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Identifying the Dimensions of Pilgrims' Experience (The Case of Arba'een Pilgrims)

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Abstract

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Most existing research on pilgrims and religious tourists has focused on their motivation, with limited attention to their actual experiences. This knowledge gap is particularly apparent in the Islamic context, where understanding the experiences of pilgrims and religious tourists is crucial for predicting their future behaviors. This paper aims to identify the key dimensions of pilgrims' and religious tourists' experiences during the Arba'een pilgrimage. To achieve this objective, a thorough review of the relevant literature was conducted, and appropriate questions were developed and refined through consultation with experts in the field. The target population for this study consisted of Iranian pilgrims who participated in the Arba'een pilgrimage. The researchers utilized a convenience sampling method to collect 229 completed questionnaires, which were then analyzed using exploratory factor analysis in SPSS software. Through this analysis, the researchers identified six key dimensions that contributed to the experience of Arba'een pilgrims: spiritual and emotional, cognitive, interactive, pleasant, physical-bodily, and learning. This research suggests that while the primary motivation for pilgrims is a spiritual experience, other types of experiences can also enhance their overall pilgrimage experience. These findings have practical implications for destination managers, as they can use them to design various experiences that cater to the needs and preferences of different types of pilgrims.

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Introduction

Pilgrimage and religious tourism, among the oldest and earliest forms of tourism, become an essential part of the global market in the tourism industry and continue to evolve, grow, and transform (Zamani-Farahani & Eid, 2016; Iliev, 2020). Pilgrimage is a cultural-religious phenomenon that has been a significant aspect of religions throughout human civilization. Sacred locations and destinations within all religions entice millions of individuals who seek spiritual fulfillment (Padin et al., 2016). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2014), around 300 to 330 million visitors visit the world's most significant religious sites annually. Additionally, approximately 600 million religious trips are conducted nationally and internationally. (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019).

The experience of religious travel is not confined solely to the spiritual and pilgrimage aspects. There are diverse categories of experiences and outcomes associated with religious travel, including social and relational experiences. (S  raphin & Jarraud, 2022). As a result of the diverse range of experiences available in pilgrimage and religious tourism, religious sites have become popular destinations not only for devotees and followers of religions but also for general tourists (Nyaupane et al., 2015).

Most studies in the field of pilgrimage tourism focus on understanding the motivations of pilgrims or tourists who visit religious sites and destinations (e.g., Wang et al., 2016, Terzidou, 2018, Liro, 2021; Nikjoo et al., 2021). Recently, tourism scholars and researchers have shifted their attention toward analyzing the tourist experience (Huang & Pearce, 2019). Similarly, only a limited number of studies have explored experiences in pilgrimage tourism. For instance, Bond et al. (2015) analyzed visitors' experiences to three holy sites in the UK, while Ramirez et al. (2018) focused on investigating travelers' experiences visiting the Monastery of Guadalupe in Spain. Bond et al. (2015) highlighted that most studies in the field of pilgrimage and religious tourism have focused on exploring the spiritual experience while disregarding other dimensions such as emotional, cultural, and especially social aspects (Patwardhan et al., 2020; Joo & Woosnam, 2020).

Religious events and ceremonies play a significant role in strengthening the beliefs of believers and also provide attendees with an opportunity to learn about each other's history, traditions, culture, and religious values, particularly those of the local people, through interaction with others (Getz & Page, 2016; Patwardhan et al., 2020).

Pilgrimage is one of the fundamental principles of Islam. Religious and pilgrimage ceremonies associated with this practice play a significant role in various aspects of Muslims' life. Among these ceremonies, Hajj and Arba'een, which are particularly noteworthy, drawing millions of pilgrims annually from across the Islamic world (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019) Arba'een, in particular, has

become an important symbol of Shi'a identity and community, uniting believers from different countries (Hashjin & Khanghahi, 2020). Arba'een attracts millions of Shi'a pilgrims from Islamic countries every year and has turned into one of the huge gatherings in the world (Abdul-Zahra & Mizban, 2019; Husein, 2018; Sims, 2016) So, in 2016, 22 million pilgrims traveled to Karbala to participate in this ceremony (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019). Along the way, local people welcome and interact with pilgrims during this religious trip, fostering community connections (Husein, 2018).

Undertaking a study of tourist experiences can aid in comprehending consumer behavior (Alhothali et al., 2022). However, most prior research on religious or pilgrimage experiences has focused on Western contexts or religions other than Islam. As pilgrims and religious tourists in different religions exhibit specific behavioral patterns and consequently go on various experiences (Albayrak et al., 2018), it is crucial to examine their experiences in various contexts, including Islam. It would enable researchers to identify the key determinants of consumer behavior and satisfaction. This insight could further guide tourism industry stakeholders in enhancing the overall experience for both tourists and service providers. Hence, it is crucial to analyze the experiences of pilgrims and religious tourists in diverse settings. Consequently, this research aims to fill the void above in the literature by exploring the experiences of individuals participating in Arba'een and developing a comprehensive model that identifies various facets of their experiences. This framework will allow researchers and professionals to evaluate these experiences accurately. Ultimately, the purpose of the current research is to answer the following question:

What are the dimensions of the pilgrim's or religious tourist's experiences in Arba'een?

Literature review

Pilgrimages and religious tourism

In the context of tourism related to religion, scholars have used different terms, such as pilgrimage, spiritual tourism, and religious tourism, despite ongoing debates about their similarities and differences (Albayrak et al., 2018). While some researchers suggest that these terms can be used interchangeably (e.g., Abad-Galzacorta et al., 2016), others argue that they represent distinct categories based on differences in beliefs, motivations, and the locations visited. Consequently, there is a need for these concepts to be categorized differently (Kato & Prozano, 2017). According to Smith (1992), pilgrims and tourists are situated at opposite ends of a spectrum ranging from religious to non-religious. However, other scholars have argued that making such a clear distinction between these two groups is challenging since modern pilgrims may engage in non-spiritual activities such as shopping or visiting historical sites. In other words, contemporary travelers may participate in both pilgrimage and tourism simultaneously, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. Indeed, it is also true that

a tourist may participate in religious activities such as visiting a religious site or attending a religious ceremony; in this sense, the boundary between tourism and pilgrimage can be pretty fluid (Albayrak et al. 2018). In general, religious tourism can be defined as a form of travel that is either fully or partially motivated by religious reasons (Kim & Kim, 2019). As such, both pilgrimage and spiritual tourism can be considered types of religious tourism. In this study, we will investigate both forms of religious tourism to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

According to Nikjoo et al. (2021), gaining experience is the motive of pilgrims. Motivations for embarking on a pilgrimage can be categorized into two types: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivations are those that result in physical effects and are believed by believers and devotees to be gained through activities such as walking. These motivations include feelings of security and the ability to communicate with others. On the other hand, intrinsic motivations refer to internal transformations that are comprehensive and general and include factors such as improved health, happiness, psychological well-being, and spiritual well-being. Ultimately, a pilgrimage is a meaningful journey that provides valuable insights and triggers transformation in a pilgrim's religious belief, leading to long-lasting effects on their future.

Tourists and pilgrims experience

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) contributed to conceptualizing experience in marketing, specifically with the introduction of experiential marketing. Their concept centers on creating emotional connections between consumers and brands by providing engaging experiences. Pine and Gilmore's (1998) idea of the Experience Economy further emphasizes the importance of experiences as an economical offering, encouraging businesses to design and market experiences that provide value for both consumers and the business. In tourism, experiences are often defined as opportunities for knowledge acquisition and skill development through experiential learning. Thus, tourism experiences can be seen as avenues for personal growth, entertainment, and learning (Sharpley and Stones, 2014). Tourist experiences are comprised of the activities and interactions that individuals engage in while visiting a destination. These experiences are imbued with social meanings that can affect the internal feelings and cognitive states of tourists. As such, tourist experiences encompass a wide range of phenomena, whether they are overt or covert, including behaviors, perceptions, cognition, and emotions (Wu et al., 2020).

These interactions are throughout the customer journey and include three phases of pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip, all actions ranging from information gathering to experience sharing in online and offline channels (Irani et al., 2022). In particular, post-trip experiences that are stored in their minds as pleasurable stories and memories can encourage the destination to revisit. In addition,

tourists usually tend to create stories about their authentic experiences and share them with others as their travel memos (Moscardo, 2010; [Albayrak et al., 2018](#)). The term "tourist experiences" refers to the interactions and activities between a tourist and the various touchpoints of a destination. These touchpoints encompass all components of the destination, such as accommodations, attractions, transportation, food and beverage establishments, and interactions with local residents. The quality of these interactions and activities is crucial in determining a tourist's level of satisfaction with their trip and can significantly impact their likelihood of returning to the destination or recommending it to others. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, Irani et al. 2022). In tourism and marketing, various dimensions of experience have been introduced based on different contexts. For instance, Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggested escapist, esthetics, education, and entertainment as dimensions of experience. Schmitt (1999) also introduced five dimensions sense, feel, think, act, and relate. Dimensions suggested by Aho (2001) include emotional, informative, practical, and transformation. Kim & Ritchie (2014) believed that these dimensions are hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty. Packer and Ballantyne (2016), in a review of the visitor experience, specified ten components as following experiences: physical, sensory, restorative, introspective, transformative, hedonic, emotional, relational, spiritual, and cognitive, which all form a multifaceted model of the visitor experience. In the religious context, also Bond et al. (2015), and Albayrak et al. (2018), found some dimensions as experiential factors encompassing scale for religious experience, including connecting spiritually and mentally, discovering new things, engaging mentally, interacting, and belonging, and relaxing and finding peace. These factors highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of religious experiences and the various ways in which individuals engage with their faith. In this case, the results showed that pilgrims and tourists seek not only spiritual experiences but also restorative experiences at religious sites is noteworthy; this is attributed to the cultural and historical value of these sites. The study by Chang et al. (2020) aimed to develop a scale for measuring pilgrim experiences during the Dijia Mazu Patrol in Taiwan, which was subsequently validated. The results identified five dimensions contributing to the pilgrim experience: spirituality, learning, physicality, help, and unpleasantness. Spirituality focused on the personal significance derived from the pilgrimage, while learning encompassed the acquisition of knowledge through interactions with other pilgrims. Physicality is related to the beneficial impact of the pilgrimage on physical health and self-improvement achieved through self-discipline. Help pertained to mutual support among pilgrims, whereas unpleasantness referred to negative emotions resulting from various factors such as air pollution, crowdedness, and inadequate services. Validating this scale provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of the pilgrim experience and offers a deeper understanding of the cultural and spiritual significance of pilgrimage. Cohen (1979) identified several modes of experience that tourists

could have, including recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental, and existential modes. Durán-Sánchez (2018) suggested that when it comes to pilgrimage, the pilgrim's experience is often connected to the existential mode of experience, though religious tourists can have a variety of different experiences at religious sites (Reisinger, & Steiner 2006). However, these dimensions have primarily been explored in Western countries and other religions, indicating a requirement for more research on the experience of tourism in Islamic contexts.

Research method

This study focuses on the experiences of people who participate in the Arba'een religious ceremony, which is a significant event for Muslims. It brings together people from different countries and cultures who share a belief in Imam Hossein and his sacrifice. The ceremony occurs once a year on the 20th day of the lunar month of Safar, according to the Arab lunar calendar. It occurs in Karbala, Iraq, and attracts many Muslims.

The researchers used convenience sampling to gather data for this study by selecting individuals who had recently participated in the Arba'een religious ceremony (e.g. (Kim et al. 2021). They distributed questionnaires online to potential participants through networking media platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp. This method allowed the researchers to reach a larger survey population more efficiently.

The survey items used in this study were adapted from a previous research article by Chang et al. in 2020, which also focused on the experiences of pilgrims. The survey questions were specifically tailored to the context of pilgrim tourism and aimed to identify the experiences of individuals who participated in the Arba'een ceremony. By adapting the survey items to this particular context, the researchers were able to collect data on the unique experiences of Arba'een participants.

To facilitate understanding among the survey participants, the original questionnaire, which was in English, was translated into Persian by the authors. The survey questions were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scholars modified and corrected the questions to improve the questionnaire's validity and reliability before distribution among Arba'een pilgrims and tourists. The data collection took place between 2021-2022.

Results

A total of 229 religious travelers participated in the study and completed the questionnaire. Table I provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants. The majority of the sample consisted of married individuals (56.4%), with nearly half being young adults between the ages of 18 to 29 years old (48.5%). The majority of participants were female (61.1%). Additionally, more

than one-third of the participants (36.7%) had a bachelor's degree, and 23.1% were university students. It is also worth noting that over one-third of the participants (35.3%) attended the Arba'een event for the first time.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

| Variable | Group | Frequency | Percentage | Variable | Group | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------|--------------------|-----------|------------|---|-------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | Female | 89 | 9/38 | Marital status | Single | 100 | 43/6 |
| | Male | 140 | 1/61 | | Married | 129 | 56/4 |
| Education | Lower than diploma | 26 | 3/11 | Employment status | Highschool student | 11 | 4/8 |
| | Associate degree | 58 | 3/25 | | University student | 53 | 23/1 |
| | Diploma | 15 | 6/6 | | Employed | 48 | 21 |
| | Bachelor | 84 | 7/36 | | Self-Employment or Freelancer | 36 | 15/8 |
| | Master | 38 | 6/16 | | Retired | 19 | 8/3 |
| | P.H.D | 8 | 3/5 | | Unemployed | 23 | 10 |
| Age | 18-29 | 111 | 5/48 | The number of times participating in the walking ceremony | Other | 39 | 17 |
| | 30-39 | 57 | 9/24 | | Once | 81 | 35/3 |
| | 40-49 | 25 | 9/10 | | Twice | 51 | 22/3 |
| | 50-59 | 30 | 1/13 | | Three times. | 38 | 16/6 |
| | 60 Or older | 6 | 6/2 | | Four times or more | 59 | 25/8 |

The researchers used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to explore the underlying dimensions of the survey items. EFA is a popular method in psychology and behavioral science research that aims to identify the latent, unobservable components or factors that are measured using observable variables. This approach evaluates the relationship between the survey items and estimates the factors based on these relationships.

To assess the appropriateness of the sampling and responses in this study, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was used. The result indicated a KMO value of 0.933, which is considered superb according to Field (2009). Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity indicated appropriate correlations

between the survey items ($p < 0.000$), suggesting that each identified factor has only one dimension, as suggested by (Chen & Hsu, 2001)

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's test

| | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|----------|
| KMO index | | 0/933 |
| Bartlett test | chi-square statistic | 7553/237 |
| | Degrees of freedom. | 528 |
| | The significance level | 0/000 |

Then, items with less than 0.50 communalities were exposed to deletion. As shown in Table III, the remaining items' communalities ranged from 0.652 to 0.890, suggesting that the common factors fairly explained the variance of the original values.

Table 3. Communalities

| Item | Initial subscription | Communalities |
|------|----------------------|---------------|
| 1 | 1/000 | 0/764 |
| 2 | 1/000 | 0/738 |
| 3 | 1/000 | 0/740 |
| 4 | 1/000 | 0/812 |
| 5 | 1/000 | 0/811 |
| 6 | 1/000 | 0/872 |
| 7 | 1/000 | 0/807 |
| 8 | 1/000 | 0/652 |
| 9 | 1/000 | 0/841 |
| 10 | 1/000 | 0/799 |
| 11 | 1/000 | 0/839 |
| 12 | 1/000 | 0/890 |
| 13 | 1/000 | 0/622 |
| 14 | 1/000 | 0/839 |
| 15 | 1/000 | 0/746 |

| Item | Initial subscription | Communalities |
|------|----------------------|---------------|
| 16 | 1/000 | 0/800 |
| 17 | 1/000 | 0/654 |
| 18 | 1/000 | 0/763 |
| 19 | 1/000 | 0/760 |
| 20 | 1/000 | 0/683 |
| 21 | 1/000 | 0/657 |
| 22 | 1/000 | 0/687 |
| 23 | 1/000 | 0/720 |
| 24 | 1/000 | 0/578 |
| 25 | 1/000 | 0/680 |
| 26 | 1/000 | 0/659 |
| 27 | 1/000 | 0/743 |
| 28 | 1/000 | 0/704 |
| 29 | 1/000 | 0/793 |
| 30 | 1/000 | 0/744 |
| 31 | 1/000 | 0/805 |
| 32 | 1/000 | 0/867 |
| 33 | 1/000 | 0/817 |

The researchers employed principal component analysis with varimax rotation to identify the final factors. Items that did not meet the criterion of an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 were removed. Table IV presents the final rotated factors and the indicators of religious tourism experience for each factor, along with the statistical data relating to each element and indicator. After several iterations of EFA, 33 items remained and were identified as belonging to six categories, resulting in a six-dimensional structure.

To test the reliability of the data, a reliability analysis was conducted. The results showed that Cronbach's α coefficient for all dimensions was above the acceptable level of 0.70, indicating adequate internal consistency.

Table 4. The final results of the exploratory factor analysis.

| Dimensions | Item | Query | Factor load | Cronbach's alpha | Rotation sums of squared loading | | |
|------------------------------------|------|--|-------------|------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | EV | The percentage of variance | Cumulative% |
| Spiritual and Emotional Dimension. | 11 | After the pilgrimage ,I felt that the Shi'a and Islamic belief is very effective and worthwhile. | 0/846 | 0/972 | 9/747 | 29/537 | 29/537 |
| | 12 | I feel impressed after the pilgrimage. | 0/838 | | | | |
| | 9 | During the pilgrimage ,I felt quite close to the belief of Shi'a and Islam. | 0/815 | | | | |
| | 6 | I feel that have achieved a spiritual attachment to Islam and Shiism. | 0/808 | | | | |
| | 7 | I am encouraged to go on pilgrimage. | 0/792 | | | | |
| | 2 | The pilgrimage made me think more about myself and get to know myself. | 0/755 | | | | |
| | 8 | I feel purified after the pilgrimage. | 0/731 | | | | |
| | 3 | The pilgrimage is an important achievement for me. | 0/692 | | | | |
| | 24 | I feel that my sins were pardoned after the pilgrimage, and my repentance was accepted. | 0/664 | | | | |
| | 4 | I feel that during the pilgrimage, I became one with the belief in Islam and Shi'a. | 0/678 | | | | |
| | 1 | During the pilgrimage ,I interacted with the belief of Shiism and Islam. | 0/679 | | | | |
| | 28 | I felt reborn after the pilgrimage. | 0/656 | | | | |
| | 5 | I feel excited about the pilgrimage. | 0/634 | | | | |
| | 14 | I feel happy during the pilgrimage. | 0/611 | | | | |
| | 10 | While I feel cheerful and excited about the pilgrimage. | 0/594 | | | | |
| | 26 | Participation in this religious ceremony has the potential to become a family tradition. | 0/568 | | | | |
| | 17 | in participating in this religious ceremony ,I learned the cultural and historical meanings of this religious ceremony and pilgrimage. | 0/565 | | | | |

| Dimensions | Item | Query | Factor load | Cronbach's alpha | Rotation sums of squared loading | | |
|--------------------------------|------|--|-------------|------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | EV | The percentage of variance | Cumulative% |
| cognitive dimension | 16 | Pilgrimage has emotional elements. | 0/821 | 0/879 | 4/531 | 13/731 | 43/268 |
| | 15 | Pilgrimage has spectacular elements. | 0/787 | | | | |
| | 22 | The performances on the pilgrimage are quite unique. | 0/608 | | | | |
| | 21 | Participating in this ceremony made me understand that the Arba'een pilgrimage is distinguished from other religious pilgrimages. | 0/594 | | | | |
| | 23 | I had a new cultural and religious experience during the pilgrimage. | 0/589 | | | | |
| Interactive dimension | 29 | I experienced tangible things such as free food and drink and residence generously provided free of charge by other believers | 0/758 | 0/851 | 3/387 | 10/264 | 53/531 |
| | 30 | I experienced intangible things such as help, service ,a sense of friendship, etc., which were generously provided free of charge by other believers | 0/735 | | | | |
| | 18 | Shi'as have a special way to mourn Imam Hussein during the pilgrimage. | 0/703 | | | | |
| Pleasant dimension | 32 | I felt happy during the pilgrimage. | 0/932 | 0/895 | 2/595 | 7/865 | 61/396 |
| | 31 | I feel happy about the pilgrimage. | 0/882 | | | | |
| | 33 | I have a sense of satisfaction from the pilgrimage. | 0/879 | | | | |
| Physical and bodily dimensions | 25 | I will feel bad if I can't do all the pilgrimage steps. | 0/729 | 0/733 | 7/394 | 7/255 | 68/651 |
| | 27 | Participating in the pilgrimage improves my physical condition. | 0/721 | | | | |
| | 13 | Taking part in this religious ceremony and pilgrimage experiments with my physical strength. | 0/612 | | | | |
| Learning dimension | 19 | I had the opportunity to acquaint myself with the culture and religion of the Iraqi people. | 0/799 | 0/738 | 2/239 | 6/783 | 75/434 |
| | 20 | During the pilgrimage ,I learned about the long history of some mosques and places. | 0/770 | | | | |

Lastly, a one-sample t-test was conducted to compare the average score of the variables. The test used a test value of 4.0 with a 95% confidence level. Table V displays the results, which indicate that the average score for all scales is more significant than 4.0 and the Sig. (2-tailed) value is 0.00 (<0.05). This suggests that all of the variables reached the mean at the consent level.

Table 5. One-sample test

| Dimensions | Mean | T value | df | Sig ,(2-tailed) | Mean difference | 95%confidence interval of the difference | |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|-----|--------------------|--------------------|---|--------|
| | | | | | | lower | upper |
| Spiritual and Emotional | 6/5140 | 104/763 | 228 | 0/000 | 6/51397 | 6/3914 | 6/6365 |
| Cognitive | 6/4066 | 95/895 | 228 | 0/000 | 6/40655 | 6/2749 | 6/5382 |
| Interactive | 6/6638 | 123/596 | 228 | 0/000 | 6/66376 | 6/5575 | 6/7700 |
| Pleasant | 6/6346 | 98/920 | 228 | 0/000 | 6/63464 | 6/5025 | 6/7668 |
| Physical And Bodily | 5/ 9432 | 64/047 | 228 | 0/000 | 5/94323 | 5/7604 | 6/1261 |
| Learning | 5/5830 | 57/141 | 228 | 0/000 | 5/58297 | 5/3905 | 5/7755 |

Finally, Fig.1 illustrates identified dimensions of pilgrims' experience in the case of Arba'een pilgrim.

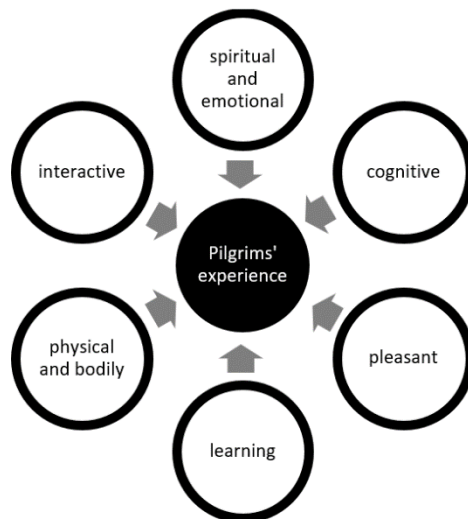


Figure 1. Pilgrims' experience dimensions

Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes significantly to the literature by identifying the dimensions of religious tourists and pilgrims within the context of Shi'a Muslims. It addresses a gap in the existing literature by exploring the experiences of non-Western pilgrims and religious tourists, particularly Muslims, explicitly focusing on the Arba'een foot pilgrimage and Shi'a Muslims. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the unique experiences and motivations of individuals who participate in these types of religious events. This information can be useful for policymakers, tourism professionals, and others interested in understanding and supporting religious tourism and pilgrimage in the Shi'a Muslim context.

Based on the scales developed by Chang et al. (2020) and Albayrak et al. (2018) to measure measurable development, the current study aims to develop a scale for measuring the experiences of Shi'a Muslims during the Arba'een pilgrimage. This religious event is the second most significant Muslim religious event and attracts millions of participants every year. Developing a scale to measure the experiences of pilgrims during this event can provide valuable insights into the unique aspects of this religious event and its significance to the Shi'a Muslim community. The six dimensions identified in this study, including Cognitive, Spiritual and Emotional, Interactive, Pleasant, Learning, Physical and Bodily, and Learning, consist of 33 items. The results of this study are in line with research conducted by Chang et al. (2020), Albayrak et al. (2018), and Bond et al. (2015) and share similar dimensions with these previous studies, but according to Albayrak et al. (2018) based on destination and different religions, the results may differ from one pilgrim to another.

The core motivation for Shi'a pilgrims to participate in the Arba'een pilgrimage is their spiritual and emotional experience, which is considered crucial and paramount. This experience encompasses not only memorable and moving moments that bring them closer to God but also an elevation in their religious beliefs, leading to a more profound sense of integrity and proximity to these beliefs than before the pilgrimage. In essence, the pilgrimage plays a decisive role in shaping the overall experiences of the pilgrims as it serves as a powerful source of religious inspiration and connection. This insight confirms previous studies by Slavin (2003) and Husein (2018). According to Reader (2007), Certainly. The spiritual and emotional experiences gained from participating in a pilgrimage like Arba'een can positively impact an individual's self-esteem and inner strength. Such experiences can help people feel more connected to their faith, provide them with a sense of purpose and direction, and offer personal inspiration and motivation for daily life. (Willson et al. 2013; Reader 2007). The dimension of spiritual and emotional experience that is gained from pilgrimages is not restricted to this particular form of tourism. Such experiences can also be encountered in other types of tourism, such as cultural tourism.

According to this study, the second type of experience that pilgrims gain from participating in the pilgrimage is cognitive experience. The pilgrims' satisfaction was linked with emotional and cognitive experiences, as identified by Del Bosque and San Martín in 2008. Findings show that pilgrims have gained cognitive experience, ultimately contributing to their overall satisfaction and experience. By gaining a deeper understanding of the religious significance and historical context of the pilgrimage, pilgrims were able to enhance their cognitive experience, leading to a more meaningful and fulfilling journey.

The third dimension highlighted in the study is the interactive dimension, which emphasizes the importance of human interaction in tourism. The study found that pilgrims had a high level of interaction with each other during the pilgrimage. Such gatherings provide ample opportunities for not only interactions between tourists but also interactions with locals. The potential for social and cultural exchange in such settings can be significant, allowing for cultural learning, sharing of experiences, and strengthening of bonds between individuals and communities. Therefore, the interactive dimension of tourism plays an essential role in enhancing the overall experience of the pilgrims and promoting a sense of community and belonging. Resembling Nikjoo et al. (2021), this study found that interactions among individuals who follow the same religion can contribute to familiarity and a sense of closeness toward the destination. Similarly, in the context of the Arba'een pilgrimage, the interactions between pilgrims can create a sense of belonging and identity within the religious community. These interactions may occur personally or as part of group activities, but they foster social connections and promote a shared sense of purpose and belief. Religious ceremonies can substantially impact both the local community and visitors who attend them, resulting in significant social and economic consequences. Such events can foster greater interaction between locals and pilgrims, thereby potentially enhancing the quality of experiences for all tourists, regardless of their reasons for visiting. These interactions are not limited to those of a religious nature but also extend to individuals with non-religious motivations (Joo & Woosnam, 2020).

The significance of physical and bodily experiences in religious journeys for pilgrims has been confirmed by recent research, including Husein's (2018) findings. Pilgrims tend to view these journeys as tests of physical endurance that can lead to improvements in their overall physical state. These physical challenges may also positively affect mental health and well-being, as physical activity has been shown to reduce stress, and anxiety levels, improve self-esteem, and promote positive feelings. (Higgins & Hamilton 2016).

According to Chang et al. (2020), learning is the fifth dimension and involves gaining knowledge or skills through interactions with others. Pilgrimage is seen as one of the best sources of social interaction, providing an opportunity for pilgrims and tourists to learn about local cultures and beliefs.

Through this experience, individuals can acquire new knowledge and skills that may be useful in various contexts, broadening their understanding of different customs and ways of life. Participating in a pilgrimage is a valuable opportunity for personal growth and a deeper appreciation of the world around us. The study findings show that pilgrims undergo a remarkable learning experience regarding cultural and religious aspects. This dimension of the pilgrimage experience facilitates knowledge creation and sharing among fellow pilgrims and believers. By interacting with others, pilgrims can learn about diverse cultures, beliefs, and customs, gaining a deeper understanding of the world. They can also share their own insights and knowledge with others, encouraging mutual learning and community-building. Overall, this dimension of the pilgrimage experience is crucial for promoting knowledge acquisition and sharing, enabling individuals to expand their horizons through social interactions.

The final dimension is a pleasant experience, which can be impacted by factors such as high population density and transportation shortages. Cheng and Chen's (2014) research suggests that despite the many pilgrims attending these events, they tend to report positive feelings about their journey. This may be due to their patience and tolerance for enduring challenges in pursuing their emotional objectives. Despite the difficulties encountered along the way, pilgrims often find the overall experience to be enjoyable and fulfilling, with many reporting a sense of personal satisfaction and spiritual growth. These findings highlight how the pilgrimage experience can be a source of positivity and contentment, even in the face of challenging circumstances.

Managerial and academic implications

Most studies on the pilgrimage experience have been conducted in non-Islamic contexts, making this research the first attempt to develop a scale for measuring the experiences of pilgrims participating in the Arba'een foot pilgrimage. As this type of tourism continues to gain popularity, investigating the experiences and behavioral patterns of pilgrims and tourists is becoming increasingly important.

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of pilgrims in Islamic contexts, highlighting the significance of not only spiritual experiences but also social and learning experiences, which confirms previous studies (e.g. Albayrak et al. 2018). These findings underscore the importance of understanding the multifaceted nature of pilgrimage experiences and the contribution of various factors to pilgrims' overall satisfaction and well-being. Paying attention to this matter paves the way for more studies investigating experiences in the Islamic context that are relatively ignored.

The results of this study are precious for destination managers, as they may assume that the primary interest of pilgrims and tourists is limited to spiritual or emotional experiences. However, the

findings prove that other types of experiences, such as social and learning experiences, also play a crucial role in shaping the overall experiences of pilgrims and religious tourists. Therefore, destination managers should pay attention to these dimensions of the pilgrimage experience and strive to provide opportunities for knowledge creation, social interaction, and personal growth alongside spiritual and emotional fulfillment. By doing so, they can enhance the overall experience of pilgrims and contribute to developing sustainable religious tourism destinations.

Limitations and future directions

This study was primarily quantitative in nature and focused on investigating the experiences of Shi'a Muslim pilgrims, particularly those from Iran. As a result, there is a need for additional qualitative studies to explore these experiences more deeply and gain a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Cross-cultural differences may also influence the findings, indicating a need to investigate pilgrims from different countries. Furthermore, since various religious sites and events have unique characteristics and requirements, they may elicit distinct motivations and experiences. Therefore, future studies are necessary to develop scales that are specific to various religious sites and events. Additionally, since this study focused on the independent construct of the pilgrimage and tourist experience, further research is needed to examine its relationships with other constructs, such as behavioral intention, word of mouth, engagement, co-creation, and others. This will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing pilgrims' behaviors and decision-making processes.

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