The structure and content of the religious tourism destination image construct: an exploratory netnography of travelers' reviews of Makkah and Medina

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the structure and content of religious tourism destination image through the reviews of visitors to Makkah and Medina, two of the world's most popular Muslim pilgrimage sites.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an exploratory netnographic study of the 913 reviews posted on TripAdvisor from 2018 to 2022. The structure (dimensions and attributes) and content (variables) comprising the construct of religious tourism destination image emerge through manual thematic analysis and confirmed through content analysis.

Findings – Religious tourism destination image is a three-dimensional – cognitive, affective and conative – construct comprising both religion-specific, generally sacred and secular variables in a single, indivisible crystallization of experience.

Practical implications – Destination marketing organizations and marketers of tourism enterprises should regularly analyze visitor reviews posted on social media and carefully manage all variables of the religious tourism destination image, specifically stressing the religious aspect.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first systematic analysis of the structure and content of religious tourism destination image based on detailed consumer evaluations and unprompted storytelling.

Keywords Religious tourism destination image (RTDI), User-generated content (UGC), Netnography, Religious tourism (RT), Muslim tourists, TripAdvisor reviews, Cognitive, Affective and conative tourism experience attributes, Tourism marketing, Tourism experience, Qualitative study, Destination marketing organizations (DMOs), The Muslim consumer

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The largest human gathering in the world, the Hajj to Makkah, consistently attracts between almost two and well over three million people every year (Saleh, 2023) whilst the pilgrims performed by the quarter of the world's population who identify as Muslims have been a major source of income for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) for centuries, despite the fact that income from other forms of tourism to the country is negligible (Bokhari, 2018). Even when overall travel was down by an average of 13% (UN Tourism, 2023), after the COVID-19 pandemic measures were lifted, six million people traveled to the KSA for Umrah (Gulf News, 2023). This is not a strictly Muslim phenomenon, of course. Pilgrims and spiritual travelers of all faiths make over 600 million national and international voyages per year (UN Tourism, 2014, 2023). Further to its economic significance, religious tourism (RT) is also a major sociocultural and political force and a mechanism for shaping and reinforcing individual and collective identities. It is also a mechanism of increasing human well-being even under globally stressful situations (Lin and Hsieh, 2022). Yet, it is still a relatively unexplored phenomenon (Cheer, 2024) and, as the extensive literature review of Kim *et al.* (2019) demonstrated, the literature suffers from the common limitations of conceptually and methodologically "relatively unsophisticated" cross-sectional studies, thus resulting in a sketchy understanding of the multifaceted RT phenomenon. However, its popularity as a study area is growing, and the geographic and cultural scope of the works is expanding (Ohlan and Ohlan, 2024; Das *et al.*, 2024; Hassan *et al.*, 2023).

We here explore the RT phenomenon though the systematic exploratory mapping of tourists' descriptions of their experiences, attitudes and behaviors. This approach is consistent with earlier studies of RT experiences (e.g. Patwardhan *et al.*, 2020), and especially with respect to Muslim consumers (Moufahim and Lichrou, 2019). We focus on two of the most popular overall, and the most iconic sacred destinations for Muslims – Makkah and Medina and their monuments, the Great Mosque of Makkah, Kaaba, Al Masjid an Nabawi and Masjid Quba. We explore the structure and contents of the religious tourism destination image (RTDI) construct, which offers researchers and practitioners a measurable crystallization of tourists' motivations, experiences of their interaction with the site, the destination, the infrastructure and other tourists, perceptions and behaviors. As such, RTDI encapsulates the interplay of all three domains of RT identified in Kim *et al.* (2019), i.e. tourists, destination and infrastructure.

The domain of religious tourists as research subjects is rather well-developed (Kim *et al.*, 2019). The literature on RT has identified various motives behind voyages to sacred places and has demonstrated that, often, several of them coexist. Some of the most often identified RT motives are: to cultivate spirit and mind, to seek emancipation and relief, to connect with holy personages and places (Wang *et al.*, 2020), to discover new things, to interact and experience belonging and spiritual and emotional connection, to relax (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018), to reaffirm one's sense of self through identification, community and belonging, to recreate or memorializing the past, to seek enlightenment, healing or peace, to fulfill obligations related to particular religious communities (Reader, 2007), to experience authenticity through visiting, participating in rituals and consuming objects (Moufahim and Lichrou, 2019) and as part of an ongoing identity construction project (Liu *et al.*, 2022a). In an attempt to organize the motives behind RT, the empirical study of Vistad *et al.* (2020) identified eight factors, namely, the inner me (consisting of 11 items), the religious me (five), meet the locals and local heritage (six), slow travel (two), nature – knowledge and joy (four), exercise in nature, hiking together (three), be in solitude (two). This categorization amply demonstrates the context specificity of the conceptualization, as many pilgrimage sites are anything but slow and close to nature, and thus its limited generalizability. Finally, a survey

of pilgrims to Makkah led to a three-dimensional structure of their motives comprising religious, sociocultural and shopping (Hassan *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, the interplay of experiences, perceptions and behaviors is not clearly documented.

Earlier research on the RT experience has also been context-specific (e.g. Yoo *et al.*, 2022). The closest to a generalizable conceptualization has identified five experience factors, namely, "connecting spiritually and emotionally, discovering new things, engaging mentally, interacting and belonging, and relaxing and finding peace" (Bond *et al.*, 2015), which is more or less confirmed in recent empirical studies listing five motivational dimensions, namely, religious experience, belief experience, escape, touristic experience and shopping (Carvache-Franco *et al.*, 2024). This conceptualization is also problematic because the experience factors are not clearly distinguished from motives. Moreover, these dimensions of the RT experience are hard to measure to estimate their effect on tourists' perceptions of the destination and the resulting behaviors, such as word of mouth or intention to revisit. These crucial relationships are, thus, still largely underexplored (Alhothali *et al.*, 2021).

Understanding experiences, value perceptions and their effect on consumption behaviors, however, is crucial on multiple levels. At the macro level – be it nation, region or destination – it can improve the accuracy of the estimates of both the contribution of each religious site or event to the tourism industry revenue and overall economic development (Alhothali *et al.*, 2023) and the strain it puts on the locals, the infrastructure and the sociocultural, political and natural ecosystems (Luo *et al.*, 2020). At a meso level, the more local authorities and businesses understand how the RT is experienced, the more efficiently they can manage the required infrastructure, which comprises *inter alia* accommodation, packages and activities (Kim *et al.*, 2019), with an emphasis on the rituals that enhance the perception of authenticity of the place and the experience (Moufahim and Lichrou, 2019). At the micro level, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourism and other travel-related services marketers, need an understanding of how RT is experienced to design, market and deliver value-added products (Abror *et al.*, 2021), which are perceived as meaningful and memorable (Tian and Cànoves, 2020). They can also enhance experiences, and at the same time, increase revenue, by offering products for sale at the site; products that are infused with authentic consumption meanings such as an object's "contamination" with the sanctity of the place, its symbolic representation of the place or the experience, its function as the owner's identity marker (Moufahim and Lichrou, 2019) or its ability to convey a sensory cue of the experience of communitas (Higgins and Hamilton, 2020). Effectively and efficiently promoting and managing the experiential attributes the RT product is thus critical (Battour *et al.*, 2011) at all levels as it increases the potential of generating the feelings of surprise, joy and happiness, which support consumer re-enchantment and turn visitors to loyal customers (Batat, 2019; Nisar *et al.*, 2022) and brand advocates (Dhaoui and Webster, 2021). To achieve these, it is essential to focus on the dimensions of the experiential aspects of RT product consumption (Battour *et al.*, 2011) as these shape tourists' attitudes toward a pilgrimage site and, ultimately, determine their intention to revisit (Wu *et al.*, 2019).

The religious tourists of the 21st century, however, unlike pilgrims of earlier times, are connected to the digital global community at all stages of their consumption experience. Before the visit, they seek advice from their peers – members of online communities of shared interests with whom they have no personal relationship – while selecting potential destinations (Cheong and Morrison, 2008; Cerutti and Piva, 2016). They also have their expectations shaped by online evaluations of service quality of both the religious site and the auxiliary services, such as hotel accommodation (Shinde, 2015; Gannon *et al.*, 2027). These evaluations play an important role because internet users seem to perceive user-generated content (UGC) on digital shared interests-based communities as more authentic and reliable

than content posted by tourism-related organizations (Guo *et al.*, 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2020; Lam *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2022b; Lu and Stepchenkova, 2015). During and after the trip, they share their experiences with the other members of their online communities (Husemann *et al.*, 2016), thus reinforcing their own consumption experience and resulting attitudes whilst fulfilling their desire to influence others. Thus, a new cycle of merging the physical with the digital experience in a way that influences travelers' behavior starts and continues *ad infinitum*, thus giving contemporary travel its seamless on-offline character.

Although other less esoteric and complex forms of tourism have been studied through qualitative data analyses of UGC (Liu *et al.*, 2022b; Thanh and Kirova, 2018), the unequivocally phygital nature of the RT experience is still underexplored. Most of the empirical RT literature uses researcher-guided post-visit narratives or evaluations (Kim *et al.*, 2019; Beerli and Martín, 2004; Tian and Cànoves, 2020). Departing from the norms of adopting a broad brushstroke quantitative approach or focusing the investigation on a specific aspect of it, such as transportation, accommodation or food and beverage, which addresses RT in a fragmented manner (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018), we opt for a customer-centric, holistic, perspective, which is commensurate with the tenets of experiential marketing (Batat, 2019, 2022). This paper heeds calls for research to explore the complex RT phenomenon as a single but multifaceted experience, an understanding that is gaining ground among scholars in recent years (Ohlan and Ohlan, 2024) and one encompassing both service quality evaluations and personal meanings. The holistic approach is achieved by using the same technologies used by modern people in their everyday lives (Kim *et al.*, 2020) for immersive observation of consumer behavior (Kozinets, 2002; Tavakoli and Wijesinghe, 2019; Nayak *et al.*, 2023). The study focuses on two of the most popular RT sites in the world, Makkah and Medina in the KSA, where millions congregate to fulfil a basic requirement of the Muslim faith. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: first, the literature is reviewed to identify relevant theoretical frameworks that can be used in the study of RTDI, to pinpoint the specific research gaps that need to be filled and to present the theoretical foundations of the research project presented here. Second, the methodology and procedures for data collection and analysis are presented. Finally, the findings and their implications for academics, policymakers and practicing marketers are discussed alongside limitations and suggestions for future research.

Literature review

Tourist destinations hold a special place in the hearts and minds of travelers. Experiences accumulated when traveling are stored in their long-term memory (Larsen and Mossberg, 2007) as stories to be revisited mentally but also to be shared (Ryan, 2010; Moscardo, 2010), not only with significant others, but also with strangers. They were shared in the form of travel memoirs, sketches and watercolors in the olden days, in photos and home videos not so long ago, and, nowadays, as reviews, videos and photos posted on social media platforms, blogs, vlogs and review sites. The memories are reinforced through the sharing process and, eventually, they become integral parts of travelers' life stories. Thus, value is perceived as motivation in the pre-trip stage, through experiences in the on-site phase of the trip, and as meanings and desirable outcomes post-trip (Yoo *et al.*, 2022). Tourist destinations can be special even for people who have no real experience of them; as objects of desire that have the power to generate visit intentions (Perugini and Bagozzi, 2004). They can also motivate actions that create actual experiences, such as consuming relevant content, disseminating WoM or visiting. The experiences – both lived and second-hand – as well as perceptions shaped through the consumption of DMOs and tourist businesses marketing communications are combined to form the tourist destination image (TDI).

Regardless of its having been built on contextualized experiences or discourse, and irrespective of its basis in the travelers' retrospective or prospective memory (Cardoso *et al.*, 2019), destination image has been identified as a factor influencing consumer behaviors such as dreaming of visiting (Goossens, 2000), intention to engage in pre-visit actions (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020), intention to visit, to revisit and to recommend (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020; Gannon *et al.*, 2027), destination loyalty (Stylidis *et al.*, 2020) and actual visiting and revisiting (Maghrifani *et al.*, 2022). As such, a positive and widespread TDI can be a powerful tool for, not only the destination but also for the tourism industry and businesses. Most importantly, its lack or negative valence can become major obstacles to the tourist and economic development of a destination, especially in the current global hypercompetitive and always connected market (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020).

Conceptualization and measurement of tourist destination image (TDI)
Despite its practical usefulness, for example, as a market segmentation tool (Srivastava and Fernandes, 2021), and long-standing popularity as a research topic, TDI is still "loosely defined and lacking a solid conceptual structure" (Beerli and Martín, 2004), which is often described as too subjective (Stylidis *et al.*, 2020) and abstract (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020). Consequently, the numerous attempts to identify the dimensions of TDI have resulted in fragmented conceptualizations. The identified components of TDI found in the literature are heavily contextual and vary according to the research approach (Stepchenkova and Mills, 2010), but most studies (e.g. San Martín and Del Bosque, 2008; Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; Beerli and Martín, 2004; Kastenholz, 2010; Wang and Hsu, 2010; Stylidis *et al.*, 2020; Hosany *et al.*, 2007) conceptualize TDI as a two-dimensional construct, comprising a cognitive and an affective component, whilst others see it as a three-dimensional one, incorporating a conative dimension (e.g. Stylos *et al.*, 2017; Gartner, 1994; Pike, 2004; Prayag, 2009; Kim and Chen, 2021). The latter approach better reflects the definition of destination image as the tourist's subjective interpretation of a place (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020) and is more likely to prove a better reflection of the interplay of factors influencing attitudes and behaviors at all stages of the consumption experience. For these reasons, we adopt the three-dimensional conceptualization of TDI as a global evaluation of a destination on the cognitive, affective and conative level.

The three-dimensional conceptualization of TDI are based on theories of regulation from the field of social psychology (Bagozzi, 1992) and define the cognitive component as consisting of the beliefs and knowledge about a place that form the basis of mental representations of the destination held by people, the affective component as people's feelings that form the basis of their emotional responses toward the destination and the conative component as the potential tourists' behavioral intentions of a destination that are related to the possibility of visiting, revisiting or recommending (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020). In a nutshell, overall TDI is the aggregate of how tourists perceive a destination (cognitive component), how they feel about it (affective) and how their perceptions and emotions affect their consumption intentions and ultimately their behaviors (Michael *et al.*, 2018; Gartner, 1994).

To measure destination image, its cognitive, affective and conative dimensions are usually broken down into sets of attributes. Echtner and Ritchie (1991) used a combination of structured and unstructured measures and identified several components clustered into holistic impressions, and functional, psychological, common and unique characteristics of a place, thus roughly echoing the Kotler *et al.* (2009) five product levels (core benefit, basic, expected, augmented and potential product). Beerli and Martín (2004) measured TDI using nine groups of attributes, namely, natural resources; general infrastructure; tourism infrastructure; tourism, leisure and recreation; culture, history and art; political and economic

factors; natural environment; social environment; and the atmosphere of the place. Others like Hosany *et al.* (2007) eschewed the attribute thematic categorization problem and adopted a total of 21 bipolar adjective measures, identified in earlier studies of the cognitive (e.g. "easily accessible/isolated," "innocent/sinful" and "harmonious/hostile") and affective (e.g. "sleepy/ arousing" and "unpleasant/pleasant") components of TDI. There is no consensus in the literature on the dimensions of TDI, their categorizations are debatable and their relative contribution to the formation of tourists' mental images is not measurable. Thus, we concur with Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020): the conceptualization of the TDI construct needs further examination using qualitative methods and the tourists' own words as trying to fit such a subjective and complex experience into a predetermined mold seems to have reached its limits. Moreover, there is a clear research gap with regard to the RT experience, one that is not adequately covered by existing conceptualizations.

Religious tourist destination image (RTDI)
The empirical literature on the RT experience is quite young, emerging as late as the 1980s (Kim *et al.*, 2019), rather limited despite its growing popularity amongst tourism researchers since 2015 (Collins-Kreiner, 2020), and fragmented because it stems from disciplines as conceptually and methodologically disparate as religious studies, sociology, cultural anthropology and geography. Some approaches attempt to separate factors with a positive valence, such as atmosphere and attractive environments, from those of a negative one such as modern buildings and secular behaviors (e.g. Huang and Pearce, 2019). The categorization of positive and negative, however, is rather arbitrary as research has shown that RT is hardly focused on the pursuit of "continuities from past eras" or of interest only to the devout (Reader, 2007) and has come to be understood more than seeking the meanings of a place and appealing to non-believers as much as to pilgrims (Kim *et al.*, 2019). There is some consensus in the literature on some of the attributes of TDI related to religious sites, such as authenticity, friendly people, architecture, pleasant weather, heritage and history, prayer facilities and safety (Gannon *et al.*, 2027; Terzidou *et al.*, 2017; Battour *et al.*, 2011). There are also diverse components of the RTDI on which there is no consensus, such as language familiarity, luxury brands for shopping and easy to get a tourist visa (Gannon *et al.*, 2027).

It is not only the inclusion of the mundane alongside the spiritual that confuses the RTDI construct, however. Focusing on the "religious" at the expense of the "tourist" and reducing the RTDI to mental engagement, belonging, connecting emotionally and spiritually and finding peace (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018) or focusing on the sociopolitical aspects, such as interacting with people who share similar religious identities and the contestation of national and other collective identities (Jafari and Scott, 2014), also contribute to the fragmented conceptualization of RTDI and the lack of clarity and coherence regarding its attributes and constitutive components. Moreover, lived experience shows that there are some aspects of RT that cannot be categorized under the attribute categories identified in the extant literature. For example, in the most visited Muslim sites, visitors experience *Zam-Zam* water (holy water sourced from the *Zam-Zam* well in Makkah) and *Tawaf* (anticlockwise walking around Kaaba), which, anecdotal evidence and personal experience suggest, are important aspects of the overall visitor experience. RT experiences such as consumption of sacred liquids (water, oil, etc.) or ceremonial movement (walks, dances, etc.) are found in religious sites of many, if not all, other religions, and as such, we here argue, cannot be left out of the conceptualization of RTDI.

There are studies that seek the conceptualization of RTDI through multi-faith approaches (e.g. Albayrak *et al.*, 2018; Nisar *et al.*, 2022) but also strong arguments for the opposite (Jafari and Scott, 2014; Terzidou *et al.*, 2017; Yoo *et al.*, 2022; Vistad *et al.*, 2020). The former approach could be at the root of the lack of agreement of researchers regarding the

effects of RTDI on consumer behavior, either as a single, unified construct or in studies exploring its dimensions individually. Muslims on Umrah, for example, were found to be unlikely to alter their travel decisions based on factors like KSA culture or weather (Eid, 2015). So, in this in-depth exploration of the structure and contents of the RTDI and its effects, we adopt a single faith approach. We also propose that the hierarchically interrelated cognitive, affective and conative components of RTDI (Gartner, 1994) need to be reexamined in the context of actual consumer experience sharing.

People visit religious sites for a variety of reasons, interpret religious symbols and recognize holiness in different ways, engage with the place, the locals and each other through various spiritual and secular practices, process mental and emotional stimuli in diverse modes and participate in numerous institutional, and as many unconventional, performances but, what matters is that the RT experience is a unique and undividedly religious and touristic one (Terzidou *et al.*, 2017; Vistad *et al.*, 2020). Travel is both a part of a person's life story and a story that people love to share. Storytelling, in one form or another, is part of the actual experience of life and traveling, and it is ingrained in human nature to want to share it as well as to seek it. Thus, stories have always been trusted sources of information that exert a major influence on judgments, attitudes and behaviors, including traveling (Schank, 1995) and the process of assigning value to one's pilgrimage (Yoo *et al.*, 2022). We here propose that it is through these stories that the nature and structure of the RTDI can be best approached.

The phygital nature of religious tourist destination image (RTDI)
Travel storytelling and consuming others' travel stories are as phygital as any other personal experience in the contemporary connected world. Digital content plays a major role in the decision-making of prospective visitors to a place, and at the same time, forms an integral part of the overall tourism experience for both travelers and their physical and digital audiences. Regardless of how people experience RT, its physical and digital experiential components have been demonstrated to be intertwined for at least two decades now, both in terms of tourist product design and promotion (Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003) and in the context of information seeking and offering. In this sense, digital storytelling is integral to the RTDI and a form of creating and propagating meanings out of experiencing the place and the interactions with the locals, the service providers and other travelers.

Earlier studies have established that SM users rely on UGC because they believe that it can give them useful and reliable information about tourist destinations (Baniya *et al.*, 2021; Ebejer *et al.*, 2020). It is also known that religious similarity is a predictor of tourism flows (Fourie *et al.*, 2015) as people consider the experiences of those they consider to be similar to them as valid predictors of their own (Adel *et al.*, 2021). Regardless of their being devotees, explorers or seekers (Kruger and Saayman, 2016), visitors to religious sites, like all other travelers, produce and consume content, especially in the form of reviews on travel platforms. Muslims are, of course, no different. They have been empirically found to strongly rely on the opinions of other Muslims (Adel *et al.*, 2021) The most detailed and readily accessible travel UGC is found in online reviews on specialized tourism platforms, which have been empirically confirmed to shape destination image (Nayak *et al.*, 2023). Thus, the content on these platforms becomes the rich source of valuable data for the investigation of tourism experiences (Lu and Stepchenkova, 2015) and their crystallization into RTDI.

Research methods
We depart from the norm of previous studies on destination image, which have shown a preference for quantitative over qualitative methods (Song and Hsu, 2013; Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2020). Following the netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002, 2010),

which has already been adopted in relevant recent studies (Liu *et al.*, 2022b; Nayak *et al.*, 2023; Pearce, 2011), we delve into UGC in the form of online reviews on a platform dedicated to leisure and tourism. These organic and rich data sources are freely available to all internet users, devoid of copyright constraints (Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent, 2007), as close to personal storytelling as any data source can get (McCabe and Foster, 2006), and a window to naturally occurring behaviors and actual, unprompted and spontaneous conversations among consumers (Mkono, 2011). In the netnographic study presented here, we have adopted the methodological stages of Kozinets (2002), which are discussed herewith.

Selection of the online community for data collection

We selected TripAdvisor because, with its 169 million visits per year (Statista, 2023), is the most visited comparison shopping website and mobile app, rich with traveler reviews and UGC regarding all aspects of tourism. It invites reviews on any place, site or business related to traveling and users choose to reveal the personally significant aspects of their experiences (Larsen and Mossberg, 2007). The data are characterized by high originality and thus overcome the inherent limitations of survey or interview-based research. Moreover, TripAdvisor not only shapes consumer expectations – as evidenced by the 77% of respondents to the company's survey who said that the reviews they find on the platform are extremely important to them when choosing their destinations and attractions – but also provides the richest possible content – as evidenced by the fact that reviews posted on it are three times longer than those posted on other social media platforms and review sites (Tripadvisor, 2023a). Finally, the data can be accepted as reliable because reviews on TripAdvisor fared well in terms of inter-reviewer reliability (i.e. the comparison of reviewers' ratings with average reviewer ratings) and intra-reviewer reliability (i.e. consistency between the rating and the comment of a reviewer) (Chua and Banerjee, 2013).

Data collection procedures

We adopted a passive lurker approach to data collection (as described in Kozinets, 2019). This entails the immersive observation of communicative activities of users and extraction of data, which is relevant to the specified research questions as they emerge in their natural discourse setting without any researcher participation in the unprompted, naturally occurring online communications. As the reviews used in this study were already publicly available, there was no need to obtain consent from online users to use their content. No user identification data was collected, and all ethical standards of ethnographic studies stipulated in earlier research (Dillette *et al.*, 2021; Roy *et al.*, 2015) were strictly observed.

We focused on what constitutes an outstandingly positive RTDI, so we picked the four holy sites that were the recipients of TripAdvisor's 2022 Traveler's Choice Award on the basis of the reviews they received from visitors during the previous 12 months (Tripadvisor, 2023b): the Great Mosque of Makkah, Kaaba, Al Masjid an Nabawi and Masjid Quba. They were also selected because of their having 5/5 stars but also for their significance for the Muslim world, their popularity as tourist destinations and their having thousands of reviews.

All possible keywords were used to identify the reviews. For example, the Great Mosque of Makkah is also found as the Sacred Mosque, Mashid-e-Haram and the Great Mosque of Mecca. To increase research replicability, only reviews posted by tourists from 2018 to 2022 in English were collected. The data was reviewed several times by the authors to eliminate duplicate reviews and to remove reviews, which were irrelevant to the four religious sites of Makkah and Medina. Data saturation and convergence (as stipulated in

Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011) were reached at 913 reviews, after which no new attributes emerged from the additional coding.

Data analysis

Most studies based on the analysis of online travel reviews use computerized methods of large volumes of travel review data, thus overquantifying the attributes in the material and missing the finer nuances (Guo *et al.*, 2021). Because of the exploratory nature of the study, we departed from this norm. The online reviews were imported into Microsoft Word[TM] and coded manually as the volume was manageable, and it was deemed important to keep the process iterative so as to establish data saturation and convergence. We opted for manual coding because it also increases the familiarity of the researchers with the context and the data (Kozinets, 2010) and, when used to explore the tourism experience, has been found to be reliable (Sterchele, 2020).

We used a blended approach to data analysis following the recommendations of Neuendorf (2019). First, thematic analysis was used to ensure that adequate "depth of understanding of the meaning of a set of texts" was achieved. Then, content analysis was used to control for the individual perspective of an investigator and test the robustness of the deductive coding scheme. This approach to the analysis of qualitative data drawn from online sources is consistent with earlier approaches (e.g. Fernando *et al.*, 2014; Szalaty and Derda, 2020). Thematic analysis (based on Neuendorf, 2019) was performed to identify the variables that comprise RTDI and subsequently to extract clear themes that represent its attributes, an approach that is commonly accepted for its effectiveness in understanding complex social phenomena (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991; Thanh and Kirova, 2018). First and secondary coding was performed using a data reduction technique that includes line-by-line or open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), followed by aggregating the generated themes into the three dimensions of RTDI, namely, cognitive, affective and conative (Stylos *et al.*, 2017; Gartner, 1994; Pike, 2004; Prayag, 2009; Kim and Chen, 2021).

A content analysis of the manifest content (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), using the thematic analysis as the coding scheme (Bryman, 2003; Fernando *et al.*, 2014), was performed to quantify the qualitative data and thus provide a first approach to measuring the relative importance of the variables (codes) withing each attribute (theme), estimating the relative importance of attributes within each dimension of the RTDI construct and providing an indication of the relative weight of each one of the dimensions on the construct of RTDI. All coding was independently performed by all the authors and then compared. Disagreements and ambiguities were resolved by discussions between all three authors, and thus, the data set is fully consolidated.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data revealed clear cognitive, affective and conative dimensions, thus supporting the three-dimensional conceptualization of destination image (Gartner, 1994). The cognitive dimension, which covers how tourists perceive a destination (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020; Gartner, 1994; Michael *et al.*, 2018), roughly reflected the conceptualization by Beerli and Martín (2004) and comprised, in order of the most to the least mentioned, the following attributes: general infrastructure, tourist infrastructure, culture, social environment, nature and economic factors. There are no systematic analyses of the affective dimension of RTDI, which refers to how tourists feel about the destination (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020; Gartner, 1994; Michael *et al.*, 2018), so the categorization we here propose into atmosphere of the RT destination, mental state of the pilgrim and visitors' spiritual attainment is part of this

paper's contribution. Finally, the conative dimension, which reflects how the tourists' perceptions and emotions affect their consumption intentions and ultimately their behaviors (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020; Gartner, 1994; Michael *et al.*, 2018), was articulated as revisit intentions and expressions indicating place attachment. These three dimensions are hereby presented and discussed.

How tourists perceive the destination: the cognitive dimension of religious tourism destination image and its attributes and variables

The data demonstrated that what really matters is the cultural attributes of the RTDI as 70% of the comments related to the cognitive dimension were about the deeper significations of the sites, their physical (e.g. architecture) and behavioral markers (e.g. worship) and the impression they invoke (e.g. grandeur). This implies that the tourists' motivation for visiting religious sites is the desire to experience rituals and immerse themselves into the history and feel of a place of worship. The comments, intertwined with various other dimensions and variables, were all enthusiastic, e.g.:

> People from whole the world are coming for prayers very enthusiastically in groups and groups. One can see there's no end of people old (making tawaf on wheel chairs by their families never feel tired) some oldies and gentlemen though very old walking by themselves with support sticks, Middle Ages young small kids it's looking like festivals all around. The security cleanness management is superb. Wonderful arrangements to avoid disturbances for such a huge crowed. Mashaallah (Entry #361).

Aspects of general infrastructure (37% of the comments), the social environment (30%) and tourist infrastructure (24%) were less important and reflecting a mixture of positive and negative perceptions. Cleanliness was one of the most mentioned variables comprising the general infrastructure and one that was highly appreciated as shown in this comment:

> The place is huge but well-maintained, especially the manner in which the crowd is managed. An army of workers keeps this magnificent building and its huge surrounding outer areas incredibly clean (#650).

Some of the visitors felt the destinations were chaotic because of overtourism and construction combined with inadequate signage as in:

> It is difficult to figure out all the doors and where to access the disability ramps, etc.; so much construction is very confusing. They should have maps (#420).

The architecture and auxiliary facilities were overall positively perceived and so was the performance of the staff. For example:

> I was very impressed with the architectural details, the use of high-tech umbrellas, and the choice of materials to build the mosque; it is truly a world-class architectural spot (#858).

> The authorities go out of their way to accommodate the pilgrims. I was unable to find any problem there (# 61).

> Work hard for to Allah 😍😍😍🙌🙌🙌 (#14).

Nature and the cost of the trip were hardly an issue (5% and 4% of the comments, respectively). The number of mentions alongside the variables comprising each one of the attributes of the cognitive dimensions are shown in Table 1.

Most (19) of the 31 variables in the cognitive dimension could be describing any tourism experience. There are four variables – prayer (mentioned 71 times), worship (48), house of

Table 1. The cognitive dimension of RTDI

Attributes (themes)	Variables (codes)	Frequency
Culture (Total mentions = 1,001)	On-site rituals	268
	History	210
	Grandeur	145
	Design	58
	Prayer	71
	Worship	48
	Tawaf	46
	Architecture	36
	Shifted direction of Qibla	34
	Center of earth	31
	House of God	30
	Gazing/looking at Kaaba	17
	Sunnah	7
General infrastructure (529)	Cleanliness and maintenance	229
	Commercial infrastructure	92
	Public transport facilities	66
	Signage	53
	Special arrangements for women	47
	Safety	42
Social environment (433)	Other tourists	181
	Local staff	167
	Diversity	53
	Locals	32
Tourist infrastructure (336)	Ease of access to destinations	133
	Facilities management	69
	Accommodation	71
	Souvenir shopping	47
	Facilities for pilgrims	16
Nature (66)	Availability of Zam-Zam or holy water	38
	Weather	28
Economic factors (61)	Cost	61
		Total 1,425

Notes: Darker-shaded cells indicate Muslim-specific attributes, lighter-shaded cells indicate attributes related to RT only, unshaded cells can be related to any tourist experience
Source: Authors' own work

God (30) and facilities for pilgrims (16) – that are specific to RT, and eight, which are particular to Islam (shaded in darker grey in Table 1). Muslim-specific variables that were noted by the pilgrims were related to rituals and sacred objects, e.g.:

Cold Zam-Zam water is available round the clock (#152).

Sex segregation was a topic of disagreement between reviewers as evidenced by the following comments:

I am dismayed with the level of segregation between men and women; and the mad rush of pilgrims to occupy the Rawdah (#789).

The space for women needs to be more extensive, while the men's area usually offers wide open spaces between prayers and frequently even during (#836).

but:

> The arrangements for the visitors are very convenient, with separate praying areas for men and women. The masjid has expanded considerably over the years (# 899).

How tourists feel about the destination: the affective dimension of religious tourism destination image and its attributes and variables

The comments related to the affective dimension of RTDI discussed the destinations' atmosphere (66% of the total 2,045 mentions in this dimension), the mental state the atmosphere induced in visitors (21%) and the travelers' spiritual attainment (14%). The full list of adjectives used and their frequencies are presented in Table 2.

The comments were overwhelmingly positive if not outright enthusiastic like this one:

> Mind blowing: The greatest experience ever. The centre spot of the world and the most beautiful view of anything I've ever seen. Mind blowing call to prayer and breathtaking recitation of the holy Quran life changing experience an absolute must and go as soon as you can (#3).

and introspective, often too personal, for example:

Table 2. Attributes of the affective dimension of RDTI

Attributes (themes)	Variables (codes)	Frequency
Atmosphere of the RT destination (total mentions = 1,340)	Best / ultimate place to be/incomparable	412
	Spiritually enhancing	281
	Holy/sacred	211
	Fantastic/mind blowing/wonderful	164
	Lovely/nice/mesmerizing	156
	Good	61
	Breathtaking/impressive	25
	Heavenly paradise	19
	Quiet	11
Mental state: "Feeling. . ." (428)	Peaceful	247
	Tranquil	32
	Losing sense of time/space	32
	Rewarded	26
	Relaxed	25
	Happy	24
	Serene	20
	Enjoyment	15
	Changed	7
Spiritual attainment (277)	Blessing	141
	Soul revival/regeneration/recharging	54
	Repentance/absolution/forgiveness /mercy	30
	Close to God	21
	Spiritual awakening	11
	Introspection	14
	Solace	6
		Total 2,045

Note: Shaded cells indicate attributes related to RT only, and unshaded cells can be related to any tourist experience
Source: Authors' own work

> Here is the place where you lose time and place and think of nothing except worship (#88).

> When you notice that the poor and the rich are all wearing the same white garments and everyone is the same, when you see very old people sweating and working hard to complete their umrah, some with no legs even, when you see sisters and brother crying and beseeching Allah from Asr until after Isha sitting in the same position - that is when it hits you, and you realize, am I doing enough? Am I trying my best to be of the sabiqoon? These people spend lots of their savings to visit and often stay in difficult conditions. One can write a book about the realization factor that hits you as you enter [. . .] (#17).

> It is the real experience of falling in love at first sight (#863).

> Makkah is always the right choice for all Muslims to refresh their Spirits. It would help if you went from time to time to perform spiritual awakening (#136).

Out of the 25 variables comprising the three attributes of the affective dimension, eight were RT-specific ones, but they were some of the most mentioned (e.g. spiritually enhancing was mentioned in 12% of the affective dimension-related comments and receiving a blessing in 6%). The narratives here were, as expected, very personal indeed as in:

> One visit the Kaba to make Doowah(pray) and ask Allah for Forgiveness and Repent for sins committed against one own Soul. The best gift one could give oneself is to visit the Kaba and beg Allah for Forgiveness and ask to enter Jannah (Heaven) InshaAllah through Allah's Mercy (#366).

and:

> I have been visiting this sacred site since 26 years now and after performing Hajj five times and Umrah 41 times one still can't have enough as this place is a truly humbling experience and a spiritual satisfying experience that a Muslim really needs to experience at least once in a lifetime (#370).

This last comment is an example of the many comments spanning the affective with the conative dimension.

Tourists' behaviors and behavioral intents: the conative dimension of religious tourism destination image and its attributes and variables
The pilgrim (#370) returning year after year is not alone, and as far as the level of commitment to visiting the holy sites pilgrims express goes, not at all extreme as evidenced in:

> It's the place that there are no words could describe it, I have done this time my Omra number 42. And if I will make for 4000000 times, I will never get bored (#369)

Similar behaviors were mentioned in a total of 60 comments. Moreover, another 33 noted that they had returned to bring their children, and 149 exhibited an altruistic side of their attachment to the destination, in that they expressed the hope or said they prayed that others, or all Muslims, would get a chance to visit as in:

> The grand masjid holiest place on earth very spiritual journey the best trip of my life there is certainly a heart connection here I pray the Lord Grant's all my Muslim brothers and sisters the chance to visit Alhumdullilah just like he gave me and my family the chance you will literally forget every 1 and everything when visiting this place (#50).

An interesting finding of the analysis is that 79 pilgrims said they found it difficult to leave the site. Finally, in 35 comments, there were extensive narratives and reminiscences of their first, unforgettable and sometimes even subsequent visits to the Holy sites as in:

My first visit [. . .] was in year 1982.That was the time you could just walk to the Roda Sharif and offer your salams in peace [. . ..] This continued like this till 1985 and things started changing [. . .] My last visit during that era of peace was in May 1987. I again visited in 1995 and things had changed. [. . .] During my this recent visit in February 2019, I was totally confused and lost. The Masjid has undergone huge expansion [. . .] (excerpt from #670 – the entry is 285 words long).

These four variables comprise the place attachment attribute of the conative dimension and represent 52% of all the comments that had a clear conative component.

Intentions to revisit were expressed as either hoping or praying to get a chance to revisit (186 comments) or as definite intention or commitment to return (143). It is remarkable that 76% of the comments in the data set had a reference to the conative dimension of RTDI, thus reinforcing its being an integral part of the construct, inseparable from perceptions and emotions, that is the cognitive and affective dimensions. The structure of the conative dimension and the number of comments in which each variable was present are shown in Table 3.

As expected, the conative dimension was expressed in the most personal of terms as in:

The last time I had the chance to do so was perhaps three years ago, and after some time, the longing for the kind memory and serene atmosphere made me come again, and it was like meeting a long-lost lover (# 646).

and:

After you have been there once, you cannot stop the irresistible urge to keep going back; the craving to go back is so intense that a part of you is left there, and you have no choice but to go back (#377).

Discussion and conclusions

So, what makes people crave to go back to an iconic RT destination? What makes a pilgrim experience love for a place; a love so intense and personal that the place itself becomes a part of ones' self? The comments travelers to Makkah and Medina posted on TripAdvisor raise these and other important questions regarding the factors affecting destination selection and place attachment formation. On a theoretical level, these are classic consumer behavior problems, which in practice, however, are confounded by the fact that a tourist destination is part and parcel with its geography, history, politics, infrastructure, services and, of course, its people with their own culture, memories and aspirations. As a tourist product, each

Table 3. Attributes of the conative dimension of RDTI

Attributes (themes)	Variables (codes)	Number of comments
Place attachment (total number of comments with references to place attachment = 356)	Hoping/praying others get a chance to visit	149
	Difficult to leave	79
	Multiple/regular visits	60
	Reminiscing about first visit	35
	Visiting again to bring one's children	33
Intention to revisit (329)	Hope/pray/want to revisit	186
	Will visit again/will return	143
		Total 685

Source: Authors' own work

destination is like no other. It is also a constantly evolving product. Change is inevitable for all human communities, and it takes place at its own pace, whilst its constituents and stakeholders evolve in different, sometimes diametrically opposed directions – not all of them predictable and certainly not manageable. As Gartner (1994) aptly puts it, the tourism product cannot be pretested. Neither can the pull factors (i.e. product attributes) be precisely designed and holistically managed, nor the push factors (i.e. travelers' motivations) can be precisely activated and directed toward this over the other destination. When the destination is one of religious significance, more confounding factors, such as the depth of the visitors' religiosity and its effect on their beliefs, attitudes, emotions and world- and self-view make classical marketing theory of limited applicability.

With these in mind, the research project presented here sought to shed light on the interplay of cognition, affect and conation through the comments of tourists who have visited two of the world's most visited and iconic RT destinations: Makkah and Medina, the central reference point for Muslim communities the world over. The aim was to better understand the RT phenomenon and to provide insights for more efficient marketing of destinations of religious significance. In the following sections, we present an overview of the theoretical and methodological contributions of the work, its practical implications and managerial recommendations, as well as a note on limitations and recommendations for further research.

Contributions to scholarship
Our findings reinforce the conclusions of the literature review on which this research is based:

- RT is a single phenomenon in which religion and tourism are inextricably linked, thus confirming earlier studies (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Nayak *et al.*, 2023); and
- the construct of RTDI is a robust, higher-order one (thus reinforcing Hosany *et al.*, 2007) and one that provides better insights into the factors affecting consumer behavior than the study of perceptions, attitudes or motives in isolation of each other.

Thus, we concur with earlier research on TDI (Afshardoost and Eshaghi, 2020), which follows the logic of Gartner's (1994) seminal work and views destination choice as a seamless process by which prospective as well as returning and recommending tourists move from a total opportunity set (i.e. all the possible tourist destinations) to the consideration, choice and decision sets, and eventually the actual choice of destination via the simultaneous elimination of choices that do not fit the three opportunity sets, that is:

(1) the perceived opportunity set (which is constructed on the basis of informational and perceptual constraints);
(2) the realizable opportunity set (which results after socially constrained preferences and internal constraints are applied); and
(3) the attainable opportunity set (the one that results when institutional and access constraints on the supply of destinations are removed).

This, in turn, leads to the conceptualization of TDI is a three-dimensional global evaluation of a destination on the cognitive, affective and conative levels (as also argued in Stylos *et al.*, 2017; Pike, 2004; Prayag, 2009; Kim and Chen, 2021).

Personal experience, anecdotal evidence and ample empirical research results (e.g. Michael *et al.*, 2018; Stylidis *et al.*, 2020) as well as literature review articles (Das *et al.*, 2024) concur with our finding that RTDI is a unique and powerful construct reflecting the interaction between the place attributes that create the attitude, with the feelings toward the

place, and with the resulting behaviors. It is a clearly demarcated and measurable construct, and as such, useful for both research and practice as also indicated in earlier studies (e.g. Albayrak *et al.*, 2018; Jafari and Scott, 2014; Terzidou *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, RTDI seems to be accurately encapsulating the interplay of all three domains of RT (identified in Kim *et al.*, 2019): tourists, destination and infrastructure.

Our work confirms earlier conceptualizations of RTDI (e.g. Stylos *et al.*, 2017; Gartner, 1994; Pike, 2004; Prayag, 2009; Kim and Chen, 2021) and also expands on their findings and refines them by identifying the attributes comprising each dimension (i.e. the structure of RTDI) and the variables constituting each attribute (i.e. the contents of RTDI) as they emerge through the unprompted comments of actual pilgrims. The analysis indicated that the cognitive dimension of RTDI comprises culture, general infrastructure, the social environment, tourist infrastructure, nature and economic factors. Some of the variables, such as history and architecture (which are part of the culture attribute), or locals and other tourists (in the social environment attribute), are found in all destinations, whilst others, such as prayer and facilities for pilgrims, are particular to RT. There are, however, a number of variables that reflect particularities of the specific destination and Islam. The affective dimension consists of feelings toward the atmosphere of the destination, the pilgrims' mental state and their spiritual attainment. Finally, the conative dimension includes place attachment and intention to revisit attributes. Our findings regarding the strength of place attachment, which includes even praying that others might experience the destination, contributes to filling the gap regarding the cultivation of experiential supportive behaviors in religious tourists noted in previous studies (Wu *et al.*, 2019; Nisar *et al.*, 2022) by pinpointing the cognitive bases of experiential satisfaction and trust studied in Wu *et al.* (2019).

Our findings are also consistent with earlier studies of identity construction through pilgrimage, which found it to also take place through a process of cognitive, affective and conative involvement (Liu *et al.*, 2022a). They also not only firmly reconfirm the three-dimensional hierarchically interrelated cognitive, affective and conative structure of Gartner (1994) through evidence of actual consumer decision-making but also show that it is valid at all stages of the customer journey as the comments referred to planning of the trip they were accounting for or their next trip, on-site experiences and post-travel evaluations. Moreover, our findings are consistent with the pilgrimage experience enablers and impactful customer journey paths and touchpoints identified in recent studies and, in particular, the centrality of RTDI (Lin, 2023) and its role as a determinant of RT destination choice (Singh *et al.*, 2022). Finally, many of the variables comprising the RTDI were also identified as motives for undertaking the pilgrimage to Makkah listed in Hassan *et al.* (2023). Thus, our work also brings together findings of earlier studies into a coherent whole. For example, variables such as feeling close to a higher power (Nayak *et al.*, 2023) and peaceful (Kim and Chen, 2021) are aspects of a single, dimension of RTDI, the affective one. Finally, it adds fine grain to the conative dimension, which seems to be broader and deeper than behavioral intent, as earlier studies suggested (Pike, 2004; Prayag, 2009; Kim and Chen, 2021; Nayak *et al.*, 2023).

Managerial implications

Social networking sites like TripAdvisor are where visitors initially arrive before making their travel decisions. It is not just that Muslim tourists who have already visited these sites are considered a reliable source of travel-related information by prospective pilgrims (Tasci and Gartner, 2007) but also that perceived religious similarity has a similar effect on not only RT but other forms of travel as well (Fourie *et al.*, 2015). This means that RTDI carefully managed on SM and review platforms can be a powerful tool for DMOs, as well as managers of related businesses. The way this can be achieved is by providing images, videos and text

describing the visualizations and giving detailed information on the attributes of cognitive dimension of the place that most matter to pilgrims, especially the ones that are unique to the destination. Culture and the social environment are the attributes better represented by photographs (e.g. of the architectural treasures) and videos (e.g. of the on-site rituals and pilgrims participating in them). General and tourist infrastructure are better handled by providing maps and text with detailed information. The affective dimension can be strengthened by responding to comments with emotional content on the atmosphere and accounts of the pilgrims' feelings and spiritual experiences, thus generating conversations that make the marketing organization part of the tourists' social milieu.

It is not enough to strive to create a satisfying travel experience. Taking into account the three-dimensional structure and the combined sacred and secular contents of RTDI is of paramount importance and needs careful orchestration of the content the marketer places on SM and participating in the community discussions in a thoughtful, honest and open way. It is not a matter of advertising and promoting but being part of a community, showing the religious affiliation, nurturing relationships and demonstrating responsiveness (Zarkada and Polydorou, 2013) that not only makes the RTDI strong enough to attract visitors and retain loyal customers and advocates – the ones who will influence others through their UGC and reviews.

Important as communication might be, it is, of course, no substitute for careful tourist product design and consistently delivered service quality at all stages of the customer journey. The research presented here has provided an indication of what tourists appreciate. Some of the variables are within the control of the DMO and the service providers at each RT destination. For example, cleanliness and maintenance is one of the most commonly mentioned variables of the cognitive dimension and one that cannot be managed by engaging SM representations or maintaining conversations with audiences. The same applies to the demeanor and performance of local staff, which can be managed with training and internal marketing actions. No matter how nicely presented the cognitive dimension of the RTDI is at the pre-trip stage, it is the on-site experience that can destroy the perception and lead to hard to manage negative WoM and e-WoM at the post-trip stage, which can negatively influence the perceptions of prospective tourists and thwart the conative dimension of RTDI. Thus, the gaps model, taking into consideration the advantages and potential pitfalls of contemporary technology (Bitner *et al.*, 2010), throughout the customer journey (Følstad and Kvale, 2018) can be applied to set the service design and standards according to customer expectations and to deliver according to standards. Further to operational excellence, it is the responsibility of DMOs and marketers of the service organizations to also match promises to performance.

The more visitor expectations are met and the more often they are exceeded, the more likely people are to revisit – a finding confirmed in the study of Muslims' pilgrimage to Makkah by Hassan *et al.* (2023), and recommend to their phygital social circles. Customer satisfaction, or even delight, however, are not enough. Understanding RTDI and carefully and consistently managing its dimensions, attributes and variables needs to be based on the highest levels of customer centricity possible and with empathy and demonstrated respect for the customer to ensure that travelers are enchanted and re-enchanted so as to achieve the superior customer experience that supports loyalty and customer citizenship behaviors (Batat, 2022; Batat, 2019). In the case of religious tourists, the experiential marketing strategy and tactics need to create and sustain perceptions of respect for the faith and practices of the pilgrims.

Limitations and future research

The strengths of the work are also its limitations. Data was extracted manually from a single online review platform. Even though data saturation and convergence were achieved, the sample remains relatively limited. More destinations and sites, other religions and more platforms need to be

studied before the results are generalizable. Using the conceptualization we propose as a basis, automated data collection and analysis using scraping tools and machine learning can provide richer data sets and more detailed analysis. User reviews are not the only UGC worth studying, of course. Visual content and interactions between SM users can also be a great source of information for researchers and policymakers.

The order of attributes listed above in the discussion of the dimensions of RTDI indicates the relative importance pilgrims assign to each one. We present them with confidence as our findings were not shaped by a predetermined mold, in which people's thoughts, feelings and actions were forced to fit, as is the case with surveys, for example, but they are inductively detected by systematically sensing actual pilgrims' spontaneously produced evaluations, narratives and accounts of their thought, feelings and actions. Nevertheless, further investigation is necessary to confirm the initial observations of this exploratory study and test their generalizability.

The generalizability of the conclusions is also limited by the use of a mono-method. Netnography has set a basis, but the findings need to be confirmed using active participant observation and quantitatively validated before the structure and contents of RTDI presented here can be accepted as a reliable measure. In-depth interviews can also shed light on the interaction effects of one dimension or set of variables on others.

The exploratory nature of the study mandates that the findings should be treated as preliminary insights. Moreover, this study is based on online travel reviews submitted between 2018 and 2022, so it is likely that the pandemic might have influenced the volume and valence of the data. Therefore, future research using a longitudinal design is needed.

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