Religious Servicescape: Does Convenience Matter for Revisit Intentions and Positive Word of Mouth?

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Umrah is an optional holy ritual that is highly rewarded when performed in the month of Ramadan. Hence, managing such an event is a challenging mission facing stakeholders. However, limited studies have examined the quality of services provided in the Umrah site (i.e., the Holy Mosque in the city of Makkah, Saudi Arabia) from the pilgrims' perspective. The current study examines the influence of religious servicescape on service convenience and investigates whether service convenience matters to pilgrims. Further, the study tests the role of religious attractiveness (i.e., of the Kaaba) on pilgrims' behavioural outcomes (i.e. intention to revisit and Positive Word of Mouth (PWOM). A Mixed-method approach is followed to collect rich data (i.e., quantitative and qualitative). The findings demonstrate that religious servicescape has a critical impact on service convenience. The results also show that service convenience is also a significant mediator between servicescape and PWOM. However, service convenience does not mediate the relationship between religious servicescape and intention to revisit. Consequently, service convenience in the religious context matters to pilgrims and the service provider. Further, Kaaba attractiveness creates a 'halo' effect.

Key Words: Saudi Arabia, Umrah, religious servicescape, service convenience, Kaaba

Introduction

Umrah, the small pilgrimage, is a ritual that takes place at the Holy Mosque in the city of Makkah. Although Umrah is neither time-restricted nor compulsory, it is recommended by the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) to be performed during the fasting month of Ramadan (Alhothali *et al.,* 2021; Elgammal *et al.,* 2022). Therefore, Muslims around the world prefer to perform this ritual during this month which results in massive gatherings that are a challenge for Saudi stakeholders involved in managing the site.

Since Umrah is performed in the Holy Mosque, the General Presidency of the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques (GPAM) is concerned with service provision and management to the Two Holy Mosques in Saudi Arabia. The government of Saudi Arabia considers servicing pilgrims as an honour that the country is proud of. The government with the collaboration of other stakeholders

seeks to ensure the success of this noble mission (Alhothali *et al.*, 2021). Due to the limited research in this particular context i.e. pilgrims' service experience within the Holy Mosque, the country is investing in research to improve service provision and to increase their efforts to create preferable pilgrim's experiences throughout their religious trips to sacred places (Vision and Mission, 2030). The gatherings of very large groups of people from different cultures, ages, languages, and Islamic schools complicate the mission of managing this event. Managing such large groups in a mosque with 750,000 square meters of space and a capacity of 3 million worshippers is an ultimate challenge. Hence, service providers strive to provide quality services. However, research focusing on the quality of services during Islamic religious gatherings is relatively recent (Eid, 2012).

Most of the existing research to explore the role of the servicescape on consumers' perception of value,

service convenience, and customer engagement has been conducted in commercial settings (Bitner, 1992; Arnould, Price & Tierney, 1998; Mari & Poggesi, 2013; Roy *et al*., 2020). To the researchers' knowledge, there are very limited studies that investigate the impact of the servicescape on pilgrims' behaviour in a religious context (Alhothali *et al*., 2021) and whether service convenience matters. However, previous research confirms that the servicescape offers various insights into value and behaviour within the hospitality context. The effects of service convenience and social servicescape on value, revisit intention and WOM warrant further investigation (Chiang, 2018). Moreover, prior studies have emphasised the role of place attractiveness on fostering outcomes and behaviours such as the intention to revisit (Vengesayi *et al*., 2009). However, research investigating the impact of place attractiveness on visitors' behaviour in the religious context is still scarce. This study extends prior research by investigating the role of place attractiveness on pilgrims' intention to revisit and spreading positive word of mouth (PWOM).

The study tests the influence of *Religious Servicescape* on pilgrims' perception of service convenience. The study further tests the influence of place attractiveness demonstrated by pilgrims' perception of *Kaaba Attractiveness* (i.e., the black cubic building situated in the middle of the Holy Mosque) on pilgrims' behavioural intentions (i.e., intention to revisit and positive word of mouth).

The paper is organised as follows: firstly, the extant literature is explored and scrutinise to inform the development of hypotheses and the conceptual model. Secondly, the methodology is discussed followed by the validation of the measures. This section is followed by data collection, analysis and discussion. Finally, the implications for academics and other stakeholders are discussed followed by limitations and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Religious Servicescape

Since services are difficult to assess, different scholars indicate that servicescape (physical environment) in which the services are offered, has an important role in influencing customer experience (Lee *et al*., 2017) and their attitude and value perception (Fernandes & Neves, 2014). Servicescape also has been acknowledged for many

years in hospitality research as appealing experiences which significantly influence customer satisfaction and loyalty (Walls *et al*., 2011). Kotler (1973:50) defines the concept of servicescape as

> *the design* [of] *buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his* [or her] *purchase probability.*

Further, Bitner (1992) explains the consumer's dyadic relationship and explores the surrounding physical environment (Bitner, 1992). Bitner also describes the servicescape as

> *the built environment (i.e., the manmade, physical surrounding as opposed to the natural or social environment)* (1992:58)*.*

She goes on to define servicescape as:

> *all of the objective physical factors that can be controlled by the firm to enhance (or constrain) employee and customer actions* (Bitner, 1992:65).

However, Arnould, Price and Tierney (1998:90) describe the concept as 'consciously designed places, calculated to produce commercially significant actions.' On the other hand, Ezeh and Harris (2007) describe servicescape as

> *the design of the physical environment (with or without customer input) housing the service encounter, which elicits internal reactions from customers leading to the display of approach or avoidance behaviors* (2007: 61).

In the current study, a religious servicescape is understood as the physical elements of the sacred place that evoke visitors' innate responses and supports the ritual smoothly, safely, and peacefully.

A recent study has emphasised the role of the religious servicescape on enhancing pilgrims' service experience and its subsequent impact on revisit intentions (Alhothali *et al*., 2021). Furthermore, prior studies have emphasised the impact of servicescape elements on service convenience in a retail setting (Roy *et al*., 2002). Hence, we hypothesise:

> **H1** *Religious Servicescape relates positively to Service Convenience*

Service Convenience

While convenience can be interpreted differently by various people (Yale & Venkatesh, 1986), the term

emphasises reducing the non-monetary aspects (price) of goods and services such as time and effort (Kelley, 1958; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Hence, a convenience-oriented customer is defined as the one who seeks to

> *accomplish a task in the shortest time with the least expenditure of human energy* (Morganosky, 1986:37).

'Effort' is used interchangeably with 'energy expenditure' and seen to have three dimensions: emotional, cognitive, and physical. Reduction of the effort spent on obtaining goods/services influences customer satisfaction (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009).

It has been suggested that consumers mostly face difficulties in estimating the amount of effort required to complete different tasks, but at the same time, they tend to try as much effort as possible (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009). Time is also valued differently by various consumers (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009). It is suggested that time pressure and low levels of energy increase the desire for convenience (Brown & McEnally, 1993). Although the concept of convenience is seen to be related to customer /user evaluations of service experiences (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009), studies related to exploring the concept particularly concerning time and effort are still in their early stages (Alba *et al*., 1997, Farquhar & Rowley, 2009).

A pioneering study exploring service convenience emphasises that *Service Convenience* comprises five dimensions: decision convenience, access convenience, transaction convenience, benefit convenience, and post-benefit convenience. Accordingly, Berry and colleagues (2002:5) defined service convenience, as 'time and effort saved by customers while purchasing and using a service.' A recent study (Roy *et al*., 2020) demonstrated the role of service convenience in influencing customer engagement behaviour (i.e., service improvement, customer cooperation, positive word-of-mouth, and customer helping customer). In this study, we argue that pilgrims' perceive *Service Convenience*, where they feel convenience while engaging with the service site, and this impacts their intention to revisit the site. Hence, we hypothesise:

> **H2** *Service Convenience relates positively to Intention to Revisit*
>
> **H3** *Service Convenience relates positively to PWOM*

Place attractiveness

The city of Makkah is the primary destination for pilgrims in Islam. According to Formica and Uysal, (2006), the attractiveness of a destination depends on its availability and perceived importance. Hence, Kaaba, the house of God, is a religious landmark that is considered attractive as it has been available for all Muslims around the world to visit and accomplish their Hajj and Umrah mission for centuries. Prior studies looked at the main attributes visitors consider when evaluating the attractiveness of a destination, such as facilities, price of venues, and transport networks (Middleton, 1989), historical and cultural sites and natural environment (Gartner, 1989), scenery (Meinung, 1995) clean and peaceful environment, quality of accommodation facilities, family-oriented amenities, safety, accessibility, reputation, entertainment, and recreational opportunities (Kim, 1998). On the other hand, people are seen to be attached to places due to the bonds created with their physical and social settings (Brown *et al*., 2003; Brown & Raymond, 2007).

Hu and Ritchie (1993) and Swarbrooke (1995) indicate that a destination's attractiveness depends on the visit's context such that a religious visit would be different from educational or leisure visits. Therefore, the resources that should be allocated by stakeholders to increase the attractiveness of a certain destination should be grouped according to attractiveness attributes and priorities from the visitors' perspective (Vengesayi *et al*., 2009). Thus, the more a destination is seen as attractive, the more people will visit it. Hence, we hypothesise:

> **H4** *Kaaba Attractiveness relates positively to Service Convenience*
>
> **H5** *Kaaba Attractiveness relates positively to Intention to Revisit*
>
> **H6** *Kaaba Attractiveness relates positively to PWOM*

Pilgrims' Outcome Behaviours

Intention to revisit

Intention to revisit is described by Davidow (2003) and Chang *et al*. (2013) as customer repurchase intention behaviour and his/her continuous use of a certain product/service when needed in the future. Within the tourism and hospitality context, revisit intention refers to visitors' desire to frequently revisit the same destination/attraction (Kozak, 2011) and continuously stay in the same accommodation type every visit (Kozak, 2011;

Han & Kim, 2010). The physical environment attributes that influence the guests' behaviour and the intention to revisit the place are parts of the *Religious Servicescape* (Alhothali *et al.*, 2021).

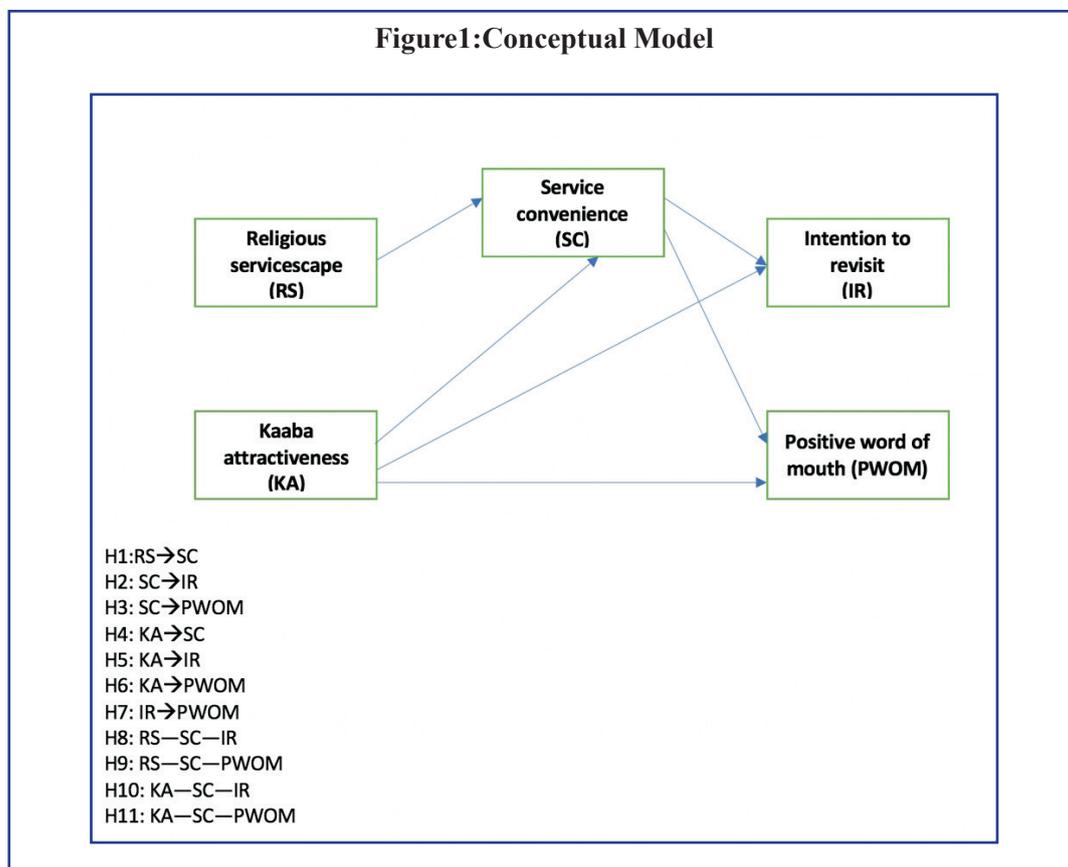### Positive word of mouth (PWOM)

PWOM has long been considered a behavioural outcome that needs incremental efforts from companies. It has long been recognised as a tool for promoting a firm's products and services (Gremler *et al.*, 2001). Hence, marketing scholars and practitioners make tremendous efforts to understand the factors influencing positive word of mouth dissemination. A pioneering attempt to explore the concept was by Westbrook (1987) who defines the concept as

> *informal communications directed at other (potential) consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers* (Westbrook, 1987:261).

In the current study, PWOM is described as the desire to talk positively to others about the sacred visitor experience. Moreover, marketing-wise, prior studies have recognised that WOM dissemination is significantly influenced by service experience (Ng *et al.*, 2011), service recovery and service convenience (Maxham, 2001). PWOM is also influenced by the customer-employee relationship (Gremler *et al.*, 2001) and customer trust and satisfaction (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). In tourism, a positive service experience has also been associated with PWOM. Further, Abubakar and Mavondo (2014) found that human factors and emotions are strong predictors of customer satisfaction and PWOM. In a religious tourism context, e-word of mouth is positively related to tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations and travel intention (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012). Hence, we further hypothesise :

H7 *Intention to Revisit* relates positively to *PWOM*

H8 *Service Convenience* mediates the relationship between *Religious Servicescape* and *Intention to Revisit*

H9 *Service Convenience* mediates the relationship between *Religious Servicescape* and *PWOM*

H10 *Kaaba Attractiveness* mediates the relationship between *Religious Servicescape* and *Intention to Revisit*

H11 *Kaaba Attractiveness* mediates the relationship between *Religious Servicescape* and *PWOM*

Figure1:Conceptual Model

H1:RS→SC
H2: SC→IR
H3: SC→PWOM
H4: KA→SC
H5: KA→IR
H6: KA→PWOM
H7: IR→PWOM
H8: RS—SC—IR
H9: RS—SC—PWOM
H10: KA—SC—IR
H11: KA—SC—PWOM

Methodology

A mixed-method approach was followed to collect rich data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Unstructured observation was first undertaken for collecting qualitative data. The use of unstructured participatory observation is justified as 'observation may be the only method to obtain data on consumers' behaviour in certain situations' (Boote & Mathews, 1999:15). Qualitative data assist in exploring the experience of undertaking the ritual in real time. Unstructured observation was conducted inside the Holy Mosque during the fasting month of Ramadan in 2018 to observe and understand the services provided inside the Holy mosque and experience the actual servicescape. The main purpose of using participant observation was to gain deeper insights into pilgrims' experience during Umrah through personal immersion.

The researchers decided to perform the journey of Umrah and to undertake participant observation during their visit to understand the quality of the servicescape, and talk to pilgrims to assess how they felt during this journey. This active participation had a positive impact on the study. This led to the collection of rich insights into the services offered within this physical environment (Mulhall, 2003). This is unstructured because it was experiential and did not start with a hypothesis but focused on participation and immersion.

The quantitative data were then collected by using a self-administered questionnaire. Respondents were approached at the end of their journey of Umrah at the departure terminal at King Abdulaziz International Airport, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The data were collected during Ramadan 2018. A systematic sample of pilgrims was recruited by approaching every third person while waiting for their flights, after they had completed their check-in. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to respondents in three lounges (i.e., North, South, and Pilgrims) of King Abdulaziz Airport. The sample size of 300 was considered adequate for the study's proposed purposes (Wolf *et al.*, 2013). It also took into account the cost and time of collecting more data. 285 out of the 300 questionnaires were returned for analysis; seven were considered unusable due to incomplete answers. Thus, the total usable sample was 278, yielding an effective response rate of 85%. The sample was diverse in terms of pilgrims' gender, age, level of education, and nationality (see Table 1).

Methods

In the current study, *Religious Servicescape* is measured using a scale adapted from Reimer and Kuehn (2005), while *Service Convenience* is measured using a scale developed by Berry *et al.* (2002) (see Appendix). Further,

Demographics of Sample			
Variable	**Criteria**	**Number**	**Percentage (%)**
Age	18-24	47	16.9
	25 to 34	102	36.7
	35 to 44	64	23
	45 to 54	25	9
	55 and above	16	5.8
Gender	Male	117	42
	Female	143	51
	Not disclosing	18	7
Education	Less than high school	2	0.8
	High school	47	16.9
	Diploma	2	0.7
	Bachelor	130	46.8
	Master	55	19.8
	PhD	9	3.2
Nationality	Saudi	65	32.4
	Gulf region	27	9.7
	Africa	108	38.4
	Asia/Australia	16	5.8
	Middle East	4	1.4
	Europe/US	2	0.7
	Other	4	1.4
Note: The percentages do not add to 100 % due to some missing values			

Table 2: Behavioral Profile of Visitors			
Variable	**Criteria**	**Number**	**Percentage (%)**
Familiarity with Umrah experience	First-time Visitors	60	21.6
	Repeat Visitors	218	78.4
Visit other cities of Saudi Arabia	Yes	209	75.2
	No	69	24.8

the scale measuring *Intention to Revisit* is adapted from a scale developed by Hsieh and Luo (2013), and *PWOM* is adapted from a scale developed by Ng *et al*. (2011). Perceived *Kaaba Attractiveness* is measured via one item developed for the study. A 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) was used throughout the questionnaire. The data were analysed by SPSS, AMOS version 26.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the observation demonstrated that the sacred place is designed to serve pilgrims and accommodate large numbers of heterogeneous people gathered to achieve one goal. The colours of the place are neutral, warm, and reassuring. The main feature in the space is signage that is carefully installed to ensure compliance with the ritual routines and assist in managing crowd movement. The extra fittings are to assure adequate lighting and temperature control. There are plenty of water fountains with disposable cups for sanitary purposes. The floor is all marble carefully laid to minimise any hazards for participants. The floor marble is selected with extra care to keep the surface cool and firm to protect pilgrims' feet from the extreme heat during summer as pilgrims should enter the place barefoot. The cleaning process is novel as the cleaning is ongoing and

appears to occur seamlessly with crowd movement. The odour is carefully managed to create a pleasant atmosphere. Specifically, the scent is well-controlled by using a unique type of Oud wood. The carpets are cleaned regularly and sprayed with precious rose water. There are large volumes of pilgrims in a relatively small space, and individuals move at their own pace. The crowds are self-managed with dedicated pilgrims seeking to achieve personal goals, while all trying to accomplish a common objective.

The quantitative analysis in this paper is conducted using several analytical techniques. The socio and behavioural demographic descriptions are shown in Table 1. The data show that the average respondent is relatively young as 36.7% are aged between 25 to 34 years old. The sample is gender-balanced as 51% are female, and 42% are male with 7% not disclosing their gender. The majority of pilgrim respondents were from Africa (38.4%) and Saudi Arabia (32.4%). Regarding the behavioural profile (see Table 2), 78.4% of the participants were visitors with multiple previous visits with only 21.6% on their first visit. 75.2% visited other cities of Saudi Arabia during the religious trip.

Data analysis was undertaken in three stages: the first stage was running Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) on

Table 3: Correlations, Average Variance Extracted and Reliabilities					
	1	2	3	4	5
1, Religious Servicescape (RS)	*.676*				
2. Kaaba Attractiveness (KA)	.402**	0			
3. Service Convenience (SC)	.435**	.218**	*.739*		
4. Intention to Revisit (IR)	.327**	.248**	.219**	*.861*	
5. Positive word of Mouth (PWOM)	.333**	.256**	.290**	.464**	*.884*
Composite reliability	.834	0	.822	.861	.878
Cronbach Alpha	.830	0	0.818	.859	.879
Mean	4.008	4.5	3.743	4.366	4.256
se (mean)	.043	.051	.060	.049	.049
Standard deviation	.729	.857	.823	.832	.823
Skewness	-1.149	-2.211	-.755	-1.503	-1.303
Kurtosis	2.112	3.271	.041	2.538	1.851
Note: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001. The figures on the diagonal are the square root of AVE, the figures below the diagonal are Person's correlations.					

Table 4: Relationship Between Religious Servicescape, Service Convenience, Kaaba Attractiveness and Intention to Revisit and PWOM

Hypothesis	b(se)	t-value	p-value	Support/ no support
H1: Religious servicescape relates positively to service convenience	.766 (.145)	5.265***	<.001	Support
H2: Service convenience relates positively to intention to revisit	.138(.046)	3.033**	<.01	Support
H3: Service convenience relates positively to PWOM	.100(.045)	2.214*	<.05	Support
H4: Kaaba attractiveness relates positively to service convenience	-.005(.088)	-.058	.945	Not supported
H5: Kaaba attractiveness relates positively to intention to revisit	.212(.056)	3.764***	<.001	Support
H6: Kaaba attractiveness relates positively to PWOM	.027(.055)	.489	.625	Not Supported
H7: Intention to revisit relates positively to PWOM	.481(.082)	5.870***	<.001	Support
Note: *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001 B Coefficient refers to unstandardized regression coefficient, standard error shown in brackets				

20 items to identify the underlying factors in the data. The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.856 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (p =.000). Principal component analysis was selected as the extraction method and varimax rotation was used to maximise factor differences and minimise overlapping meanings. A five-factor solution was confirmed by Kaiser's rule (eigenvalues>1). The eigenvalue ranged from 1.104 to 6.880 and the five factors explain 66.348 % of the total variance. Five items were removed due to cross-loadings.

The second stage was to conduct Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) on the four factors (*Servicescape, Service Convenience, PWOM,* and *Intention to Revisit*). The results of the measurement model show: χ^2=130.192; df=71; p<.001; CMIN/DF=2.58; GFI=.94; AGFI=.91; NFI=.92; TLI=.95; CFI=.96; RMSEA=.06.

The final stage was testing the structural equation model (SEM). The findings of testing the full model shows: χ^2=236.057; df=83; p<.001); CMIN/DF=2.84; GFI=.90; AGFI=.86; NFI=.87; TLI=.89; CFI=.91; RMSEA=.08.

Table 3 shows that the values for average variance extracted (AVE) were above .50 which confirms convergent validity. Construct reliability values for all latent constructs were above .70, ranging from .822 to .878 as shown (Table 3). Correlation between constructs was estimated and the values range between .218 and .464.

The findings in Table 4 show that *Religious Servicescape* is found to have a positive and significant impact on *Service*

Convenience (b=.766, t=5.265, p<.001) supporting **H1**. Although the influence of *Servicescape* on *Service Convenience* was not significant in the medical care industry (Lee & Vichet, 2008), the *Servicescape*, in the this religious context, is found to be a highly significant antecedent (precursor) for *Service Convenience*. This finding corroborates previous studies on the role of *Religious Servicescape* as a key to service experience (Alhothali *et al.*, 2021). This finding also verifies our observational study where the servicescape is carefully managed, and the ambient factors (i.e., temperature, odour, and cleanliness) are well-managed.

Prior studies demonstrate the role of *Service Convenience* as an indicator for behavioural outcome intentions such as *PWOM* (Roy *et al.*, 2020). The findings in the current study (see Table 4) confirm that *Service Convenience* is a key factor to influence *Intention to Revisit* (b=.138; t=3.033, p<.001), and for *PWOM* (b=.100; t=2.214, p<.001) which supports **H2** and **H3**. This could be because *Service Convenience* is of critical importance to pilgrims' safety, comfort, and enjoyment. This is perhaps related to the level of crowdedness - when crowdedness increases, pilgrims' perception of security decreases as they will be at risk of stampede, a major hazard, during mass gatherings (Illyas *et al.*, 2013), and separation from groups and friends.

Moving on to *Kaaba Attractiveness*, it is found that *Kaaba Attractiveness* has no significant impact on *Service Convenience* (b=-.005; t=-.058), rejecting **H4**.

The results also show that *Kaaba Attractiveness* significantly influences the *Intention to Revisit* (b=.212;

Table 5: The Indirect Effect				
Hypothesis H4	**b (se)**	**t-value**	**Boot LICI**	**Boot HICI**
H8: RS-----SC------IR	0.047 (0.032)	1.468	-0.011	0.116
H9: RS-----SC-----PWOM	0.088 (0.043)	2.046*	0.009	0.179
H10: Kaaba---SC---IR	0.037(0.018)	2.055*	0.007	0.077
H11: Kaaba---SC-- PWOM	0.051(0.023)	2.217*	0.013	0.103
Note: *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001 B Coefficient refers to unstandardised regression coefficient, standard error shown in brackets				

t=3.764, p<.001) supporting **H5**; however, *Kaaba Attractiveness* has an insignificant impact on *PWOM* (b=.027; t=.489) rejecting **H6**. Thus, the ambience, design, and thus the overall *Kaaba Attractiveness* is a major contributor to increasing pilgrims' *Intention to Revisit* the Holy Mosque.

The observational study has also confirmed how pilgrims were enjoying the experience of worshipping around the Kaaba. This might be attributed to the fact that circulating and experiencing Kaaba is considered an important part of the Umrah ritual. In particular, some pilgrims believe that the more they watch Kaaba, the more religious rewards they get. Further, the findings show that *Intention to Revisit* influences *Positive Word of Mouth* dissemination (b=.481; t=5.870, p<.001) supporting **H7**.

The findings (Table 5) demonstrate that *Service Convenience* does not mediate the relationship between *Religious Servicescape* and *Intention to Revisit* (b=0.047; t=1.468) rejecting **H8**. This suggests there may be other mediators that are more important than *Service Convenience* (Zhao *et al*., 2010). These may include the cost of the trip especially for international pilgrims, it may indicate the difficulties of getting visas (at least during data collection in 2018) and may also suggest older pilgrims may consider their obligations fulfilled and do not intend to revisit.

The findings also show that *Service Convenience* mediates the relationship between *Religious Servicescape* and *PWOM* (b=.088; t=2.046*, p<.05) supporting **H9**. This finding corroborates prior studies which show that the relationship between *Servicescape* and *PWOM* is significantly mediated by *Service Convenience* (Chang & Polonsky, 2012). Pilgrims are likely to talk about the level of *Service Convenience* to their friends and relatives after their visit; hence the indirect relationship is strong. Based on these findings, *Service Convenience* matters to pilgrims for several reasons: large masses could be a problem to pilgrims, leading to greater perceived risk

(i.e., loss of property and separation from groups) and the associated anxiety of being pushed during congestion and falling due to stampedes. Hence, increasing *Service Convenience* could contribute to pilgrims' feelings of security, serenity, and comfort. The findings show that *Service Convenience* mediates the relationship between *Kaaba Attractiveness* and both *Intention to Revisit* and *PWOM* (b=0.037; t=2.055*, p<.05)(b=.051, t= 2.217*, p<.05), supporting **H10** and **H11**. This could perhaps be because the Kaaba creates a 'halo' effect. Those attracted by the Kaaba are likely to positively experience the *Service Convenience*. This leads to positive effects on *Intention to Revisit* and passing on *PWOM*.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the tourism literature by emphasising the role of *Service Convenience* on the *Intention to Revisit* a particular place and the generation of *PWOM*. The study provides a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the Umrah experience and their subsequent effect on pilgrims' behavioural outcomes. The findings show that *Religious Servicescape* significantly influences *Service Convenience*. Further, service convenience has a significant impact on *Intention to Revisit* and *PWOM*. *Service Convenience* is also a significant mediator between *Servicescape* and *PWOM* (Chang & Polonsky, 2012). However, *Service Convenience* does not mediate the relationship between *Religious Servicescape* and *Intention to Revisit*. As a consequence, *Service Convenience* in the religious context matters to pilgrims and the General Presidency of the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques.

Further, *Kaaba Attractiveness* is key to increasing pilgrims' *Intention to Revisit* and generate positive word of mouth about pilgrims' visiting experience. The current findings add substantially to our understanding of the factors influencing pilgrims' experience of Umrah at the Holy Mosque in Makkah. We note the significance of the Kaaba in potentially providing a salience or a halo effect

on pilgrims' experiences and behavioural intentions. The results provide additional evidence concerning the critical impact of place attractiveness on pilgrims' *Intention to Revisit* and *PWOM*. In particular, the study emphasises the role of religious attractions (i.e., Kaaba) to the religious visitor's consumption experience.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice. Utilising religious cues and symbols could support marketing and tourist managers in attracting visitors and could also promote tourist activities and services to religious visitors. They could also add value to branding the two Holy cities (i.e., Makkah and Madina) and inform the decision-makers to build a strategy for branding the religious destinations. Since Kaaba is found of critical importance to pilgrims, the symbol of Kaaba could be highlighted and better utilised by the Saudi tourism Authority during their tourism attractions campaigns. Furthermore, since *Service Convenience* is critical to stimulating *PWOM*, the General Presidency of the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques should consider the importance of increasing levels of *Service Convenience* to pilgrims. This could be by investing in advanced technologies to minimise the hazards of crowdedness.

The more recent COVID-19 guidelines and strategies are lessons that the GPAM should learn from. The investment in technologies such as the *Etamarna* App, where the visitor book a visit to the mosque, and *Tawakalna* the COVID-19 tracking App, followed by the country during their fight with the pandemic have been seen as successful in managing crowds inside the mosque. Hence, the GPAM should continue their efforts to increase pilgrims' feelings of convenience and comfort inside the mosque to encourage *PWOM* and stimulate *Intention to Revisit* for those who can afford it.

For pilgrims, it is important to raise their awareness of the potential opportunities available for them to maximise the benefits from their Umrah journey. Since GPAM has operationalised important regulations to maximise their convenience, safety, and comfort in undertaking the Umrah ritual, time will be available for them to include other activities based on their intentions and motivations. For example, learning about Islamic history, exploring heritage areas around Makkah, and helping the community by buying Saudi handmade souvenirs

(Elgammal *et al.,* 2022), particularly ones that include Kaaba, the Holy Mosques, and other ritual symbols, and play a positive part before they go to their homes. With the new visa allowances, pilgrims could plan for their visits differently by undertaking their rituals and spending a few days exploring other places perhaps nearby Makkah and Madina, and then revisit the Holy Mosque to perform a second Umrah if they want before final departure from KSA. In this case, the GPAM is planning to be prepared for the various pilgrim groups' itineraries, ensuring that facilities are available in various historical and heritage spots. Furthermore, applying concepts such as carrying capacity, green practices and sustainable tourism planning should be beneficial in the long run to maximise benefits for the Saudi economy, society, and the environment (Elgammal & Alhothali, 2021).

Limitations and Future Studies

Notwithstanding the empirical results, the research behind this paper has some limitations which future research may address. The sample was not representative of all Umrah performers since the questionnaire was developed in only two languages (English and Arabic); hence the sample excludes those not competent in either of these languages. Future studies should attempt to include additional languages such as Indonesian, Malay, Urdu and Chinese. Additionally, the sample did not capture the perspectives of the elderly pilgrims. Future studies could allow for assisted completion of the questionnaire by people of different ages who speak different languages. The elderly pilgrims are an important segment since most people postpone their visit to undertake Umrah until their old age.

The current study was limited to a specific religious context, and further studies could be conducted in other religious cities such as Madina (i.e., the second Holy city in Saudi Arabia). For international comparability of religious studies, holy sites in other contexts could be studied. The current study has only examined one dimension of *Service Convenience* (i.e., access convenience). Other dimensions of *Service Convenience* could matter to pilgrims, such as the convenience of seeking help and support when needed and the convenience of re-joining their fellow pilgrims in case of being lost.

Finally, the collection of data was undertaken during departure at the airports. Ideally, data collection could be undertaken shortly after the pilgrims complete their Umrah journey when their memories are more fresh and vivid. While this presents challenges it would be worthwhile exploring new ways to overcome this and follow up with such investigation.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A			
Construct	**Items**	**Literature Source**	**Cronbach Alpha**
Religious servicescape	"The odour in general is pleasant" "The noise level is acceptable" "The lighting is comfortable" "The audio systems were strategically located for efficiency" "The odour of the carpet is pleasant" "The level of temperature is acceptable"	(Reimer & Kuehn, 2005)	0.830
Service convenience	"I was able to perform my Umrah in a reasonable time" "I was able to perform Umrah Effortlessly" "I was able to access the Holy Mosque whenever" "I was able to access the Holy Mosque from different locations wanted"	(Berry *et al*., 2002)	0.818
Intention to revisit	"I am willing to visit Saudi Arabia again". "I am willing to save for my next trip to Saudi Arabia".	(Hsieh & Luo,2013)	0.859
Positive word of Mouth	"I will speak of the journey of Umrah much more than any other journeys". "I will speak favourably about my journey to Umrah to many people".	(Ng *et al*., 2011)	0.879
Kaaba Attractiveness	"I enjoy watching Kaaba"	Developed for the study	N/A