Virtual Tour- An Alternative to Responsible Heritage Tourism?
Case Study: Lasem Old Town

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ABSTRACT

Virtual tours have become a new form of tourism that recently came to fame due to pandemic's travel restrictions. It takes advantage of numerous digital platforms that are rapidly growing their users owing to the circumstances; meanwhile, far-reaching technology advancement enables it to be acceptable by a wider market now. This zeitgeist was immediately caught by museums and cultural institutions and independent travel agents/operators in Indonesia's tourist destinations-- including Lasem. Being promoted as a heritage tourism destination, Lasem is gaining popularity among tourists. However, tourism in heritage sites has always had two sides of the coin: as a driver for both local economic gain and unsustainable development. The latter could be minimized by applying the "responsible tourism" concept to make visitors more socially and culturally mindful of the site's significance. This paper investigates two virtual tours in Lasem Old Town using a framework of responsible tourist behavior and evaluates whether this new form of tourism is worth considering as an alternative to visiting our heritage sites.

Keywords: Virtual Tour, Responsible Heritage Tourism, Lasem Old Town.

1. INTRODUCTION: LASEM OLD TOWN, RESPONSIBLE HERITAGE TOURISM, AND VIRTUAL TOUR

Lasem, also known as Little Tiongkok, is one of three coastal towns in Java populated by Chinese immigrants from the early 14th century to the 15th. According to the travel notes of NJ Krom [1], Chinese settlements in Lasem even dated back to 1294, making it attainable for its oldest temple— *Klenteng* Cu An Kiong – to be also the first of its kind ever to be built in *Nusantara* [2]. With centuries-old historic built environment made of rich acculturation of Chinese, Javanese, and Dutch— creating a city structure and architecture like none other – it is with no surprise that Lasem Old Town has been promoted as a heritage tourism destination and, along with it, has also gained popularity among tourists.

Though easily represented by their long-standing artifacts, heritage sites should be seen not only for their tangible assets. Sites that are rich with historic architecture and urban spatial qualities, like Lasem, are packed with physical attributes that may distract visitors from the intangibles: the social system, deep-rooted history, living culture, even the environmental and economic value [3]. Tourism could act as either a favorable or destructive agent towards this goal; even though it undoubtedly contributes to local economic gain, studies have shown that the industry has been a driver of unsustainable development in tourist destinations. Whichever way, it does not deny that tourism represents a powerful option for heritage conservation [4,5].

Responsible heritage tourism does not only concern about the sustainability of the destination's environment and economy but also its cultural values [6]. Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism [7] mentioned at least three points that deal with heritage and/or cultural conservation: it gives positive contributions to heritage conservation; it connects tourists with the locals for greater cultural understanding; it is culturally sensitive; it boosts local pride and confidence. In short, responsible tourism needs to be sustainable in every aspect possible.

Virtual tour has become a new form of tourism that recently came to fame due to pandemic's travel restrictions. It takes advantage of numerous digital

platforms that are rapidly growing their users owing to the circumstances; meanwhile, far-reaching technology advancement enables it to be acceptable by a wider market now. As of April 2020, numerous world-class museums (e.g., The Louvre, The Met, British Museum, Rijksmuseum) have developed and hosted their virtual tours— outside of Google Arts and Culture, a Google-owned platform dedicated to digital collections of museums and cultural events across the globe. Indonesia swiftly got on board with Google Arts and Culture; in March, the Ministry of Education and Culture announced that it was collaborating with Google to get at least ten museums under the ministry to be "visitable" through the said platform— a notably giant step acknowledging that in the past, even digital-archive was a noun that sounded too extravagant. These tours mainly use visual-based media: 360-panoramic photographs and walkthrough videos, completed with zoom-in, pop-up, or direction click-based features.

This zeitgeist was immediately caught, not only by museums and cultural institutions but also by independent travel agents/operators— arguably one industry that got hardly-hit by the pandemic – as an alternative to their former business model. However, could it also be an alternative to more responsible heritage tourism? With tourists "not being there physically," it could inevitably minimize physical damages in heritage sites; yet, on the other hand, could it still withhold the full experience attained by physically visiting them? Following the flourishing trend, this paper investigates two virtual tours in Lasem Old Town using a responsible tourist behavior framework and evaluates whether this new form of tourism is worth considering as a new way to visit our heritage sites.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: FINDING AND COMBINING FRAMEWORKS OF RESPONSIBLE TOURIST BEHAVIOR

How to reflect the success of a heritage destination from the eye of sustainability? Timothy [8] believes it first and foremost rests on the tourists themselves; their behavior towards a destination carries a great capability of indirectly deciding the fate of development in said site. Thus, reflecting on the supply and demand principle, to create responsible tourism, it is necessary to look upon shaping responsible tourist behavior. Borrowing sustainable behavior in the ecotourism framework [9], there are two main aspects that are contributive to tourists' environmentally responsible behavior: "place engagement" and "relationship quality."

2.1 Place Engagement

When talking about place engagement in the virtual world, it requires an understanding of how virtual space is limited to be agitated physically; its concept of space is what Edensor [10] conveys as multiple and contested meanings. It appeals better, particularly to Lefebvre's [11] one of the conceptual triad: representations of space— a conceived space related to a mental place. Therefore, the investigation focuses on how well participants can "imagine" Lasem in their heads through the virtual tour and whether this representation interests them in the physical built environment.

2.2 Relationship Quality

It is no secret that successful tourism can establish a firm bonding between the tourist and the soul of the place where tourists can connect and celebrate their past [12]. Hence, in seeking relationship quality of the tour, participants would be asked predominantly about how they feel during and after joining the tour. There is no standard to approaching this emotional connection, rather than basing it on the local community [13]— so there would be an extra credit if tourists feel attached to the community as well, rather than to just Lasem as a place.

2.3 Responsible Behavior and The Concept of Mindfulness

Responsible behavior concentrates on a "mindful" manner of conducting around a heritage site; it resonates with "mindfulness"— a term coined by Moscardo [14] – meaning a mental state in which the tourist is actively connected with the site through their own experience or mental processing of information. Mindfulness might enhance tourist satisfaction, encourage the reassessment of information, and in the end, promote sustainability [15,14,16]. In this framework adapted from Tan, *et al.* [17], the state is branched into two contributing elements: "information" and "perceptions" of the tourists. Satisfaction in information weighs in tourists' initial interest versus the knowledge they gain; satisfaction in perception weighs in their expectations versus experience.

This paper analyzes virtual tours using a combined framework from these existing two (Figure 1), consisting of place engagement, relationship quality, and Mindfulness. The integration between all aspects above is nonetheless to put forth heritage awareness to the tourists. In them being able to engage, relate, experience, and learn, there is a hope that they can appreciate and can further feel the obligation to take part in heritage conservation— something that positively leads to sustainability.
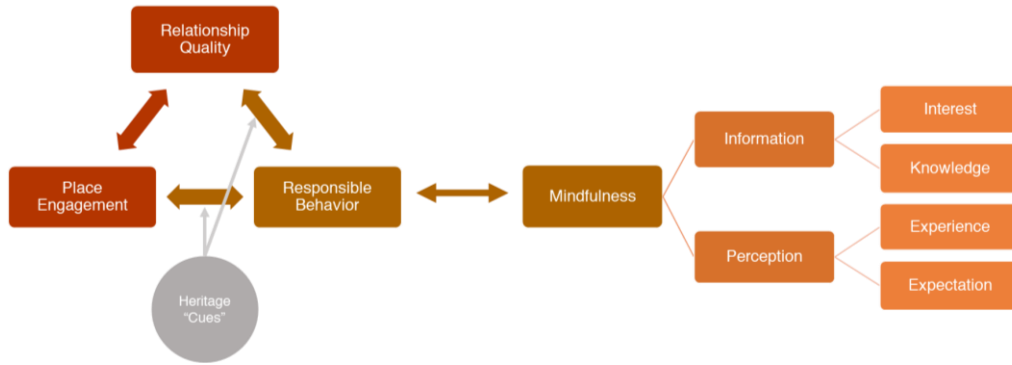
Figure 1 Combined Frameworks of Responsible Tourist Behavior. Adapted from [9] and [17].

3. METHODOLOGY

Two virtual tours conducted by two different operators, Mari Vakansi and Traval Co, are examined in this research. Though both are not based in Lasem, they collaborated with local tourism agencies or cultural centers to "host" the tour together. The tours visited Lasem Old Town, with slightly similar destinations, but different themes— Traval Co focused merely on Batik Tiga Negeri and its production houses, while Mari Vakansi brought up a more general theme of heritage in Lasem.

The virtual tours were entirely conducted on a well-known video conference platform, Zoom, using videography and photography as the primary medium. They ran in an almost identical plot: a prologue, the tour itself, and an epilogue (Figure 2). The prologue was one of the most crucial parts to get participants "in the zone". It started with an opener by the tour leaders, introducing the destinations and setting expectations by showing a "trailer" video or slideshows. It continued with a comprehensive itinerary shown using maps to help participants locate themselves virtually, sometimes completed with a 360° view of the airport they were supposed to be arriving at and of the hotel they were supposed to be staying in for a make-believe scenario. The tour officially began with a greeting from a local tour guide. Participants were carried along the streets of Lasem, through Google Street view or a prerecorded walkthrough video, until they reached each destination. The guide first explained the floorplan of the building or site plan of the area, talked about the historical significance of the place, and then showed visuals supporting the narrative, including 360° views, videos, historic photographs, and related archives. The epilogue was supposedly done to engage participants in group activities; one operator held a giveaway contest via Instagram, while the other came up with a batik folding workshop. In the end, both offered souvenirs made by local crafters that could be purchased online.

The numbers of participants were contrasted between the two: Mari Vakansi had 42, while Traval Co only had 17. It was reasonable, knowing that the latter charged four times more. However, both groups seem to be coming from a fairly similar age and travel experience background based on the demography (Figure 3 & 4).

After 1.5-2 hours of the tour, 54 respondents were asked to fill in an online questionnaire consisting of 30 questions in semantic scale form. On a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), respondents were required to assess some statements based on the virtual tour they participated in. As a continuation, four of the respondents were asked to be interviewed using open-ended questions regarding their experience on the virtual tour.
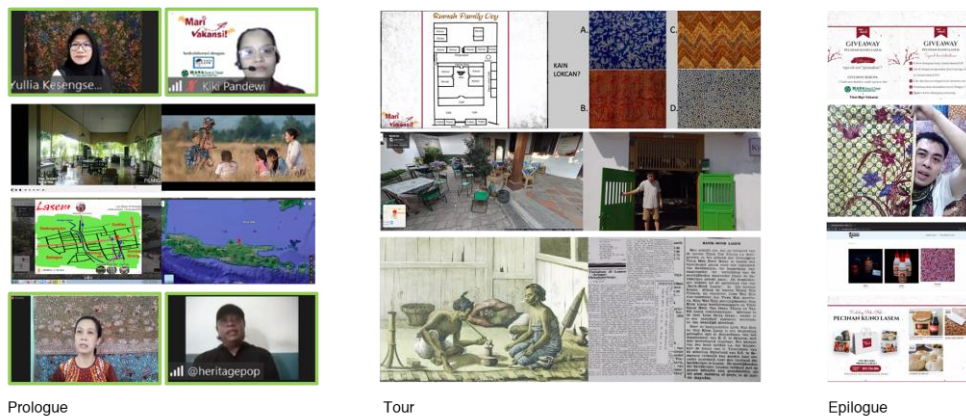

Prologue   Tour   Epilogue

Figure 2 Structure of Both Virtual Tours in Lasem Old Town.
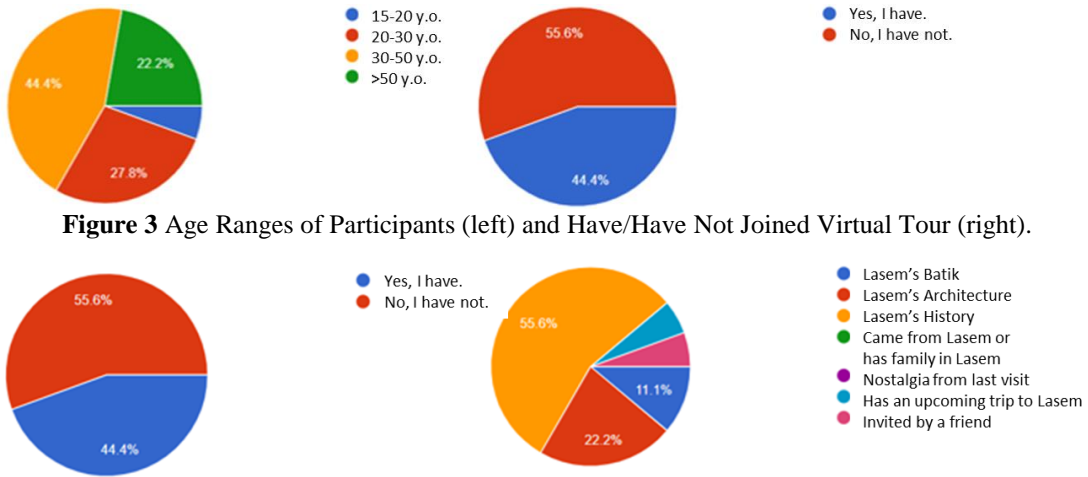
Figure 3 Age Ranges of Participants (left) and Have/Have Not Joined Virtual Tour (right).
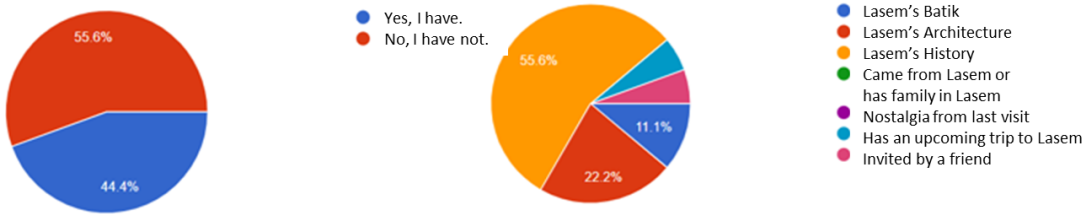

Figure 4 Have/Have Not Visited Lasem (left) and Interests/Motivations in Visiting Lasem (right).

4. RESULTS

Data gathered from the two collections are going to be categorized into three aspects consisting of the framework laid out in the previous section: "place engagement," "relationship quality," and "mindfulness." Other statements that do not fit into these categories but are worthy of mentioning are separated into "notable notes."

4.1 Place Engagement

Based on the questionnaires, six statements cue visitors' engagement to Lasem as a "physical place" (Figure 5). They were all rated highly— meaning visitors broadly agreed and strongly agreed to these. The highest ratings have to do with their expectation and interest in physically visiting Lasem.

During the interview, some participants mentioned that—although the type of media used was limited, they could mostly feel like they were indeed in Lasem.

4.2 Relationship Quality

There are five statements regarding the visitors' relationship quality to Lasem (Figure 6). It could be said that visitors felt happy and connected to the place, with more than half of them felt proud leaving the virtual

tour, for they had learned more about Lasem.

In the interview, it was revealed that participants established a connection to the soul of the place and the people "presenting" it (i.e., the tour guides). The reasons they wanted to buy souvenirs were also because they empathized with the local crafters. Even though not all of them wanted to re-visit Lasem virtually, but they would join another virtual tour by the same operator.

4.3 Mindfulness

In Moscardo's mindfulness concept, tourists' mental state exclusively relies on their perceived perception and received information. Satisfaction in perception would mean tourists experienced enough to meet prior expectations; satisfaction in information would mean tourists gained enough knowledge to fill in their current interest.

4.3.1 Expectation VS Experience

Statements 1-6 were related to participants' multisensorial perceptions (Figure 7). They were all rated highly, signing a satisfactory experience over expectation—none of the interviewees expected to be able to perceipt Lasem virtually rather than just visually. The make-believe scenario and walkthrough video were the ones felt contributing a lot to this. The group activities seemed to be binding participants together.
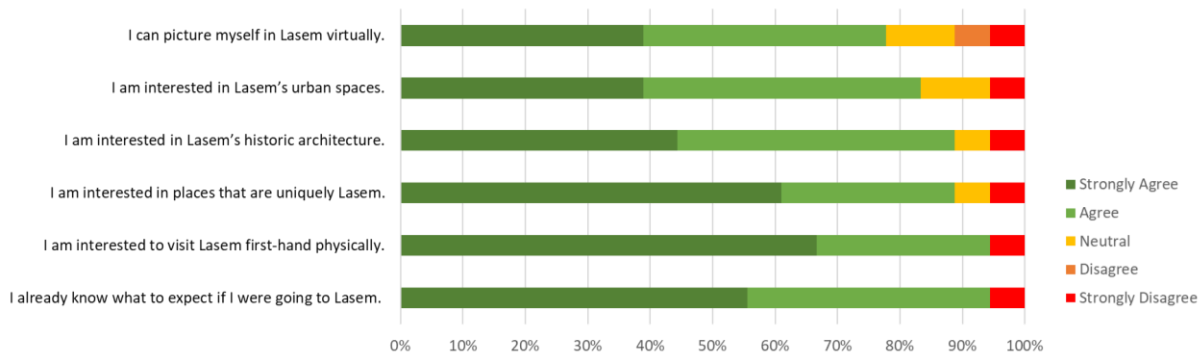

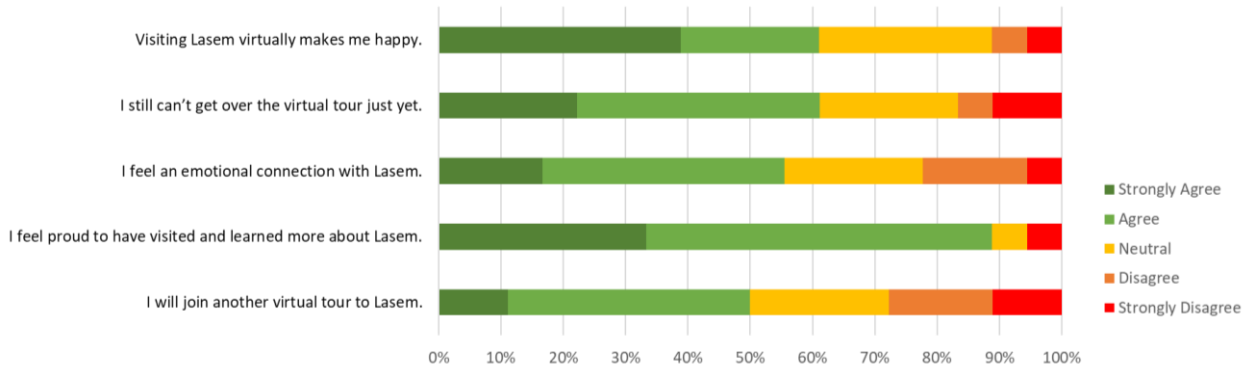**Figure 5**. Statements Regarding Place Engagement

Figure 6. Statements Regarding Relationship Quality

Though not totally immersive and participants just "go with the flow," the virtual tour exceeds their overall expectations.

4.3.2 Interest VS Knowledge

Statements 7-11 were related to participants' gathering of information, and they were all rated highly, signing a satisfactory experience over expectation (Figure 7). Most participants were interested in the general history of Lasem, yet interviewees said they came back with new interests in Lasem's architecture and batik. The knowledge given was not overwhelming, just enough to spark curiosity and willingness to visit Lasem.

4.4 Notable Notes

Other than statements associated with the three aspects, some taken were not necessarily in conjunction with the framework but had a lot to say about virtual tours' future potentials compared to the "real" physical tour. These opinions could essentially be manifested into two key findings.

4.4.1 The virtual tour can be a trailer to the physical tour

Interviewees conceded that by the time travel restrictions are lifted after the pandemic, they would still consider joining virtual tours before arriving at the destination physically. They felt that this was an appropriate way to know more about the place they would visit beforehand. With this, some of the opinions expressing this finding:

"After this, I always want to check out the virtual tour first before deciding to go to a certain destination."

"It can be seen as research before going on a real tour."

"When I go to Lasem later, I already know what to look for (like the mosaics in the *klenteng*), what to expect, whom to call, what boundaries I should respect."
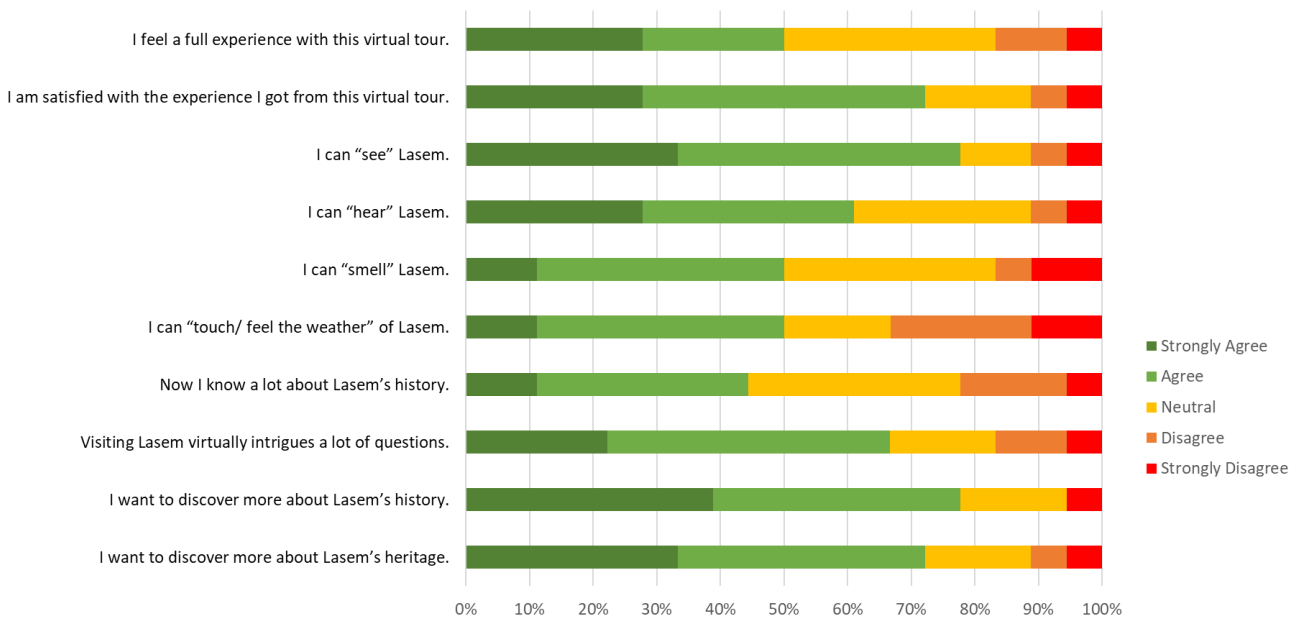

Figure 7. Statements Regarding Mindfulness

4.4.2 The virtual tour is preferable to the physical tour

Below are some statements that showed agreement on virtual tour being more favored than the physical one in certain conditions. Reasons uttered by the interviewees included affordability, practicality or convenience, and, surprisingly, wholesomeness.

"It's cheap; it makes me more adventurous to go to a less famous destination."

"It's convenient; physical traveling can sometimes be stressful to prepare. Here, I can relax while having this experience."

"Being there physically makes me distracted with all the pretty things by taking pictures that I often forget to absorb more information."

5. DISCUSSION

Findings above tried to decode three essential aspects that contributed to responsible tourist behavior in heritage settings: place engagement, relationship quality, and Mindfulness. These can later tell whether the virtual format of touring heritage sites, in this case, Lasem Old Town, could indeed be an alternative to more responsible heritage tourism.

Based on the questionnaire, both place engagement and relationship quality were rated highly and felt strongly by tour participants. The interview further disclosed that participants started developing an attachment to the locals and tour operators, reminding them that tourism is about empowering people at the end of the day. McKercher [18], in his case study on heritage attraction development, argued that emotional attachment to the heritage attraction, in particular, drives community attitudes— or in this case, tourists' attitudes that are leading to responsible behavior. Moreover, Lasem Old Town's virtual tour was assured of having generated local support that could minimize the possibilities of having its heritage interpretation challenged [5].

Engagement and relationship, although important, do not guarantee a satisfactory visit. One of the ways to "measure" this is through the concept of Mindfulness in

tourist destinations. The questionnaire results exhibit how the state of Mindfulness was rated surprisingly high. Participants gained more experience and knowledge than their expectations and initial interests, indicating that they are truly mindful of the heritage destination.

Additionally, participants were asked about their awareness of heritage in Lasem and in general. These statements above are what tourists supposedly would agree as an output of a successful heritage tour (Figure 8). Delightfully, there was a notable strong agreement on being aware, obligated, and wanting to take part in conservation attempts— which could be imposed as the ultimate output of synchronizing the three aspects. With that being laid out, it justifies how virtual tour in Lasem Old Town achieves a high level of Mindfulness in tourists and provokes heritage awareness—legitimate evidence of responsible tourism.

In comparison to physical tour, participants do not necessarily see the virtual tour as a contender, but rather an alternative or even a prevue. They do not see the virtual format as something better, but more preferable in particular circumstances. The virtual tour cannot be evenly contested to the physical tour in offering a physical experience. However, if reflecting on the classification of holistic "experience-scape" [19]— that groups experiences of heritage tourism into three: learning (gained knowledge vs. fulfilled interest), recreational (perceived experience vs. initial expectation), and heritage (involvement in heritage-related activities) – both virtual tours of Lasem Old Town, based on these results, are to have all three of the experience-scape.

6. CONCLUSION

Heritage destinations will always go hand in hand with tourism, for the better or worse. Having proven to have its share of driving regeneration/renewal in heritage sites, tourism needs to be addressed in an apprehensive way. One means to approach this is to assure that it plausibly happens in conjunction with sustainable development— by shaping up a responsible behavior in tourists, a significant force on the demand side.
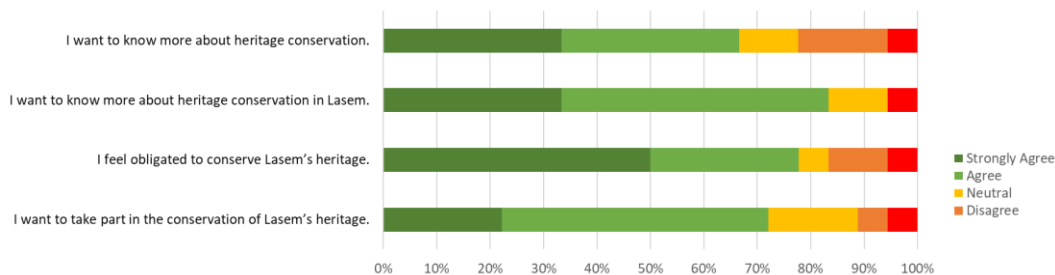

Figure 8. Statements Regarding Heritage Awareness

Coming to an age of digital eloquence, "virtual tour" has slowly surfaced as a substitute to physical tour, intensified by the travel restriction caused by the global pandemic. This paper investigates how virtual tours can be an alternative to more responsible heritage tourism. Based on the responsible behavior tourist framework, it adequately meets all three important aspects: place engagement, relationship quality, and "mindfulness." If all these are a success, it will establish a sense of obligation for tourists to participate in conservation attempts. Rojas [20] formulated three phases of heritage conservation; first, it is led by "cultural elites"; second, the role is more proactively played by the public sector; the last, when it becomes the broader public's responsibility, the local communities and the tourists. It is safe to say that the virtual tours in Lasem Old Town paved the way to reach the highest conservation stage. Hence, it is worth considering launching more virtual tours of heritage sites as another way to visit them.

After this pandemic, more people are going to consider virtual-touring. It could be treated as a pre-tour or even another form of a tour for people who cannot physically be there. Stakeholders of heritage sites should grab this chance as a way to "promote" their destinations, for it is proven to be raising a great deal of heritage awareness.

The upcoming research would need to explore the kinds of features or interactions best to have in a virtual tour to better experience and knowledge gaining for tourists. Architects can contribute ways to present these spaces virtually, affirmatively, with a responsible tourism framework in mind.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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