

Managing repeat visits: an exploratory study of the visitor experience and destination image

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Abstract

Purpose – While the experiences and values linked to religion are distinct, there is limited literature on the outcomes of spiritual and metaphysical experiences that affirm destinations and motivations for visiting. The research aims to examine the underlying goals for repeated travel through the design of a conceptual framework by demonstrating how the destination influences motivations and experiences, involving atonement, faith, vulnerability, well-being and self-transcendence facilitated by travel to Medjugorje.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on narratives, 82 video testimonies extracted from YouTube were analyzed reflecting the scope of theories and developing a framework on themes related to the spiritual destination repeated visits. A multidimensional approach to well-being is considered.

Findings – The framework highlights newly defined patterns of repeat behavior visits and the importance of the visitor experience. The study adds value to the nascent work on spiritual destinations and repeated visits and how the effectiveness of this relationship can generate greater well-being.

Originality/value – The findings of the study have critical implications for tourism practitioners and contribute insightful theoretical implications for understanding destinations as a catalyst for realizing motivations, self-transcendence and well-being.

Keywords Spiritual destination, Repeat visits, Faith, Belief motivation, Experiences, Self-transcendence, Well-being

Paper type Research article

Introduction

There is limited literature on the outcomes of spiritual and metaphysical experiences that affirm destinations and motivations for visiting (Terzidou *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, tourist sites such as Camino de Santiago are a major attraction (Girish and Lee, 2020). Running parallel is Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, despite being marked by a prolonged political, economic, socio-cultural upheaval and an ethnically diverse population, it continues to attract large numbers of visitors due to metaphysical experiences, with a 1.7% increase in visitors recorded from 2023 (SeeNews, 2024). While Medjugorje is primarily recognized as a pilgrimage site attracting people seeking spiritual renewal, atonement and association with the divine, it can also be perceived as a religious tourism destination, bringing large numbers of international visitors, offering guided tours, hospitality services and culturally mediated experiences. This combination reflects broader debates in sacred space scholarship, where sites such as Lourdes or Fatima are simultaneously spaces of faith, cultural heritage and tourism consumption (e.g. Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Olsen *et al.*, 2013). Positioning Medjugorje in this context not only emphasizes the spiritual destination that one perceives but also the nexus between pilgrimage motivations, experiential engagement and destination image, allowing the current study to explore how visitors view personal vulnerability, self-transcendence and repeated visitation in a perspective that is both religiously sacred and



globally recognized. The relationships with pilgrims and tourists are a discourse for further research (Kliot and Collins-Kreiner, 2003), and it is meaningful to have an in-depth understanding of these relationships (Andrade Suarez *et al.*, 2024).

Systematic reviews were conducted and identified that there are gaps in the spiritual tourism development literature (Mishra and Maheshwari, 2025). Others have shown that spiritual tourism can be viewed as a new strategy for marketing Islam (Haq and Yin Wong, 2010). Developing destination marketing of religious tourism is certainly found to be an innovative move for pilgrim tourism (Navruz-Zoda and Navruz-Zoda, 2016). Authors have argued that spirituality extends beyond formal religion (Kujawa, 2017; Norman and Pokorny, 2017; Singleton, 2017). In tourism contexts, visitors frequently experience sacredness, inner reflection or self-transcendence while participating in religious activities or visiting spiritually significant destinations. Although such experiences are commonly associated with pilgrims, existing literature has largely focused on pilgrimage participants and formal religious motivations, leaving a limited understanding of how broader groups of tourists experience spirituality at these destinations. This highlights an important gap in the literature and warrants further examination of how spiritual experiences are constructed, interpreted and valued across different visitor segments at these destinations.

Our study suggests repeated visits have more meaningful growth opportunities allowing stakeholders to invest in long-term destination development. Destination marketing organizations tend to cultivate a loyal visitor base for long-term relationships and economic development. This research contemplates how deeper visitor experiences at the heart of religious travel represent a contemporary transformation of the essence of recurrent journeys. Research within this area lacks understanding of the nuances of repeat religious visits, given the buoyant economic development it creates. The present state of the literature provides a limited understanding of this underserved phenomenon for repeated visits to religious sites. This research aims to narrow those gaps by employing multidimensional theories to inform our understanding of the spiritual destination that influences the individual's self-transcendence experience, their decision-making process and the process of revisiting. Thus, the study aims to examine the underlying goals for repeated travel through the design of a conceptual framework to show how spiritual destination influences motivations and experiences, involving atonement, faith, vulnerability, well-being and self-transcendence, all facilitated by travel to this destination, together manifesting repeated visits. It begs the question: In what ways do spiritual destination experiences shape motivation, personal transformation and repeat visitation among pilgrims? The findings of the study have critical implications for practitioners, as well as insightful theoretical implications for repeat visits, well-being and understanding spiritual destinations as a catalyst for realizing this motivation. The study adds value to the nascent work on spiritual destinations, repeated visits and how the effectiveness of this relationship can generate not only well-being but greater market performance by creating superior value for tourists.

Destination and repeated visits

In tourism, a destination can be conceptualized as the mental image individuals hold about a particular destination. Alternatively, it is described as the visual impression retained by individuals of a place or an experience endured (Milman and Pizam, 1995). Popular tourist destinations often overlook the broader definition of places where apparitions have taken place, for instance, Medjugorje, a small town in Bosnia and Herzegovina former Yugoslavia where Our Divine Lady started to appear to six young children. The first apparition was in 1981, and hence, it is current and ongoing, as compared to other apparitions. This has been perceived as a subject of deep interest, and while these apparitions have continued, there is strong support among many of the clergy, pilgrims and people practicing the faith. Medjugorje is inspired by travelers, fueled by multiple visits and identified as an unsaturated site for visits. A nuanced understanding of this spiritual destination warrants the need for further research to

understand the nexus between spiritual destination and repeated visits. Visitors have been traveling to Medjugorje multiple times as these apparitions started fairly recently.

It is believed that 80% of the world is religious and researchers have only recently looked at the “consumption” of religion and spirituality (Ozanne and Appau, 2019). Motivations to travel have been examined in the light of well-being and pleasure, spirituality and avoidance, socialization and entertainment and religious motives (Andrade Suarez *et al.*, 2024). Ozanne and Appau (2019, p. 462) challenge authors to question the metaphysical foundations by encouraging authors to consider the consumption of religion and spirituality and “critically evaluate with an appreciation for the worldview upon which it is based.”

This alludes to the fact that destination images are created through what the visitor perceives at the point of the destination based on their experiences. The impressions created during the visit have a major impact on the individual in question and may be less visible in what might be considered tangible and encompassing, as well as what may be considered emotional and intangible. It is essential to shed light on the dynamic nature of destinations and the meanings associated with places by tourists requires considering a destination’s spatial features in contrast to the characteristics of domestic spaces (McCabe and Stokoe, 2004).

Methods

The study uses narrative research to explore the participants’ personal experiences and life stories. In narrative research, one of the primary functions of narration is to “make present” life experiences and interpret a life within specific times and places (Schiff, 2012). Narratives are critical, as it is crucial to emphasize that both narrated and untold lives and necessitate contextualization by integrating the broader context (Brannen, 2013).

Through testimonies, a person is expected to narrate their personal encounter with god or the supernatural being and “how such an encounter has become a life-changing event and experience” (Faimau, 2017: p. 1). Interviews were extracted from publicly accessible videos (YouTube) where participants shared their testimonial narratives of recurrent visits to Medjugorje in Bosnia. In total, 98 videos were screened from YouTube, and 81 videos featuring visitors who made multiple trips to Medjugorje were analyzed. The study was guided by the question of the interviewer “What are the deeper experiences in visiting Medjugorje to warrant repeat visits?” The video interviews analyzed consisted of testimonies that revealed travelers’ experiences in Medjugorje, as discussed with the interviewer. The parameters surrounding these testimonies were multiple visits, which were selected for our study. A narrative inquiry was conducted through a sequence of questions raised by the interviewee of the video creator, asking them about Medjugorje, their motivations to travel again and their experiences visiting this holy location where apparitions of our lady appeared. These interviews are on YouTube. The study employed purposive sampling of publicly available testimonies from individuals who explicitly reported multiple visits to the focal spiritual destination. This approach was intentional and theoretically driven rather than random.

Purposive sampling was appropriate because the research sought depth of insight into the processual and experiential dimensions of spiritual visitation, particularly how destination image, faith and experiences evolve over time. Individuals who reported repeat visits were especially information-rich cases, as they were able to reflect not only on initial motivations but also on how experiences deepened, transformed or reinforced their beliefs and intentions to return. We also acknowledge the limitations (e.g. overrepresentation of highly engaged visitors and underrepresentation of those who do not produce or consume YouTube content).

The interviewer raised a series of questions with responses endorsing the meaning individuals give to their experiences. Their testimonies hugely influenced repeat visits. We traced the interconnections across all the testimonies to gain a broader perspective. The duration of many testimonial interviews ranged from 8 to 60 min. Most of the people interviewed were from the USA and Europe. Table 1 in appendix 1 also shows the participants, the country, the number of repeated visits and the duration of the video.

The data was entered into the NVivo software. Data were extracted in a textual form paying close attention to the participant and the context of their story, paying attention to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the subject being studied (Bryman, 2016). The research follows Riessman's model (2008) of transcribing, analyzing and reading while placing a focus on interpreting the experience that occurs in the five points of the model. The researcher also paid attention to several questions to make sense of the data.

A second coder was employed to check the quality and the balance of material to ensure clarity, and all possible scopes of experience were included. Further, to examine the meaning of information regarding the experiences and to understand the role that the information plays between the second coder and the researcher, the findings were again scrutinized from the thematic analysis using the analytical approach (Charmaz, 2006). Memos were also looked at and line-by-line inference was made to ensure all data was accurately captured. There was a difference between some codes and overlaps, as "experiences" and "emotions" were found to be similar; we concluded this could be a subtheme. A comparison of coding trees gave us further insights and some subthemes were merged.

In several ways, the trustworthiness of the research approach can be addressed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) made a case for assessing qualitative research without scientific measure but using trustworthiness. Triangulation, which involves cross-checking research for increasing credibility, is important (Stahl and King, 2020). Here consistency in conclusions between the coder and the researcher is a key indicator of trustworthiness in this qualitative research. In presenting the analysis and elucidating the themes, excerpts from the theories were utilized to provide detailed descriptions (Tracy, 2010).

Findings

In analyzing the data, we identified three dimensions of repeat visits that emerged, namely, spiritual destination image, experiences and motivation. The themes and subthemes are outlined in Figure 1 for a better understanding.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between different factors influencing the image of a destination and its associated experiences and outcomes.

- (1) Motivation, which is grounded in faith and beliefs, plays a powerful role in creating the destination image of a spiritual place.
- (2) Self-transcendence and spiritual and emotional experiences further influence conversions. Vulnerability requires letting go of control, while self-transcendence also allows for improving.

Repeat Visits

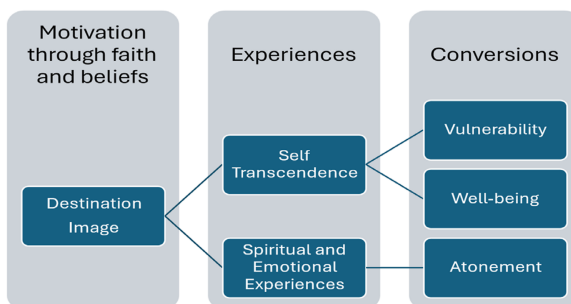


Figure 1. Conceptual map

- (3) Emotional and spiritual experiences can create the psychological and moral conditions required for atonement, whereby it leads to conversions to the religious faith, which is the natural outcome.

Motivation

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The inner motivation of consumer behavior is curiosity (Li *et al.*, 2023). Italian travelers to Medjugorje found that motivation for men and women were different; men were motivated by the need to discover, while women were for socialization (Abbate and Di Nuovo, 2013).

Repeated visits resulted in three themes that were extracted from the data, namely, spiritual destination image, motivation and experiences that can be drawn on to provide a more defined understanding of repeat visits. The motives for repeat travel to sacred destinations often emerge from aspirations that contribute to the formation or reinforcement of religious beliefs, where faith plays a significant role. Even though motivations are perceived as a vehicle for repeated travel, the literature considers the act of repeatedly visiting sacred places to go beyond merely constructed motivation; instead, it reflects a deep-seated urge to reconnect with the lived experience and encounter the spiritual growth and advancement it offers once more.

Motivation for repeat travel was highly evident in all the testimonies. Motivation to pilgrim sites was also seen to fulfill religious obligations, spiritual development and to follow the faith (Raj, 2012). Internal factors such as personal values, beliefs, faith and spiritual aspirations were highly evident in most of the responses. One respondent was clear that the first time they came to Medjugorje was inspired by the writings of a book. For example, Pauly “*and somebody can come here and become um transformed spiritually and that is it. It is not a must that we have to see Miracles you know yes miracles happen, but it’s not all the time that we have to expect it.*”

Faith and beliefs

Hinnells (1984) opines that religion is defined by a framework of identifiable beliefs and rituals that recognize the existence of a transcendent force empowering individuals to confront and surpass life’s challenges. Moreover, religious tourism is often synonymous with faith-based tourism, acknowledged as a distinct form of alternative tourism. Individuals embark on journeys for pilgrimage, missionary work or leisure, either independently or in organized groups. It is a journey of faith that encompasses cultural diversity (Damari and Mansfeld, 2016). While belief is a common motive for travel, there is also an emphasis on having a strong engagement in faith, given the outcomes of their first-time visits. Michael’s visit to Medjugorje had a strong connection to the belief he held – “*God doesn’t need our prayers, we need to pray to bring down Grace upon ourselves. We need to go to him, he doesn’t want us. It’s not about going to master we need to go, or we need to go I mean for the Holy Eucharist . . . we’re always thinking of the body, but we think of the Soul and feed the spirit.*” Caroline on the other hand found enlightenment in discovering her faith and beliefs: “*I would say um yes when I went, I started taking my faith seriously. It was because I was searching for answers to all of these hard questions and the church had the answers. So, it was the truth that brought me back and um it’s the beauty of the Church that has kept me.*”

The influence of faith or religion on the decision to visit a specific religious site is significant, as it shapes the types of experiences that these sites offer to visitors it may be the main personal quest for visiting particular pilgrim sites for self-development (Iliev, 2020). Bernadette draws on the messages she has heard before coming to Medjugorje and this motivated her to travel to reinforce that faith “*I read a message of our lady in Medjugorje before, it was so beautiful and it is very important that we do these things because when we come to Medjugorje we hear the messages..*”

Experiences

Theoretical models focusing on visitor demand often adopt a hierarchical approach, positing that individuals select specific products or participate in particular activities to fulfill distinct needs or achieve specific objectives (Beeho and Prentice, 1997). One such model extensively utilized in heritage tourism literature is the activity, setting, experience and benefit (ASEB) model, initially introduced by Beeho and Prentice (1997). The ASEB framework examines how visitors perceive the physical attributes or ambiance of an attraction, the activities they opt for and their assessment of the anticipated outcomes of their visit (Bond *et al.*, 2015). This includes their evaluation of the overall experiences and the perceived benefits derived from the visit (Beeho and Prentice, 1997, p. 76). Experience plays a prominent role in repeat visits, and while the ASEB framework gives some indication, the list of experiences is exhaustive. Thus, encompassing experiences, three dimensions can be exerted from the data, namely, emotional experience, self-transcendence experiences and spiritual experiences, which are discussed below.

Self-transcendence experiences

Spiritual transcendence can be defined as “the capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place and to view life from a larger, more objective perspective” (p. 5) (Piedmont, 2001). Self-transcendence can be seen to influence well-being by going beyond boundaries to connect with the self, others and nature (Reed, 2018). For instance, self-transcendence and well-being in homeless adults (Runquist and Reed, 2007) and to increase well-being among nursing home patients (Hogan *et al.*, 2014). Within the context of tourism, self-transcendence has been examined by investigating young traveler’s values and motivations (Cavagnaro *et al.*, 2021), understanding spiritual tourism (Wang *et al.*, 2023) and transformative tourism outcomes (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017).

The narratives support observations made by many of the participants experiencing spiritual transcendence, like Alexander “... *it’s really quite interesting. Hope always comes somehow Consolation, the light of God always comes somehow and that’s why it’s a lifeline that we can hold on to*”. Colleen for instance spoke about the metaphysical healing process and experienced a miracle, the end result was commitment and well-being. She attributes the Medjugorje visit to a self-transcendence healing process. While Desmond testified about “... *the known to the unknown, from the physical to the metaphysical world the mind is something that I mean it helps you to understand something beyond the ordinary. So when you raise your mind and your heart to God you raise it up because you are trying to reciprocate the love that God has for you and then in piercing through the things you know you’ve been led by the spirit into the metaphysical if you like, the realm where you don’t understand what’s happening and at the end of the day you find the peace you find joy and you find Solace because it is not a fruitless effort. It is something that you do and then you feel the response from the other end because God answers prayers.*”

Most participants spoke about going through this process and eventually expressing healing and well-being. Reed’s perception based on the self-transcendence theory (2008) can be useful in all stages and different contexts while experiencing multi-level self-transcendence to enhance well-being (Khait *et al.*, 2020). Reed’s model of self-transcendence was created within the context of nursing and healthcare. The nursing perspective of self-transcendence is based on the awareness linked to one’s wholeness in connecting to person-environment when fragmentation threatens one’s well-being (Smith and Liehr, 2014). This framework that includes vulnerability and well-being provides an understanding for advocating opportunities for connection, meaning-making and spiritual growth, thereby contributing to a holistic well-being and healing process. Self-transcendence was evident in many of the testimonies, which stems down to Maslow’s (1969, p. 66) perspective that considers self-transcendence as a pivotal concept in human development and meaning-making, which goes beyond self-

Vulnerability

Well-being and vulnerability are two major concepts of the self-transcendence theory as proposed by Reed. [Reed \(2009\)](#) opines that self-transcendence theory has progressed in part from four perspectives, namely, theoretical, empirical, clinical and philosophical beliefs to facilitate the integration of complex and conflicting elements of life into personal growth and well-being. By going beyond one's limits and acquiring different perspectives, self-transcendence can assist with transforming change by organizing challenges into meaningful systems to sustain a sense of wholeness and well-being ([Reed, 2008](#)). Vulnerability can be seen as awareness of one's personal mortality or the experience of stressful life events (examples are chronic illness, disability, grief and other life crises). The vulnerability was also an attempt by some participants to visit Medjugorje, the visitors who faced life-threatening illnesses and other catastrophes in their lives such as heroin addiction, suicidal attempts, divorces and abortions visited Medjugorje to get some kind of healing or solace. For instance, Megan and Linda testimony stated that *"my daughter was murdered and um my heart was broken and um I've been married for 45 years to my best friend and his heart was broken too and we have strong faith, but I needed something more."*

These life events that pose difficulties for survival or vulnerability can progress toward a renewed sense of identity and expanded self-boundaries ([Erikson, 1986](#)). Self-transcendence is aroused by such events or crises and is likely to enhance well-being by transforming into healing experiences ([Reed, 1996](#)).

Wellbeing

Medjugorje was considered a place for healing and well-being a result of self-transcendence. Eudaimonic well-being arises when an individual experiences life with meaning and self-fulfillment ([Ryan and Deci, 2001](#)). In general, the concept of well-being has risen exponentially in the literature, and no single universally acknowledged definition exists ([Dodge et al., 2012](#)). Scholars use a combination of definitions to present a very broad definition of happiness that is roughly synonymous with the hedonic/eudaimonic perspective of well-being ([Huppert, 2014](#)).

Being vulnerable and then experiencing self-transcendence and the consequence of well-being are strong results of Medjugorje's place identity. For instance, John states *"what impresses me is the infinite love of god coming into our hearts changing our lives transforming our lives"* is an indication of subjective well-being. [Agner \(2010\)](#) provides a comprehensive literature review on subjective well-being, happiness and satisfaction indicating "while some proponents argue that subjective well-being is one homogenous, subjectively experienced mental state, others argue that it is a heterogeneous state consisting of some combination of affective and/or cognitive states." Notably, other scholars regard subjective well-being as a dual composite, comprising an affective component (i.e. happiness) and a cognitive component (i.e. satisfaction) (see, for example, [Diener, 2000](#)). Furthermore, arguably, subjective well-being is far more intricate, encompassing components such as satisfaction, engagement, positive emotions and meaning (see, for instance, [Kesebir and Diener, 2008](#)).

Other participants like Maryann says, *"Two years later, I'm on the same trip with her and Thanksgiving to our blessed mother so the first trip that I made was because I lost a life the second trip is because I got a life in return so I'm very grateful"*. Michael on the other hand reflects on inner healing, *"Months later, perhaps, I don't really remember all the details. I had this inner experience I closed my eyes and had this inner vision of Jesus and Mary looking at me their hands open like that and smiling"*. This can be supported by the relationship between well-being and nouns such as health, wellness, welfare and quality of life treated as synonyms (see [Simons and Baldwin, 2021](#)). Or supplements other scholars' well-being perspectives that

are at two levels, one internal well-being, i.e. subjective as a “human, spiritual well-being associated with one’s personal characteristics and features.”

While the objective of well-being emerges from the notion of perception and one’s evaluation of human society (Alatartseva and Barysheva, 2015: p. 36), contemporary theorists have recognized both affective and cognitive processes (e.g. Diener *et al.*, 2003). These varied instances of well-being, while interesting and relevant, make it even more complicated, as there is a strong overlap between some meanings of well-being and there is a risk of drawing what to include and what not to include, often rendering the concept as multidimensional and inconclusive. So rather than considering a single perspective, this research identifies a subset of meanings within which encompasses a more meaningful usage of the term to capture self-transcendence positive relationship with well-being, making the spiritual experience a personal achievement.

Spiritual experiences

Places involving spiritual power attract those who are searching for enlightenment, devotees and the curious alike. While they function as tourist attractions, the motivations of visitors can vary widely, not all individuals who visit these places perceive themselves as tourists. In some cases, the term “tourist” may carry a negative connotation compared to alternative terms like “traveler” or “pilgrim” (Collins-Kreiner and Wall, 2015). Those who are novices, who arrive due to curiosity, may not necessarily hold any spiritual faith but can be enlightened after going through deep evoking spiritual experience. For instance, Catherine states, “*Anyway I got a great conversion on top of the mountain. I didn’t open my heart to our lady she opened my heart, she took me*”. Colleen, for example, states, “*When we arrived in Medjugorje, I remember experiencing it. It was like God was in the air, that’s exactly what it felt like. You could just feel his love all over this village of Medjugorje*”; Deirdre reports that it “*was a life-changing experience*.” This kind of spiritual transformation can lead to repeat visits (Sharpley and Jepson, 2015).

Emotional experiences

Attachment to a place is nurtured through experiences, and for religious tourists, both the tangible and intangible aspects of a place hold significant personal value, often evoking deeply gratifying positive emotions (Patwardhan *et al.*, 2020). This was supported by one of the respondents from the UK who stated that it was a “*wonderful experience, especially when we did the hill yeah that was emotional for me [...] emotionally I felt as if her presence was with me yeah you feel that she’s there*.” Catherine’s view supports an emotional seeking relationship, “*You will have joy and peace, pray for a connection with God and built a relationship where you have to talk to be together*.”

Consumption-related emotional experiences such as the above can be perceived in the light of critical elements of post-consumption behaviors such as place attachment, destination choice of destination and revisiting intentions and/or loyalty (Hosany and Gilbert, 2010). We found emotional experiences can also be associated with the realm of spiritual experiences.

Atonement and conversions

Atonement is perceived as confessional practices that have evolved over time comprising diverse meanings, methods and purposes. Morishima (2025) examines the historical context of atonement as a theological term and unpacks the confusion surrounding its context. In religious contexts, atonement often carries spiritual significance, representing the restoration of harmony between individuals and their higher power (Brummer, 1992). For many travelers, confession involves a connection to God or a spiritual level of existence (Murray-Swank *et al.*, 2007). Spiritual confessions often carry reflective significance and depth for participants. Moreover, they may hold significant implications for physical, psychological and spiritual

well-being (Murray-Swank *et al.*, 2007). Confessions played a huge role in seeking transformations. Atonement refers to the process of making amends for wrongdoing. By confessing, forgiving and repenting a part of this conversion takes place. For instance,

“Confession provided individuals with the opportunity to confront their transgressions and guilt, often in the context of their relationship with God. In addition, many people viewed confession as an initial step to forgiveness and reconciliation with God, resulting in a decrease of guilt and anxiety” (Murray-Swank *et al.*, 2007: p. 287). Spiritual confession at Medjugorje formed a platform for creating and expressing a deep sense of spiritual meaning in the lives of these participants. It provided a deep sense of freedom through this transformation.

People were apprehensive about confessions when they had fears for not only punishment but also what would the priest think and often got entangled in the emotion of guilt; however, here in Medjugorje, the atonement and penance gave them that sense of freedom. Anne Marie and Thommy found liberation of sin through confession, thus expressing purity; for instance, they reported *“I’m holding on to something terrible I need to get rid of it [...] so he went into confession box to pray, he came out like a new man he just felt new after 50 years. Yeah so the power of confession [...] why do people have to be uh worried about confession [...] unless you’re holding on to sin”*

Eileen, for instance, related *“it’s God that’s given us absolution I understand that part but it’s something different that you can talk about; it’s for free. You don’t have to go to the psychiatrist to pay a lot of money it’s the priest and he has the power to forgive and leave everything behind. People who haven’t gone for 40 years and they cried with joy, and one of our parishioners last year went he had a huge conversion.”* Jeanette found reconciliation, *“We went back to confession. It was after day two that’s when all the graces started to happen with us, so once we went into confession everything happened the channel is clean the Holy Spirit can flow to us.”* Thus, many of the participants experienced these conversions, which kept them coming back year after year.

Repeat visits

While revisit intention stands as the main metric for evaluating visitors’ loyalty to a destination (Oppermann, 2000), it’s essential to recognize that visitors seeking diverse experiences may warrant consideration beyond this sole criterion. In these instances, tourists’ willingness to recommend a destination to others emerges also as a significant indicator (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2018). Thus, in the light of the latter, we consider the conclusions of the testimonies for repeat visits, where the interviewer asks all participants what you would say to people, as to why visit Medjugorje.

The desire to return can not only be linked to their memorable experiences but also related to the deepening of their faith and self-transformation. Repeat visits can be witnessed when encountering spiritual experiences for many of the visitors. For instance, Bernadette’s response to the interviewer, when the interviewer posed a question [...] *“well I hope so and in the end what would you tell people why come to Medjugorje?”* Bernadette response was *“because our lady is here, she invites us to come and she calls us, all her children and if you’re mother called you wouldn’t you come to her, so our lady is inviting people last 42 years so [...]. special Grace is being given now [...] now is the time of Grace and renewal and they can transform themselves and their lives.”* Sofia Gamiz *“[...] and we never stopped returning to Medjugorje, I don’t know how many times we’ve been here. Whenever Our Lady calls us, we always say: Yes!”* This scholarly discourse with religion and the supernatural is a popular phenomenon in the literature of travel and has even in recent times found increasing interest (see Egeler, 2020).

Deirdre is an example of who appears to have had strong spiritual experiences, and it is more than just achieving eudaimonic well-being; it is more related to a conversion – *“I come back because my heart is here. I felt the peace yeah real the peace that I never got in my life ever’*. Similar experiences witnessed by Sr. Maria, *“Philippines surpassed my expectations*

because when I came here it's not only that our place is beautiful it's like spiritual [...]. everybody's happy, everybody's peaceful and you see a lot of joy in everyone everybody [...] that's beautiful because when your hearts are open and you smile at everybody and there's dialog, there's love."

This link between faith and peace could also be a link to regaining one's identity back to the religious faith witnessed by Emily and George, *"I have been here 14 times' it will change you, will have inner peace. It is the faith, [...] faith can move the mountains it says in the Bible [...] we meet I suppose like-minded people, and I suppose the people that we meet we get the kind of help to increase our own faith."*

Discussions

This research aimed to explore the experiences through the testimonies of travelers to shed some light on repeated visits. While some factors like interaction-seeking motivation, destination image and visitor image congruity yield notable influence, especially among repeat visitors (Maghrifani *et al.*, 2022), highlighting a redefined pattern of repeat visit behavior, with a focus on the overall visitor experience.

Spiritual destination

Spiritual destinations are highly significant in influencing travel decisions (Lee *et al.*, 2014). Perceptions of destinations and the importance of prior visits in shaping these perceptions have been well-ingrained in the literature (Almeida-Gracia *et al.*, 2020). Yet, there is limited research on religious travel and destination image, and while these are influenced by mass media, celebrities satisfied customers, third parties or organic such as personal experiences, understanding apparitions at Medjugorje has contributed to a broader dialog of the religious doctrine, devotion, and repeated visits.

The traveler's testimonial narratives considered a spiritual destination, and while the choice to travel to a spiritual destination often hinges on the events taking place nearby, all travelers opting for Medjugorje as a destination found that it is a place deeply rooted in its spiritual symbolism and significance. This allure is intangible, transcending conventional tourist attractions, as it embodies complexity and spirituality, appealing to a specific segment of travelers. The destination not only catalyzes customer satisfaction but also advances loyalty, thereby encouraging potential repeat visits (Campo-Martínez *et al.*, 2010). The research also found strengths in supporting the literature where cognition, as a factor, was found to influence image complexity and affective responses reflected in the experiences (emotional, self-transcendence and spiritual), and thus, destination images can be influenced by specific place identity and specific individual characteristics (Ryan and Cave, 2005).

Motivations

It is often understood that motivation and engagement help to define and interpret the persuasive rationale that initiates, sustains and drives visitors to a place. These motivational capacities of religious beliefs and faith shape people's lives in lasting ways as indicated in the testimonial narratives. It was clear that religious phenomena and spiritual occurrences appeal to tourists in many ways that go beyond the physical identity of the place, based on how each traveler is motivated to travel. The evidence of these rich experiences and innate feelings challenges conventional wisdom, as was indicated by the traveler's testimonial narratives, and, therefore, the extreme motivation to influence repeat behaviors. Moments of experiencing a rich faith and significant spiritual beliefs can provide a high motivational level. Therefore, prioritizing the transformation of human consciousness becomes crucial for the future of tourism, where motivation can be designed to foster this awakening (Sheldon, 2020).

Experiences

The experiences dimension is underpinned by emotional experiences, self-transcendence experiences and spiritual experiences. Emotional experiences were found to overlap the spiritual and self-transcendence experiences. Self-transcendence played a central role in the experience of repeated visits for many of the participants. Participants showed a spiritual connection while many experienced moments of transcendence where they felt connected to something greater than themselves. On the other hand, spiritual experiences such as peacefulness and rituals of purification such as confessions, atonement and penance also led to transformation giving participants a sense of spirituality over worldly concerns. Self-transcendence can indeed manifest as fluid, yet it remains a pivotal factor in enhancing both well-being and spiritual growth. Consequently, it could serve as a primary practice for repeat visits, particularly among individuals who were not fully committed to religious beliefs and found themselves in this overwhelming situation. Subsequent studies could research its significance across various contexts.

Self-transcendence model, as suggested by [Reed \(2008\)](#), revealed transformative experiences for the participants. This showed that participants can extend self-boundaries in numerous ways. For instance, Reed's perspective on "intrapersonal (toward greater awareness of one's philosophy, values and dreams), interpersonal (to relate to others and one's environment), temporal (to integrate one's past and future in a way that has meaning for the present) and transpersonal (to connect with dimensions beyond the typically discernible world)" ([Reed, 2008](#), p. 111). These can be applied to understand the nuances of the self-transcendence experience of the testimonies when applied in-depth. Future studies may want to consider probing this further.

Repeat visits

The research investigates the rationale behind travelers' revisitation of destinations, emphasizing that not all instances of repeat travel significantly shape satisfaction. This research indicated people return eager for more. This sense of less satisfaction compels them to seek greater fulfillment. This is contrary to the satisfaction studies indicated for repeat travel behavior in the literature, whereby scholars have pinpointed overall satisfaction as the foremost influencing factor for revisiting a destination, and perceived image holds the least sway ([Campo-Martinez et al., 2010](#)). Satisfaction and the number of previous visits were also found to positively relate to the intention to return ([Alegre and Cladera, 2009](#)). We question whether these experiences exceeded their expectations, or was it *not knowing what to expect* as every visit was different? In this research, multiple visits have shown participants are insatiate with their self-transformation or conversions and repeat their behavior to reach newer levels. They showed that satisfaction saturated levels were fully met, and they wanted more, hence the yearning to return persisted. Not knowing what to expect and eager for more could be a plausible explanation, or this may imply the existence of other variables likely to yield either direct or indirect impacts.

We believe that secular and religious practices are created to enhance well-being in part by expanding self-transcendence ([Yaden et al., 2016](#)). The theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that vulnerability is not merely a contextual condition but a mediating mechanism through which transcendental experiences may generate deeper personal and spiritual change. By linking destination image formation, transcendence, vulnerability, conversion and well-being within a single framework, the model extends tourism theory beyond traditional motivation–experience–satisfaction approaches and introduces a process-based explanation of how sacred destination experiences may lead to transformative outcomes. This alignment shows that the model is theoretically coherent across disciplines and consistent with established conceptualizations of transcendence as both a response to vulnerability and a pathway to enhanced well-being.

Practical and managerial implications

The subsequent section highlights practical and managerial implications. By associating Reed's model to analyze self-transcendence among tourists making repeat visits to religious places, destination marketing organizations can gain a nuanced understanding of how to target different segments such as those falling under the vulnerable umbrella facing health issues or other crises situation in their lives. Although targeting vulnerable segments is often considered untenable, the ethical issue lies not in vulnerability itself but in how it is addressed. The key question is whether targeting exploits vulnerability for gain or seeks to reduce harm and enhance well-being. For example, targeting smokers to increase cigarette consumption is unethical, whereas targeting them with cessation support promotes survival and autonomy. Thus, vulnerability does not automatically make targeting those in crises or have health issues but exploitation does (Spratlen, 2014). This structured framework allows for the exploration of how self-transcendence dimensions intersect to shape well-being.

Allport's (1966) seminal work on religious motivations delineated between two categories of individuals: those who are extrinsically motivated, utilizing religion to fulfill various forms of self-interest, and those who are intrinsically motivated, for whom religion permeates their entire existence, encapsulating their lives with faith. Destination marketers can distinguish these segments into high and low involvement, and marketing efforts can be directed toward their needs. Religiousness and spirituality have long been regarded as distinct entities. While scholars suggest that religion tends to be deeply rooted in established doctrines and practices, spirituality is often described as a quest for transcendence or connection to the sacred, without necessarily adhering to specific religious dogma or deities (Miller and Thoresen, 2003). It emphasizes an individual's relationship with transcendence and their connection to the broader world and others, without exclusive allegiance to any particular religious tradition, but yet within the religious context, spirituality and spiritual experience do exist. In a broader context, religion is often associated with sacred rituals and institutional frameworks, whereas spirituality is more concerned with personal experiences of meaning and transcendence (Hill et al., 2000). This distinction has led many individuals to gravitate towards what is often termed "New Age" spirituality, which prioritizes personal growth and exploration of the spiritual. Thus, practitioners need to draw a clear distinction between spirituality and religion, as individuals seeking spiritual experiences may not necessarily adhere to specific religious beliefs (Heelas, 1998). However, individuals who undergo spiritual experiences may subsequently choose to embrace a particular religion. Accordingly, religious faith and beliefs are likely to be different and so will their motivations to travel, explore experiences, analyze the consequences of religious travel and inform destination strategies.

Since a distinction exists between pilgrimage tourists and religious tourists, the latter encompasses a broader spectrum of activities and meanings, practitioner marketing efforts and campaigns designed to promote repeated visits will be different, as pilgrimage tourists are specifically focused on fulfilling particular rituals at the sacred sites they visit (Rinschede, 1992) and may not be customized to the religious way of thinking. Religious tourists typically engage in a variety of activities such as visiting shrines, churches and temples and partaking in common tourist experiences. The testimonies revealed that many were of the religious faith, they could be pilgrims, but this was not evident in the testimonies, and hence, travel needs may have to be customized separately for religious and pilgrim segments.

Furthermore, this research provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and offers practical guidance for practitioners. By differentiating between first-time and repeat visitors, destination managers can more explicitly link destination image to religious tourists and design targeted marketing strategies and travel programs that address the distinct motivations and expectations of each segment (Wang, 2004).

Understanding the relationship between motivation and visitation intentions from a destination image formation shows that the influence of destination image congruity on intentions is stronger for repeat visitors than for potential first-time visitors (Maghrifani et al., 2022). Pilgrims often interpret their travel experiences differently from those organized by

commercial tourist companies (Belhassen and Ebel, 2009). Marketing strategies could leverage imagery that reflects the experiences identified in this research, emphasizing the significance and benefits of spiritual conversions, healing and overall well-being. Such an approach is likely to increase repeat visitation among target segments while also appealing to the broader community. In the long term, this strategy benefits practitioners, as repeat visitors are less costly to attract than new visitors (Oppermann, 1998) and play a key role in maintaining market share, particularly for mature destinations and attractions (Oppermann, 1998).

Limitations and future studies

We understand that our suggested directions for future research are limited and may not encompass all potential focus areas within this field. Nonetheless, they can serve as the initial step for further investigation. Through this contextualization into literary depictions of the interconnectedness between place (destination image) and repeat visits (loyalty), it draws travel narratives within psychological and branding theories to explore the relationship. Nonetheless, there are limitations of testimonial studies that need to be considered.

Some observations can be noted. Both tangible and intangible factors are generally investigated to improve tourist travel satisfaction and repeated visits (Perovic *et al.*, 2018). Since the emphasis demonstrated by these findings laid more on the intangible factors, except for one respondent who spoke about the hotels, this could be an anomaly. Future research could validate the model through empirical analysis, which would strengthen the external validity and generalizability of the study's conclusions.

We suggest a reevaluation of current models on pilgrim repeat behavior, with an increased emphasis on the pursuit of self-transcendence with considerations on vulnerability and well-being, as an experiential aspect of travel. Emotional and spiritual experiences when combined would enhance the model's overall value. This shift would move beyond solely focusing on religious-related activities or other conventional motivation models. Apart from self-transcendence, other scholars have drawn from the core principles of the self-determination theory, developing a conceptual framework and illustrating how autonomy, relatedness and competence contribute to restorative tourism experiences for returning travelers (Vada *et al.*, 2023). Drawing out the nexus between these two frameworks would provide more useful groundbreaking research. Furthermore, there is also a need to further investigate a collective, socio-cultural construction of the place and its meaning (McClinchey, 2015). There is an assumption made regarding the traveler's level of faith and beliefs and whether they could all be categorized as pilgrims. Future studies may want to augment this by being more specific, as we believe that the outcomes will critically vary.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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