



Religious Tourism and Marketing Strategies: A Mapping Approach

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Abstract

The tourism industry has excelled with the passage of time, and it now forms a major part of the economy. One of the major components of the tourism industry is religious tourism, which involves the movement of people for religious purposes and cultural experiences related to religious destinations. Religious tourism is also called faith tourism, and it has gained scholarly interest along with marketing research, encompassing pilgrimage, spiritual travel, faith-based destinations, and sacred places. The literature has expanded in this field, but research remains fragmented in this context. To address this gap, researchers conducted a bibliometric analysis on religious tourism and marketing published between 2015 and 2025. A well-established scholarly database (Scopus) was used to conduct this study. Using VOSviewer and the Biblometrix (R) package, this study maps influential authors, affiliated institutions, collaboration networks, and dominant themes in the field. The findings reveal the steady pattern in scientific output in the last decade. The research is not confined to a specific region, but it is broadly distributed. The findings highlight emerging themes and provide valuable insights for researchers and future development in this growing interdisciplinary field.

Keywords: Bibliometric Analysis, Religious Tourism, Marketing Strategies, Mapping Approach

1. Introduction:

Religious tourism came into existence with the existence of human civilization. Pilgrims travelled to religious places across the globe to pay homage and respect to their protectors. Since ancient times, it has made its global presence (Sahrpley & Sundaram, 2005; Turner & Turener, 1978; Nag et al., 2025a). It is that segment of tourism in which people travel to sacred places to have some spiritual experience (Patial et al., 2025). "Religious tourism is one of the driving forces to bring people from varied backgrounds together under a common cause: the admiration and protection of heritage of tangible and intangible nature," ("Religious tourism, a catalyst for cultural understanding | UN Tourism", n.d.). In most of the major religions, religious tourism has been the most powerful motivational tool for people to travel (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Religious tourism is a non-economic journey to both traditional and modern pilgrimage sites (Jackowski and Smith 1992). When travellers come into contact with a religious environment, they gain deeper insights and knowledge about a specific religion. Religious tourism introduces travellers to the religious environment, allowing them to have a deeper understanding of a specific religion. The three main types of religious tourism are: pilgrimages, religious fairs and events, and heritage visits with context to tourism (Vukonić, 1996).



The integration of marketing principles and strategies has reshaped the field of religious tourism. Destination marketing strategies and integrated approaches, including social media, celebrity endorsements, and the combination of traditional cuisines with wellness and spiritual tourism, are influential in attracting tourists from around the globe (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019). Setting a brand name with religious orientation, perfection in guest services in religious markets, digital marketing, creating films and short commentaries of religious places and promoting them with domestic and global media, are the marketing strategies for religious tourism (Zouni & Digkas, 2019). The marketers can use the shared experiences of travellers about pilgrimage on social networking sites to promote the idealized religious image of a destination. By respecting the role of self-presentation and status motives of devotees on virtual communities, they can highlight the image of religious locations (Park, Seo, & Kandampully, 2016). The existing literature mainly focuses on specific regions, destinations, or thematic perspectives (Raj & Griffin, 2015) and is mainly narrative or conceptual. There is a dearth of studies that systematically map the intellectual structure, collaboration patterns, and thematic evolution of religious tourism and marketing research over time. This systematic and integrative overview of religious tourism and marketing research advances the theory, methodology, and strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Religious Tourism:

Religious tourism is not a new concept, but is the oldest form of non-economic faith travel amongst pilgrims, and in the modern tourism world, it is driven by spirituality (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). We cannot have a complete picture of the modern-day tourism activities and patterns without taking religion into account. Other studies indicate that there are connections between religion and tourism. The commercialisation of religious sites as tourist attractions has destroyed the spiritual importance of these places and the popularity that they once enjoyed among the visitor fraternity. Raj and Griffin (2015) argued that the reason why scholars referred to the hybrid nature of tourism is that it draws on the diversity of forms of tourism, including cultural heritage and experiential tourism. Religious tourism is not merely a visit to a holy place, but it is a multidimensional process that is guided by religious piety and market forces.

2.2 Marketing of Religious Tourism Destinations:

In simple terms, marketing is a strategic response to delivering value and building a shared trust. It encompasses identifying, promoting, and delivering values to stakeholders through various channels, including both traditional and modern channels. Marketing of religious tourism destinations focuses on promoting sacred destinations by spiritual, cultural, and heritage experiences through strategies, like building infrastructure, offering customized accommodation, and adding architectural value of the destination to drive sustainable tourism. Long-term visibility and fame of the religious destination heavily rely on the marketing of these destinations. To promote religious tourism, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are utilizing branding, storytelling, and experiential marketing as their strategic marketing tools in the global tourism markets (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2016). Destination image formation is particularly important in religious tourism. Word-of-mouth, recommendations from visitors based on their pleasant experience, are important in creating touristic images among non-visitors (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Digital marketing efforts, such as social media campaigns and virtual tours, boost the visibility of spiritual destinations, and there is an escalation in tourist visits (Kumar et al., 2025). The traditional marketing strategies need to be replaced by niche marketing strategies, organizing specific events to attract tourists on specific sacred relic

(Ibănescu et al., 2018). To attract and develop religious tourism market assessment is needed in context of 4 A's of tourism: "Accommodation, Access, Amenities and Attractions" (Ranga, 2022).

2.3 Sustainability and Ethical Dimensions:

Sustainability and maintaining the ecological environment have become a major theme in religious tourism studies because of the high concentration of visitors at sacred places, and these destinations are also under socio-cultural pressure (Timothy, 2011; Nag et al., 2025b). Sustainable tourism aims at improving tourist experiences while contributing to local community and preserving the environment (Bisht et al., 2025a). In this segment, social media has become an important connecting tool between the environment, local people, and religious tourists (Kumari & Thakur, 2023; Kumar et al., 2026c). Tourism ethics are a set of guiding principles and values that tourists exhibit; these principles go beyond the notion of "what is right and what is wrong" to respect culture, communities, and business practices ("Understanding Diverse Perspectives on Ethics in Tourism • The.", n.d.). Tourism ethics are a mutual understanding between people and societies for the sustainable usage of environmental resources and the protection of social minorities in tourist destinations (POGGENDORF, 2018; Bisht et al., 2025b).

The literature remains fragmented irrespective of the growth of scholarly research because most of the study are region-specific and case-based studies. There is a lack of a comprehensive and bibliometric approach that studies religious tourism and marketing. To fill this lacuna lying in the literature, it becomes imperative to advance theory and practice in religious tourism and marketing.

3. Methodology

The present research uses a bibliometric mapping approach, a well-established tool in bibliometric research. The current research visually portrays the structure and characteristics of a specific research area, connections lying between the research, using bibliographic data. The researchers used the following steps to execute the research. The steps included are: a) Study Design, b) Data Gathering, c) Data Analysis, d) Visualization, e) Data, f) Interpretation

4. Study Design:

The study design started with the extraction of relevant publications. The publications were extracted from the Scopus database using targeted keywords related to the study. The search query started with keywords "Religious Tourism" OR "Pilgrimage Tourism" OR "Spiritual tourism" OR "Sacred tourism" OR "Faith tourism" AND "Marketing" in titles, abstracts, and keywords. The study included only articles published in the English language, and articles published in other languages were excluded. The base year for analysis began with 2015, despite the roots of Religious Tourism dating back to ancient civilizations. A total of 134 articles were extracted. After that, applying filters and selecting English language articles, the researchers were left with 133 publications, including articles, book chapters, books, conference papers, and reviews, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Document Types of the Study

DOCUMENT TYPES	
Article	81
Book Chapter	31
Book	7
Conference Paper	7

Review	7
Total	133

5. Data Collection:

The researchers used the Scopus database to collect data. The raw data was extracted in the form of a "CSV" file for further analysis and interpretation. Data collection was limited to articles published between 2015 and 2025, and captured recent scholarly developments in the field

6. Data Analysis:

The researchers used two complementary bibliographic tools, "VOSviewer" and "Biblioshiny", a package of R, to analyze the extracted data. With the help of these tools, the extracted data was classified and organized to develop networks and visualization maps. Data reduction method made the research easily understandable as results displayed the document type with relevant sources, authors and their affiliations & contribution to the research, thematic dendrogram and collaboration maps. The results of the study are valuable to disseminate the knowledge into the current field of research.

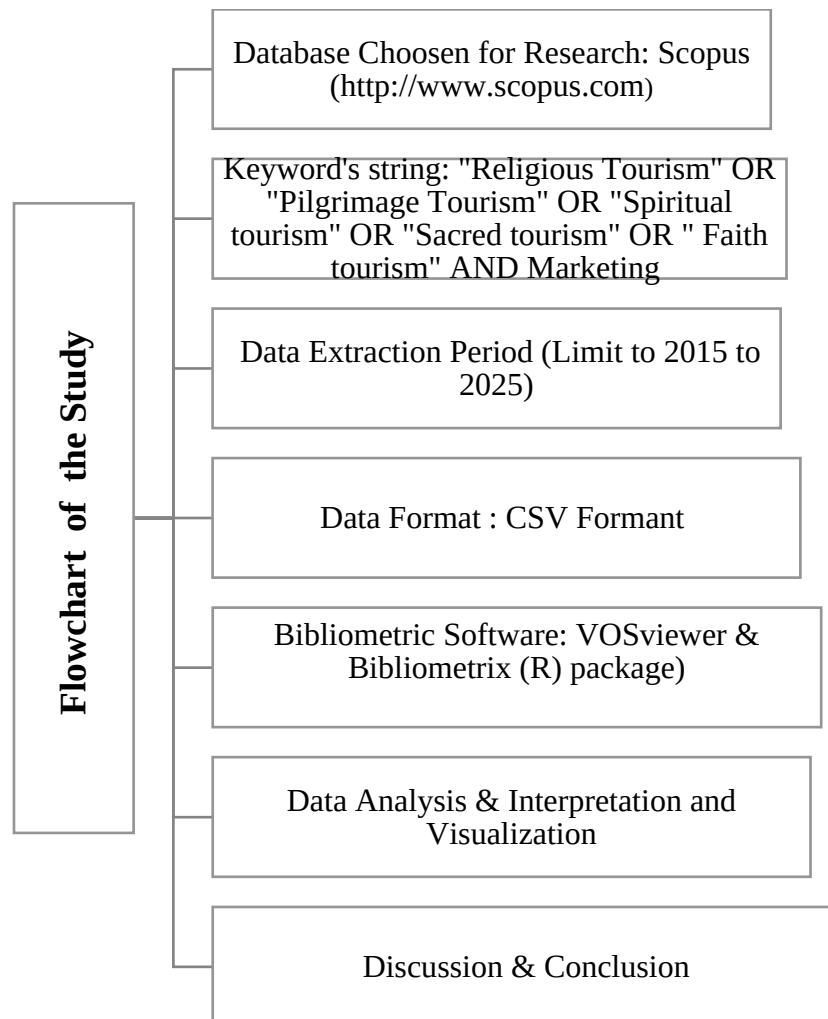


Figure 1: Study Flowchart Source(s): Authors

Most Productive Authors and Their Fractionalized Contributions

Table 2: Most Relevant Authors

Authors	Articles	Articles Fractionalized
HAQ, FAROOQ MUHAMMAD	4	3.00
SHARMA, SHIKHA	3	1.33
THAKUR, MAYUR	3	1.33
ABRANTES, JOSÉ LUÍS	2	0.50
CAMILLERI, MARK A.	2	2.00
DAS, IVA RANI	2	0.58
GEDECHO, ERMIAS KIFLE	2	1.00
HARUN, AMRAN BIN	2	0.50
HILPERT, MARKUS	2	2.00
INAL, MEHMET EMIN	2	0.67

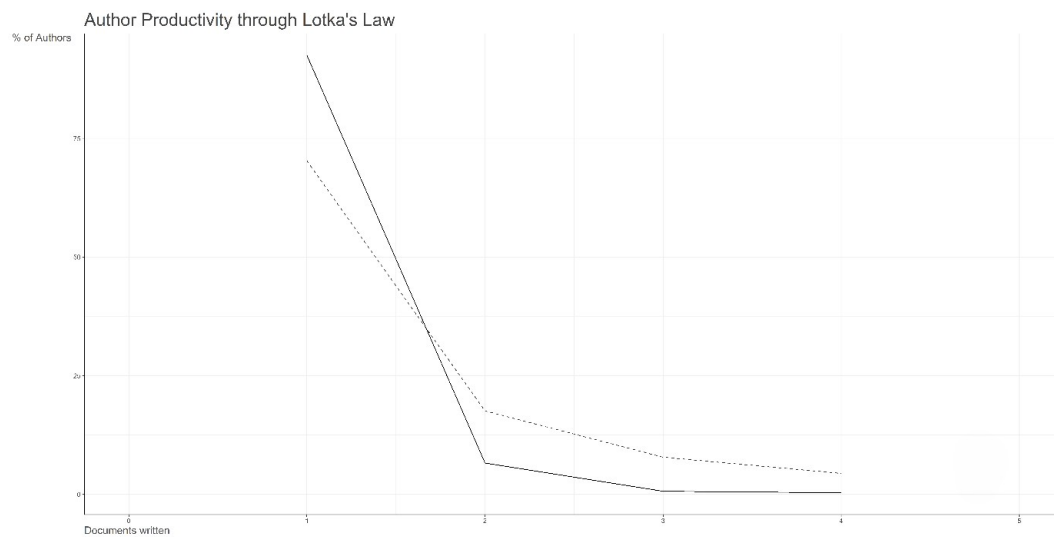


Figure 2: Author Productivity

Table 2 presents the most productive authors based on the number of published articles and their fractionalized authorship contribution. The authorship analysis reveals a moderately concentrated and collaborative structure in the field of religious tourism and marketing research. A small group of authors—most notably Haq, Farooq Muhammad; Sharma, Shikha; and Thakur, Mayur—exhibit relatively higher publication frequencies, and their fractionalization indicates multi-authored research efforts. Lotka's Law of scientific productivity in Figure 2 demonstrates that only a few authors produce multiple papers, while the rest of the authors contribute only one publication (Kumar et al., 2026a).

Three Field Plot

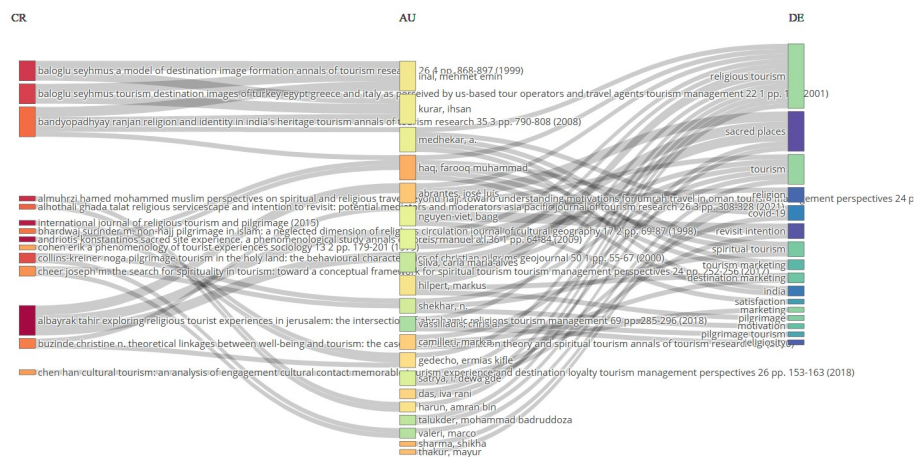


Figure 3: Three-Field (Sankey) Plot

The plot in Figure 3 is a three-field (Sankey-style) bibliometric plot that visually displays the literature by linking cited references (CR), prominent authors (AU), and keywords/descriptors (DE) in religious tourism and marketing research. The seminal work of Baloglu & McCleary; Cohen, and Collins-Kreiner forms the theoretical base. The work of authors such as Haq, Farooq Muhammad; Abrantes, José Luís; Camilleri, Mark A.; Hilpert, Markus; Sharma, Shikha; and Thakur, Mayur connects religious tourism with marketing-oriented research. This plot shows that there is a shift towards consumer behaviour, experience, and marketing strategy within religious tourism contexts.

Most Relevant Affiliations: Figure 4 displays the most productive institutional affiliations in the field of religious tourism and marketing as a bar chart.



Figure 4: Most Productive Institutional Affiliations

The figure 5 indicates that Universiti Malaysia Kelantan and the University of SS Cyril and Methodius emerge as the most productive institutions, each contributing six publications, having a strong research focus on religious tourism and related marketing dimensions. followed by Shiraz University and the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, each contributing five articles with a focus on religious tourism from regional, cultural, and destination development perspectives. The rest of the institutions, Chandigarh University, Chitkara University, State University of Gorontalo, Universidad Pontificia Comillas, University of Tehran, and Zhejiang Gongshang University each contributed four publications. This figure demonstrates that the research is not boundary-specific, but it is dispersed across diverse institutions and shows the global relevance of religious tourism.

International Research Collaboration



Figure 5: Co-authorship Network with Countries

This visualization depicts the international research collaboration network, highlighting India as the most productive hub that connects with multiple international partners. Indonesia and Bangladesh show a connection with India, but Bangladesh is closely connected. China has a peripheral position, while Portugal and Spain act as secondary collaborators. This network shows uneven but developing collaboration. The research in the religious tourism and marketing field is concentrated in emerging economies, particularly in India. The weak density of intercontinental links suggests that the research in this field has not fully globalized the network (Kumar et al., 2026b).

Keyword Co-occurrence Network

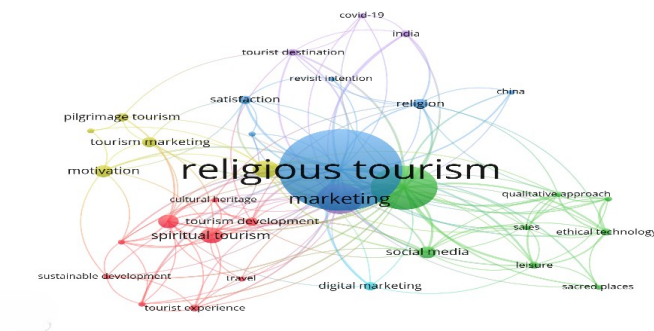


Figure 6: Keyword Network

The visualization network in Figure 6 presents a keyword co-occurrence network and mapping of intellectual structure and thematic evolution of research on religious tourism and marketing over the last decade. The “religious tourism” is the most influential keyword, and it is strongly connected to “marketing”, reflecting that marketing-oriented aspects are essential elements of religious tourism research (Choudhary et al., 2024).

Table 3: Thematic Clusters and Their Key Concern

Thematic Clusters	Key Concern
Cluster1: Core Religious Tourism & Marketing	Concerned with linking religious tourism and marketing and highlights a shift from purely descriptive studies to strategic and managerial perspectives.
Cluster 2: Digital Marketing, Social-Media & Ethics	Concerned with the alignment of religious tourism with digital and ethical marketing technologies
Cluster 3: Spiritual Tourism & Sustainability	Concerned with long-term destination sustainability and preservation of cultural–spiritual heritage
Cluster 4: Pilgrimage, Motivation & Tourism Marketing	Concerned with the integration of the traditional foundation along with marketing and experience-based tourism aspects
Cluster 5: Emerging Contexts	Concerned with context-specific and recent research trends, particularly in emerging economies

The thematic clusters have been developed based on the Keyword Visualization Network, and these clusters signify the interdisciplinary nature of religious tourism, integrating marketing strategy, digital innovation, sustainability, and socio-cultural sensitivity.

Word Cloud



Figure 7: Word Map

The conceptual prominence and thematic focus are reflected in the idea of the word cloud map. In this visualization, there is dominance of “tourism” and “marketing”, and highlights the dominance of ideas of “religious tourism”, “tourism development”, and “ecotourism” ideas. The presence of “social media”, “social networking (online)”, “marketing communications”, and “ethical technology” indicates that responsive application of digital technologies is beneficial in promoting religious destinations. The keywords, methodological in this map, including: qualitative approach, quantitative approach, and questionnaire survey, indicate a balanced application of empirical research design in this field.

Bibliographic Coupling Between Countries

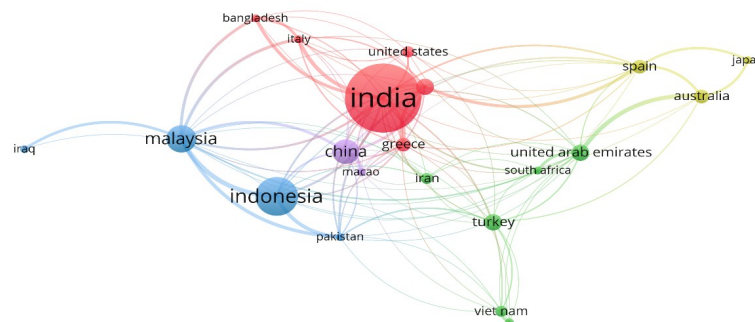


Figure 8: Country Collaboration Network

According to the country collaboration network, the country of India is located in the center, and has connections to both developed (the United States, Spain, Australia) and developing countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Turkey, UAE). India is also performing the role of a producer of knowledge as well as linking to such research partnerships. The network shows clear regional clustering with the Southeast Asian countries collaborating around pilgrimage and Islamic religious tourism, and a cluster between the Middle East and Europe reflecting a shared interest in heritage, sacred destinations, and sustainability. The Western cluster is linked to tourism marketing, destination branding, and methodological approaches. Their emergent and growing involvement in the world research network is evidenced in the countries in a peripheral position (Iraq, Macao, Bangladesh, and Vietnam). Both the appearance of tourism markets in emerging economies and the evolution of these markets in developed countries have important contextual implications and deepen the theoretical relevance of development studies.

7. Conclusion:

Based on articles published in the past decade, this paper presents a detailed bibliometric analysis of religious tourism and marketing. It used the assistance of “VOSviewer and Bibliometrix” to synthesize 133 articles based on the highly established database, called Scopus and bound a fragmented corpus of knowledge (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). The paper presents a complete bibliometric review of the substantive characteristics and development of this emerging research area. It has increased scholarly contributions of religious tourism within the globalization, cultural exchange, and competitiveness of the destination. The study of religious tourism and marketing is spread all over the world, and there are cross-regional partnerships. Thematic mapping and occurrence of keywords indicate that religious tourism and marketing are the core hubs, and they are closely related to themes of pilgrimage tourism, destination image and branding, tourist motivation, digital and social media marketing, ethical and sustainable tourism, and tourist experience. Marketing strategies and practices centered on sustainability have shifted to practically viable research agendas. Traditional themes are greatly contributing to the development of travel actions and behaviour in conjunction with faith, spirituality, and cultural heritage. This bibliometric review provides an integrative and systematized overview of the cognition of religious tourism and marketing studies. The knowledge gained in this article will assist the researchers and policymakers in coming up with culturally sensitive and sustainable marketing strategies for religious tourism destinations.

8. Limitations and Future Direction:

The study presents a detailed bibliometric mapping of studies on religious tourism and marketing in the past ten years. Nonetheless, this research has its limitations, which must be mentioned. First, this research is restricted to the Scopus database, which is widely accepted, and it does not cover studies of other databases like Web of Science, Google Scholar, or regional repositories that could be useful to complete this study. Second, semantic bias might be introduced by keywords and abstracts that are selected by the author. Although the list of keywords is quite extensive, not all of the terminologies can be fully covered: such terms as faith-based tourism, sacred travel, or culturally specific terms are not exhaustive. Third, this research focuses on English-language publications and disregards other language publications, which can affect the research. Fourth, bibliometric analysis offers quantitative information, and it does not evaluate the qualitative nature of research, including the theoretical richness, the methodological rigour, or the richness of the context of studies. Fourth, the timeframe (2015-2025) chosen to study is appropriate to research recent trends, but leaves out the past underpinning work. Restricting to these limitations, it is possible to suggest further research. First, the study can adopt a multi-database approach and can integrate databases like Web of Science, Dimensions, or Google Scholar to make it a more comprehensive and robust study. Second, it is possible to carry out SLR and longitudinal content analysis to enrich and broaden the theoretical knowledge of the study. Third, the time frame can be extended to cover the past and to find the origins of the marketing of religious tourism. Fifth, the future work can be based on the uncharted regions and religions where religious tourism is developing, yet still has not found its niche in mainstream research. Lastly, future research can explore the digital transformation and ethical marketing in more depth with the increased presence of virtual pilgrimage and its experiences, as well as the role of social media and the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in this regard.

Conflict of Interests Statement: There exists no conflicting interests between authors at any stage of production of this document.

Funding Statement: This research has not been financially supported by any govt. or private funding agencies.

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