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# The role of cultural heritage in visitor narratives of peatlands: analysis of online user-generated reviews from three peatland sites in England

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## ABSTRACT

User-generated reviews of visitor attractions, on publicly available websites, such as Tripadvisor, are frequently used in tourism research but feature less often in published cultural heritage research. In this paper, we describe a qualitative analysis of the text from user-generated reviews of three peatland heritage landscapes in the United Kingdom – Ilkley Moor, Thorne and Hatfield Moors, and Shapwick Heath – to better understand the role tangible and intangible cultural heritage play in visitor perceptions and narratives of these sites. Our analysis indicates that visitors tend to emphasise natural over cultural heritage of peatland landscapes and hold plural, highly contextual and sometimes dissonant perceptions; there is no single story of peatlands. This presents both challenges and opportunities for building public appreciation of peatland cultural heritage. User-generated reviews offer, as-yet under-explored, potential data for use by heritage researchers and managers who seek to explore how visitors understand and use sites, and may also contribute to the emerging intangible heritage of heritage landscapes.

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## Introduction

User-generated content on web 2.0 sites such as Tripadvisor is widely used in tourism research (Stoleriu et al. 2019) to obtain service-user as opposed to service-provider perspectives. Although many built and landscape cultural heritage sites appear on such websites, with users sharing their experiences, there are fewer publications on their use in cultural heritage research. Cultural heritage is a large tourist draw in the UK; research commissioned by Historic England (2019) states that 218.4 million heritage-related trips and visits were made in England alone in 2018, resulting in significant contributions to the local and national economy. Munar and Ooi (2012) highlight the interconnections between tourism, history and culture, and the role heritage can play in articulating the unique draw of destinations. Thus, cultural heritage may be an important aspect of visitor experiences and perceptions of sites, even those not formally marketed as 'heritage destinations'. This paper focuses on public perceptions of peatland heritage. It describes qualitative analysis of user-generated reviews (UGR) of three peatland sites in England (Ilkley Moor, Shapwick Heath and Thorne & Hatfield Moors), to explore the prominence and role that cultural heritage plays in visitor narratives of these sites.

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This research is part of a multi-national project, *Wetland Futures in Contested Environments*, which seeks to understand how different user groups perceive, engage with and value wetlands and the different aspects of heritage associated with these environments. Following the Ramsar Convention (Ramsar 1994), peatlands are defined as a form of wetland, and we use both terms in our paper, to refer to peatlands specifically and wetlands generally. Peatland environments attract professional (e.g. land managers and conservation organisations) and recreational users. Understanding how recreational users perceive and value the cultural heritage of the landscapes and environments which they visit is significant for management and conservation practices, and may highlight where the development of cultural heritage presentation could enhance user experiences. Furthermore, understanding how recreational users identify cultural heritage within wider landscapes not presented as ‘cultural heritage’ is critical to holistic valuations of landscapes.

Ecosystem services provided by landscapes include provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting services, each with a range of subcategories and values, with cultural heritage values contributing to the cultural services (MEA (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment) 2005). However, the importance of cultural heritage values is not always recognised or understood (Tengberg et al. 2012). One reason for the low visibility of cultural heritage in ecosystem service valuations is the difficulty in identifying the value to the wider economy. Although work by Historic England (2014) in the UK explores the social, cultural and environmental value of heritage (e.g. education and skills, quality of life, personal development, and sense of place) alongside direct economic benefits (e.g. tourism, regeneration and development), there is often an attempt to translate these into economic value. Giving quantifiable values to the affective responses evoked by cultural heritage, for instance a sense of belonging, wellbeing, and identity, is highly problematic, therefore, qualitative studies have much to offer here. Online user-generated reviews (UGR) provide an additional narrative to official tourist information and site documentation. In some ways this is nothing new: personal accounts, reviews and diaries, images and souvenirs have a long history in sharing information about destinations (Munar and Ooi 2012). Cultural heritage has played an important role in this: from the Grand Tours of Europe in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries (Kriz 1997; Darley 2008), to reports from early travellers and antiquarians (e.g. Colls 1846). However, social media disrupts the means of creating, sharing and consuming these accounts (Munar and Ooi 2012) and contributes to the perceived image of sites, influencing prospective visitors (Corpas and Castillo 2019). Previous studies suggest that potential visitors may see UGR as easy to access, and more trustworthy than information provided on official attraction websites (Stoleriu et al. 2019).

Carter (2016) describes how UGR can be seen as ‘narrative appraisals of tourist sites, that is, visitor-authored stories about places’. These digitalised stories are often complemented by user-taken images (Munar and Ooi 2012) and allow visitors to co-construct narratives around cultural heritage experiences (Hodsdon 2020). UGR provide alternative interpretations (Stoleriu et al. 2019) which may differ from – or challenge (Munar and Ooi 2012) – formally sanctioned (authorised) heritage discourses (Smith 2006). Visitor-authored stories may re-frame narratives to align with their pre-existing ideas, or even question or critique the formal narrative in contrast with their own story of the site (Carter 2016). As such, UGR are a useful source of data for those seeking to understand visitor experiences and perceptions, alongside more traditional sources, such as visitor comment books (Stoleriu et al. 2019). However, UGR are not neutral or unproblematic reflections of public perceptions of sites. Not all visitors post online reviews. For example, in Bronner and de Hoog’s (2011) sample of 3176 ‘vacationers’, only 14% were described as contributing posts to online review sites. Alongside the growth of social-media, researchers have studied the motivations for posting, and using, user-generated reviews of products and services as a form of electronic word-of-mouth. However, there is limited literature specifically on the motivations for posting online travel reviews of destinations (Mladenovic, Krajina, and Milojevic 2019). Studies of Indian domestic tourists (Bakshi, Dogra, and Gupta 2019), international tourists to Serbia (Mladenovic, Krajina, and Milojevic 2019), Dutch holiday-makers (Bronner and De Hoog, 2011), and travellers from the UK, Spain and Switzerland (Wilson,

Murphy, and Fierro 2012), all appear to suggest that the main motivations for posting UGR are altruism and social benefits: reviewers sharing their experiences and opinions for the benefit of future visitors. However, not all studies distinguish between the type of service/experience being reviewed or the site the review is posted on. Therefore, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the specific motivations of reviewers of peatland sites on Tripadvisor.

Tripadvisor is a high-profile social-media site which hosts UGR and describes itself as the world's largest travel platform; with an average of 463 million visitors each month in 2019, and over 860 million reviews and opinions (Tripadvisor nd2020). Although Tripadvisor provides some suggestions, which may influence what is included in reviews (a description of place, activity and recommendations for fellow travellers), and there may be perceived norms about what is appropriate to include (Wilson, Murphy, and Fierro 2012), there is a sense that these are spontaneous and voluntary comments. This 'unmediated visitor feedback' (Wight, 2020, 1; Hodsdon 2020) provides insight into what visitors found memorable (Stoleriu et al. 2019) rather than reflecting the researcher-led topics of structured surveys or interviews. Bronner and de Hoog (2011) indicate that contributors to consumer-generated-sites tend to focus on positive aspects of their experiences, suggesting that such reviews may hold useful insight into what people value about destinations and experiences. As such, it is potentially a valuable source of data for cultural heritage researchers and those managing heritage sites.

Munar and Ooi (2012) have explored the contribution UGR make to heritage tourism and the understanding of new, digitally mediated, experiences of heritage. UGR from Tripadvisor have been used to explore visitor perceptions and experiences of heritage sites, including historic buildings (Zhang and Pearce 2019; Chester 2020; Hodsdon 2020), museums (Dumbraveanu, Craciun and Tudorico 2016; Carter 2016; Su and Teng 2018), UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Renwick 2017; Corpas and Castillo 2019; Stoleriu et al. 2019), and broader cultural heritage sites and objects (Alexander, Blank, and Hale 2018; Hajibayova 2019; Wight, 2020).

### ***Public perceptions of wetlands and peatlands***

Published studies of perceptions of wetlands tend to use traditional social science research methods, such as questionnaires, focus-groups, interviews and documentary analysis. In the main, these focus on the natural heritage and ecological value of landscapes, with public participation and support seen as crucial to wetland protection (Davenport et al. 2010; Scholte et al. 2016; Lee 2017; Wilkins et al. 2019). Many studies focus on public attitudes towards wetlands restoration and conservation (Aggestam 2014; Polajnar 2008) or nature-focused wetland tourism (Lee 2011), with an understanding that individual perceptions may influence support for or opposition to management strategies and restoration/conservation efforts, and even shape the options available (Johnson and Pflugh 2008). Often, there is an assumption that wetlands are perceived unfavourably and that negative perceptions are rooted in a lack of knowledge or understanding of the ecology and environmental value of these landscapes (Polajnar 2008; Lee 2017). In contrast, some authors assert that 'favourable attitudes to wetlands may be more substantial than previously thought' (Rispoli and Hambler 1999, 478) and although wetlands may have been perceived negatively in the past, they are increasingly valued for nature (Davenport et al. 2010). Some studies report positive social attitudes towards wetlands in the UK (Rispoli and Hambler 1999) and the USA (Johnson and Pflugh 2008) or that people hold positive impressions of wetlands they are familiar with (Scholte et al. 2016). Similarly, people living closer to wetlands tend to be more aware and more likely to visit them (Wilkins et al. 2019). Spending recreational time on wetlands is associated with greater place attachment (Lee 2011) and concern about losing ecosystem services (Wilkins et al. 2019). Byg et al. (2017) describe people as holding conflicting views of peatlands; as both an awe-inspiring wilderness and a wasteland, simultaneously a rich cultural landscape and degraded nature. There is a level of ambiguity, plurality and ambivalence with which people perceive these landscapes that is more nuanced and complex than simply whether people view them positively or negatively.

Some studies of wetlands perceptions explicitly use the concept of ecosystem services and others can be aligned with elements of the MEA (2005) framework. Different stakeholders may have different views of the ecosystem services provided by wetlands (Johnson and Pflugh 2008; Aggestam 2014). For example, farmers in Nova Scotia perceive wetlands positively and value regulating services (water management) alongside supporting (economic and biodiversity) services (Sherren and Verstraten 2013), whilst Scholte et al. (2016) describe all stakeholders valuing provisioning (food) and cultural (recreation) ecosystem services, with low appreciation of regulating services. Bridging tensions between global perspectives (which tend to emphasise ecology and biodiversity) and local perspectives (which focus more on livelihoods and access) is challenging and requires balancing the often competing aims of wetland protection and conservation work (ibid.) as well as taking into account the local context and history of controversy in peatland management (Warren 2000).

Whilst some authors suggest that restoration work and communication efforts do not always consider the cultural services provided by wetlands (Davenport et al. 2010; Pueyo-Ros, Ribas, and Fraguell 2019), there is little reference to physical cultural heritage or forms of intangible heritage such as folklore, art and customs, in published studies on perceptions of wetlands. Where cultural values are considered these tend to dwell on recreation, aesthetic appeal (e.g. Dobbie 2013; Lee 2017), tourism and, less frequently, a sense of calm or tranquillity. These aspects may be over-emphasised as they are the simplest to measure, or reflect a focus on economically valued cultural services (Davenport et al. 2010; Pueyo-Ros, Ribas, and Fraguell 2019).

## Study sites

The three study areas in the UK for the *Wetland Futures in Contested Environments* project are Ilkley Moor (West Yorkshire), Shapwick Heath (Somerset Levels and Moors) and Thorne & Hatfield Moors (Humberhead Peatlands); all peatlands with rich natural and cultural heritage.

Ilkley Moor (Figure 1), with areas of upland blanket bog, is an internationally important site for prehistoric rock-art and other lithic monuments (such as cairns, stone circles and boundaries). The landscape has been influenced by humans since prehistory; from Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation and clearance, historical industrial exploitation (mines and quarries), to more recent management for grazing, grouse-shooting (banned on Ilkley Moor since 2018), and recreational use, including having an important place in social history as an urban common.



Figure 1. Ilkley Moor.



**Figure 2.** Humberhead peatlands (Image: J Canning).

Thorne & Hatfield Moors (Figure 2) are lowland raised mires forming part of the Humberhead peatlands. The sites have a long history of drainage, ‘improvement’ for agricultural use, and peat extraction, (although peat-cutting stopped in the early 2000s). Archaeological material from the site and nearby – including bog-bodies, boats, and prehistoric tools – were reported by early antiquarians. More recently there have been substantial palaeoecological investigations and two prehistoric trackways were discovered, one of which was excavated and reconstructed in the 2000s (Chapman and Gearey 2013).

Shapwick Heath (Figure 3) is part of the Avalon Marshes Partnership in the Somerset Levels. Peat extraction for horticultural purposes, land enclosure and drainage have substantially changed the nature of the landscape, creating a variety of habitats and supporting a diverse range of flora and fauna. Archaeological remains have been recovered widely across the Somerset Levels, with well-known prehistoric trackways (e.g. the Sweet Track: Coles and Coles 1986), prehistoric villages (Aalbersberg and Brown 2011) and remnants of peat extraction technologies.

In addition to the tangible heritage described above, each site has a rich intangible heritage, including folklore, art and crafts connected with the landscape. Examples include, willow growing and weaving in the Somerset levels (*Daily Telegraph*, 26 January 2008), the traditional song *On Ilkka Moor Baht’at* from Ilkley Moor (Simmons 2003), and folklore recorded in the late nineteenth



**Figure 3.** The reconstructed sweet track at shapwick heath (Image: R Brunning).

century relating to wetlands in the Humber region (Balfour 1891). As wetland sites with evidence of past human presence, there may be undiscovered cultural material beneath the surface; as-yet-undisturbed archaeological material preserved in the peat, and remains of plants, insects and other material that may give clues to human activity and environmental conditions (Gearey et al. 2010).

These three sites are also visitor attractions. Ilkley Moor is an urban common managed by the City of Bradford Metropolitan and District Council, Shapwick Heath and the Humberhead Peatlands are National Nature Reserves (NNR) cared for by Natural England. Like many wetlands, they are subject to multiple uses and interests – including natural biodiversity and conservation, heritage management and research, diverse recreational (and wellbeing), economic and livelihood uses – and require compromise and careful management to keep in balance. Occasionally, different uses and interests can lead to conflict and contestation; for example, peat-cutting as traditional heritage is at odds with the drive for conservation, and management for leisure activities can have unintended consequences for hidden archaeological heritage. UGR provide insight into how people who visit peatlands understand and value those landscapes, and may provide useful information for management practices.

## Methodology

This paper describes analysis of the text from user-generated reviews (UGR) of these three locations, publicly available from Tripadvisor. Our primary interest is the content of the reviews, therefore we did not capture users' name, profile or location, and reviews were anonymised before analysis. The sample includes the text of all 194 reviews (146 for Ilkley Moor, 23 for Shapwick Heath and 25 for Thorne & Hatfield Moors), written in English and posted online between July 2012 and August 2020. Users are aware that their reviews are publicly available when they post them, however, no direct quotes from their reviews are used in our paper, as these could easily be searched to identify specific individuals (Beninger 2017). Permission was obtained from Tripadvisor to use the content, and approval for the research was granted by the University of Bradford ethics panel.

Whilst issues have been raised about the trustworthiness or impartiality of Tripadvisor reviews (Corpas and Castillo 2019), we do not see this as a significant risk for our study. Indeed, as Hodsdon (2020) states, issues around the objectivity or veracity of UGR are not as critical if trying to understand individual visitor interpretations and perceptions of a site, as opposed to an objective description of it. However, it is important to remember that authors of online reviews are a self-selecting group (Su and Teng 2018) and their views may not be representative of all sections of the visiting public.

The analysis of social-media content provides a naturalistic approach, using existing (freely accessible) data, which may be particularly valuable when facing challenges around gathering new data (Wight, 2020) and avoids additional burden on participants, being an unobtrusive gauge of visitors' views (Alexander, Blank, and Hale 2018). In our context, we were exploring public perceptions of peatland heritage at the three sites during the Covid-19 pandemic, when traditional face-to-face community engagement and research activities presented both practical and ethical challenges. Exploring Tripadvisor UGR offered a complementary secondary data source, alongside data gathered through online surveys and interviews. This paper reports on the analysis of the content from Tripadvisor and addresses the following research questions:

- To what extent (and how) does cultural heritage feature in the narratives constructed by visitors?
- What role does cultural heritage play in visitor perceptions and experiences?

The lead author coded and analysed the data using an iterative and inductive approach. The anonymised reviews were read and re-read to develop a draft coding structure (for table of codes see supplemental file 1). Data were first coded manually, then using a CAQDAS programme for

the second coding cycle and to assist with data organisation (Saldaña 2021). The text tagged for each code was reviewed and categories and themes synthesised (Braun and Clarke 2006). A thematic summary document was produced for each site separately, then integrated and analysed to explore differences and commonalities across sites.

## Findings

In this section, we present analysis of Tripadvisor user-generated reviews (UGR) of the three sites, with a focus on how people engage with and describe these sites, and the role cultural heritage plays in their experiences. Our analysis indicates that reviewers hold very favourable views of these landscapes and value them highly for a range of reasons. Using the Tripadvisor rating scale as a broad indicator of sentiment (e.g. Hajibayova 2019), 95% of reviews are positive (Excellent or Very good), 4% are neutral (Average) and only 1% are negative (Poor), with no reviews using the lowest rating (Figure 4).

Positive perceptions of peatlands are also reflected in the text of UGR, which imply high-status and strong positive emotions. Thorne & Hatfield and Ilkley Moors are described in reviews as important regionally and nationally (through press coverage of Thorne & Hatfield and through the general fame of Ilkley). Some reviewers use language which infers high-status, e.g. metaphors of treasure, or present the sites as must-see attractions. Formal designations as a NNR (Thorne & Hatfield and Shapwick Heath) and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (Thorne & Hatfield) are noted by a small number of reviewers. However, high-status and popularity are not always seen as positive attributes. Across all sites, reviewers imply that low visitor numbers contribute to positive visitor experiences and a sense of tranquillity, e.g. in UGR of Thorne & Hatfield Moors the less well-known nature of the site is seen as a strength. A few reviews describe undesirable visitor behaviours, such as littering and poorly controlled dogs, others highlight the friendliness of other visitors (e.g. fellow bird watchers sharing knowledge).

### Wetland aesthetics

79% of user reviews mention the aesthetic value of the upland landscape of Ilkley Moor, whereas only around a fifth of users emphasise the aesthetic value of the lowland sites. For Ilkley Moor, the open views and wider scenery often prompt emotional responses, with users employing strong

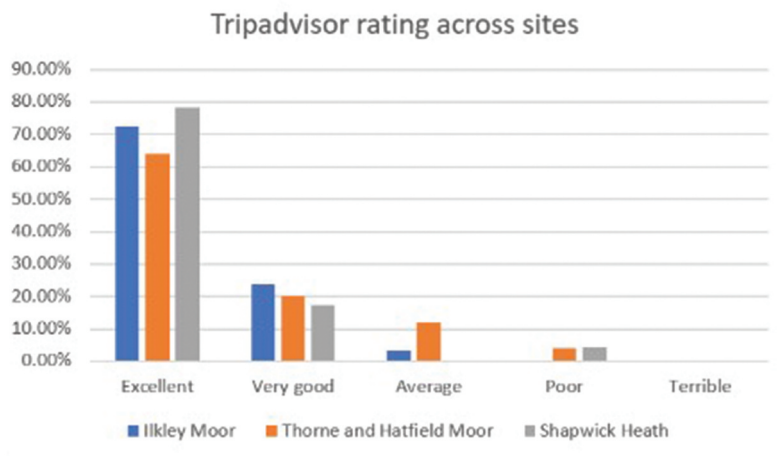


Figure 4. Proportion of Tripadvisor ratings across the three sites.



adjectives such as ‘stunning’, ‘breath-taking’ and ‘spectacular’. For the other sites, aesthetic values are more linked to smaller scale natural features and wildlife.

The landscape difference between sites may influence perceptions here; it is difficult to get a wider landscape view from the lowland sites, whereas Ilkley Moor rises to 400 m a.s.l, offering commanding views of the wider valley. This does not mean that the lowland views are less ‘stunning’ or ‘breathtaking’, but they are simultaneously more enclosed and more open; the absence of significant terrain variation can provide an almost featureless landscape, offering visitors a flat viewshed enclosed by vegetation, as opposed to the far-reaching vista offered from upland landscapes (Natural England 2009).

### **Natural heritage**

The natural heritage of peatlands is reflected in UGR through references to landscape features and wildlife (plant and animal) encountered at each site.

At Ilkley Moor, the most frequently mentioned landscape feature is geological; the prominent rock formation known as the Cow and Calf. This provides a focal point for many reviews, linked to aesthetic appreciation of the landscape, activities undertaken (e.g. walking and climbing) or as a key location to anchor reviews. At Shapwick Heath and Thorne & Hatfield Moors, the most mentioned landscape features are wetlands: open water (pools, meres and lakes); bogs and marshes; and running water (canals, streams and rivers). Watery features also appear in reviews of Ilkley Moor (streams, rivers, ponds and waterfalls) but here only two reviews make direct reference to peatlands. Some reviews frame boggy ground as an obstacle to be overcome or prepared for (by keeping to hard paths and wearing appropriate footwear) or even a potential hazard to small children and dogs.

Wildlife plays a much bigger role in UGR of the lowland sites (featuring in over 70% of reviews) than it does for the upland site. At the two NNRs, birds feature most prominently, followed by a variety of mammals, insects, amphibians and reptiles; with UGR naming individual species as well as noting the general richness and diversity of wildlife. At Thorne & Hatfield Moor, reviews also mention varied flora and fungi, or that rare plants and animals may be spotted. In contrast, the main wildlife referred to on Ilkley Moor are domesticated animals (cattle and sheep) and heather.

### **Cultural heritage**

Cultural heritage is mentioned in just over a quarter of reviews for Shapwick Heath and Ilkley Moor and around 10% of reviews for Thorne & Hatfield Moor.

UGR of Ilkley Moor describe multiple tangible cultural heritage features including historic buildings and structures (White Wells Bath House, Ilkley Tarn), prehistoric rock-art, the quarry, WW2 aircraft crash sites, stone circles, graffiti, and contemporary additions (the Millennium Walk and Stanza Stones). References to the intangible heritage of Ilkley Moor mainly focus on the traditional song *On Ilkla Moor Baht'at* and the Brontës. Individual reviews mention a historical connection with Charles Darwin – who convalesced at one of the hydrotherapy houses in Ilkley (Campbell and Matthews 2015) – and the use of the moor in WW2 military manoeuvres.

At Shapwick Heath, isolated reviews mention the Sweet Track, the landscape shaped by peat extraction, disused railway lines, nearby historic buildings and contemporary art installations. A few reviews mention industrial heritage at Thorne & Hatfield, noting how peat extraction shaped the landscape and an access road which was previously part of colliery works.

### **Wetlands and wellbeing**

The few UGR that mention the wellbeing value of sites tend to relate to the mental health benefits of time away to combat the stress and anxiety of busy lifestyles by providing relaxation, peace, and

spiritual nourishment. For Ilkley Moor the physical benefits of exercise and fresh air are mentioned, and may also be implied in the active ways that users engage with all sites (e.g. walking).

### **Engagement with landscape**

Across all three sites, the majority of UGR mention recreational activities, of which walking is the most frequently mentioned. Other cross-site activities include photography and picnicking. Overall, there is a greater emphasis on physical activity in UGR of Ilkley Moor (e.g. climbing) than for the two other sites, which tend to place more emphasis on enjoying nature (especially bird-watching).

Many reviews describe emotional engagement with the sites; present in around three quarters of reviews of Thorne & Hatfield Moors and Shapwick Heath and over half of reviews for Ilkley Moor. Emotional engagement is reflected in the language used, from moderately positive adjectives (lovely, pleasant, nice, great) to strong adjectives (stunning, breath-taking, amazing, spectacular). At Ilkley Moor, the stronger adjectives tend to describe the scenery and views from the moor, at the lowland sites the language reflects a more moderate emotional response (with more emphasis on peace and tranquillity) and, where used, stronger adjectives tend to be prompted by the reserve as a whole or the nature within it. Some reviewers use verbs such as 'love' or identify sites as favourite places, indicating personal attachment. This form of place attachment is echoed in a handful of reviews which describe living nearby, visiting regularly, or family connections and memories of visiting sites since childhood. At Ilkley Moor, emotional responses include a sense of thrill in seeing rock-climbers, a rare bird's nest or people engaging in ritual activity.

Some users express their identity through their reviews, positioning themselves as having familiarity and knowledge of sites; directly offering advice and recommendations to readers (as opposed to simply sharing their experiences and opinions). For example, naming animal and plant species or cultural heritage features that they encountered on their visit. Cultural heritage features are most used in this way in UGR of Ilkley Moor, with users indicating the depth of their knowledge by adding dates to prehistoric and historic features or making references to the lyrics of *On Ilkley Moor Baht'at*. Others identify with a particular interest or activity (e.g. bird-watching, photography, cycling, climbing, walking).

A small number of UGR from both Ilkley and Shapwick describe a sense of connection across time with people in the (prehistoric) past who may have stood in the same place or seen the same view. For Ilkley Moor cognitive engagement and a sense of time-depth are prompted by encounters with prehistoric rock-art, nineteenth-century graffiti, and geological features. The language used to describe cultural heritage material implies it prompted intellectual interest and fascination, and that cultural heritage may be a focus of future visits. At Shapwick, deeper engagement is also prompted by the natural heritage and is multi-sensory and immersive, including sounds and smells as well as sights (e.g. a poetic description of a starling murmuration). Here, and at Thorne & Hatfield, there is an attentiveness to the small details of nature (e.g. noticing small flora and fauna or the behaviour of individual animals). In general, this depth of engagement is less evident in the reviews from Thorne & Hatfield Moors, but some UGR describe multi-sensory experiences (the absence of sound), reflect on family memories or a feeling of being in a different world or country.

Many reviews also comment on access and facilities, but these aspects are outside the scope of this paper.

### **Discussion**

If visitors to heritage sites are, as Hodsdon (2020) and Carter (2016) suggest, story-builders what kind of stories do they create in user-generated reviews (UGR) of peatland heritage landscapes?

### ***Wetlands as natural and/or cultural landscapes***

At Shapwick the majority of narratives are about nature and recreation; people enjoying these landscapes for wildlife, recreational activities and aesthetic value. There are also sub-narratives around access, and peace and tranquillity in relation to wellbeing. In contrast, only a few reviews mention cultural heritage, framing this in the context of past human use of the landscape. At Thorne & Hatfield Moors, the picture is similar, with slightly more emphasis on recreation and slightly less on aesthetic value. Again, few reviews refer to cultural heritage. The narratives from reviews of Ilkley Moor tend to be framed around active recreation and aesthetic values, with sub-narratives around escape and wellbeing, access and facilities. Nature plays a role in this, but at the landscape scale, as scenery for aesthetic appreciation. There are more references to cultural heritage, but still as a sub-narrative. In general, UGR are not obviously aligned with provisioning, regulating or servicing ecosystem services (MEA 2005) which are, to an extent, ‘behind the scenes’ services. Cultural services are more represented in UGR; particularly around aesthetics, recreation and ecotourism. This emphasis on leisure and recreation also aligns with the cultural services provided by landscapes, as identified by Natural England (2009).

Comparing the three areas, Shapwick Heath and Thorne & Hatfield Moor are generally perceived as wetland nature reserves, whereas Ilkley Moor is seen as a semi-cultural and natural moorland valued for the opportunity to experience open scenery and outdoor pursuits. We use ‘semi-cultural’ deliberately here, because it is unclear whether writers of UGR understand the cultural origin of the upland landscape, largely existing in its present form as a result of forest clearance between the Neolithic and Iron Age (c. 4000BC – AD51) and continued use for animal grazing since then restricting natural reforestation. Furthermore, quarries situated around the edges of Ilkley Moor have been utilised since the Roman period to provide construction material for the local area. Similarly, Shapwick and Thorne & Hatfield are areas which have been created and modified through human action over millennia, with peat-cutting in more recent times for fuel and horticulture significantly changing the environment. Far from being ‘natural’ landscapes that reviewers perceive them to be – most evident in a handful of references to the sites as unspoilt or wilderness – these are landscapes shaped by cultural practice and action.

Comparing visitor perceptions with the official online presentation of sites, some differences emerge, particularly around the emphasis on natural and cultural heritage. As of 27 January 2021, the Humberhead Peatlands website emphasised the natural heritage of Thorne & Hatfield Moors, described as a ‘raised bog wilderness’, but mentions past peat working. Shapwick is described (as of 27 January 2021, on the Avalon Marshes website) as a nature reserve ‘steeped in history’, and separate paragraphs indicate its importance as a natural habitat, a landscape shaped by former peat working, and the Neolithic Sweet Track. The Bradford council webpage (27 January 2021) for Ilkley Moor focuses on access and which activities are and are not allowed on the urban common, emphasising recreational use. The Friends of Ilkley Moor website (27 January 2021) presents more information, emphasising the importance of natural heritage through formal designations (SSSI, SPA) and as an important moorland habitat, with links to social history, archaeology and a series of ‘heritage walks’. However, what is common is a blurring in presentation of natural and cultural heritage in both formal documentation and UGR, with sites described as wilderness with cultural heritage elements.

### ***The role of cultural heritage in visitor perceptions and engagement***

In general, although cultural heritage is only discussed in a minority of UGR, it was perceived positively. Even the, often contentious, practice of peat-cutting is mentioned in a couple of UGR at Shapwick and Thorne & Hatfield in what appears to be neutral language. Peat-cutting is generally viewed in negative terms from an ecosystem services, sustainability, and environmental conservation perspective, although a counter to this is the cultural role of pre-industrial peat-cutting of some

areas; closely tied to the history of individuals and social dynamics. One reason for the limited references to peat-cutting in UGR may be that it is only identifiable via the absence of material, which makes it difficult for those who are unaware of the practice to identify it in landscapes. More easily identifiable are tangible (standing) elements of cultural heritage. These are mentioned more frequently in UGR of Ilkley Moor, possibly because they are more visible in the landscape, often adjacent to well-marked and used footpaths. Interestingly, some reviewers marvel at the antiquity of Victorian graffiti but do not mention the much older prehistoric cup and ring carved rocks. This may be because they are unaware of or did not come across the older carvings or do not recognise the markings as human made (Figure 5).

On the other sites, cultural heritage and archaeological remains are less visible, often hidden beneath the peat, though well documented. Across all sites there is little reference to wetland specific cultural heritage (apart from the Sweet Track at Shapwick).

Differences between the recognition of cultural versus natural heritage are further emphasised by the formally designated status of sites (e.g. NNR, SSSI) mentioned in some reviews. In contrast, even though all three sites have scheduled ancient monuments with associated legal protection and registration (listed online on The National Heritage List for England, as of 27 January 2021), the status of sites' cultural heritage is not mentioned in UGR.

The emphasis on recreational activities in UGR indicates direct physical engagement with landscape, perhaps reflecting the embodied and experiential nature of people's experiences of heritage sites (e.g. Renwick 2017). However, it tends to be the natural heritage of sites that people



**Figure 5.** Users frequently reported elements of more recent historic graffiti on Ilkley Moor (lower image), but less commonly the prehistoric rockart (upper image). Possibly due to lack of obvious human creation of the prehistoric features, and their frequent coverage by vegetation.

are physically engaging with. In some cases, this is accompanied by sensory details – muddy, boggy or slippery ground underfoot, the sounds and smells of wildlife, the absence of sounds of urban life, the experience of different weather conditions – all implying multi-sensory physical engagement with landscape that goes beyond the dominant ‘aesthetic’ framing. Like Stoleriu et al. (2019) and Munar and Ooi (2012) we found that affective experiences and emotional engagement were important components of UGR. These are landscapes that evoke (largely) positive emotional responses and may connect with physical and mental wellbeing benefits. For Ilkley, this may tap into the history of the moor’s role in health and wellbeing as a spa town in the Victorian period (Wallis 2018). The importance of cultural heritage in wellbeing was highlighted in the UK during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, through the widespread promotion and uptake of cultural heritage media in virtual form, including museum exhibits, art galleries, and the live streaming/re-broadcast of music and theatrical performances on national television and the internet. Outdoor locations and heritage sites, particularly national parks, became especially popular during the summer of 2020 (Jones 2020), with many people indicating outdoor spaces and heritage were a source of local pride, personal wellbeing and reflection (The National Lottery 2020).

At times the engagement with cultural heritage appears to be somewhat passive or superficial, for example, describing them as adding interest and aesthetic value when encountered. However, a handful of UGR describe this prompting deeper engagement; empathy with past human users of the landscape and inspiring a sense of wonder and interest in the past. There may also be less obvious ways in which people actively engage with heritage landscapes, that reviewers indicate through memories and attachment to place or through expressing aspects of their identity by aligning with recreational activities or sharing their knowledge of the landscape’s natural and cultural heritage. All of these may reflect people actively constructing the meaning of these sites (Smith 2006). Indeed, the act of engaging with the landscape and recording their experiences and views in UGR contributes to the wider discourse around the heritage of these sites. Although UGR suggest that tangible and intangible cultural heritage play a role in meaning-making at one of our sites (Ilkley Moor), it is less evident at the two lowland sites, and wetland-specific cultural heritage elements are largely absent. However, it should be noted that these differences may also be a product of the much smaller number of reviews for each of the lowland sites. Corpas and Castillo argue that ‘archaeological assets are under-promoted from a touristic perspective’ (2019, 49), and we would tentatively agree with this for the broader cultural heritage of our three study sites.

## Future directions and conclusions

Our analysis suggests, in agreement with Munar and Ooi (2012), that there is untapped potential for employing analysis of UGR to understand public perceptions of heritage, especially in the realm of heritage landscapes, where the cultural heritage value is not always foregrounded in formal presentation of sites. The limited literature on motivations for posting UGR of heritage sites on Tripadvisor clearly should be borne in mind when considering the generalisability of our findings. However, we argue that UGR provide a window into the perspectives of visitors to peatlands, and provide a sustainable and non-intrusive source of information on one aspect of public perceptions and experiences. Within our WetFutures research, we are using this data as part of a mixed-methods qualitative study alongside insight from literature review, questionnaires and online photo-elicitation interviews to address our research questions. We suggest that a useful focus for future research would be to specifically look at motivations for posting UGR of heritage sites and destinations. Such studies would provide greater understanding of the potential use and relevance of UGR for heritage researchers and managers. Understanding how visitors perceive and engage with both natural and cultural heritage aspects are crucial to conservation and preservation efforts as well as how users are encouraged to engage with peatlands as visitor attractions.

Narratives around heritage not only shape how it is approached in the present, but shape how the past will be managed in the future (Harrison et al. 2020). The narratives from our UGR analysis

tend to focus on natural heritage and recreational use. The recreational use of peatlands reflects a direct physical engagement with these landscapes, and potentially their rich natural and cultural heritage. There are indications that appreciation of the aesthetics of the landscape (including cultural heritage features) leads to emotional engagement, but there are fewer indications of cognitive engagement with natural or cultural heritage. This may be a limitation of the data set – an account of deep cognitive engagement may not be what people expect from UGR – but nonetheless it plays a role in broader discourse around heritage. In this way, there is a risk that UGR may contribute to framings of cultural heritage as something to be passively and aesthetically enjoyed as part of visiting an entertaining attraction. However, our analysis also suggests potential for cultural heritage to prompt narratives around intellectual engagement with past and continued human activity at these sites.

This is of particular importance for peatland landscapes. Most peatlands in England are culturally-modified landscapes, shaped by human activity in prehistoric and historic periods; from early forest clearance, as a long-used source of resources and materials (sometimes settlement), and more recent recreational use. They are important as rare habitats for distinctive wildlife, for water management, as an effective means of carbon sequestration, as an environmental and (pre)historical archive, but they are also landscapes at risk (Bain et al. 2011). These risks do not only impact natural heritage and nature-focused ecosystem services provided by these landscapes but also affect their cultural heritage (Gearey et al. 2010).

Many authors advocate education about the value of wetlands (e.g. Dobbie 2013; Lee 2017; Wilkins et al. 2019) to address misunderstandings (Rispoli and Hambler 1999). However, this implies that there is a ‘correct’ narrative about wetlands that the public need to be educated about, often prioritising the environmental or ecological value. In contrast, Byg et al. (2017, 188) suggest that conflicting views of peatlands do not stem from a lack of knowledge, but from the ‘biophysical characteristics, history, trade-offs between different uses and differences in personal relationships with nature’. Our analysis suggests that visitors tend to see peatlands as natural landscapes, and where they do acknowledge cultural heritage features these sometimes reflect dissonant views of peatlands – as simultaneously wild yet showing evidence of past human presence and activity – and do not always align with formal presentations of these sites. Lazzero, Sartori and Innocenti (2015) suggest that perspectives from UGR can pose conceptual challenges for heritage professionals around what are considered valid interpretations (and who can be interpreters) of heritage assets. For wetland landscapes, we suggest our analysis of UGR lends weight to calls to consider holistic conceptualisations of wetland heritage. Developing a greater understanding of the plural uses and meanings held by different users of peatlands will benefit future efforts to educate and engage people with value of both the natural and cultural heritage of these landscapes, and enable such engagement activities to start from where users’ interests lie.

Presenting both natural and cultural heritage simultaneously through ‘legitimised’ routes requires consideration of the intended and unintended impacts of active management plans for example, potential risks to archaeological heritage from peatland conservation action, impacts of water retention schemes, erosion from recreational users and visitors. Part of these management plans could include using natural and cultural heritage features to manage movement through landscapes. In our analysis of UGR there is a sense that the presence of other people can impede visitors’ enjoyment of the landscapes. This chimes with findings from other studies (Munar and Ooi 2012). There is potential for the impact of higher visitor numbers to be mitigated through managing the spread of visitors to well-visited sites, and cultural heritage could play a role in supporting this (Corpas and Castillo 2019). For example, the limited cultural heritage features mentioned in reviews of Ilkley Moor may reflect the popularity of certain areas of the landscape. By highlighting the diverse archaeological features at the site, visitors could be encouraged to use wider areas of the moor, reducing pressure on heavily visited areas. However, this relies on visitors being willing to seek out lesser-known cultural heritage features, whereas one of the draws for visitors may be high-

profile features, such as the 12 Apostles Stone Circle, the Swastika stone and the White Wells bath-house.

One avenue of reconciliation identified through our analysis of UGR is a reflexive consideration of what narratives we – as scholars and practitioners – try to present, what we try to conserve/preserve and how these aspects relate to elements highlighted as significant to the users of landscapes. The stories and meanings that users construct from their experiences should inform part of the heritage of landscapes, and how they are managed; complementing authorised narratives and educational information with user perspectives (Munar and Ooi 2012).

Our study suggests that there is no single story of the perceptions of peatlands and their heritage, therefore approaches to reconcile and create dialogue between different views is likely to be highly contextual. At Ilkley Moor, the primary narrative from UGR is recreational use and to a limited extent the cultural heritage – so we might reflect on how this could be used to foster care for the surrounding natural and cultural environment. At the other sites, we might reflect on how user narratives around nature and wildlife might connect with the presentation of sites' cultural heritage. The different expectations and projections of the landscape shared through UGR can engender both cohesion and division amongst recreational users and peatland professionals. Recognising and exploring how such dissonance may be reconciled is one of the wider aims of the *Wetland Futures in Contested Environments* project.

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