



Discussing the Limitations of Virtual Pilgrimage on Socio-Cultural & Religious Activities of Selected Asian Destinations during Covid-19 Crisis: A need for physical presence

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ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage tourism involves the physical traveling of pilgrims to a specific place for rituals. Pilgrimage as a distant journey has contributed to tourism development until recently. The emergence of the Covid-19 crisis introduced some sociocultural and religious challenges through virtual pilgrimage (VP). VP is a type of pilgrimage that limits the physical presence of pilgrims to the place of rituals. Although VP reduces the spread of Covid-19 infections, it limits the sustainable development of sociocultural benefits of biodiversity. For example, it reduces the aesthetic values of natural ecosystems and aboriginal relationships with the pilgrims. Previous studies have neglected the impact of VP on sociocultural and religious activities during the Covid-19 crisis, preferring to focus instead on tourism impact and types of pilgrimage. This gap could be critical if not addressed. This study explores the negative impact of VP on the sociocultural dimensions of biodiversity and religious activities of selected pilgrimage destinations during the Covid-19 crisis. The study used primary and secondary data. Findings from stage 1 reveal that VP decreases arrivals, pilgrim well-being, and job opportunities. Stage two analysis confirms the findings. The study also discusses the limitations and future studies.

Keywords: Covid-19 crisis, physical presence, socio-cultural changes, sustainable development, virtual pilgrimage.

INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage tourism has contributed more than million times to the development of tourism destinations. According to world population review (WPR), around 85% of people worldwide identify as religious (World population review, 2020). These believers form the demographic base of religious tourism of which pilgrimage is a part (Griffin et al., 2018). Pilgrimage is a spiritual exercise involving seasonal travel and creates income for the host destinations

(Kurar et al., 2020) by reuniting pilgrims from other faiths (Dokman, 2020), meeting friends & family, and doing businesses (Hanna et al., 2019). The tourism sector often relies on immigrant workers to function, and migrants frequently enter the labour market through employment in tourism and hospitality (Hania & Lugosi, 2022). Thus; pilgrimage increases tourism businesses, creates job opportunities and fosters mental and spiritual well-being through the pilgrim's physical presence until recently.

Although crises (e.g., the Australian Seasonal BushFire) improves the strategic decisions making of fire authorities in increasing tourism developments (Onyeama, 2022. 2021), Covid-19 crisis is different because it is a turning point in pilgrimage tourism. As a health crisis, it shook global businesses and the spiritual well-being of pilgrims. It restricts mass gatherings in open spaces. As such, authorities enforced virtual platforms to limit infections. VP is a newly coined word for a site on the Net where people from different places can meet and stimulate a sacred journey. Unlike traditional pilgrimage (TP), VP is a pandemic neologism that helps pilgrims focus by stimulation, but with no real experience, but TP uses the physical presence of shrines and crowds as key objects to sensory interactions to entice pilgrims to visit, as Erasmus reflected:

Another important feature of pilgrimage sites is the presence of various shrines and altars within one larger location. This is important to the concept of sensory perception and interaction as the numerous types of saintly engagement provided by these various attractions increased the overall experience of the cult, giving greater prestige to the church, and then enticing more pilgrims to visit (Wells, 2011).

Although VP reduces the spread of Covid-19 crisis and eases access, it limits the sustainable development of socio-cultural benefits of biodiversity such as aesthetic values of natural ecosystems and aboriginal relationships within the environments (land and mountains). These values contribute to the emotional and spiritual well-being of pilgrims. Traveling to ritual sites is a culture in pilgrimage tourism; however, the changes from mental travel (VP) decreases the cultural dimension of biodiversity such as the decrease in the number of arrivals at the sites. And the rapid environmental changes (switch to online platforms) led to mass extinctions of pilgrimage cultures (mutual interactions between pilgrims and the environments). These changes decrease financial incomes by reducing the overcrowding of pilgrims, which creates receipts, income, and job opportunities for host destinations, sustainable heritage, and preservation of wildlife. While there are studies on socio-cultural impacts of tourism development (Mbaiwa, 2005; Gjerald, 2005), and types of pilgrimage (Aslam et al., 2021), the negative effects of VP on socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity and religious activities have been neglected especially, during the Covid-19 crisis. Knowledge of these changes explains translocation experiences (e.g., moving from one country to another) (Onyeama et al., 2023) involved in distant travel.

This study explores the socio-cultural impacts of VP on selected Asian destinations using primary and secondary data. Respondents include pilgrims who have physically travelled to any pilgrimage sites; to help share their experiences while answering the research questions. In stage 2, a panel data from world tourism barometer UNWTO, 2020 was reused for comparison. The study achieved the aim by addressing four questions, which include 1. Why

do you go on pilgrimage? 2. How much do you spend for a pilgrimage trip? 3. What are the impacts of Covid-19 crisis on pilgrimage destinations? 4. Can VP replace TP?

Major contributions of this study include, first, filling the literature gap. The negative impacts of virtual pilgrimage on pilgrimage tourism remain under-searched. Understanding the impacts of VP on pilgrimage tourism can reveal the loss incurred by this industry and direct the destination marketing organizations (DMOs) on how to recover pilgrimage tourism. As far as we are aware, little or no study discussed this topic. Second, this study contributes to the tourism industry and society. For example, receipts from arrivals create job opportunities for the host, and strengthen interactions between the pilgrims, workers and the host. However, as terrorism and militancy represses foreign direct investment, trade and tourism inflows (Evans & Kelikume, 2018), VP also represses pilgrimage tourism inflows in the short and long run. Little or no study discussed this; the current study fills this gap.

Chapter 1 discusses VP as an alternative to TP during Covid-19 crisis; sadly, it has several limitations. For example, it decreases the number of arrivals, job opportunities, income, and the socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity. The second chapter discusses the literature on VP, physical presence, Covid-19 crisis, socio-cultural, and the sustainable development of tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impacts of Covid-19 Crisis on Pilgrimage Destinations

Pilgrimage destinations have witnessed unprecedented and tremendous impacts from the outbreak of Covid-19. International arrivals declined by 70% (a loss of \$730 billion in export revenues) for the first eight months of 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). This unprecedented decline has drastic socio-cultural challenges. For example, millions of businesses were bankrupted, and the Lourdes pilgrimage 2020 switched online. About 320 employees who depend on the services they render at the shrine lose their jobs (Courtney Mares, 2020). This experience decreases the socio-cultural values of biodiversity where employees who normally enjoy the relationships with visiting pilgrims, mountains, and shrines become dependent. These mutual relationships are core values, beliefs, and norms that bonds the faithful together. Socio-cultural impacts are the 'people impacts' of tourism, and changes in their day-to-day quality of life. Cultural impacts refer to changes in traditional ideas, values, norms, and identities resulting from tourism. In their words, Robinson and Phipps 2003) said:

“Our assumptions about reality and everyday existence are thrown into new relief through rest and through the new social and cultural worlds we inhabit as tourists.”

Unfortunately, these negative socio-cultural changes altered the status quo, and this could affect the mental health of both parties. Interdependence theory (Kelley, 1984) holds that relations between people are defined through interpersonal interdependence i.e., the process by which interacting persons influence each other's experiences. Pilgrims' well-being improves through cultural interactions with employees and the entire environment. Festivals (e.g., pilgrimage) that celebrate the identities, cultures, and traditions (Onyeama, 2000) of diverse minority, ethnic, and diaspora communities are significant cultural and social phenomena (Fu et al., 2015). Thus, the Covid-19 crisis decreases socio-cultural relationships

in pilgrimage. To control these negative impacts, several measures were put in place (e.g., virtual platforms, but the challenge is about managing the effects of these interventions.

Negative Impacts of Virtual Pilgrimage

VP is an alternative form of TP. It involves an artificial type of journey that stimulates a sacred voyage for spiritual, educational, and economic reasons. In VP, pilgrims are physically absent and miss real experiences; but need adaptation to feel the authentic experience. Social presence theory (Short et al., 1976) emphasized the impacts of salience of the interactants and their interpersonal relationship during a mediated conversation. Intimacy and immediacy seems to be missing in this type of relationship. Interestingly, four characteristics of VP include; It does this by first constructing a mythscape, an immaterial mental landscape that originates from revered oral or written traditions. It also functions as a visual-auditory interactive medium for encountering a feeling of holy presence. Thirdly, it produces limuloid-style symbolic forms of amusement. Fourth, it can form "virtual traveling communities" of pilgrims who use the *communitas* discourse to describe their experience while using computers at home or at work as a leisure activity (MacWilliams, 2002). Unfortunately, these characteristics offer no "real" experience instead, alternative fantasy.

The socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity are fundamental for the development of pilgrimage tourism. They promote the behaviour of tourists on cultural diversity and transcultural strivings, but VP demotes these. For example, the creation of myths and immaterial mental geography reduces the terrestrial biodiversity (coexistence) which occurs through overcrowding of pilgrims. The crowded environment in TP creates high-level biodiversity and improves pilgrims' well-being, but VP only offers a sense of sacred presence. So, due to the absence of crowds for an authentic experience, it decreases biodiversity.

In TP, pilgrims physically travel outside their comfort zones (domains) to a distant place in search of meaning and encounter with the divine. Turner argues that pilgrimage is a journey "extroverted mysticism" where "the pilgrim physically traverses a mystical way; the mystic sets forth on an interior spiritual pilgrimage" (Turner & Turner, 1978). However, in VP, pilgrims do not leave their comfort zones by physically traveling to distant places to offer rituals. This socio-cultural disorder triggers religious revolutions were pilgrims no longer uphold the values and cultural practices in pilgrimage such as 'stoning the devil and receiving the Holy Eucharist. Sadly, the heightened sense of loneliness from Covid-19 evokes a need for social connections that increases the attractiveness of "not near" offerings.

Ben Macready explains Karl Marx's theory of the Age of Revolution (1775-1848). The theory holds that the middle class controls production sources, but the average class relies on wages, but their economic value is the labour power that keeps the wheel rolling. Marx advocated for an industrial revolution where the lowest-class citizens would be independent. This theory suggests that transitions in pilgrimage platforms (from traditional to virtual) might reduce the spread of the Covid-19 crisis; but, it cannot create job opportunities, incomes, mutual interactions, and pilgrims cannot participate in the ritual activities of "stoning the devil" as a ritual in Islamic pilgrimage (Joll&Aree, 2020), and the receiving of the Holy Eucharist in Christianity. These experiences trigger pilgrim's self-value and hierarchical revolutions. To maintain positive socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity, physical presence is essential, as Dawson's account advised:

You cannot do the Hajj or the holy land pilgrimage without traveling to the “real”- meaning the actual physical-sacred site (Dawson & Cowan, (Eds.), 2004).

Like the custom, tradition, and philosophy of Isuochi people (Onyeama, 2000), pilgrimage tourism is a routine practice and an identity for a pilgrim's physical travel to a real place of rituals. The above statements explain the value of physical presence for authentic experience.

Physical Presence for Sustainable Tourism Development

Before the Covid-19 crisis, pilgrims meet friends and families, visit historic sites, and participate in religious rituals. Their personal needs are facilitated by employees (e.g., language translators, travel guards, and traders), who physically work in pilgrimage. These mutual activities encourage biodiversity in pilgrimage. Contrarily, VP lacks these characteristics. The next three scriptural verses highlight the need for physical presence:

After that, Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and informed him that The God of Israel, the LORD, had given a command. them to go so that they may celebrate his birthday in the desert” (Exodus 5:1).

I could write you a lot, but I'd prefer not use paper and ink. Instead, I want to see you and speak with you in person so that our delight is full (2 John 12).

And let us think about ways to encourage one another, not failing to gather together as some people have a tendency of doing, but all the more so for the day is fast coming (Hebrews 10:24–25) (ESV).

The underlined statements stress the central role of physical presence. Seeing people's faces on screens and hearing their voices can be very wonderful, but the uniqueness of physical presence has no substitute. Using VP seems like life is hugely relational, but in reality, it is a very incomplete way to relate to others because it gives an illusion of being highly connected, but is in fact an insufficient means for cultivating healthy relationships (Sam Allberry, 2021). Hence, pilgrims' 'real' physical absence in VP decreases sustainable tourism development.

Selected Asian Destinations

The selected destinations are based on the three major religions (Torrecillas et al., 2020); Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. The majority of the world's pilgrimage takes place in the Asia, for example, Saudi Arabia/Mecca is for Islam (Asia and the Pacific, North Asia, South East Asia). India is for Hinduism (South Asia), and Jerusalem is for Christianity (Middle East). In addition, International tourism movements have the most dynamic growth in Asia and the Pacific (Cochrane, 2007). PATA reports that over 8 million Indians travelled abroad for their holiday in 2006, with around 3 million traveling to Asian Pacific destinations (Winter, 2009). Moreover, Asian pilgrims' top list of pilgrims to Makkah (Arab News, 2019). Pilgrimage has adapted to a supposedly secularizing world and even benefited from contemporary modes of transportation and communication. Planes now carry Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, Buddhist pilgrims to dambadiva, North India by different motor vehicles (Silva, 2016), and Christians to Jerusalem. This link (traveling) is the inseparability of pilgrimage from the marketplace (Gäbel, 2017). This act of traveling shows the socio-cultural benefits of TP through the

proliferation of sacred sites; as priests recognize the financial advantages of providing ritual services at these sites and the many pilgrims they could attract (Olson, 2014). These benefits increased the income and employment of the residents of Jammu and Kashmir's standard of living (Ganai, 2017). Likewise, these established social and close communities (pilgrims' interactions) can influence people's behaviour (spending patterns) more than marketing institutions and other cultural authorities (Kayaman&Armutlu, 2003) for sustainable tourism developments; sadly, VP discourage these. Understanding the effects of virtual pilgrimage on socio-cultural and religious activities can help plan the sustainability of pilgrimage tourism.

METHOD AND DESIGN

Our study collected data from two sources. In stage one; we collected data through in-depth interviews with twelve tourists who have travelled to pilgrimage destinations. In stage two, we reused panel data. Triangulated data of this nature provides a clearer picture of issues of interest and increases the result's validity. The criterion of participation in stage one is that all respondents must have travelled to any pilgrimage destinations. This gives them the experience to answer the questions. We used snowball-sampling technique in recruiting the respondents as it satisfies our interest in suggesting likely respondents (Patton et al., 2021).

Out of twelve respondents, two were Hindus, three were Christians, and seven were Muslims. Nine were male, and three were female. Face-to-face interviews were granted to nine respondents, while three were online because it was difficult to reach them. Our study employed Resnik's data collection steps to avoid the 29 unethical research practices (Resnik, 2011). They were aware of the study's aim, and the interview was through note taking. Their information was anonymised using pseudonyms, for example, John, Joe, Bob, Mike, Juan Carlos, Jane Smith, etc. Their participation was voluntary; this means that anyone can quit at any time, depending on the person's willingness. The interview lasted between 5 to 10 minutes in September 2020. They speak and understand English (Table 1).

Stage One Analysis and Findings

Content analysis was used in stage one, which involves drawing ideas from the literature as guiding frameworks (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to identify codes, categories, and themes. This method helps in identifying comments useful for answering the research questions. The method followed (Erlingsson&Brysiewicz, 2017) a continuous process by which the researchers tap into their intuition while maintaining a reflective understanding, and avoiding their previous knowledge from influencing the analysis. Two authors manually condensed the data in a reflective process by reading through the transcript repeatedly. This helps to master the data for emerging codes and then categorize them to develop themes (French et al., 2020).

Lastly, ten codes and four themes emerged from the transcripts. The first theme is motivations and demotivation to pilgrimage; it includes health implications and personal & religious affiliations. The second theme is the socio-economic effects of pandemics; it includes financial cost & differences in currency and staying unemployed at home. The third theme is the environmental & religious impacts of Covid-19; it includes a few worshipers at the holy site. The fourth theme is the pandemic measures. It includes facemasks; social distance & staying safe at home, going back to the drawing board & a management board, provision of vaccines; disinfectants, inhalers & local herbs, increasing number of pilgrims, and faith & prayers in God. See the discussion part and Table 2, see previous studies (e.g., Younis, 2015).

Figure 1 Virtual Pilgrimage in a Wordcloud

Pilgrimage in a Wordcloud
Table 1 Demographic Detail of Respondents

No	M	F	Age	Nationality	Religion	Occupation	Language	MARSTA
1	Yes	—	60	Poland	Christianity	Rev. Priest	English	Single
2	—	Yes	55	Nigeria	Christianity	Student	English	Married
3	—	Yes	45	Nigeria	Christianity	Retiree	English	Married
4	—	Yes	26	Sudan	Islam	Worker	English	Single
5	Yes	—	23	Lebanese	Islam	Student	English & Arabic	Single
6	Yes	—	27	Sudan	Islam	Student	Arabic	Single
7	Yes	—	28	Mauritania	Islam	Student	English & French	Single
8	Yes	—	30	Lebanese	Islam	Student	English & Arabic	Single
9	Yes	—	45	Nigeria	Islam	Student	English	Married
10	Yes	—	42	Nigeria	Islam	Student	English	Married
11	Yes	—	26	Pakistan	Hindu	Worker	English	Single
12	Yes	—	18	Kenya	Hindu	Student	English	Single

Table 2 Interview Findings

Categories	Themes
Personal & religious affiliations and Health implications	Motivations and Demotivation to Pilgrimage
Financial cost & differences in currency, and staying unemployed at home.	Socio-economic Effects of Pandemics.
Few worshipers at the holy site	Environmental & Religious Impacts of Covid-19
Facemasks, social distance & staying safe at home. Going back to the drawing board & a management board. Provision of vaccines, disinfectants, inhalers, and local herbs. Increasing the number of pilgrims, and faith & prayers in God.	Pandemic measures.

Stage Two Analysis and Results

In stage two, panel data (See Table 3) from the world tourism barometer UNWTO, May 2020 on international arrivals in 2019 and 2020 was reused with permission. The original data is a supplementary file on international arrivals in 2019 and 2020. The 2020 Q1 data was compared with 2019 Q1 data. This approach helps verify stage one results. Note there has been a consensus that data reuse and sharing are beneficial in scientific research and has drawn growing attention (Yoon, 2015).

Moreover, the motivations and benefits of reusing and sharing existing data reduce costs and expedite knowledge transfer. Multiple linked data give triangulated insights, and data with similar information helps to verify, check, and validate itself by providing differences about the phenomenon in question (Basole, 2020). It is necessary to classify different trends with insights from data results by adding different visualizations to pivot tables, trend lines, and bars (Clark, 2017). Excel Conditional Formatting Tool (ECFT) is an excellent tool in this area. It enhances data visualization with three international traffic lights control (ITLC) colours (green, yellow, and red) in comparing/contrasting international arrivals. Using different colors, it sorts data and allows readers to view findings on pathways, significance, and intensities.

Furthermore, although qualitative researchers do not frequently work with quantitative/numerical data, we used numbers and colours to shade light on the analysis. This practice explains why some researchers might want to convey quantitative information in reports from qualitative studies. Using numbers to describe results is uncontroversial and necessary. Integrating quantitative information in qualitative data analysis and reporting has several advantages. First, quantification can improve the transparency of data analysis and give precision to statements (Maxwell, 2010). It enables patterns in the data to emerge with greater clarity (Dey, 1993) and increase the meaning of key results by providing focus (Sandelowski, 2001). Therefore, numbers and colours can help readers understand better or read meanings. Hence, this panel data complement stage 1 results in answering the research questions and achieving the research aim. See table 3 for stage two analyses. Figure 2 is the excel spreadsheet; it directs how to use the conditional formatting tool.

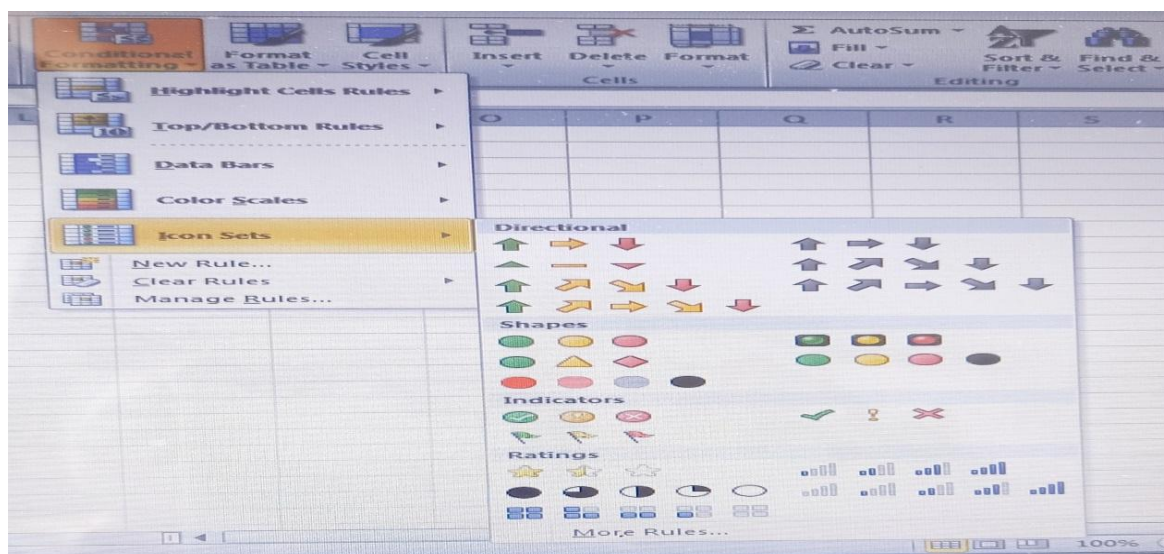


Figure 2 Excel Conditional Formatting Tool

Table 3 ECFT Analysis on International Tourist Arrivals by (Sub) region

	2019		2020	
	Indicator	Arrivals	Indicator	Arrivals
World		3.3		-22.4
Advance Economies		1.9		-28.9
Emerging Economies		4.6		-16.2
By UNWTO Regions:				
Europe		2.2		-19.1
Northern Europe		0.6		-17.2
Western Europe		-1.7		-19.9
Central/Eastern Europe		4.8		-14.9
Southern/Mediter. Europe		4.8		-22.5
of which EU-28		1.5		19.6
Asia and the Pacific		6.2		-34.6
North East Asia		0.8		-39.6
South East Asia		4.2		-33.3
Oceania		-0.3		-23.4
South Asia		9.3		-22.2
Americas		-0.6		-15.2
North America		-1.1		-12.7
Careibbean		15.2		-20
Central America		-2.1		14.5
South America		-7.8		-19.1
Africa		2.9		-12.5
North Africa		9		-17.5
Subsahara African		0.3		-10.1
Meddile East		8.3		-10.8

We selected all digits in 2020 Q1 from the original data panel (supplementary file) and compared them with all digits in 2019 Q1. Next, we applied ECFT with three sets of ITLC (Karami&Kashef, 2020); green, yellow, and red colours on the selected digits. The results showed a decrease in arrivals in 2020 with red, yellow, and a few green colours (see table 3 above). These light icons are safety traffic signs for movement controls in/out or within the selected regions. Greenlight implies a go/move signal (Novak et al., 2020).

Logically, it means an increase in arrivals. Yellow light implies slowness with caution. Logically, it means a slow/pause in arrivals, and a red light means a stop. Logically, it means a drop-in arrival. For further verification, we selected only the regions of interest in the current study and applied ECFT, see Table 4. The results were the same in table 3; hence, both analyses were correct. Recall that an increase in arrivals increases income, job opportunities, physical interactions, well-being, and vice versa. These changes are negative impacts of VP on socio-cultural & religious activities of selected Asian destinations during the Covid-19 Crisis.

Table 4 Final Findings from Table 2 on International Arrivals in Asian Region.

	2019		2020	
	Indicator	Arrivals	Indicator	Arrivals
World		3.3		-22.4
Asia and the Paccific		6.2		-34.6
North East Asia		8		-39.6
South East Asia		4.2		-33.3
South Asia		9.3		-22.2
Middle East		8.3		-10.8

Table 4 presents the final results from table 3. It shows that arrivals dropped in three focal pilgrimage destinations selected in the current study. Saudi Arabia-Islam (Asia and the Pacific) dropped from 6.2 to -34.6. North Asia from 8 to -39.6, South East Asia from 4.2 to -33.3, and India-Hinduism (South Asia) from 9.3 to -22.2. Jerusalem-Christianity (Middle East) dropped from 8.3 to -10.8, and the world from 3.3 to -22.4. ECFT identifies and presents the trends with clearer and more insightful color icons necessary for understanding the socio-cultural impacts of VP on pilgrimage destinations. See the Asian map in Figure 3).

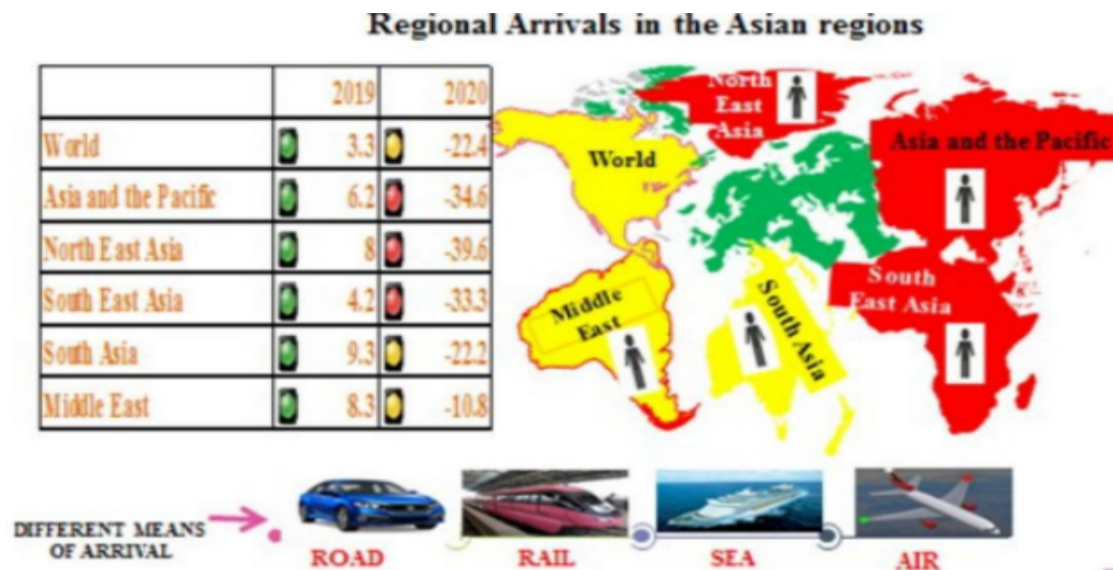


Figure 3 Trends in 2019 and 2020 arrivals in Asian regions

Discussion

Recalling the research questions and the aim, our discussion addressed these by describing the results from the ten codes and four themes in the following paragraph starting with theme one.

Theme-1 Motivations and Demotivation to Pilgrimage

Personal & Religious Affiliations

Pilgrimage tourism is a collective event as well as an individual undertaking. Many reasons drive people to pilgrimage; these involve but are not limited to fulfilling religious rituals, satisfying personal desires, and having different types of experiences. Bob and Mike said:

I travelled to Jerusalem to have a deeper knowledge and encounter with my lord Jesus Christ. To experience his life while on earth, eat what he ate, drink what he drank, and feel his pains too.

I went to Jerusalem to thank my God and to foster my faith in the lord. Also I went to see the sites about Jesus while on earth as was written in the bible.

The above responses indicate that maintaining the socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity through the physical presence of pilgrims is necessary, as it builds both physical and spiritual lives. This theme also supports the theory of presence, and addresses research question one.

Health Implications

Some of the consequences of Covid-19 crisis include social distance and flight cancellation. Keeping these measures affect the mental health of pilgrims because they feel denied from having their usual rituals, which gives them joy and accomplishment. John and Joe said:

Okay, I did not go because it was closed for all foreigners this year, that is why, and because of the Covid-19 crisis. We have to keep social distance; that is it.

Well actually, if I had gone to Mecca, I would have faced many troubles this year because they cancelled flights due to Covid-19. This is the main reason for not going.

The respondents confirm that international pilgrims were not allowed to Mecca because of Covid-19 virus. So, authorities banned mass gatherings in an attempt to protect people's health. This response also answered question one and supports the spillover effect theory.

Theme-2 Socio-Economic Effects of Pandemics

Financial Cost & Differences in Currency

Unlike VP, pilgrims spend a lot when physically traveling on a pilgrimage. The receipts promote sustainable tourism marketing and support the interdependence theory, as these receipts create income and job opportunities. However, pilgrims do not spend much using VP because they do not need to travel to distant places. Juan and Carlos said:

I spend between \$3000 and \$5000 for a more comfortable airline, and for every other thing; so it is a fair amount; sometimes it is much higher or little lower; between \$2500 and \$3000.

Well it depends from country to country and their currency fluctuations. In Nigeria, for example, pilgrimage to Israel or Saudi Arabia (mecca) it is usually around #1.500 million including accommodation. This amount is not easy in local currency. This is my view.

The above statements answered question two by explaining how much pilgrims spend traveling on a pilgrimage. Unlike VP, this also shows that physical presence creates income for the host destinations through receipts. I.e., VP does not create receipts and job opportunities.

Staying Unemployed at Home

Although VP benefited many individuals and companies, including the pharmaceutical sector, in tourist centres, for example, the experience of the VP was terrible because employees in those sectors lost their jobs, and others maintain social distance indoors. Jane and Smith said:

Ehm, the negative impact is increasing, because we are not keeping social distance, so we need to keep social distance and stay home; that is it.

Ahm, as soon as you arrive in Saudi Arabia or India, you see millions of people. The atmosphere suddenly changed due to the absence of pilgrims. Currently, Mecca is empty. Therefore, it affected the economy because everyone stayed home.

The above statements showed that the impact of VP not only crippled many activities, but also many people became jobless. This addressed research question three.

Theme-3 Environmental & Religious Impact of Covid-19

Few worshipers at the holy site

Covid-19 has not only triggered VP but also reduced the number of worshipers, making the environment unfriendly. This experience reduces the socio-cultural dimension of biodiversity between pilgrims and the site and explains the spillover effect. Jane, Mike and Smith said:

Ahh, as you are aware, the Covid-19 introduced health challenges. So the Saudi authorities restricted pilgrims from going to Saudi Arabia. They only allowed a few locals. I could not go to the 2020 pilgrimage because of this reason.

Yeah, I did not go because the authorities did not allow us to go, but the government allowed less than 15 people to go with their masks and they kept social distance.

Due to the pandemic, authorities blocked the road to Israel; people are not coming; only few persons are allowed. It affected the hotels where Arab Christians work too. This is sad to the economies of Palestine & Israel.

Although VP can curb overcrowding in pilgrimage, it decreases the socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity, which encourage environmental and religious mutuality. Unfortunately, pilgrims Covid-19 triggered VP, which limited pilgrims' presence to pilgrimage 2020. This practice does not encourage the sustainable development of tourism and the socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity. Other better alternatives can handle the Covid-19 crisis than VP.

Theme-4 Pandemic Measures

Face-Masks, Social Distance & Staying Safe at Home

As measures to Covid-19 crisis, VP, facemasks, social distance, and staying at home were introduced. Unfortunately, these measures deter socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity through restrictions on pilgrims' physical presence and interactions. Olive and Smith said:

Well ehm, since the prophet Muhammad said if something like this happens, we should stay at home, keep a social distance, wear a mask and clean our hands, they will help solve the problem. Therefore, we need to obey and maintain them.

Ahm, this is a lesson so next year, we should be well prepared. Maybe a global Islamic organization should organize flight tickets, number of pilgrims, and time for both India and Jerusalem. In this way, it will be easy to control the pandemic.

These measures reduce the benefits from socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity, for example, the receipts from tourists' visits to historic sites.

Going Back To the Drawing Board & a Management Board

Going back to the drawing board is an adage indicating a failed effort and that one must start all over again. We used to indicate that VP decreases socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity; hence, the DMOs should review their values. Smith said:

Well, the crisis was sudden and it affected millions of businesses. So, it will take time to revive it. Ahh, leaders should go back to the drawing board to see what strategy to adopt to energize the economy of these countries. Most of them relied on tourism, but they suddenly stopped. This huge loss may take time to recover.

The above statement indicates the central role of time and the responsibilities of organizational leaders in recovering these losses. Therefore, new considerations are necessary at this point.

Provision of Vaccines, Disinfectants, Inhalers & Herbs

Due to the effects of Covid-19 crisis on almost all of the economy, some of the respondents suggested ways to manage the situation, while other efforts are going on. Joe and Bob said:

To stop the restrictions, there must be vaccines so that activities can go back to normal. They can use disinfectants and observe all protocols along with vaccines.

Since the effects are not peculiar to Jerusalem alone, but to the globe at large, it requires an adequate supply of vaccines, inhalers, and herbs to fight the pandemic.

Some respondents opined that there are other means of controlling the pandemic other than stopping the program. These alternatives must have been tried and confirmed. Therefore, instead of cancelling the pilgrimage, authorities can apply these alternatives, as they can sustain the socio-economic benefits and recover the losses in 2020.

Increasing Number of Pilgrims

As an important event, some respondents suggested increasing the number of pilgrims in the next pilgrimage as a way of recovering from the loss in 2020. Carlos and Jane said:

I think, keeping social distance, having more ambulances & medicine in the pilgrimage sites, and then increasing next year's pilgrims can help.

Well I think they can increase the number of pilgrims next year, in this way, they will recover the loss of the 2020 pilgrimage.

Pilgrim's presence creates a positive atmosphere and creates receipts and job opportunities. Therefore, increasing the pilgrims' number in the next pilgrimage can help.

Faith & Prayers in God

Since pilgrimage is a spiritual exercise, prayer is one of the spiritual measures that can handle the situation. Bob said:

The pandemic is beyond human power. It is in the power of God to stop it and restore the destinations; therefore, we are praying to God for intervention.

Some people believe that there is a supreme God controlling the universe; He can save us from this challenge. Above all, these statements showed that pilgrimage tourism created income, job opportunities, and mutual interactions in 2019, but these benefits were lost in 2020 through VP. We confirmed this by comparing 2019 data and 2020 data, which indicate decreases and stops in selected regions. In other words, VP discourages religious practices and socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity from tourism, but the physical presence of pilgrims can restore these.

Implications

Managerially, our study recommends two important implications for practice. First, DMOs should organize programs on the spiritual and economic benefits of going on pilgrimage. During such programs, they can emphasize the need for facemasks, inhalers, herbs, and approved vaccines for protection. The lack of pilgrims' physical presence on pilgrimage decreases spiritual growth and wellbeing. However, going on pilgrimage uplifts pilgrims' spirits and prepares them to fulfil religious rituals. Pilgrims' physical presence creates job opportunities and increases income, mutual interactions, and authentic experience (Jin et al., 2020) for biodiversity.

Second, religious leaders and DMOs should promote the physical presence of pilgrims. VP increases dependency, expenditure, and loss of job opportunities and mutual interactions. For example, the switch to Lourdes online pilgrimage in 2020 led to the loss of jobs of 320 employees who depended on the services at the shrine; such experience increased societal expenditures. Encouraging individuals to come together through clans (religious groups) and establish social and close communities can influence people's behaviour (pilgrims' spending) more than marketing institutions and other cultural authorities (Kayaman&Armutlu, 2003) and boost sustainable tourism development.

Theoretically, our study discusses three contributions. First, crises disrupt sustainable development, as Covid-19 challenges trigger ripple effects such as social distancing and flight cancelation, and introduced VP, which decreases income, job opportunities, and pilgrims' mutual interactions. People experience spillover effects daily, but the theory is under-researched in tourism literature. The current study fills this gap by explaining the spillover effects of Covid-19 crisis through VP. This knowledge can promote pilgrim's awareness during crises by explaining the implications and solutions for sustainable pilgrimage development.

Second, religion suggests abundant rewards in the afterlife than in the present. Thus pilgrims value pilgrimage as an obligation to achieve afterlife rewards. No study suggests that pilgrims can achieve these rewards or practice religious rituals such as stoning the devil and receiving the Holy Eucharist remotely (VP) without physically traveling to the pilgrimage sites. Marx's (2002) theory of religion explains these religious influences; still, his theory is under-studied in tourism literature. This study fills the gap by explaining that VP decreases afterlife expectations.

Third, pilgrims' physical presence contributes to sustainable pilgrimage development. For example, presence as "you are there" in a classroom/pilgrimage differs from "you are there" in an online meeting. Lombard and Ditton (1997) discussed different types of presence,

including physical presence, as in “you are there”-in Transportation. The benefits of pilgrimage tourism are difficult without the pilgrims’ physical presence. For example, the flow of pilgrims creates socioeconomic benefits on Sabarimala region (Libeson&Muraleedharan, 2008). Most studies on VP use social presence theory to explain VP, we use physical presence theory is used to explain the bias in pilgrimage tourism without pilgrim’s physical presence.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

The current study is limited in two ways. First, out of hundreds of religious groups, the scope of this study covered just three major religions (Torrecillas et al., 2020). Expanding the scope to involve other religious groups could uncover more insights; therefore, future studies can examine this topic. Second, the sample participants are unequal; it has three females and nine males. Feminists might criticize this imbalance. It is not intentional; however, future studies can increase or balance the gender difference for deeper insights. As you know, qualitative interviews are best from feminist views because they are good storytellers.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the socio-cultural impacts of VP on selected Asian pilgrimage destinations. Ten codes and four themes emerged from the analysis. The results suggest that VP negatively affects the socio-cultural dimensions of biodiversity in pilgrimage destinations. For example, increasing arrivals, income, job opportunities, and physical interactions of pilgrims are fundamental for pilgrims’ well-being and tourism-dependent regions like Asia. The results also showed that arrivals in the selected regions decreased in 2020 compared to 2019. In addition, participants suggested that the DMOs could increase the number of pilgrims in the next pilgrimage, enforce the use of facemasks and social distancing, and provide effective vaccines, disinfectants, inhalers, and herbs as measures. Finally, ECFT is a unique contribution to this study as it clearly displays the trends in arrivals in the selected destinations. Some of these findings align with Baker et al. (2020) and Jaipuria et al. (2020).

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GLOSSARY

ECFT: Excel Conditional Formatting Tool

ITA/IPA: International tourist arrivals or International pilgrim arrivals are interchangeable.

YTD: Year to date refers to the change in the months with data available, compared to the same period of the previous year. The (sub) regional totals are approximations for the whole (sub) region based on trends in countries for which data is available.

ITLC: International traffic light control

Q1: January, February, March.

Q2: April, May, June.

Q3: July, August, September, etc.

UNWTO: United Nations world tourism organization.

VP: Virtual pilgrimage.

TP: Traditional pilgrimage.

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