphorus. This route is technically a few kilometres more than the original route. However, you can get the same place in 15-20 minutes compared to 45 minutes"*
>
> (Driver 9)

With the prospect of being trapped on congested roads, the taxi driver, attuned to the city's myriad identities, chooses an alternative route. Such routes therefore can shape the encounter with 'Istanbul' in alternative and aesthetic ways through disturbance and convenience. Equally, vehicle breakdowns or road accidents all add to the unpredictable nature of the wayfaring. Furthermore, it is not only the density of urbanisation that evokes new forms of wayfinding but also the omnipresence of satellite and smartphone navigation connectivity that passenger agency towards new spatial understandings.

> *"(Tourists) are clever now. They can use their phones and check if you are on course or not. They know if you are detouring for no reason. In addition to that, I know a few English words and I can tell tourists like '20 minutes here quick'. They understand me. As long as you know a couple of English words they understand you. They know that you are not trying cheat them."*
>
> (Driver 9)

Drivers explained that passengers on the other hand may not want to travel through the city quickly or take official tour guide routes, in favour of influencing how the trip unfolds by prolonging it. As Laurier and Philo (2006) point out, the experience of place might be said to differ affectively with each occasion; one's favourite cafe is once a source of contentment or satisfaction, and at other times conjures all the disaffections of a modern city. Arguably, the taxi is taken out of function into form and used to see sights along the way. As suggested by the quote, some drivers use their time on the road to enjoy their working lives. Despite the constraining aspect of busy roads, one driver was keen to have an aesthetic experience that in turn benefits visitors. This was not always possible, but insider knowledge can at times create a more interesting ride.

> *"I have freedom to drive however I want. I can take any route I think it is suitable. It is pretty common to use (the) coastal route between the airport and city centre. It is more scenic and generally less busy than the highway. But there are times that I avoid the coastal route. You need to know the traffic and times."*
>
> (Driver 12)

Throughout the interviews, Istanbul taxi drivers reflected on their interactions with tourists. It is noted that conversations often revolved around the logistical elements of getting from points A to B, and the relative merits of using the perceived quickest routes between the locations of Istanbul's tourist attractions. Such interpretations of Istanbul present the city initially as thin, where one iconic location from the enclavic concept of is linked to the next in apparent ease and order, a sort of *Istanbul in a Nutshell* https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/istanbul-in-a-nutshell-a-travel-guide–417005246758779412/ where 'Skinny Jeanne' writes about the glorious chaos of the city, and lists the key attractions. However, as Taxi Driver 5 alludes, Istanbul's chaotic character means its routes and pathways are not always easily followed.

"They (tourists) carry maps, looking at maps, scratching their heads. They don't understand the maps. Our country is complicated for them, our roads and traffic systems. Most likely, they know their own countries and maps of their countries really well. I think they find ours strange or something."

(Driver 5)

Here from the perspective of the taxi driver the tourist's knowledge of the city is akin to De Certeau's (1984) view from afar, one that is clearly ordered and regulated. The mapped city in Casey's (2001) terms becomes a thinned place, appearing uniform and disembodied in that it merges the two-dimensional pages of a guidebook, the coordinates of a map potentially connecting to endless other places the tourist may have visited. In contrast, the lived experience of the taxi driver, at the point of action, navigates the disarray of the city along nostalgic corridors, rich in personal and local histories. This combination of practical skill and familiarity harnessed through their profession, is thus also imbued with stories and memories. Such tactical, thick awareness of the city exhibited by the taxi driver is removed from the more ordered, digestible understanding of Istanbul that tourists maybe offered, which in the words of De Certeau's (1984) is 'map' like in that it refers to specific locations and serves to legitimise particular routes and passages.

Storying the city

Istanbul taxi drivers referred to tourists following routes on maps or smartphones, checking the course of a journey and sometimes questioning when detours are taken. In such instances, conversations were often kept to a minimum consisting of either minor disagreements or idle chit-chat. Some drivers interviewed tended to avoid conversations with the smartphone tourists altogether, preferring to concentrate on the road. Others, although not initiating interactions, were more than happy to chat with tourists, and for many having a conversation with a tourist was the highlight of the day's work, for instance as Taxi Drivers 5 and 1 state.

"God bless, fares talk to us. I don't initiate the conversation but if they start then I join and enjoy. Generally, they are all good people. And it is a pleasure to talk to them. We talk about economics, current government affairs, many complain about Turkey's current position/situation."

(Driver 5)

"The best part of my job is talking to other people about different topics, travelling to different parts of the city, meeting with different people. I talk about the politics, living conditions (life standards). I tell them about my life problems such as economic constraints and they tell me about theirs."

(Driver 1)

Although it was acknowledged by the taxi drivers that they can act as a source of knowledge, they often played down their role as arbitrators between the tourist and the city, assuming that visitors already have information needed to hand and in some instances were better equipped to know what they want to get out of the city than the taxi driver, as Taxi Drivers 5 and 11 express:

"If they ask, I tell them, I try to help them. Or they look at something very carefully, or showing some interest on something, then I tell them. This is such and such mosque, And they say – Oh good! For instance, they might look at Eminönü Büyük Mosque, Yeni Mosque, and I tell them what it is. To be honest, tourists know Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia better than us. Because they often read about it (prior to their visit). But anything else, I tell them."

(Driver 5)

"Many of them know where to go. Ten years ago we used to direct more tourists. We had more influence on their choice. We still do but not frequently. I took a tourist to Çamlıca Hill once to show the view and scenery of Istanbul. They loved it. They said Çamlıca Hill wasn't on their itinerary or the guide programme. They were so pleased. Or I drive them to Black Sea coast of Istanbul to show where Marmara Sea mixes with Black Sea. Instantly they look surprised and pleased. Why? Because these types of things are not a part of the usual tourist itinerary."

(Driver 11)

Here, however unwittingly, the taxi driver is a compelling source of information. Their lived familiarity with the city opens up possibilities of experiencing Istanbul beyond the well-known tourist icons of the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia. As expressed in their own words, the taxi driver knows all the city, gathered as layers of experiential patina, over time:

"Taxi drivers drive at least 200 km to anywhere in every day. We know everything about everywhere in Istanbul. We have seen things and we continue to see things … We know everything."

(Driver 2)

"I share anything I know … All common knowledge learnt through living in the city."

(Driver 3)

In many ways, taxi drivers 'common knowledge' serves to give further meaning to places along a typical tourist route, thickening places by adding insider information that may not be readily gleaned through the conventional guidebook. The power of such spatial

stories lies in their ability to enact and action places. The following quotes regarding the Süleymaniye Mosque and the Bosphorus Bridge exemplify how the driver's tacit knowledge of place can direct tourists towards alternative and perhaps unthought-of vistas:

> *"This happened to me last week. A tourist said he wanted to watch sunrise in Istanbul, so I picked him up very early. I took him to Süleymaniye Mosque's Garden. The scenery is amazing there early in the morning."*
>
> (Driver 4)

> *"If a customer wants to see both European and Asian side of Istanbul, I have a good trick for that too. I would drive to the Bosphorus Bridge, reduce my gear to second and put my warning lights on. I would drive very slowly so he can see Istanbul, both continents from above (laughs). I have done this before."*
>
> (Driver 12)

In keeping with Casey (2001), these descriptions suggest a thickening of places; the taxi driver narratives are an outcome of their *concernful absorption* in that they are imbued with meaning, experiences, feelings and affective engagements between the driver and the city. Through such spatial stories, places and itineraries come alive. By using his simple trick of reducing speed, Taxi Driver 2 takes the opportunity to present the tourist with a different perspective of the two sides of Istanbul. It is the insider information that Taxi Driver 14 holds that allows the tourist to experience an alternative and amazing side of the Süleymaniye Mosque. In keeping with Casey's (2001) work on thick places, we would argue that the above elucidates an appreciation, a joy of being in and savouring a particular place. Here we begin to appreciate the imbrications of thick places, the layers of personal, storied and negotiated meanings, affective qualities that are attached to and serve as markers of thick places (Duff, 2010).

> *"Okay, let me tell you. The tomb of Telli Baba has a great view. There is a sort of countertop area there. Listen to me, little brother, 38 years of experience is speaking here. Watch the sunrise there. What a view! I did this many times when I was young. Used to pack my raspberry liquor, milk chocolate and almonds and drive there with my 49 model Plymouth to watch sunrise."*
>
> (Driver 5)

We suggest that it is the narratives of past actions, resonant memories of life events (early courting, military service, sad events, happy ones) a 'past imperfect', as such, and contingent perhaps on the resonances between driver and fare, which may serve to render places differently.

The process of adding personal stories and memories to places makes them more robust, thicker, and potentially enriches the tourist's engagement with place. In understanding this further, Ingold's (2000) work on wayfinding is useful in that wayfinding includes the retelling of journey stories "fragments of stories, telling the journeys, and the incidents that took place along them" (Ingold, 2000, p.233). Thus, upon being asked *where you would take a tourist?*, the Istanbul taxi driver does not refer to a detached grid reference, but rather a familiar a story about that place:

> *"I would take tourists to Karaköy and continue to towards to Beşiktaş, Ortaköy, then Kuruçeşme, Sarıyer, İstinye, Tarabya, then a little further to Kilyos. There are self-service (self-cook and eat) restaurants in Kilyos Forest. So, I would take them there. I would make them a nice picnic, BBQ there. After that I would follow the same route back. This is the Istanbul. Since I was a little child that's what I enjoyed. What I grew up with. I would let the tourist to enjoy Istanbul the way I enjoy Istanbul since my childhood. This will be pleasurable trip to them. Nice views, fresh air and real meat on BBQ."*
>
> (Driver 7)

> *"I would take them to Kalender Ordu Evi (type of hospitality establishment –hotel/restaurant/events facility which run by Turkish Military) in Sarıyer and tell them to check the view from there. I did my military service there and I know it has a fabulous view. I used to watch Istanbul from there."*
>
> (Driver 6)

In these accounts, places are given history and meaning through enduring past performances and lingering memories as they are shared with others to present engaging and characterful intersubjective tourist experiences and journeys. We now return to our original objective as we consider the question of how to recognise and celebrate the contribution of working citizens in the creation of heterogenous destination experiences.

Conclusion

In tourism studies in general, there is an over privileging of the tourist voice. Yet tourists do not make places – they merely visit them. They are arguably just place consumers, carrying the homogenising, alienating virus of advancing neoliberal capitalism into every new destination. Tourism is predicated on processes of exchange, difference and encounters with the 'other'. We have focused upon the 'working other' in what we hope might be the first of many studies of the people who live in places, and who work in them, make them and 'thicken' them. This study is therefore deliberately not about tourists, but about those who work for them, with them, make sense of them, and are subcontracted momentarily by visitors as they pass through. They have a job to do – a function to perform, but they are local people, immersed and active in their city, as they live it. Thus, they carry with them a credibility and natural story making powers drawn from life history, accumulated gossip and their own 'truth' about things.

The places included in the taxi drivers' narratives reveal an alternative, heterogenous, living Istanbul, distinct from the brochures and official websites instrumental in the sightseeing motivations of the tourist's romantic gaze. In keeping with Duff's (2010) accounts of thick places negotiated in these ways, there is a strong affective rendering of an 'other' place, construed in active memory work, storying and a sharing of local knowledge of living in the city. The taxi drivers' stories are infused with pride, nostalgia and pleasure. As citizens of the cities in which they operate, taxi drivers have partial, personal and authentic lived experiences of urban spaces and yet are often disregarded as part of the formal, convenient experience package available to tourists.

The above are accounts drawn from just one sector of the many unacknowledged shadow-workers of tourism. As such, this work points to the other side of a politics of authenticity in consumer society – the service providers. The qualitative data and analysis, inspired by critical feminist post-structural principles, are insistent on giving voice to marginalised, low paid actors, and strove to let respondents speak freely and share their lifeworld, stories and perspectives (Chambers, 2007; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020). We celebrate the oft-forgotten voices of these tourism service workers, as an important example of the ways places are 'thickened' as they tell their tales. Such interactions often lead to insights and unpolished accounts drawn from very local, experienced and lived narratives otherwise inaccessible to the visiting strangers. Imbrications of these heterogenous discourses, subjectively created as each tourist moves through the city, sediment to thicken places in individual conversations and perhaps in tourist memories in ways imbued with affective, emotional and private connections to the place.

In this sense, we propose that (and we lean on work from heritage studies here) the thickening of places occurs as a kind of 'tourism from below' (see Robertson's *Heritage from Below*, 2016) set against what we might call the 'Authorised Tourism Discourses' of enclavic destination zones. The term is adapted from Laurajane Smith's (2015) critique of authorised heritage discourse and is found fixed in the thin narratives of national or city-wide Destination Marketing Organisations, on tour maps, brochures and websites. It may also be found in social media and online review platforms as part of the hardening of a 'way of seeing' a place.

In paying closer attention to the oft-ignored voices and lives of places, we recognise and respect places-in-becoming, shifting and changing as people's lives progress, and the voices which might offer richer place-encounters. At times, social media can be a powerful agent in sharing such finely grained place-narratives. Likewise, the stories told in traveller-hostels, or elsewhere in inter-tourist encounters. It is here that tourism's potential for a better world, over against flattening processes of cultural commodification, the expansion of non-places and rampant exploitation, might take hold. This 'tourism from below' resists the march of advanced capitalism to an extent, precisely as it is human, storied, intersubjective and difficult to control, but is a real, lived, intangible place-asset, borne out of those subjectivities and inter-personal creativity. It is human, and always changing.

Tourism at its worst narrows places and culture down to thin, digestible soundbites and pocket histories, capsule-experiences and fleeting selfies shared to a disinterested global audience. This is ably illustrated in recent work on tourists' forlorn, tantalusian pursuit of the spectacle of Bohemia (Varley & Barry, 2025). In their study, they (ibid) suggest that, once part of the enclavic Spectacle, the existentially authentic lived bohemia has already vanished, hollowed-out by commodification and reproduction. On the other hand, our case illuminates a contingent, always-becoming sense of place which *is* rich, lived, ongoing and human, and which is part of a thickening of place and time, and contributes to meaningful place-encounters.

We celebrate the marginal, hidden and ignored people hitherto lightly regarded in tourism research, who live, work in and make places and who share stories and personal histories but may not be recognised as part of the core mechanisms of the tourism industry. Following ideas from Ingold, Edensor, Casey and Duff, the illusion of the static, spectacular idea of place must give way to research which pays attention to the congealing effects of time and human experience in the city – 'from below'. As part of this, we contend that the recognition and celebration of the place-based narratives of service workers from police officers to sex workers, bus drivers to bouncers, all carry authentic place-based narratives. Further investigations might also consider the role of incidental others in place-thickening processes, including encounters at the pub, in shops, bus queues, café's and parks.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Peter Varley: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Serkan Uzunogullari:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation. **James Johnson:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sharon Wilson:** Writing – original draft, Project administration.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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