What Shapes Visitor Experience at Religious Destinations? Deploying a Systematic Review to Identify Visitor Experience Constructs

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While religious sites are identified as unique experience spaces, offering diverse experiences, discourse on what constitutes a visitor's experience still seems unsettled, primarily due to the fragmented approach owing to the classic binary of pilgrim-tourist. However, post-modern theories emphasise de-differentiation and blurring of boundaries between pilgrim-tourist and stress the need to add a new perspective to enhance the understanding of visitor experience at religious sites to manage tourism at such destinations efficiently. Therefore, the present study is undertaken to respond to this call and aims to identify constructs that shape visitors' experience at religious sites. Building upon the synthesis of knowledge available in previous studies, the present review draws an integrated view of visitors' experiences by combining the sacred-secular dichotomy. It offers a preliminary conceptual framework on constructs associated with visitors' experiences by following the systematic and inductive methods. The study has identified four major constructs named- Destination Attributes, Visitor Attributes, Engagement, and Image, with fifteen sub-constructs, and suggests the location of visitor experience within the complex overlaps of these constructs.

Key Words: religious sites, sacred, secular, visitor experience, pilgrim, religious tourism

Introduction

Visitors to religious destinations have widely attracted the attention of scholars, particularly in the tourism field, as religious sites are one of the oldest visited places (Rinschede, 1992) and share an intimate yet complex nexus with tourism (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Nolan & Nolan, 1992). These destinations have been frequently identified as unique experience spaces. Turner (1973) called them '*liminal* spaces' that transit people through different identities and stand as the center of their faith, extrinsic to mundane socio-political spheres of life. Similarly, religious places are also regarded as 'heterotopias' (Shackley, 2002) or 'third spaces' (Olsen, 2012; Soja, 1996) that exist beyond their material form, constantly evolving between the real and the imaginary and shaped by socially and individually constructed meanings (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008). Manifesting the human aspiration to connect to the Divine, religious places are formed under the frameworks of institutionalised religion as the sanctified entity to facilitate a transcendental and powerful sacred experience for adherents (Jackson & Henrie, 1983; Turner, 1973). Such experiences include the devotees' deep emotions, transformations, and profound feelings (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019; Shackley, 2001; Terzidou *et al.*, 2017). In this way, sacredness and spirituality become core to visitors' experience during visiting such destinations (Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; Shinde, 2007; Terzidou, Stylidis, *et al.*, 2018; Wang *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, visitors are also found to visit religious destinations for secular interests and derive touristic experiences such as recreation, learning, social bonding, appreciation of art and heritage, and relaxation (Andriotis, 2009; Hughes *et al.*, 2013; Nyaupane *et al.*,

2015; Raj & Griffin, 2015; Robina Ramírez & Fernández Portillo, 2020). These stark differences in visitor experience led the religious tourism discourses towards the dichotomy of sacred and secular, which is reflected in the interest, motivation, activity and experience of the pilgrims and the tourists.

However, recent post-modern theories increasingly emphasise 'de-differentiation' (Collins-Kreiner, 2010) and 'blurring boundaries' (della-Dora, 2012; Kaelber, 2006) between pilgrims and tourists and subsequently between the sacred and the secular. This recognition indicates the progressive nature of visitor experience at religious destinations and calls attention to identifying underlying constructs that shape visitors' experience beyond the rigid boundaries of tourists and pilgrims. In this regard, academic awareness has increasingly grown towards examining the field of religious tourism, and many scholars have systematically reviewed this segment. However, the existing reviews are primarily focused on examining academic progress and conceptual evolution of the field of religious tourism. This includes tracking new developments and major trends that emerged in the segment, highlighting prospect areas for future research (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Kim *et al.,* 2019; Rashid, 2018; Heidari *et al.,* 2018), identifying linkages between tourism and religion (Collins-Kreiner, 2020) and between tourism, religion, and environment (Choe, 2020).

The question of what constitutes visitor experience in the field of religious tourism has still remained unsettled and seemingly complex. For instance, Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell (2006) suggest that the type of destination visited influences the visitor's experience and can facilitate the co-existence of sacred and secular experiences, depending upon its features. On the contrary, Terzidou *et al.* (2018) 'call into question the fixed centeredness and predetermined sacredness of religious destination' (p.54) and emphasise the visitor's inner dimensions for influencing and shaping their experience during a visit to a religious destination.

Visitors' experience has largely been approached in a fragmented way like considering the pilgrim-tourist. As such, a cohesive framework on primary constructs associated with visitor experience at religious destinations is still found to be missing. Nevertheless, tourism scholars

growingly recognise the need to step out from the classic binary of sacred-secular and adopt an integrated approach in research related to the visitor experience at religious destinations (Bond *et al.,* 2015; Collins-Kreiner, 2010, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2020) to draw wider frames to comprehend this subject.

The present paper is undertaken to respond to this call and is different in its concern and approach from the previous reviews on religious tourism. It aims to identify constructs associated with visitor experience in religious tourism and offer an integrated view of the visitor experience by consolidating general categories of visitors, such as the pilgrim, tourist, pilgrimage tourist, and religious tourist. A systematic approach was adopted to conduct the study, and a specific research question was formulated to fix the overall direction of the study, which is, 'what are the factors that bear an association with the visitor experience at a religious destination and influence their on-site experience?. Inductive methods were followed to synthesise the findings of previous literature.

In this way, the present study seeks to contribute by adding a perspective to the knowledge field of religious tourism by offering an insight into the underpinnings of visitors' experience and facilitating the enhancement of comprehension of constructs associated with visitor experience by presenting a preliminary conceptual framework.

Such enhanced understanding of visitor experience is crucial for academic enhancements and improving managerial efficiency (Chen & Chen, 2010; J.-H. Kim & Ritchie, 2014). While the concerns about managing tourism at religious destinations are increasing in tourism studies (Coleman & Olsen, 2022; Raj & Griffin, 2015; Shackley, 2001; Shinde, 2020), such understanding can contribute to suggesting how site managers and developers can connect with the visitors. It further helps them make necessary arrangements to facilitate a satisfying experience (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016) or a 'memorable experience' (J.-H. Kim, 2014). Such positive outcomes are essential for the destination's overall performance because, ultimately, it is the experience that visitors seek, talk about, and long remember (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009; Schmitt, 2010).

Theoretical Context : Religious Tourism and Visitors at Religious Sites

Travel to religious places is commonly referred to as Religious tourism (Kim *et at.,* 2020; Rashid, 2018) and is considered one of the oldest forms of travel (Nolan & Nolan; Rinschede, 1992). Religious tourism has now been identified as one of the significant segments of the travel and tourism industry, estimated to approximately 900 million visitors arriving at major religious sites each year (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). However, this remarkable growth may not be necessarily linked to the growth of religious belief (Damari & Mansfeld, 2016).

Religious places, deeply rooted in the past, possess a rich collection of cultural and heritage assets and, therefore, places of veneration simultaneously recognised as the center of cultural, historical, and heritage tourism as well (Goral, 2011; Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Rinchede, 1992; Shackley, 2001; Smith, 1992; Vukonic, 1996). Thus, in addition to religious reasons, visitors are also found to be driven to religious sites for secular motives such as curiosity, relaxation, admiration of culture and heritage, etc. For instance, Andriotis's (2009) study recognises five major factors (spiritual, cultural, environmental, secular, and educational) that motivated visitors to arrive at Mt. Athos, Greece. Similarly, recreational interests (such as sightseeing, visiting a new place, spending free time), social interests (spending time/ meeting friends and family), learning and educational interest (knowing about the culture, religion, and history of the place) and relaxation are some of the significant motivations identified in many studies on religious sites (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018; Bond *et al.*, 2015; Huang & Chu, 2020; Kasim, 2011; Kreiner & Sagi, 2011; Lupu *et al.*, 2019; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Wong, *et.at.*, 2013). Consequently, visitor experience at religious sites ranges from life-changing transformations, fulfillment, appreciation of heritage/natural landscapes, and mental and physical restoration to just exploration and enjoyment (della-Dora, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2020).

The broad spectrum of visitor typology at religious sites and sometimes a stark difference in their motivations led Smith (1992) to create her frequently cited continuum. Smith (1992) placed the pilgrim at one end and the tourist at the other in this continuum, seeking sacred and secular

experiences, respectively. The continuum also includes several combinations of these two extremes, such as more-pilgrim-than-tourist and vice-versa, though, at the same, it indicates sacred and secular as the polarised experience. This dichotomy of sacred and secular had often been central in the discourse related to religious tourism.

However, contemporary researchers also observed that the nature and patterns of travel to religious places evolved significantly over time. Liro et al. (2018) suggested that globalisation, secularisation, and commercialisation of faith have contributed considerably to transforming the nature of religious tourism and pilgrimage centers in the post-modern scenario. New concepts such as secular pilgrimage can be seen as emergent notions corresponding to these shifts (Kim *et al.,* 2020). Consequently, scholars emphasised 'de-differentiation' (Collins-Kreiner, 2010) and 'blurring boundaries' (della-Dora, 2012; Kaelber, 2006) between pilgrims and tourists and subsequently between the sacred and the secular. This approach is mainly for two main reasons. First, scholars realised that it was challenging to identify 'who is a pilgrim and who is a tourist (Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015; Olsen,2010; Shackley, 2002). Second, they recognised the multiplicity of visitor experiences where sacred and secular aspects can co-exist in individual experience (Bremer, 2006; Shuo *et al.*, 2009; Terzidou, 2020; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). For instance, pilgrims may also utilise tourism support services and facilities at religious sites (Krešić *et al.,* 2013; Terzidou *et al.,* 2017), despite arriving with religious motivation, while tourists may also engage with the sacred environment of the place (Yanata, 2021).

Thus, this evolving conceptualization of visitor experience at religious sites stimulates the need to look beyond the spectrum of sacred-secular and identify the constructs that shape visitor experience at such places.

Methodology

This study has employed a systematic approach to enable the authors to access and identify relevant literature. The systematic literature review method has accelerated in recent years due to its scientific rigour and explicit, systematic way of synthesising, evaluating, and combining knowledge from a wide range of studies

(Pahlevan-Sharif *et al.*, 2019). The central concern of this method is to develop an explicit research protocol that provides a higher degree of efficiency and quality and protects the objectivity of the study by giving an 'explicit description of the steps taken' (Tranfield *et al.,* 2003: 15). it includes details such as identification of research focus (i.e., research question and population or sample), search strategy adopted to access relevant literature, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies in the review (Davies & Crombie, 1998).

The present review has employed the technique suggested by Wolfswinkel *et al*. (2013) to conduct this type of study (see Table 1). Also, the inductive method of thematic analysis is adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006, 2016) and Walters (2016), who provide helpful tools to identify latent variables from textual data and explain research questions by establishing a relationship between concepts and categories and schemes.

An explicit eligibility criterion for inclusion and exclusion was established at the beginning stage of searching, to determine the initial eligibility of papers in the review. Articles published and available until June 2021 were selected for examination. Further, acknowledging the global prevalence of the English language and its extensive usage in the academic realm, papers published in the English language were selected for inclusion criteria. Research articles and conference papers published in peer-reviewed journals were included. Also, papers with clear processes and outcomes were included in the eligibility criteria, whereas conditions not fulfilling the inclusion parameters were considered under exclusion criteria.

The source of information employed to obtain papers relevant to the scope of the present review was the electronic database of reputed publishers. At first, a literature search was conducted in the Scopus academic database, followed by three additional databases: Science Direct, Taylor and Francis, and Emerald Insights (see Table 2), as these databases are frequently employed in other similar tourism studies (such as Shafiee *et al.*, 2019; Vada *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.,* 2017). A search was also conducted on Google Scholar to cross-check the previous searches and ensure that all available relevant articles were identified.

Table 1: Steps of the Review Process

Step- 1: Define	1.1 Define the criteria for inclusion/ exclusion
	1.2 Identify the fields of research
	1.3 Determine the appropriate sources
	1.4 Decide on the specific search terms
Step-2: Search	2.1 Search
Step-3: Select	3.1 Refine the sample
Step-4: Analyse	4.1 Open
	4.2 Axial
	4.3 Selective
Step-5: Present	Represent and structure the content
	Structure the article
Adopted from Wolfswinkel *et al.* (2013**)**	

The authors paid careful attention to selecting the keywords for the search, to generate the maximum possible literature relevant to the study, as suggested by Pickering & Byrne (2014). A preliminary study was conducted to approach the frequent terms related to the scope of the study. The term 'pilgrimage', a recurrently used synonym for travel to religious destinations, was included in the search term. Likewise, 'church experience', 'Islamic tourism experience', 'sacred site experience', were also employed along with 'religious tourism experience', 'pilgrimage tourism experience', and 'visitor experience at religious sites'. In certain cases, 'spiritual' is also used interchangeably with religious terms. However, scholars like Fedele (2012) and Kujawa (2017) argue that the concept of spirituality may not be rigidly fixed with religion and may expand beyond the frames of institutionalised religions. Therefore, it has not been included in the search term to avoid conceptual dilemmas and maintain a firm focus for the study.

Table 2: Number of Articles Selected from Different Database

Database	No. of Articles
Elsevier	20
Taylor & Francis	19
Scopus	12
Emerald insight	02

Figure 1: Screening Summary
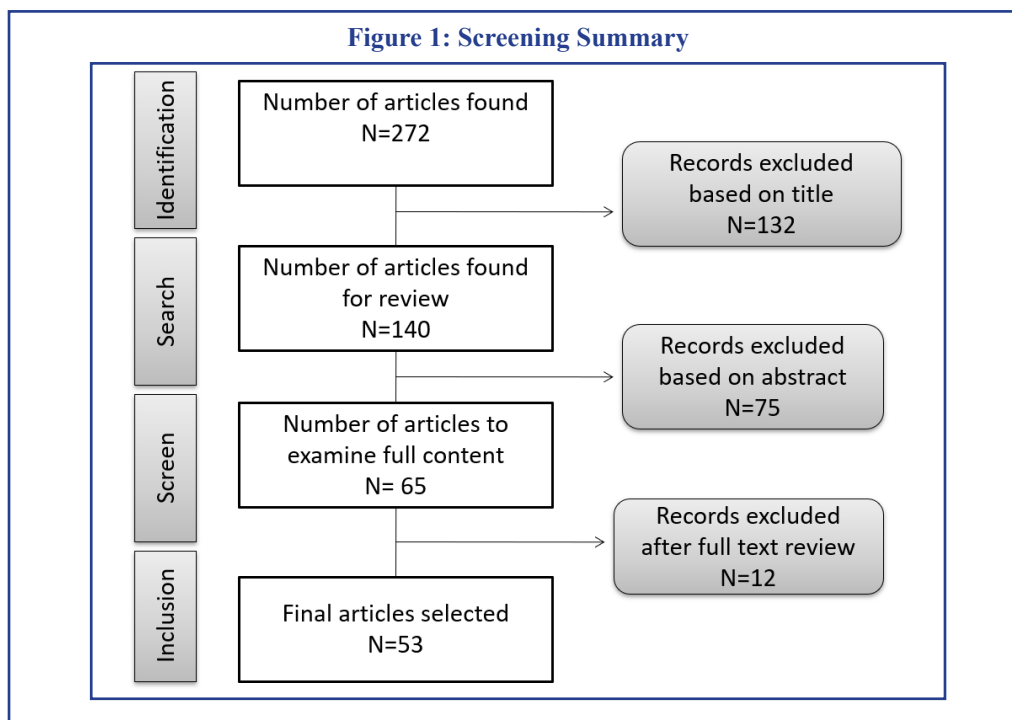
The initial search was performed using the words that exist in the title, abstract, or keywords of the paper. Keywords were customised to generate a better result, and search strings were constructed using Boolean "AND" to join the main terms and "OR" to include synonyms. Forward and backward methods were used to cross-check citations of the articles and references cited in them to find relevant papers.

The search process included materials which were published up to June 2021. By applying the various search filters, this yielded 272 records. One hundred and thirty two records were excluded by reading the article title. After reviewing the abstracts, seventy-five articles were removed, and sixty-five records were selected for full-text review. Twelve articles were discarded at the final stage of screening. The principal grounds for excluding these papers included the research context and the focal point of the discussion: studies that examined pilgrim/tourist experience in sacred but non-religious landscapes (Maddrell, 2013); examined the experience of a specific group (camp participants) only during the spiritual engagement at religious sites (Jiang, Ryan, Zhang, 2018; Song & Yan, 2020) or; considered religious lodging but not religious site experience (Chun, 2017; Hung, 2015) were excluded as these studies either offer limited scope to understand visitor experience or are not aligned with the concerns of the current study, which is focused on visitor's on-site experience at religious sites.

Similarly, studies concerning religious site experience but not offering insights from a visitor perspective (Afferni & Ferrario, 2016; Tirca et al., 2010) or focus on pilgrim/tourist consumption (Dimitrovski et al., 2020; Santana & Botelho, 2019) but not providing any discussion on the underpinnings of the visitor experience were also screened out.

Thus, the authors identified a total of 53 articles which were deemed useful for final analysis (see Figure 1). The earliest article used in the research was published in 2002.

The authors employed inductive analysis, a widely used approach to interpreting textual data for investigating less understood subjects, complex in nature and intricately intertwined with contextual factors, and thus requiring a careful interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Hannam & Knox, 2005). The resultant process of theme / scheme development is iterative. In this research it included three steps - open coding, axial coding, and selective coding - an approach adopted from the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), Walters (2016), and Wolfswinkel et al. (2013), where constant comparative analysis is used based on similarities and differences, to refine the concepts and categories. A detail of this process is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Coding Process		
Type of Coding	**Process**	**Output**
Open	First level of abstraction through identifying, (re)labeling a set of concepts relevant to the scope of research question	Initially registered 307 codes
	Iterative and constant comparison method	Developed sub-categories and grouped similar concepts
Axial	Identifying and developing central categories	15 sub-categories and 4 main categories developed
	Establishing relationship between main categories and sub-categories	
Selective	Evolving and interpreting the themes and establishing linkages	Structuring the framework

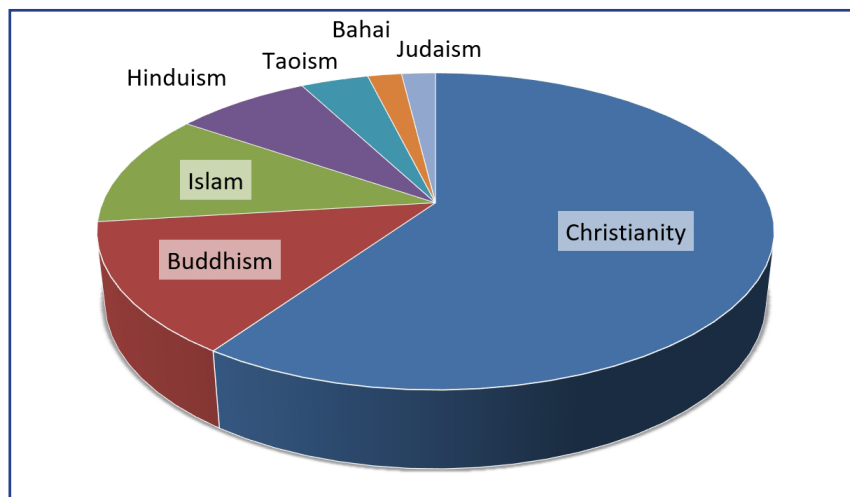**Figure 2: Representation of Religions in Peer-reviewed Articles**

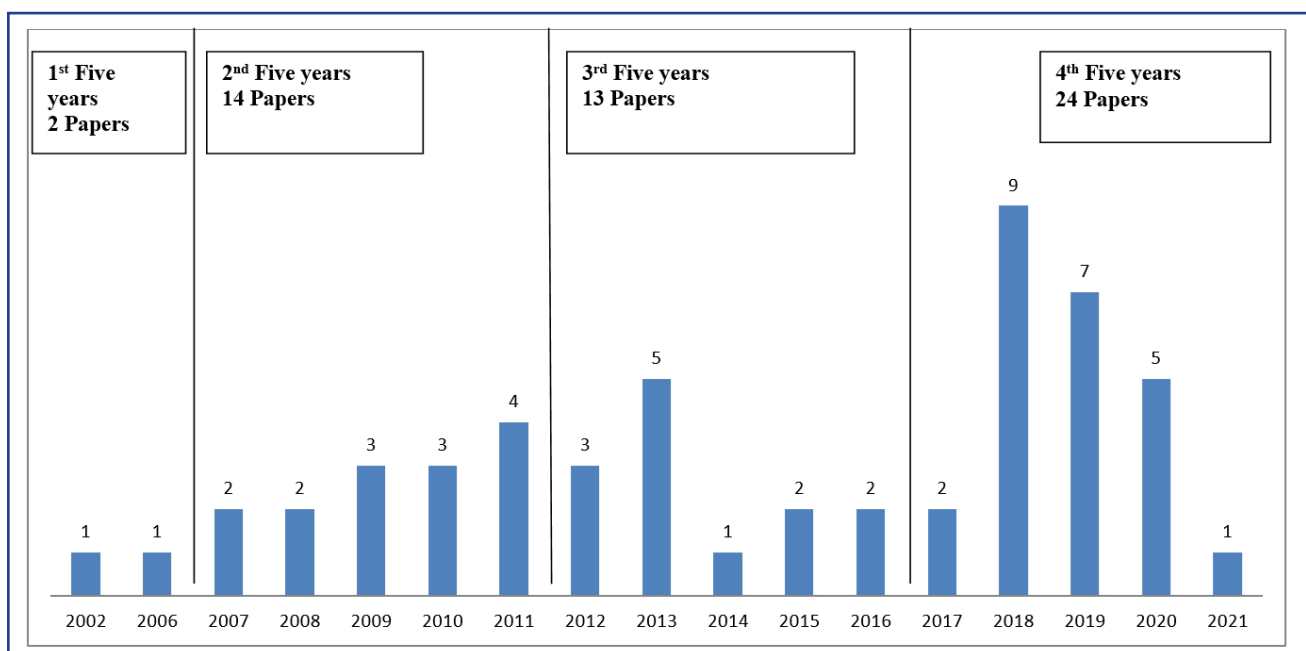**Figure 3: Frequency of Peer-reviewed Articles by Year Published**

1st Five years 2 Papers	2nd Five years 14 Papers	3rd Five years 13 Papers	4th Five years 24 Papers

Table 4: Location of Research Samples		
Religion	**Countries**	**Geographic Regions**
Christian	Australia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, England, France, Greece, India, Israel, New Zealand, Rome, Romania, Spain	Europe, Asia, Oceania
Buddhism	Japan, China, China (Tibet), India, Thailand	Asia
Islam	Iraq, UAE, Iran, Israel (Jerusalem)	Middle East
Hinduism	India	Asia
Taoism	Taiwan	Asia
Bahai	Israel	Middle East
Judaism	Israel	Middle East

Findings

The articles selected for review present a comprehensive picture of visitor experiences. This includes the best known mainstream religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and less familiar religions like Taoism and Bahai (see Figure 2). However, the representation of religions is not even. The chronological frequency of selected articles illustrates a higher volume of pertinent work in recent years (see Figure 3). This reflects the findings of Kim *et al.* (2020) and Collins-Kreiner (2020), who recognise the noticeable growth in academic attention regarding religious tourism, with a dominant focus on Christianity and Christian holy sites. The selected articles also represent a broad geographical area (see Table 4). Based on the analysis, four major Constructs (***Destination Attributes***, ***Visitor Attributes***, ***Engagement*** and ***Image***) and 15 sub-categories are developed (see Table 5).

Destination Attributes

The findings show an overwhelming acknowledgment of the role which ***Destination Attributes*** play in shaping visitor experience at religious destinations. This construct fundamentally represents several elements intrinsic to a religious place and consists of a wide range of dynamic and static aspects of the place that may exist in material or immaterial forms. Five sub-constructs were recognised within this Construct labelled as ***Closeness to Nature***, ***Religious History***, ***Structure & Heritage Features***, ***Atmosphere & Surroundings***, and ***Facilities & Services***.

Closeness to Nature appears to have an inherent association with spiritual, restorative, and reflective experiences. Several studies related to religious sites that are embedded in beautiful natural surroundings suggest that close contact with nature in aesthetic landscapes, contemplative locations, and tranquil surroundings capture the visitor's attention. It further elicits elevated feelings of inspiration, respect, thoughtfulness, peace, and spirituality, as nature and its enormous forms like mountains, lakes, caves, forests, etc. are often seen as manifestations of creative energy or divine presence, such as in case of Mount Athos (Greece), Meteora (Greece) Mount Kailash (Tibet) Camino de Santiago (Spain) Dharamshala (India) and Koyasan, (Japan). Equally, visitors feel the close presence of the Divine by visiting sites that reflect intimacy and harmony between human and natural endeavours, such as the Batu cave (Malaysia).

Religious History of a destination is identified to be an important element in influencing the visitor's experience. A prominent religious history is significant in generating profound religious experience for being associated with miraculous religious personalities or important religious events in the past. For instance, visitors to the city of Nazareth in the Holy Land, were found to be overwhelmed with realising that they were in the place where Jesus lived (Belhassen *et al*., 2008). Likewise, visitors reported gaining powerful emotional and sacred experiences at Lourdes, France (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016; Thomas *et al.*, 2018) and Virgin Mary, Island, Tinos, Greece (Terzidou, 2020), recognising the original association of the place with the Virgin Mary. Similar experiences have

Constructs	Sub-Constructs	Final Open Code	Reference
Destination Attributes	Closeness to Nature	Contemplative location in rural setting, located on hilltop, tranquil natural surroundings, astonishing natural landscape, mountain terrain, unpolluted natural environment, natural cave, gardens	Andriotis, 2009; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Collins-Kreiner & Tueta Sagi, 2011; Della Dora, 2012; He *et al.*, 2019; K. Huang & Pearce, 2019; K. Huang *et al.*, 2020; Kasim, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2016; Levi & Kocher, 2013; Lopez, 2013; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Yanata, 2021
	Religious History	Long religious history, place history, historical density, historic relic, linked to resurrection, link to significant religious personality, religious landscape	Albayrak *et al.*, 2018; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Bond *et al.*, 2015; Higgins & Hamilton, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2018; Levi & Kocher, 2013; Lupu *et al.*, 2019; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019; Olsen, 2013; Ron & Timothy, 2013; Terzidou, 2020; Thomas *et al.*, 2018
	Structure & Heritage Features	Rich architecture & conservation of artefacts, magnificent religious structure, artistic / aesthetic features, secular features, built heritage elements, collection of antique assets, element of heritage & culture, spatial properties and design	Andriotis, 2009, 2011; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; J. Huang & Chu, 2020; Kasim, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2018; Kim *et al.*, 2016; Lupu *et al.*, 2019; Meagher, 2018; Olsen, 2013; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014; Shackley, 2002; Shuo *et al.*, 2009
	Atmosphere & Surroundings	Gathering of devotees, congregants and visitors, behaviour (loyal, secular), less crowded, over crowded with tourists	Griffiths, 2011; K. Huang & Pearce, 2019; Kasim, 2011; Levi & Kocher, 2013; Lochrie *et al.*, 2019; Shackley, 2002; Taheri, 2016; Terzidou, 2020
		Calm, peaceful, relax environment, Holy atmosphere, Religious atmosphere, Peacefulness, meaningfulness, Soundscape, Impressive atmosphere	Bond *et al.*, 2015; Della Dora, 2012; Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; He *et al.*, 2019; J. Huang & Chu, 2020; K. Huang & Pearce, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2018; Smørvik, 2021; Voase, 2007; Yanata, 2021
		Site of religious use, monk and nun lifestyle, Byzantine monastic life of monks, monk engaged in religious activity, presence of religious symbols, display of offering, display of icon, touristic activities, sight of religious ceremonies, events	Andriotis, 2009, 2011; Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; K. Huang & Pearce, 2019; Kasim, 2011; Levi & Kocher, 2013; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019; Terzidou, 2020; Terzidou, Stylidis, *et al.*, 2018
	Facilities & Services	**Operation:** fee for taking picture, fee for entrance, provision of free assistance / stay, visitor access to site, imposed code of conduct for visitors, behaviour of staff, separation of space for touristic and religious acts **Information:** information about significance of site, interpretation facility, Focus of interpretation, signage about appropriate behaviour **Visitor facility:** availability of guided tours, guided tours in various languages, traditional stay facility, commercialisation, transportation facility, sanitation, food facility, safety measures	Andriotis, 2011; Buzinde *et al.*, 2014; Chang *et al.*, 2020; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; Griffiths, 2011; J. Huang & Chu, 2020; K. Huang & Pearce, 2019; Hughes *et al.*, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018; Krešić *et al.*, 2013; Levi & Kocher, 2013; Lupu *et al.*, 2019; Rishi *et al.*, 2010; Shackley, 2002; Tripathi *et al.*, 2010; Verma & Sarangi, 2019; Voase, 2007; Yanata, 2021

Constructs	Sub-Constructs	Final Open Code	Reference
Visitor Attributes	Belief & Past Experience	Everyday religiosity, religious orientation, personal belief, cultural value, spiritual value, regular church goers, predispositions, devotion, religious orientation, past experience	Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Higgins & Hamilton, 2016; K. Huang *et al.*, 2020; Meagher, 2018; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019; Shuo *et al.*, 2009; Taheri, 2016; Terzidou, Scarles, *et al.*, 2018; Voase, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2007
	Personality	Psychological trait	Francis *et al.*, 2008
	Interest & Motives	Interest and motivation, subconscious motives, personal needs and desires	Albayrak *et al.*, 2018; Andriotis, 2009; Buzinde *et al.*, 2014; Collins-Kreiner & Tueta Sagi, 2011; Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; Finney *et al.*, 2009; Gutic *et al.*, 2010; J. Huang & Chu, 2020; Lopez, 2013; Olsen, 2013; Verma & Sarangi, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Yanata, 2021
	Religious Affiliation to Place	Adherent of faith of the place, non-adherent	Albayrak *et al.*, 2018; J. Huang & Chu, 2020; Patwardhan *et al.*, 2020
Constructs	**Sub-Constructs**	**Final Open Code**	**Reference**
Engagement	Performative & Religion-Oriented Engagement	Worship, contemplation, mass prayers, religion oriented embodied acts, performance of rituals, involvement with religious objects and materials, charity, voluntary service, long walk, participation in religious ceremonies	Andriotis, 2009; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Bond *et al.*, 2015; Buzinde *et al.*, 2014; Chang *et al.*, 2020; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; Griffiths, 2011; Husein, 2018; Kim *et al.*, 2016; Kuo *et al.*, 2019; Lochrie *et al.*, 2019; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019; Taheri, 2016; Terzidou, 2020; Terzidou *et al.*, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2007
	Exploratory Engagement	Guided tours, visiting interpretation centres, information booklet, visiting on-site museum/library, coach tours, conversation with monks, consuming Biblical food	Andriotis, 2009; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Bond *et al.*, 2015; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; Hughes *et al.*, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018; Lupu *et al.*, 2019; Ron & Timothy, 2013; Shackley, 2002; Terzidou *et al.*, 2017; Yanata, 2021
	Observational Engagement	Observing others, personal meaning-making, looking around, sitting still	Andriotis, 2009; Griffiths, 2011; Gutic *et al.*, 2010; Smørvik, 2021; Thomas *et al.*, 2018; Voase, 2007; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2007
	Commercial Engagement	Shopping, purchasing souvenir, purchasing holy icons	Bond *et al.*, 2015; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019; Terzidou, 2020
Constructs	**Sub-Constructs**	**Final Open Code**	**Reference**
Image	Sacred Image	Sacred image through, social narratives of miracles and powers of place, TV news & documentaries, narrations in travel documents, visitor's narratives of personal stories of mini-miracles, word of mouth	Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Buzinde *et al.*, 2014; Higgins & Hamilton, 2016; Terzidou, Stylidis, *et al.*, 2018; Thomas *et al.*, 2018
	Secular Image	UNESCO designation	Lupu *et al.*, 2019

been reported by visitors in Karbala, Iraq, which is associated with Imam Hussein, grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and where he was massacred (Husein, 2018; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019). The influence of the prominent religious history of the place on visitor experience is also evident from studies on Jerusalem (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018) and the Vatican City (Kim & Kim, 2018). Such past accounts of religious events inevitably influence how visitors perceive and experience the sacredness of the place and are primarily associated with triggering emotional and relational experiences with the place.

Structure & Heritage Features is another sub-construct associated with visitor perception and evaluation of the sacred space. The studies of Kasim (2011) and Huang and Chu (2020) suggests that religious sites' massive physical structures evoke a feeling of awe in visitors. Further addition of rich heritage elements at such structures in the form of architectural and aesthetic designs facilitate culture and heritage oriented experiences such as at the Grand Cathedrals of England, notably Canterbury Cathedral (Bond *et al.,* 2015; Olsen, 2013), the Cathedrals in Vatican City, Rome (Kim & Kim, 2018), Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, UAE (Huang & Chu, 2020), and the Painted Monasteries of Romania (Lupu *et al.*, 2019). The visitor experience at these sites is more likely to accommodate cognitive, social, recreational, and restorative dimensions along with religious experience. In contrast, visitor experience at comparatively smaller venues, such as the shrines of Our Lady of Walsingham, England (Bond *et al.*, 2015) and sites with less heritage significance, such as Tyburn Monastery, New Zealand (Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014), are found to be more focused on worship and religious activity. Other spatial elements of religious sites, such as decoration, lighting, arrangement of space (organised-disorganised, roomy-cramped), design (old fashioned-modern), and size (large-small), are associated with indicating the sacredness of religious space and influence visitor perceptions and worship experiences (Meagher, 2018).

Atmosphere & Surroundings are one of the unique elements of religious destinations associated with visitor experiences, which create a 'sense of

space' (Shackley, 2002). The site's environment is created through a series of collective effects of soundscape, display arrangements, presence of others, and performance of rituals that seize the audio-visual senses of visitors and greatly influence their perception and experience of the place. In many studies, religious sites are recognised as unique spaces resonating with a distinct atmosphere often characterised as holy, peaceful, calm, and meaningful. He *et al.* (2019) empirically analysed the effect of soundscape and landscape on the visitor experience at religious sites. They identified that the congruence of soundscape and landscape strongly affects the visitors' sensory, cognitive, and emotional experiences. Visitors seeking religious experience look for and appreciate the holy atmosphere that facilitates religious acts such as penance, confession, or repentance (Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2018). Bond *et al.* (2015) claimed that religious sites' peaceful, calm, and meaningful atmosphere also generates restorative experiences. Smørvik's (2011) study found that a quiet and relaxing atmosphere shapes visitor experience by making one feel relaxed and peaceful, giving a moment to sit in silence, gather thoughts, and reflect on life and experiences.

Further, the presence of congregants, fellow worshippers, and visitors not just contributes to creating an atmosphere but also influences the visitor experience and perception of a sacred place. In her study, Griffiths (2011) found that more than half of the Cathedral visitors who she studied said that the congregation was an integral part of their visit experience as congregants add to the atmosphere of the Cathedral. Visitors look to the congregation as an example of 'how to behave in the cathedral' (p.70), so in a way, others and their (often) religion-oriented behaviour help to engage the visitor gaze and lead the visitor towards making 'sense of space' through observing the congregation's expression of lived sacredness. Being observed however, may not always be appreciated by congregants. Overcrowding due to tourists' presence and the secular behaviour of onlookers may also negatively affect the visitor experience (Levi & Kocher, 2013; Shackley, 2002). Religion often communicates its teachings and

values through symbols and metaphors; therefore, the arrangement of objects of worship, display of holy icons, and offerings at religious destinations also influence visitors' religious experience. A study by Maufahim and Lichrou (2019) emphasised that the display of the tragedy of Karbala influenced the devotee's emotional arousal and religious experience during their visit.

Similarly, Terzidoua (2020) recognised that the poor display of the icon of the Virgin Mary, where her face was barely visible due to numerous offerings placed around it, diminished visitors' religious experience at Virgin Mary, Tinos. An ongoing site of religious rituals or monastic lifestyle also positively influences the visitor experience (Levi & Kocher, 2013). Overall, the surroundings of the religious atmosphere allow visitors to perceive the place as a holy space, evaluate its sacredness, establish an emotional connection with the site (Taheri, 2016) and feel closer to the Divine (Kasim, 2011).

Facilities & Services is the fourth sub-construct that influences the visitor experience. Quality facilities and services at religious sites not just impact the visitor's perception of a sacred place but also affect their visit satisfaction. The availability of free assistance such as free food or beverages (tangible) or help, services, warm hospitality (intangible) are important. Other offerings include accommodation in traditional stays, imposed codes of conduct, signage for appropriate behaviour, restriction on access, etc. which all indicate to visitors that they are entering into a sanctified space that requires different approaches. This influences visitor perceptions and views of the place as sacred space (Chang *et al.,* 2020; Huang & Chu, 2020; Levi & Kocher, 2013; Yanata, 2021).

Commercial aspects, such as fees for taking pictures or entrance and the establishment of commercial outlets, contradict the spiritual essence of the place and indicate a profane sphere by linking to touristic use of the space, thus deteriorating the visitor's religious experience (Levi & Kocher, 2013; Lupu *et al.*, 2019; Shackley, 2002). Nevertheless, many studies demonstrate that commercialisation,

particularly when related to visitor facilities like accommodation, transportation infrastructure, sanitation, safety measures, restaurants / eateries, souvenir shops, etc., are equally significant components associated with overall visitor satisfaction with their visit to religious sites (Krešić *et al.*, 2013; Rishi *et al.*, 2010; Tripathi *et al.*, 2010; Verma & Sarangi, 2019).

In addition, information about a site and related facilities, such as the provision of guided tours (also in various languages) and interpretation, are found to be associated with enhancing the visitor's understanding and appreciation for a site and contribute to enabling visitors to construct personal meaning related to the site (Hughes *et al.*, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018) and experience its sacredness through understanding its value (Duda & Doburzyński, 2019).

Visitor Attributes

Destination attributes are unarguably associated with visitor experience at religious sites. At the same time, research also suggests that the same religious destination may generate different experiences for different visitors (Andriotis, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2007) and, therefore, suggests the importance of constructs that exist beyond the limit of destination features, which are more likely to be subjective. This leads to the second main theme identified in the literature: *Visitor Attributes* which are intrinsic characteristics, related to the visitor's socio-psychological state of being. This Construct consists of four sub-constructs: **Belief & Past Experience**, **Personality**, **Interest & Motives** and **Religious Affiliation to Place**.

Belief & Past Experience as a sub-construct is connect to Meagher's (2018) proposal that an individual's relationship with a worship space and their evaluation of impressions of its physical environment closely interacts with their own religious orientation (i.e., intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest). Firm adherence to a faith characterises visitors' intrinsic orientation, extrinsic orientation involves seeking benefits of religion in the external world, and quest orientation is characterised by religious doubt, openness to

change, and comfort with ambiguity. A profound transcendental religious experience largely relies on visitors' inner ability to derive meaning and emotions from their encounters with the materiality of religion in the form of spatial attributes and settings. In this regard, Huang and Chu (2020), Tahiri (2015), Terzidou *et al.* (2018), and Williams *et al.* (2007) all suggest that such ability of visitors to connect with the Divinity of the place does not emerge all of a sudden. Instead, it is an outcome of their past experiences of continuous connection with religion in regular worship, prayers, rituals, vows, and visions that strengthen their religiosity and spiritual belief. These experiences further enable them to see deeper connotations beyond the objective realities and connect themselves with the place in an emotional and meaningful way. This finding helps to illustrate that visitors do not arrive at religious sites with empty minds and fresh eyes; instead, they have a pre-determined frames of mind that moderate how they interpret their external encounters. Voase (2007) argued that 'visitors arrive at the cathedral predisposed with a set of personal narratives in their heads, which they expect to be augmented through the encounter with the Cathedral' (p.50-51).

Personality is the second sub-construct of Visitor Attributes. Experience is not just built upon the visitors' relationship with religion in their life and predispositions, their unique psychological process of perceiving and decision-making inherent in their personality are also crucial in influencing their experience. Francis *et al.* (2008) proposed that perceiving and judging any destination aspect varies depending on the visitor's psychological state and personality types (i.e., sensors-intuitive, thinkers-feelers). 'Sensors; are the people who focus on the reality of the situation and are concerned with actual, accurate, and practical, whereas 'Intuitors' concentrate on the possibility of a situation. 'Thinkers' make decisions based on objective, impersonal logic and value the mind over the heart, while 'Feelers' make judgments based on subjective and personal values. So for this reason, visitors with different psychological traits eventually experience the same place differently.

Interest & Motives is another element influencing visitor experience when visiting a religious site. The role of interest and motivation in visitor experience has been identified in several studies, and it has also been used as criteria to distinguish visitor typology by Andriotis (2009), Bond *et al.* (2015), Duda & Doburzyński (2019), Wang *et al.* (2020), in their studies. Different interests and motivations are suggested to lead to a different understanding of the sacred and how a person perceives their surroundings. For instance, the rugged terrain of Mount Kailash and exhaustive trekking were perceived differently by spiritual inquirers, pilgrims hobbyists, and accidental tourists (Wang *et at.*, 2020). Spiritual inquirers sought spiritual solutions to their life or emotional problems; pilgrims travelled out of religious belief, hobbyists were motivated by their occupation or hobby such as photography, and accidental tourists visited the site because it fell on their travel route. The visitor's interest may not always be limited to the explicit surface of the conscious mind only, it may often exist in their subconscious layers, as found in the study of Gutic *et al.* (2010). This study suggests that visitors may consciously assert secular interest as their motive to visit the religious site. However, subconsciously, they seek a spiritual experience that makes them involved in the process of personal meaning-making during their visit to a Cathedral.

Religious Affiliation to Place, while not widely examined, has also been identified as influencing the visitor experience at religious sites. The study of Albayrak *et al.* (2018) indicates that visitors 'who were members of different religions may have varying experience about the same destination' (p.292), and a visit to other's religious sites are often motivated by cultural curiosity to understand the different religions (Albayrak *et al.* 2018). This is evident in the study of Huang and Chu (2019), where Chinese visitors' experience at an Islamic religious site (Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, UAE) was more cultural and heritage oriented. On the other hand, an intense emotional experience is often linked to a visitor's attachment to place, induced mainly by their religious affiliation. Visitors' feeling of devotion to the deity of the visited site is one such

emotion. A study by Shuo *et al*. (2009) identified that degree of devotion influences visitor loyalty to a religious destination. Similarly, Patwardhan *et al*. (2020) also empirically recognised that religious affiliation significantly affects visitors' perceived emotional experiences which mediate their place attachment and destination loyalty.

Engagement

This construct refers to the activities that encourage and ensure visitors' involvement and immersion in a place. Such immersions determine the extent and nature of the visitor's connectedness with the place and consequently impact their ability to assign meaning and value to their experience. This engagement may occur in various forms, mainly depending upon the visitor's own intrinsic orientation (personal attribute) and extrinsic availability of services and facilities (destination attribute). This Engagement Construct is comprised of four sub-constructs ***Performative & Religion-Oriented Engagement***, ***Exploratory Engagement***, ***Observational Engagement*** and ***Commercial Engagement***.

Performative & Religion-Oriented Engagement is discussed by scholars such as Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell (2006) and Terzidou *et al.* (2017) who affirm that visitors' participation in various performative activities is essential during their visit to religious destinations to generate a spiritual or religious experience. In fact, in some instances, participating in religious rituals can be the primary motivation to undertake the journey (Husein, 2018). Visitor engagement through embodied performances could be institutionally guided and scripted, such as prayers, meditation or ritual, such as a dip in the holy river, circling the shrine, tying the flag, lighting the candle, reading the text, being baptised, etc. (Belhassen *et al*., 2008; Buzinde *et al.*, 2014; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Taheri, 2016; Terzidou *et al.*, 2017). It may also involve strenuous acts, such as a long journey on foot, crawling or keeling, etc. Undertaking such difficult rituals produces various intense emotions and extraordinary, peak religious experiences (Husein, 2018; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019), which may include a feeling of connectedness to the Divinity of a place, experiencing a miracle,

feeling fulfilled by following the path shown in religion and doing one's religious duty. Most notably, during the process of involvement in these acts, meaning and authenticity of experience emerge at the individual and communal level.

Similarly, other kinds of humanitarian engagement, such as charity or service to the local fraternity, facilitate visitors' notions of catharsis of sin and reinforce the feeling of religious virtue and fulfilment in serving God (Belhassen *et al*., 2008; Buzinde *et al*., 2014). In addition, visitors' involvement with Holy objects / icons during a visit and post-visit can allow them to feel a 'notion of affect through doing' (Terzidou, 2020:9). Participation in collective performances such as Holy mass and mass prayers can navigate the visitor through a strong social experience of *'communitas'* (Turner & Turner, 1978), where the feeling of mutual harmony and social bond emerges. In this way, such kinds of religious engagement allow the visitors to enliven their intrinsic beliefs.

Exploratory Engagement is another common category of engagement at religious destinations that influences visitor experience. This is exploratory in nature and includes relatively secular involvements that help in establishing a better understanding of the place and offers deeper insights, such as undertaking guided tours (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2018; Lupu *et al*., 2019) visiting interpretation centres (Bond *et al.*, 2015) reading information booklets, visiting an on-site museum / library (Andriotis, 2009), coach tours (Terzidou, 2020; Terzidou *et al*., 2017) conversation with monks (Andriotis, 2009; Yanata, 2021) or consuming religious (Biblical) food (Ron & Timothy, 2013). These kinds of engagement have a noticeable influence on the visitor's cognitive experience of a place. That is further connected to producing feelings of appreciation for the place, authenticating and constructing personal meaning, deepening faith in one's religion, and experiencing the sacredness of the place through understanding deeper spiritual connotations of cultural and heritage elements, historical prominence, and significant events occurred in the past.

Observational Engagement is a further construct which visitors are also found to be often involved in. This includes the process of personal meaning-making through sitting quiet, observing oneself or others, and gathering thoughts. Such engagement is a more solitary approach to connecting to the place and oneself and is primarily associated with generating restorative, introspective, or spiritual experiences (Smørvik, 2021; Voase, 2007).

Commercial Engagement can also be important. The visitor's engagement in commercial activities, particularly buying souvenirs and religious objects can enhance the visitor experience. Some visitors attach emotion to religious artefacts by considering their spiritual value and purchasing them as vessels to carry the sacredness of the place on their return (Terzidou, 2020). Other visitors may buy items as souvenirs or gifts (Dimitrovski *et al.,* 2020).

Image

Religious places stand out as unique spaces, demarcated by ascribed values, endowed powers, reverence, and deep meanings attached by the associated community. This makes such destinations socially constructed 'places with the shared and collectively authored meaning' (Belhassen *et al.,* 2008:668). Therefore, prevailing socially endorsed meanings, narratives, and ensuing images of a religious place will influence visitors' perception, personal narratives, and anticipation related to that place and shape their experience while arriving at those sites (Buzinde *et al.*, 2014; Higgins & Hamilton, 2016). The two components of this Construct include ***Sacred Image*** and ***Secular Image***.

Sacred Image connects with the conceptualisation of Thomas *et al.* (2018) who suggest that despite the independence of individual experience, visitors also carry the need to experience the socio-historical truths or narratives of the place and its declared miraculous divine powers. Accordingly, visitors seek to witness those transformative encounters in their lived experiences while being in such places. This is evident in their study of visitor experience at Lourdes, one of the biggest Catholic sanctuaries in the world, renowned for its miraculous powers, where the experience as expressed by visitors bears strong resembles to the historic narrative given by Bernadette.

Such lived experiences or sacred images of transformation or 'mini-miracles' and the sharing of these experiences with others acts as intangible word-of-mouth consumption drivers for Lourdes (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016). Thus, social narratives in the form of personal accounts of miracles and healing often raise the desire for a miracle and influence the awareness and expectation of visitors towards their experience. In this regard,

Secular Image are also important elements of the experience. Visual media like TV news and documentaries can play a crucial role in reinforcing the image of the place and influencing visitor experience by 'framing their understanding of the sacredness of the place' and pre-conditioning their expectation of experience through 'providing them with myths, images, and emotions' (Terzidou *et al.*, 2018: 10). The destination image highlighted in itinerary and travel materials creates a similar influence (Belhassen *et al.*, 2008). On the contrary, religious sites often are seen as heritage destinations due to international designations for their valuable heritage assets and cultural richness - this can often orient visitors' interest in secular experience (Lupu *et al.*, 2019).

Discussion

This study's findings suggest that visitor experience lies within the complex overlaps of the four Constructs identified in this investigation (see Fig.4). It suggests that while these constructs emerged as distinct categories, the visitor experience symbolises the merging point where the influence of all these Constructs blends. This outcome is aligned with previous studies suggesting that visitor / customer experience is a multifaceted, complex, and dynamic process that involves various constructs (Adhikari & Bhattacharya, 2015; Cohen, 1979; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Volo, 2009; Walls *et al.,* 2011). The complex multiplicity and inclusiveness of visitor experience is also reflected in the approaches adopted in the reviewed articles where integrated frameworks such as the Activity-Setting-Experience-Benefit model (Bond

Figure 4: Interrelation of Constructs with Visitor's Experience
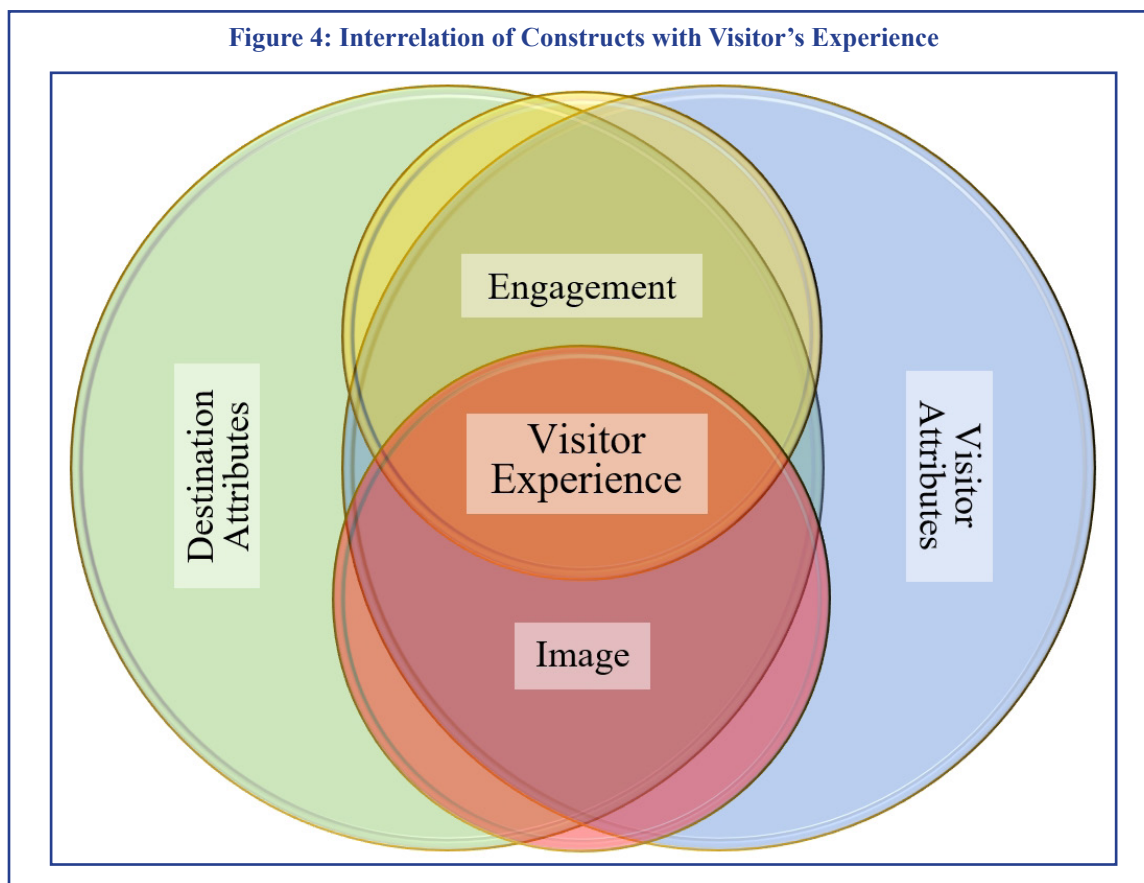
et al., 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2020), Attribute-Consequence-Value chain (Kim & Kim, 2018; Kim *et al.*, 2016; Kuo *et al.*, 2019) and a conceptual frame of Place-Activity-People (Belhassen *et al.,* 2008) were all employed to examine the visitor's experience at religious destinations.

Experience as a sensory process involves visitor interaction with the environment and elements within it (Adhikari & Bhattacharya, 2015). In this regard, the role of the **Destination Attribute** has been identified by several researchers (Kim, 2014; Wall *et al.,* 2011). Volo (2009) called destination attributes 'experience offerings' that are created or orchestrated (Wall *et al.,* 2011). These facilitate visitor encounters and can enhance destination competitiveness (Crouch, 2011; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003) and generate a memorable tourism experience (Kim, 2014). Chi and Qu (2009) claim that the way destination attributes perform can influence visitors' satisfaction and future behaviour. In the context of religious tourism, the present study has also identified the influence of destination attributes on the visitor experience. The **Destination Attribute** is identified with five sub-constructs (see Table.5) and contains both sacred and secular aspects (see Fig.5). Duda & Doburzyński

(2019) called, these *sacrum* and *profanum* elements. These identified attributes are related to manifestations of religion and its intricate nexus with tourism and generally related to facilitating visitor encounters.

The *sacrum,* which can be understood as the religious / spiritual element or sacral character of the place, forms the essence of religious destinations and the key distinguishing characteristic, separating religious tourism space from the other touristic landscape. It is essentially associated with the experience of all kinds of visitors, including those who seek it unwaveringly or those who arrive with a mixed focus. The *sacrum* or the sacredness of any religious destination is primarily linked to its religious history and its socially declared image as a seat of divine power. It continues to be manifested through symbolism in the geographical landscape, atmosphere, and surroundings of the place and further reinforced through the site's operation, such as clear separation from the *profanum* through restrictions and impositions.

Profanum can be understood as the broader secular outer religious space that witnesses elements of touristic interest. It includes structure, art, culture, and

Figure 5: Conceptual Framework of Major Constructs Associated with the Visitor's Experience
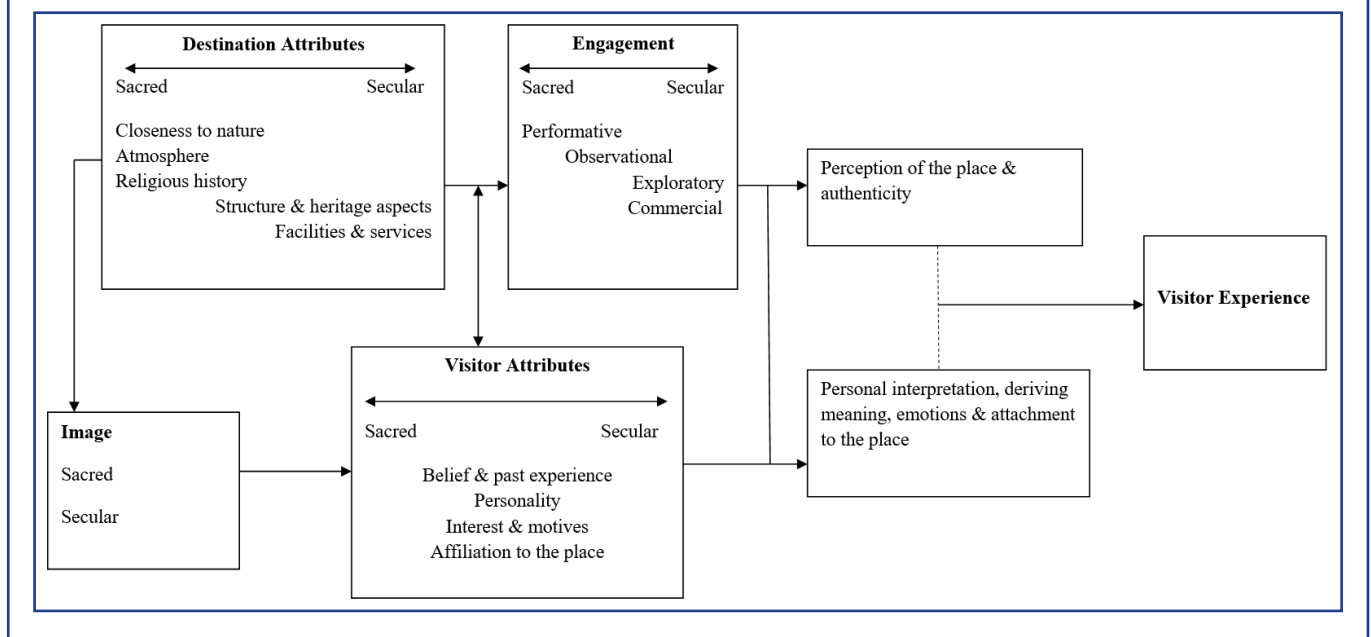
arrangements developed to facilitate visitation in terms of information, various facilities and services, which constitute another essential part of the visitor experience at the religious destination as a touristic space which influences overall visitor satisfaction. Structure & Heritage components, Atmosphere & Surroundings, Facilities & Services are some of the elements which are identified as significant items of destination attributes in previous studies (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Kim, 2014), however, Closeness to Nature is found much relevant in rural tourism (Daugstad, 2008; Kastenholz & Lima, 2011) and Religious history seems to be more particular to the religious sites.

Visitor Attributes is another significant construct identified in the current study. It supports the assertion of Hennes (2010) that external exhibits (here destination attributes) are not the actual experience; rather, they are the platform for the experience. The actual experience occurs inside the visitor's mind as their personal response to the external encounter (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Walls et al., 2011). The present study also identified visitors' Beliefs & Past Experience, Personality, Interests & Motivations, and Religious Affiliations as crucial sub-elements in influencing visitor experience at religious sites. Religious affiliation of the visitor is one of the significant elements that Nyaupane *et al.* (2015) suggest influences visitors' motivation at religious places, and people who visit sites of their faith are more likely to

travel for religious motives. However, their study also proposes that the interest and understanding of the members of other faiths towards the site may also vary depending on social impression and the nature of the religion. Nyaupane *et al.*'s (2015) study identified that sites of religions that are perceived as neutral such as Buddhism, can be positively experienced by visitors of other religious affiliations (Hindu, Christian) who share an affinity with the interests of Buddhism.

Altogether, these internal constructs, including visitors' religiosity and psychological personality, are visitor's individual characteristics. These determine the ability of visitors to connect with the place and how they interpret their external encounters. In this way, personal attributes appear to have moderating influence on visitor experience, as suggested by Silverman (1995).

The importance of visitor / customer involvement in experience generation and consumption is revealed in the study of Pine & Gilmore (1999). Visitor *Engagement* in various activities is recognised in the present study as one of the major constructs associated with reinforcing different levels of cognitive-affective experience at religious sites. On the one hand, these activities are arranged by the providers (Wall *et al.*, 2011) and belong to the destination attribute (Kim, 2014, Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). On the other hand, visitor motivation influences choice and willingness to engage in activities (Su *et*

al., 2020), as well as interpretation of the engagement, this is an outcome of their personal attribute (Schmitt, 1999; Selstad, 2007). Therefore, in the present study, the authors have placed this construct (***Engagement***) on the intersection of external (***Destination Attribute***) and internal (***Visitor Attribute***) dimensions. The destination ***Image*** is the final Construct recognised in the study. Image is considered crucial in Piramanayagam *et al.*'s (2020) study concerning visitor experience and their behavioural intent. In general, destination attribute indicates the information and association related to the site. Crompton (1978) suggested that destination image is associated with the expectations of tourists about the site. Outcomes of the present study support the previous findings where destination image is recognised to play a significant role in framing visitor expectations of experience. Since destination ***Image*** involves specifications and features related to the destination as well as visitor perception (Murat, 2016), it is also placed at the junction of the ***Destination Attributes*** and ***Visitor Attributes***.

At times, Constructs may appear linear or reciprocal, which means that religious sites where sacred ***Destination Attributes*** are dominant can coincide with the religious image of a powerful or miraculous place. It further corresponds to attracting adherents of faith, seeking a religious experience, and eventually choosing to indulge primarily in performative engagements. This is similar in the case of destinations that carry more secular dimensions in their ***Destination Attributes***, ***Visitor Attributes***, ***Engagement***, and ***Image***. However, this is not the situation in all cases. A prominent religious site with an overwhelming natural landscape and sacred atmosphere can generate a spiritual experience even for visitors with secular interest, as the studies by Andriotis (2009), della-Dora (2012), Collins-Kreiner and Sagi (2011) and, Yanata (2021) confirm. Similarly, an exploration of secular aspects can reveal sacred values gained through involvement in exploratory engagement (secular) and thus, lead to religious experience (Duda & Doburzyński, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2018). Therefore the two seemingly contrary aspects of the sacred-secular divide often reconcile and perform in mutual harmony.

Given this, it would be more appropriate to infer that visitor experience at religious sites is subject to the influence of multiple constructs that are complexly entwined, often overlapping, and inherently embedded in the idiosyncratic characteristics of the place, visitor, and process.

Theoretical Contribution

The present study offers two major theoretical implications. First, it recognises that visitor experience at religious sites is primarily an outcome of the combined influences exerted by external (***Destination Attributes***), internal (***Visitor Attributes***), and intermediary (***Engagement and Image***) constructs. Since these constructs inherently possess sacred and secular dimensions and comprise a wide range of individual items within, it substantiates the likelihood of every individual visitor's unique experience. Thus, it helps understand why the visitor experience at religious sites is so dynamic, varies extensively and in some cases can be polarised i.e., sacred-secular.

Second, it identifies the role of these constructs in the visitor experience generation and consumption during a visit to a religious site and develops a conceptual framework based on this. It discerns the crucial role of ***Destination Attributes*** in facilitating the visitor encounter with place and environment, the moderating role of ***Visitor Attributes*** in determining how these encounters are interpreted, and the intermediate reinforcing role of ***Engagement*** and ***Image*** to influence the intensity and magnitude of experience created through the interaction between the destination and the visitor.

Conclusion

Based on the premise that pilgrims and tourists share frequent convergence, being in the quest for a unique experience through displacement and seeking to experience the authenticity of a visited place, the current study focused on the subject of visitor experience at religious sites through approaching both categories in a combined way. This review aimed to explore the constructs associated with visitor experience, which exert influence on shaping their experience. To achieve its aim, the study explored the available knowledge related to the subject and followed a systematic method to access relevant literature. Additionally, it adopted an inductive approach and employed qualitative thematic

analysis to identify underlying constructs and find out their relation to visitor experience through a three-level coding process.

The findings of this study recognised four major constructs, namely **Destination Attributes**, **Personal Attributes**, **Engagement**, and **Image**, that represent external and internal dimensions of on-site experience generation and consumption. Based on that, a conceptual framework was proposed. The study also identified that all four major constructs possess sacred and secular dimensions that further help in understanding how sacred and secular aspects can co-exist in individual experience. The study's findings emphasise that visitor experience at a religious sites is essentially an outcome of the combined influence of these Constructs and therefore suggest the complexity and multiplicity of visitor experience that has been claimed in previous studies in different contexts.

However, the present study is not free from limitations. Rigid criteria for selecting articles helped obtain relevant papers from an extensive domain. At the same, this has imposed major limitations on the present study's findings, which do not consider articles exist beyond its inclusion criteria. This leaves the possibility of the existence of some additional or different perspectives on the subject. Another major limitation of the study has been in its inclusive approach that overlooks the criticism of considering pilgrimage as a tourism phenomenon (Damari & Mansfeld, 2016). Nevertheless, the findings of the current review developed a useful insight into the complex and elusive subject of visitor experience in the context of religious tourism, and the proposed framework can serve as a preliminary theoretical conceptualisation for further investigations. It is hoped that the attempt made through the present study contributes to enhancing the concerned academic domain by adding a novel perspective.

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