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Environmental Sustainability in Religious Tourism: A Systematic Review and SDG Mapping

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Abstract

Tourism's environmental impacts have been extensively studied; however, limited attention has been given to the environmental effects of religious tourism. In an era of increasing concern about sustainability, understanding how religious tourism aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) becomes a strategic priority. Using a mixed-method approach (bibliometric and content analysis) and PRISMA guidelines, 108 publications (1999–2023) were reviewed. The findings show limited but growing engagement with environmental sustainability, with only a small subset of studies explicitly addressing SDG-linked outcomes. The analysis advances understanding of religious tourism within sustainability discourse and offers practical directions for policy and planning.

Key Words: Religious tourism, Bibliometric analysis, Environmental sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Pilgrims.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Religious tourism refers to the movement of people—individually or in groups—to destinations connected to their religious or spiritual beliefs. Although pilgrimage has existed for thousands of years (Timothy & Olsen, 2006), its prominence declined temporarily with the rise of other tourism segments (Collins-Kreiner, 2019). However, in past decades, religious tourism has re-emerged as a significant global phenomenon, driven by globalization, mass mobility, and the commercialization of travel (Liro, 2020).

Sacred destinations such as Varanasi, the Vatican, Lhasa, and Mecca serve as spiritual centres for diverse religious communities. Visits to these sites not only provide spiritual fulfilment, but also strengthen social cohesion, stimulate local economies, and promote community development (Shinde, 2015). A 2017 survey estimate suggests that nearly 300 million tourists visit major religious sites annually (Tribe, 2020). Furthermore, the market is projected to reach USD 1,704.2 million by 2028 (Albayrak et al., 2018). Despite this rapid expansion, scholarly attention has largely focused on the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of religious tourism, often overlooking its environmental implications.

Environmental Challenges of Religious Tourism

The growing influx of visitors to sacred destinations often leads to adverse environmental impressions, including overcrowding, pressure on local infrastructure, and degradation of natural resources (Lin et al., 2021). In ecologically sensitive regions, these pressures are further intensified by weak regulatory mechanisms and seasonal surges in pilgrimage flows.

These pressures have been linked to catastrophic events such as floods and landslides (Nawaz et al., 2023). For example, Kedarnath—one of Hinduism’s most revered pilgrimage sites—has experienced recurrent destructive flooding in recent years. Similarly, the impact of the 2022 floods in Mecca and the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal were reportedly aggravated by the infrastructural strain of unmanaged pilgrim flows. (Hussain & Khan, 2023). Such examples highlight that religious tourism is not merely a cultural or economic activity but also an environmental concern that requires systematic scholarly attention.

Knowledge and SDG Gaps

While environmental sustainability has become a central theme in broader tourism research, its integration within religious tourism studies remains limited. Existing research prioritises pilgrimage experiences, destination branding, and economic benefits, lacking focus on environmental consequences. One possible reason is that religious tourism is a value-driven and culturally sensitive domain, where environmental critique may be underemphasised. Moreover, though tourism is widely linked with sustainability agendas, the intersection between religious tourism and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains underexplored. Prior systematic reviews in tourism sustainability are homogeneous, overlooking the unique dynamics of faith-based travel. This creates a clear gap in literature, indicating a systematic assessment of how religious tourism engages with environmental sustainability within the SDG framework.

Study Aims and Contributions

Addressing this gap, the present study examines emerging issues, key application areas, and potential directions for future research at the intersection of religious tourism and environmental sustainability. To advance knowledge in this domain, the study systematically analyses existing literature to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What is the current status of research on religious tourism?

RQ2. What research contexts and themes have been examined in the existing literature?

RQ3. To what extent do current studies investigate the environmental impacts of religious tourism, and how do they align with specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

RQ4. What future research themes could further advance this domain?

This study makes two key contributions. First, it foregrounds religious tourism as a distinct and underexamined domain within sustainability. Second, it employs a multi-layered methodological approach to address the research questions comprehensively, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to design more sustainable tourism strategies. By identifying both addressed and overlooked SDGs, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of sustainability in faith-based tourism contexts.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relationship between religious tourism and environmental sustainability; Section 3 outlines the materials and methods; Section 4 presents the findings of the bibliometric analysis; Section 5 discusses the results; Section 6 maps the findings on SDGs; and Section 7 concludes with the key implications.

RELIGIOUS TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Tourism's substantial contributions to national economies, employment generation, and infrastructural development are widely acknowledged. However, there is a need to balance these benefits against the negative social and environmental consequences associated with tourism (Yang et al., 2023). Within this broader discourse, scholars have begun to acknowledge these adverse impacts, though the evidence remains fragmented.

Existing literature shows convergence in recognising that religious tourism contributes to environmental degradation through increased visitor pressure on fragile ecosystems. For example, in discussing the environmental consequences of religious tourism, Shinde and Olsen (2022) propose strategies to promote greater sustainability within this sector. Tabash et al. (2023) analyse the relationship between religious tourism and environmental degradation in Saudi Arabia, highlighting its influence on foreign direct investment. Similarly, Ozturk et al. (2022) report a positive relationship between religious tourism and CO₂ emissions, highlighting the deleterious effects on tourism infrastructure, the erosion of religious heritage landscapes, and the degradation of community values and the “spirit of place”. Along with this, there is a notable divergence in how these impacts are interpreted. While many scholars frame religious tourism as an economic driver, others position it as a source of unsustainable practices. The divergence is visible in the methodological inconsistencies. On one hand there are large portions of studies relying on macro- level indicators; very few studies adopt micro- level approaches to cover lived environmental impacts on the local populations.

Although environmental degradation is highlighted in the literature, much tends to emphasise similar issues— such as environmental deterioration, high visitor density, congestion, vandalism, noise pollution, and microclimatic changes- without sufficiently advancing empirical depth (Woodward, 2004). For example, increased visitor density has been linked to disruptions in wildlife habitats around sacred sites, with many destinations experiencing deforestation (Shinde & Olsen, 2022). In addition, overcrowding and accumulation of ritual offerings further intensifies air and water pollution, overwhelming local waste management systems. Despite these risks, few studies have systematically examined how climate change reshapes religious tourism patterns or challenges the sustainability of pilgrimage destinations. The literature also highlights conceptual ambiguity surrounding religious tourism, particularly in sustainability contexts.

Taken together, these gaps indicate the need for a more integrated and systematic understanding of how religious tourism interacts with environmental sustainability. These concerns are closely aligned with broader environmental sustainability priorities. Responding to these imperatives, the present study adopts the SDG framework to analyse existing scholarship and identify key areas where religious tourism contributes to—or challenges—environmental sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework adopted for this study is illustrated in Figure 1. The review follows the PRISMA protocol and employs a mixed-method approach combining bibliometric analysis and qualitative content analysis (Khanra et al., 2020). The Scopus database was used to identify the relevant dataset. Following the approach recommended by Parmentola et al. (2021), each paper was examined to determine whether it addressed linkages between religious tourism and environmental sustainability—for example, recycling, waste management, emissions reduction, or natural resource protection. Environmental sustainability was framed within the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on this assessment, a comprehensive map of the SDGs addressed across the literature was developed. While previous bibliometric studies have examined religious tourism (e.g., Iliev, 2020), limited research has investigated its relationship with environmental sustainability using such an extensive and structured approach. This study therefore, identifies both the SDGs that have been acknowledged in existing scholarship and those that remain underexplored.

Application of the PRISMA Procedure

The PRISMA methodology, comprising a 27-item checklist (Moher et al., 2015), provided a protocol for the processes of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, inclusion, and exclusion. This procedure ensured the objectivity, transparency, and methodological rigour of the bibliographic review (Snyder, 2019). The PRISMA flow adopted for this study is presented in Figure 1.

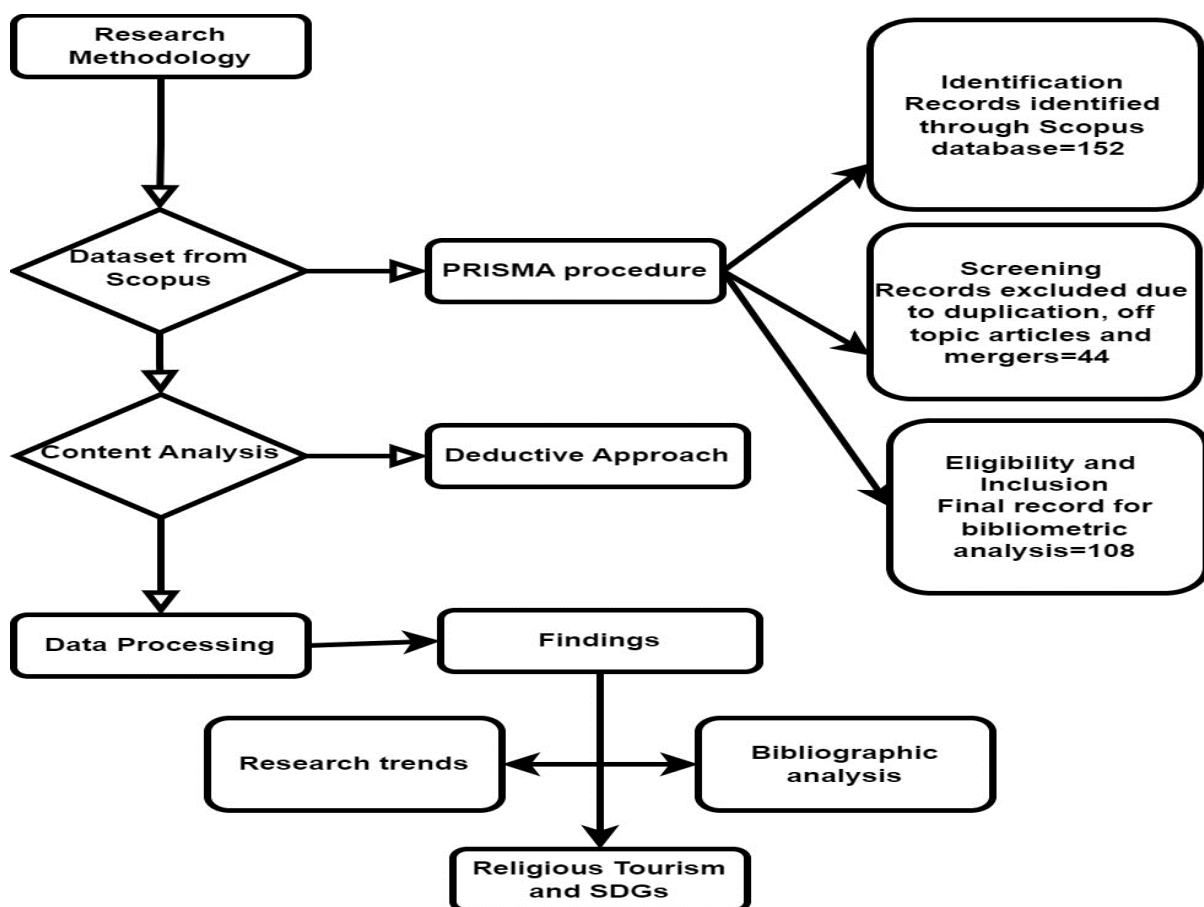


Figure 1. Research Methodology (Adapted from Parmentola et al., 2021)

Dataset Identification

A set of relevant keywords was identified and searched across article titles, abstracts, and full texts. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles. The following query string was used to extract the dataset from Scopus:

```
TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Religious tourism" OR "Pilgrimage" AND "tourism" AND "Environment")  
AND PUBYEAR > 1989 AND PUBYEAR < 2024  
AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar"))  
AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English"))  
AND (EXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "ENGI") OR EXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "MEDI") OR EXCLUDE  
(SUBJAREA, "AGRI")  
OR EXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "CENG") OR EXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "HEAL"))
```

Because "pilgrimage" and "religious tourism" emerged as formal research concepts only after the 1990s, the time span was set from 1990 onwards (Collins-Kreiner, 2019). The initial search yielded 108 articles.

Screening and Exclusion Criteria

The documents retrieved were screened manually by reading their abstracts and keywords. The following exclusion criteria were applied:

- (a) studies irrelevant to the topic;
- (b) publications in languages other than English;
- (c) duplicate records; and
- (d) articles published in non-peer-reviewed journals.

Using these criteria, 44 papers were excluded, leaving 64 articles for further consideration.

Eligibility and Final Inclusion Criteria

In the final stage of the review, to ensure analytical focus, the screening of the articles was conducted based on content relevant to environmental sustainability and SDGs. The following inclusion criteria were adopted:

- Addresses environmental dimensions such as waste, emissions, conservation, etc.
- Linked to practices in tourism leading to sustainable outcomes
- Engaged directly or indirectly with SDG-related themes

Bibliometric Analysis

For further analysis, VOSviewer, a widely used tool for constructing and visualising bibliometric networks, was used. The study employed:

Bibliographic coupling → to identify relationships between sources
Keyword co-occurrence analysis → to map thematic clusters
Network analysis → to visualise research linkages

Key Indicator: Total Link Strength (TLS)

To measure the relationships among authors, journals, and countries based on shared citations or co-occurrences, a Total Link Strength (TLS) was used. A higher TLS indicated stronger intellectual or collaborative connections within the network.

Content Analysis

The Scopus dataset was exported in CSV format, containing details such as title, abstract, keywords, author information, journal name, publication year, and citation count. A codebook was developed based on three parameters:

- (a) methodological approach,
- (b) geographical context, and
- (c) environmentally related SDGs.

Coding Process

- Each article was read and reviewed in depth by the author.
- References to SDGs were identified.
- Binary code was used (1 = present, 0 = absent)
- Articles could be mapped to multiple SDGs.

To ensure reliability and validity, a subset of the selected articles (20% of the sample) was independently coded by two trained research scholars using the same codebook and predefined SDG indicators. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, yielding 0.84, indicating strong agreement. The coding outcomes were subsequently compared, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. The codes were iteratively refined using multiple readings, and ambiguous cases were re-evaluated for consistency. These parameters enabled a systematic classification of the 40 selected articles out of an initial 108 for in-depth analysis.

Based on the analysis, Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework underpinning this study. The framework positions religious tourism as a driver of environmental pressures through pilgrimage activities, visitor concentration, resource consumption, and infrastructure demands. These environmental consequences are linked to broader sustainability concerns and can be examined through the lens of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to water conservation, sustainable communities, responsible consumption, climate action, and ecosystem protection. The framework further highlights the role of governance mechanisms, destination management practices, infrastructure capacity, and environmental awareness as factors that may influence the extent to which religious tourism contributes to or mitigates environmental sustainability challenges. The resulting sustainability outcomes provide the basis for the SDG mapping and thematic analysis undertaken in this study.

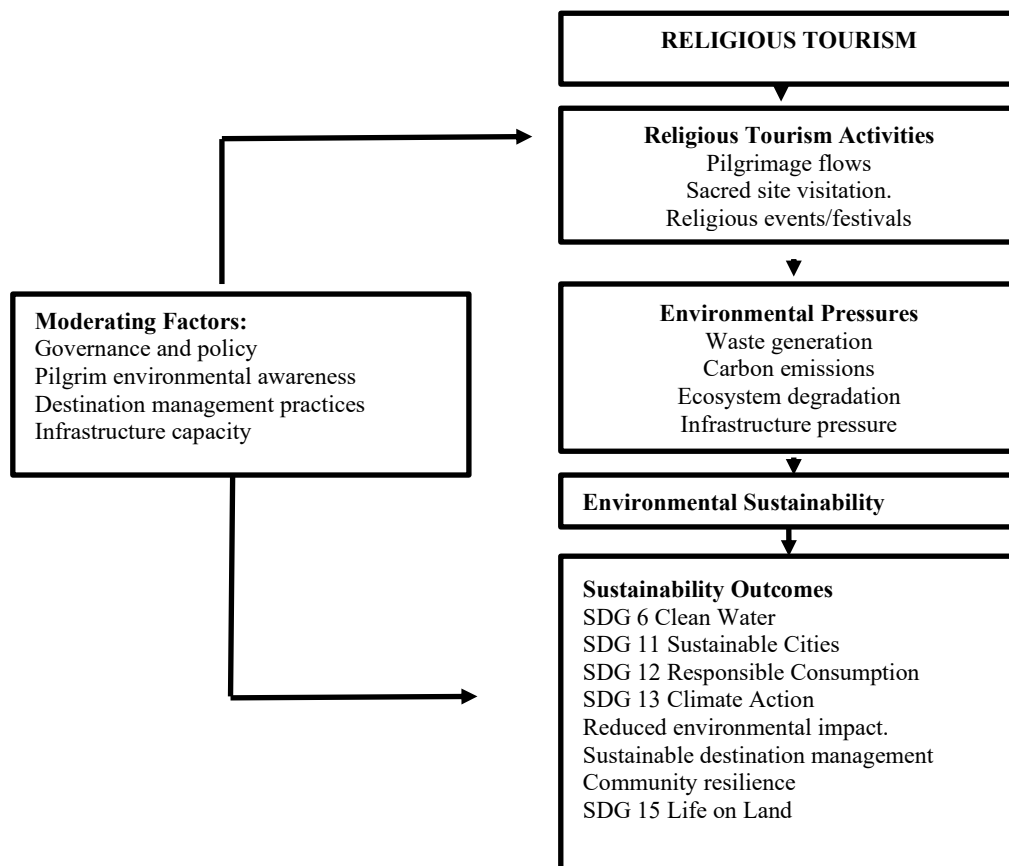


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Linking Religious Tourism, Environmental Sustainability, And Sustainable Development Goals.

FINDINGS

The study utilized bibliometric analysis to provide a descriptive overview of publication trends, sources, and collaborations. Further, the results also reveal deeper conceptual shifts in how religious tourism is understood in relation to environmental sustainability. The following sections will highlight the same.

Bibliometric Analysis

To examine the evolving dynamics of religious tourism and its relationship with environmental sustainability, this study adopts a methodological approach similar to that of Parmentola et al. (2021). Bibliographic coupling, word co-occurrence, and network analysis were employed. The 108 selected papers were analysed descriptively based on journal outlet, year of publication, research domain, country of study, citation count, and methodological orientation.

Yearly Publications and Growth Trend

Figure 2 illustrates the publication trajectory of the field, offering insights into its shifting concerns and emerging directions. Religious tourism remains a relatively recent research area, with the earliest identified publication appearing in 1999. Scholarly interest witnessed a surge in 2018, declined in 2019, and then increased significantly in 2020, when 38 papers were published. By 2023, an additional 12 articles had appeared. The cumulative publication trend shows slow growth until 2017, followed by exponential

expansion from 2018 onwards, indicating heightened academic attention to religious tourism and its environmental sustainability implications.

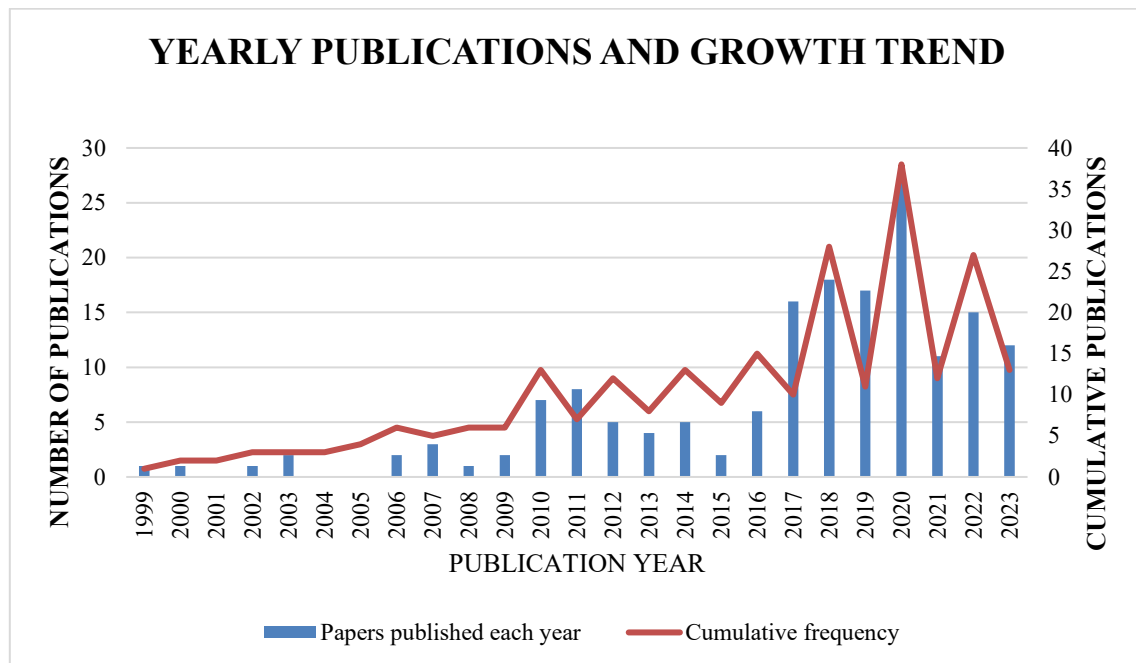


Figure 3. Research Trends in Religious Tourism - Publications Per Year and Cumulative Figures

Analysis of Publication Outlets

Figure 3 presents the distribution of journals based on bibliographic coupling. The minimum threshold was set at five documents per source and eleven citations. Of all the sources assessed, nine met these criteria. Each of these nine journals was then evaluated for its total bibliographic coupling strength with other sources, and those with the highest cumulative link strength were included in the analysis.

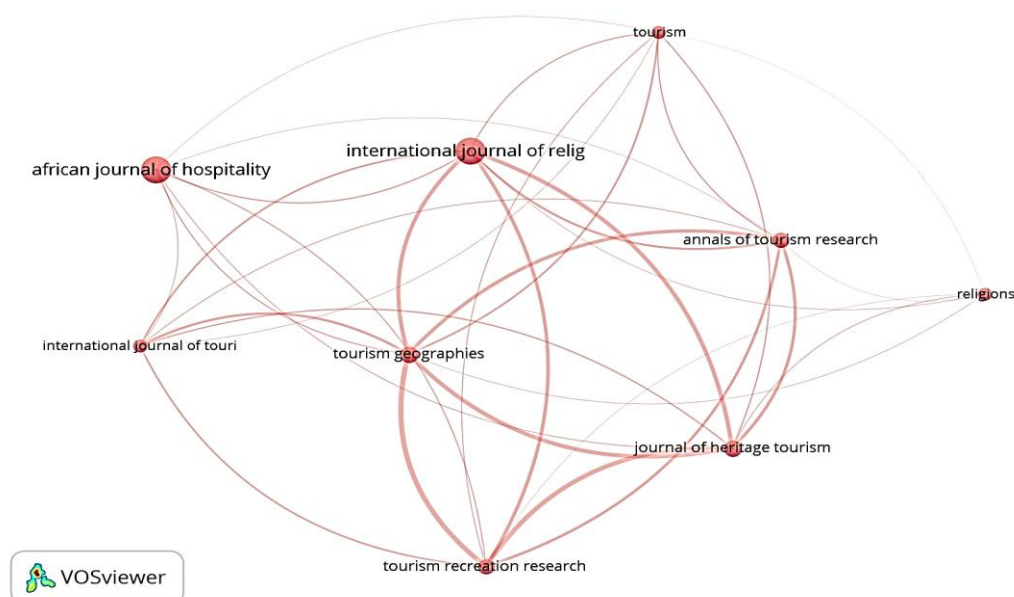


Figure 4. Distribution of Journals Through Bibliographic Coupling

Table 1. Citation Scores and Rankings of the Top 9 Journals (According to Scopus)

Source	Documents ^a	Citations ^a	Total link ^a strength	SJR ^b
Tourism geographies	8	160	548	2.596
Journal of heritage tourism	8	231	487	3.290
Tourism recreation research	7	225	476	1.066
International journal of religious tourism and pilgrimage	20	125	438	0.393
Annals of tourism research	7	615	337	3.426
International journal of tourism policy	5	43	218	0.202
Tourism	5	77	169	0.284
African journal of hospitality, tourism and leisure	20	229	130	0.216
Religions	5	11	59	0.322

^aSourced by VOSviewer.^bSourced by SCOPUS.

Scores and rankings based on journal sources were calculated, and Table 1 presents the top 9 most cited journals in the dataset. The analysis considered the number of documents, citation counts, total link strength, and the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR). Citation weighting varies depending on the journal's prestige and disciplinary relevance. The ranking shows that several high-quality journals—such as Annals of Tourism Research, Journal of Heritage Tourism, Tourism Geographies, and Tourism Recreation Research—have published extensively on this topic, indicating the field's growing scholarly visibility and importance.

Country-wise Contribution

The country-level analysis was conducted using thresholds of at least 15 countries, a minimum of seven publications, and at least ten citations per country. The results indicate that research on religious tourism is largely collaborative, with many studies authored by scholars from multiple countries. A total of 108 articles originated from 30 different nations. Israel contributed the highest number of publications, with 36 articles (17.1%), followed by South Africa with 26 articles (12.3%). The United States produced 18 articles, the United Kingdom 17, Canada 14, and both Hong Kong and India contributed nine articles each (4.3%). Australia and Ireland each published eight articles (3.8%). While six countries produced between ten and thirty-six publications, the remaining 24 countries contributed fewer than ten studies on religious tourism.

Table 2. Contributions, Citations, and Total Link Strength by Country

Country	Documents	%	Citations	Total link strength
Israel	36	17.1	1354	3415
Canada	14	6.6	380	2502
Hong Kong	9	4.3	335	2700
India	9	4.3	117	688
Australia	8	3.8	189	939
Ireland	8	3.8	58	916
China	3	1.4	20	271
Germany	3	1.4	3	40
Hungary	2	0.9	11	425
Iran	2	0.9	10	397

Ecuador	1	0.5	0	131
Ethiopia	1	0.5	0	250
France	1	0.5	5	112
Italy	1	0.5	8	60
Macau	1	0.5	67	515
Malaysia	3	1.4	3	586
Netherlands	1	0.5	0	174
North Macedonia	2	0.9	30	183
Poland	13	6.2	84	2212
Portugal	1	0.5	4	43
Romania	2	0.9	0	466
Saudi Arabia	1	0.5	1	117
Singapore	7	3.3	116	1822
South Africa	26	12.3	313	1284
South Korea	7	3.3	10	1161
Spain	3	1.4	16	1005
Switzerland	8	3.8	182	1384
Turkey	3	1.4	54	634
United kingdom	17	8.1	91	1289
United states	18	8.5	361	2801

Using the Total Link Strength (TLS) metric, the collaborative research output of each country was assessed (Table 2). Israel emerged as the most influential contributor, with a TLS of 3415, and demonstrated strong collaborative ties with South Africa, Canada, the United States, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, Poland, Singapore, Australia, and India (see Figure 4). The United States ranked second with a TLS of 2801, collaborating extensively with India, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Israel, Singapore, and South Korea.

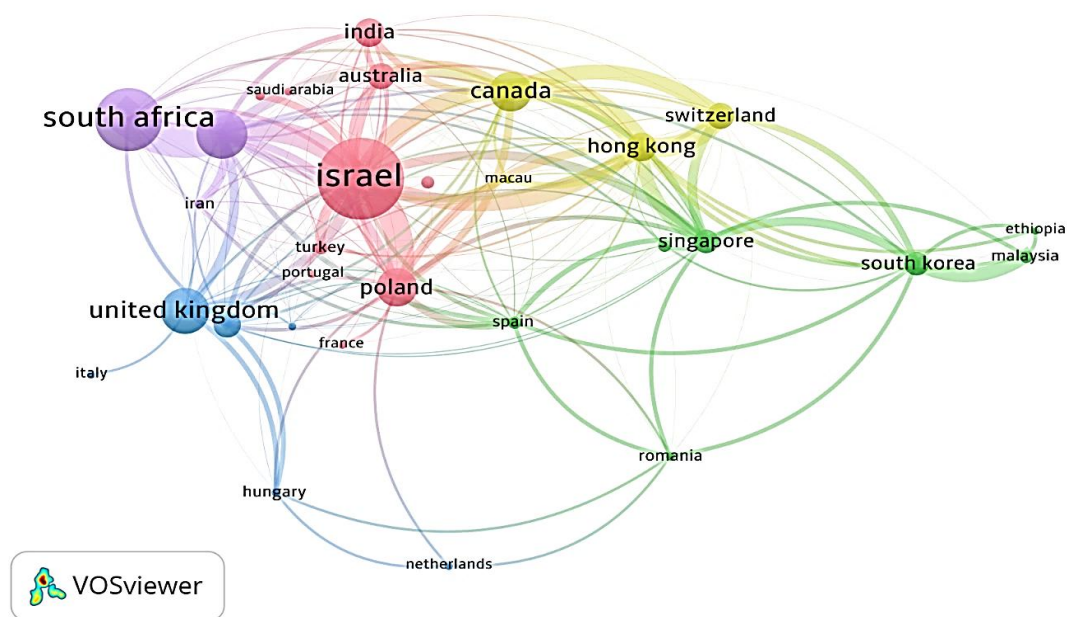


Figure 5. Collaborative Research on Religious Tourism Based on Countries

Hong Kong ranked third with a TLS score of 2700, collaborating with Canada, Switzerland, South Korea, India, Australia, Malaysia, and Ethiopia. The combined analysis of TLS scores and the Country Cooperation Network Map indicates that most countries maintain strong research connections with Israel, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Singapore.

In addition, institutions with more than two publications in this field were identified (Table 2). One institution produced 22 papers, five institutions published at least five papers each, and the remaining institutions contributed at least two publications during the study period. The University of Haifa (Israel) led with 22 papers, followed by Tshwane University of Technology and the University of Pretoria in South Africa with eight papers each. Walter Sisulu University (East London, South Africa), Leeds Beckett University (United Kingdom), and Brigham Young University (United States) each produced five publications, marking notable contributions to the field.

Table 3. The Bibliographic Coupling of Contributing Authors, Countries, and Organisations

S. no.	Top 10 authors	Top 10 countries	Top 10 organizations
1	Apleni I.	Israel	Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Haifa, Israel
2	Collins-kreiner N.	South Africa	Tshwane university of technology, Pretoria, South Africa
3	Di giovine M.A.	United Kingdom	Walter Sisulu University, East london, South Africa
4	Griffin K.A.	Turkey	Leeds Beckett University, United Kingdom
5	Henama U.S.	Canada	Brigham Young University, United States
6	Kim B.	Hong Kong	University of Augsburg, Germany
7	Kliot N.	India	Hospitality Business, Singapore Institute of Technology, Singapore
8	Liro J.	Australia	University of Augsburg, Germany
9	Olsen D.H.	Ireland	Arizona State University, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
10	Raj R.	Poland	Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University, Pune, India
11	Shinde K.A.	Switzerland	School of Global Convergence Studies, Inha University, South Korea
12	So jan I.	South korea	Singapore institute of technology, Singapore
13	Verma M.	China	Technological University Dublin, Ireland

Most Active Authors

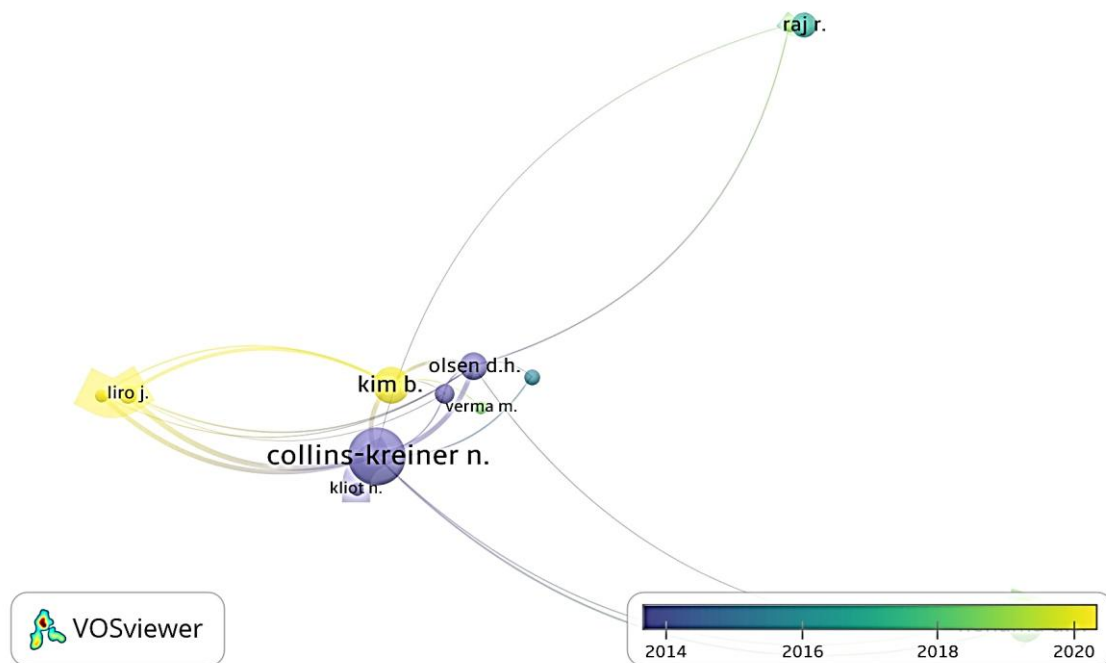
Table 3 presents the most influential contributors based on the number of publications and citations. The results show that Collins-Kreiner N. (16 documents, 1,283 citations, average citation rate of 40.1), followed by Kim B. (18 documents, 380 citations, average citation rate of 21.1) and Henamau (17 documents, 258 citations, average citation rate of 15.2), are the three most active researchers in this field (Figure 4).

The average number of citations per document was then calculated to assess scholarly impact (Table 4). The findings reveal that the most influential scholars consistently produce high-quality work. Although Collins-Kreiner N. continues to lead with an average of 40.1 citations, Kliot N. (average 46.4 citations) and Olsen D.J. (average 26.6 citations) surpass Kim B. in citation influence (Figure 5). This indicates that while Kim B.—who ranks second in productivity with 18 documents—is a prolific researcher, the recognition of her work is comparatively moderate when evaluated against that of Kliot N. and Olsen D.J.

Table 4. Most relevant contributors according to the number of published papers and citations

Author	Documents	Citations	Avg. citation pre document
Apleni I.	11	48	4.4
Collins-kreiner N.	32	1283	40.1
Di Giovine M.A.	6	62	10.3
Griffin K.A.	5	37	7.4
Henama U.S.	17	258	15.2
Kim B.	18	380	21.1
Kliot N.	5	232	46.4
Iiro J.	7	62	8.9
Olsen D.J.	12	319	26.6
Raj R.	11	82	7.5
Shinde K.A.	8	163	20.4
Sojan I.	5	38	7.6
Verma M.	5	33	6.6

Threshold: No of documents- 5, no of citations- 34

**Figure 6.** Most Active Authors Producing High-Quality Articles

Most Relevant Contributions

The relationship between the number of publications and their citation counts—where higher citations indicate greater scholarly impact—was examined. Only articles with more than 30 citations were included, resulting in a list of the top ten most influential publications (Table 5). The most highly cited work was by Collins-Kreiner N. (2010), which analysed the evolution of pilgrimage tourism, its core themes, debates, and conceptualisations. The study highlights the emergence of a postmodern perspective in pilgrimage research, particularly in distinguishing between secular and religious pilgrimage experiences.

The article by Kim, B., Kim, S. S., and King, B. (2016) ranked second with 104 citations. Their work investigates the hierarchical relationships among pilgrimage attributes, perceived rewards, and personal values, shedding light on both the profane and spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage. Articles by

Maphanga P. M. (2019) and Olsen D. H. (2010) received 73 citations each. Maphanga (2019) discusses how contagious diseases can hinder the developmental benefits associated with tourism consumption, whereas Olsen (2010) argues that the traditional distinction between pilgrims and tourists is outdated. Overall, the analysis shows that much of the high-quality scholarship in religious tourism builds upon these four influential studies.

Table 5. Bibliographic Coupling of Contributing Authors, Titles, Citations, and Journal Sources

Authors	Title	Year	Citations	Journal
Collins-kreiner N.	Researching pilgrimage: Continuity and transformations	2010	331	Annals of Tourism Research
Kim, B., Kim, S. S., & King, B.	The sacred and the profane: Identifying pilgrim traveller value orientations using means-end theory	2016	104	Tourism Management
Maphanga P.M	The tourism impact of Ebola in Africa: Lessons on crisis management	2019	73	African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure
Olsen D.H.	Pilgrims, tourists, and Max Weber's "ideal types"	2010	73	Annals of Tourism Research
Kim B., Chen Y.	Effects of religious celebrity on destination experience: The case of Pope Francis's visit to Salome Shrine	2020	68	International Journal of Tourism Research
Shinde K.	Pilgrimage and the environment: Challenges in a pilgrimage centre	2007	68	Current Issues in Tourism
Gatrell J.D., Collins-Kreiner N.	Negotiated space: Tourists, pilgrims, and the Bahá'í terraced gardens in Haifa	2006	61	Geoforum
Albayrak T., Herstein R., Caber M., Drori N., Bideci M., Berger R.	Exploring religious tourist experiences in Jerusalem: The intersection of Abrahamic religions	2018	52	Tourism Management
Strydom A.J., Mangope D., Henama U.S.	A critique of the interface between tourism, sustainable development and sustainable tourism in community based tourism theory	2019	34	African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure
Di Giovine M.A.	Revitalization and counter-revitalization: Tourism, heritage, and the lantern festival as catalysts for regeneration in hoi an, vietnam	2009	31	Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events

Source: Authors' analysis

Analysis of Research Trends

A co-occurrence analysis of author and index keywords was conducted to identify the major research domains within the field. The full sample was analysed using a minimum threshold of three occurrences per keyword, resulting in 711 unique keywords. The most frequently occurring terms were “religious tourism” (40), “pilgrimage” (39), and “tourism” (33) (Figure 6). The resulting map provided an overarching view of the research landscape in religious tourism, with co-occurrence patterns revealing deeper thematic linkages.

VOSviewer generated four distinct clusters, each represented by a different colour and exhibiting strong interrelationships:

Cluster 1: Religion-Based Tourism — 21 items (e.g., religious tourism, heritage tourism, spirituality, sacred sites, and pilgrimage).

Cluster 2: Religious Tourism and Environmental Sustainability — 18 items (e.g., ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and dark tourism).

Cluster 3: Religious Tourism and Geopolitics — 11 items focusing on tourism management (e.g., ideology, conflicts, politics, tourism development).

Cluster 4: Pandemic and Its Impact on Religious Tourism — 3 items centred on COVID-19 and tourism (e.g., pandemic, pilgrimage).

The keyword co-occurrence analysis shown in Figure 6 produced several noteworthy insights, summarised in Table 6. It provides a visual representation of thematic concentrations within the field, illustrating how sustainability-related keywords remain clustered rather than integrated across the broader discourse. This fragmentation reinforces the limited mainstreaming of environmental concerns within religious tourism research.

To explore the relationship between authors and thematic items, each article was examined in detail, providing a concise understanding of the key issues discussed. The findings from each cluster are elaborated in the subsequent sections.

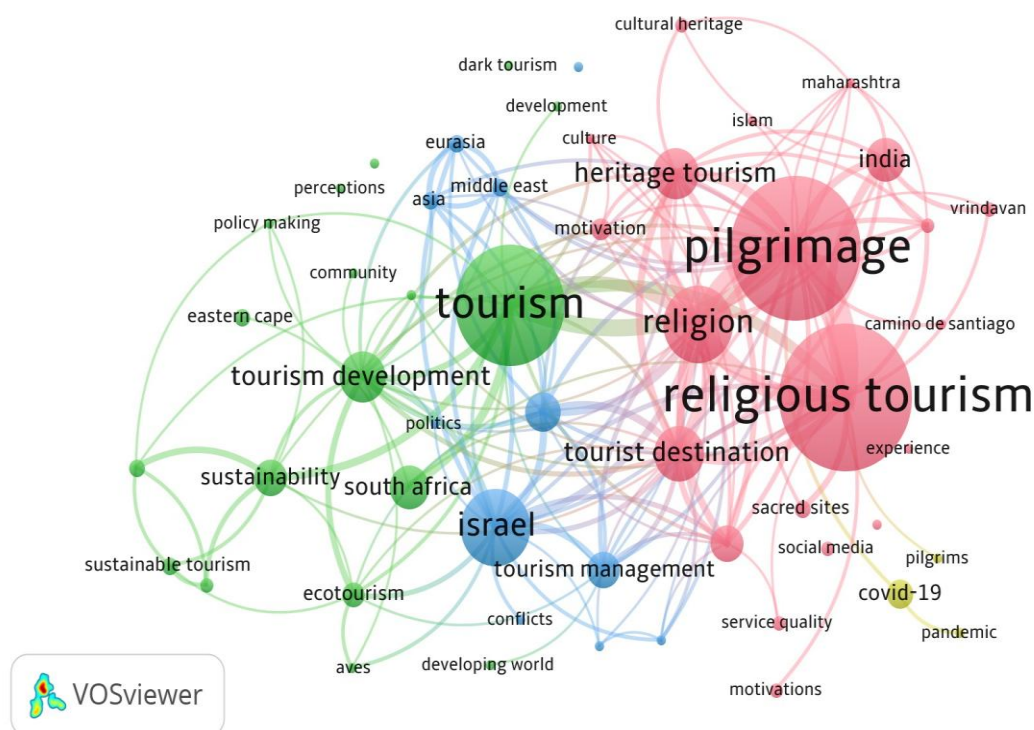


Figure 7. Keywords Co-Occurrence Analysis With Nodes Manifesting the Frequency of Keyword Co-Occurrence, and the Lines Showing Their Co-Occurrence Relationship

Table 6. Clusters, Items, and Authors (With Insights from VOSviewer and Authors' Analysis)

Clusters	Colours	No of items	Cluster labels	Items (VOSviewers)	Main authors identified
Cluster 1	Red	21	Religion Based Tourism	Camino de Santiago, cultural heritage, cultural tradition, culture, experience heritage tourism, India Islam, Maharashtra, motivation, motivations, pilgrimage, religion religious tourism, sacred sites, service quality, social media, spirituality, tourist behavior, tourist destination, Vrindavan	Rinschede (1992); Collins-Kreiner (2010b); Griffin (2007); Raj (2020); Caber et al. (2021); Nikjoo et al. (2020); Hilpert (2022); Hassan et al. (2022); Liro et al. (2022)
Cluster 2	Green	18	Religious tourism and environmental sustainability	Aves, community, community-based tourism, dark tourism developing world, development, eastern cape, ecotourism perceptions, policy making, South Africa, stakeholder, sustainability, sustainable, development, sustainable tourism tourism, tourism development, urban tourism	Iliev (2020); Trono & Olsen (2018); Shinde and Olsen (2022); Alipour et al. (2017); Qurashi (2020); Shinde & Olsen (2022); Shinde (2020); Serdane et al. (2020)
Cluster 3	Blue	11	Religious Tourism and geo-politics	Asia, conflicts, Eurasia ideology, Israel, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel, middle east politics, tourism, management tourist attraction	Liro et al. (2022); Kim & Kim (2020); Caber et al. (2021); Dowson (2021); Shinde (2015); Apleni & Henama (2020); Hilpert (2020)
Cluster 4	Brown	3	Pandemic and its impact on religious tourism	covid-19, pandemic, pilgrims	Di Giovine (2020); Nyika et al. (2022); Raj & Griffin (2020)

Cluster 1 'Red': Religion-Based Tourism

Academic discussions within this cluster examine how religious tourism is defined, what motivates participation, and the theoretical perspectives that explain such behaviour. The meaning of religious tourism remains widely debated. Jackowski and Smith (1992) describe it as travel driven by a pursuit of spiritual understanding, whereas Rinschede (1992) argues that visits may arise from cultural curiosity or a search for “new meaning in life”, even when the traveller is unaware of the site’s religious significance. Raj (2020), for example, notes that for Muslim pilgrims, visiting sacred destinations encompasses not only devotional practices but also pleasure and knowledge seeking.

Caber et al. (2021), through field studies conducted in the Vatican, Mecca, and Jerusalem, identified factors such as age, visitation frequency, and religious commitment as influential in shaping visitors’ motivation to share their experiences on social media. Similarly, Nikjoo et al. (2020), using an ethnographic approach, found three key motivations driving travel to sacred sites: (a) distancing from materialism, (b) a desire to transcend suffering, and (c) psychological effects associated with mass gatherings.

Destination marketing efforts at religious sites have prompted theological debates regarding the use of sacred spaces for non-worship activities, underscoring the need for value alignment (Caber et al., 2021). Hilpert (2022) examined signature events at prominent Catholic pilgrimage destinations in Germany and

found that these events significantly contribute to destination branding. Hassan et al. (2022) investigated motivations to visit a sacred city and demonstrated that such motivations predict fulfilment and commitment among religious visitors. Liro et al. (2022) explored the religious and patriotic symbolism of major pilgrimage centres in Poland and identified a strong relationship between spirituality and national identity. Overall, this cluster represents the foundational phase, reflecting the limited engagement with environmental concerns. The studies in this cluster suggest that sustainability has historically been peripheral to the core theoretical discussions.

From an SDG perspective, Cluster 1 demonstrates limited but notable engagement with sustainability concerns, particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) through discussions of heritage preservation and destination management. References to SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) also emerge, although these themes remain secondary to the cluster's broader focus on religious tourism experiences and motivations.

Cluster 2 'Green' - Religious Tourism and Environmental Sustainability

Religious tourism is shaped by two contrasting objectives: attracting visitors to generate economic benefits and safeguarding sacred sites from environmental degradation. An increase in tourist numbers often accelerates commodification (Iliev, 2020), threatens local cultural practices (Trono & Olsen, 2018), and contributes to biodiversity loss (Trombino & Trono, 2018). Despite these challenges, scholarly work has predominantly focused on travellers' motivations, rituals, and experiences (Raj & Griffin, 2015; Terzidou et al., 2018), with relatively limited attention paid to sustainability concerns.

A small but growing body of research examines how religious tourism affects environmental sustainability. Shinde and Olsen (2022) argue that sustainable religious tourism requires the integration of both religious and cultural elements, encompassing the tangible and intangible dimensions of a site's sanctity. Similarly, McManus (2005) highlights that expanding tourism-related infrastructure can erode the "spirit of place". Drawing attention to multiple disasters at sacred destinations linked to unsustainable practices—particularly in India—Shinde (2020) emphasises the need for systematic and sustainable management of pilgrimage sites. Overall, while pilgrimage towns contribute substantially to economic development, they do not necessarily ensure holistic sustainability (Qurashi, 2020).

A notable development within this discourse is the rise of slow tourism, also referred to as "aware" or "responsible" tourism (Serdane et al., 2020). To escape fast-paced living, many pilgrims choose slow travel along traditional or organic pilgrimage routes. This form of travel encourages engagement with local communities, culinary traditions, and cultural practices (Lois-Gonzalez et al., 2014). Such interactions foster cross-cultural exchange, strengthen local economies, enhance both domestic and international relations, and promote sustainable development (Trono & Castronuovo, 2018). Overall, this cluster showcases the emergent sustainability turn in religious tourism research. The results clearly indicate a gradual shift from descriptive to problem-oriented scholarship.

Cluster 2 exhibits the strongest alignment with the SDG framework and serves as the primary locus of sustainability-oriented research within the field. The literature in this cluster is particularly connected to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and SDG 13 (Climate Action), reflecting concerns related to infrastructure development, environmental degradation, crowd management, and the long-term sustainability of pilgrimage destinations.

Cluster 3 ‘Blue’ – Religious Tourism and Geo-politics

Cluster 3 highlights how religious tourism shapes geopolitical relations and international diplomacy, revealing the complex intersections between sacred sites, power structures, and national identity. Scholarship within this cluster examines pilgrimage destinations such as Jasna Góra in Poland; St. Clare of Assisi in Italy (Liro et al., 2022), St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican (Kim & Kim, 2020); and the Basilica of St. Francis—sites that attract millions of pilgrims each year. In the Islamic world, the Kaaba in Mecca and the shrine of Imam Hussain in Karbala are central to religious practice, while Jerusalem remains a shared sacred space for Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Caber et al., 2021; Dowson, 2021). Hindu pilgrimage traditions span sites such as Mathura, Ayodhya, Banaras, Shirdi, and Tirupati (Shinde, 2015). These sacred landscapes have distinct cultural, spiritual, and political significance and draw both pilgrims seeking devotion and tourists visiting for leisure.

A growing body of research shows how nations use sacred sites to bolster soft power and enhance their global profiles. Apleni and Henama (2020) investigate how religious events in Port St. Johns, South Africa, contribute to local economic development and highlight the governance mechanisms that shape these initiatives. Dowson (2021) introduces the concept of the “eventization of Faith,” examining three cases—including Jerusalem—to show how pilgrimage sites become contested spaces layered with religious, political, and cultural meaning. The study argues that widening the purpose of visits beyond devotional practice can generate more transformative experiences and reinforce both individual and collective identity.

Hilpert (2020), drawing on six German case studies, explores how sacred sites are branded in post-modern society. The findings suggest that increasing commodification may dilute, rather than enhance, the spiritual character of these spaces, transforming them into mass-consumption landscapes.

Overall, the literature in this cluster demonstrates that sacred sites hold economic, cultural, and geopolitical value for nations. As countries leverage religious tourism to strengthen identity, diplomacy, and development, maintaining a balance between the benefits and associated challenges becomes vital. Understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering cooperation and promoting global harmony. This cluster highlights how macro-level political analyses often overlook ecological implications.

Although sustainability is not the primary focus of Cluster 3, several studies indirectly engage with SDG-related concerns. Discussions of destination governance, regional development, and the socio-economic consequences of religious tourism demonstrate partial links to SDG 11 and SDG 9, suggesting

opportunities for future research to incorporate sustainability considerations more explicitly within geopolitical analyses.

Cluster 4 ‘Brown’ - Pandemic and its Impact on Religious Tourism

This set of publications explores how pilgrimages and visits to sacred sites were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a sense of spiritual deprivation among devotees. Drawing on ethno-historical analysis, Di Giovine (2020) illustrates how believers sought comfort in the writings of Saint Pio during the crisis. Other scholars similarly emphasise how religious teachings provided emotional and spiritual support throughout the pandemic (Nyika et al., 2022; Tsironis et al., 2021).

Although travel restrictions halted traditional practices, pilgrims adopted creative alternatives, such as participating in virtual prayers at major shrines (Raj & Griffin, 2020). Regions heavily reliant on religious tourism suffered substantial economic losses, with hotels, restaurants, and small businesses particularly affected (Olsen & Timothy, 2021). Addressing tensions among religious groups, government bodies, and public health authorities, Olsen and Timothy (2020) reviewed the literature to assess the future of religious travel in a post-COVID, post-secular world.

Overall, this body of work shows that the pandemic had immediate economic, spiritual, and social consequences for religious tourism. It compelled communities, religious leaders, and governments to adapt rapidly, revealing both the flexibility of faith practices and the resilience of individuals under pressure. Notably, several innovations introduced during COVID-19—especially virtual religious practices—have continued beyond the crisis and remain widely used today; sustainability concerns remain secondary. Overall, this cluster points to a missed opportunity for integrating environmental considerations into crisis-driven transformations.

Notably, the studies within Cluster 4 show little or no direct engagement with the SDG framework. This absence highlights a significant research gap and suggests that sustainability considerations remain unevenly distributed across the religious tourism literature, despite the growing importance of environmental and developmental concerns in tourism scholarship.

Relationship between Religious Tourism and Environmental SDGs

With religious tourism undergoing significant expansion and transformation (Collins-Kreiner, 2019), its environmental implications have become an increasingly important area of inquiry. This section, therefore, examines how religious tourism connects to environmental SDGs. The first step involved identifying studies with direct or indirect references to environment-related SDGs. The results are summarised in Table 7.

All 108 papers were reviewed thoroughly. Using content analysis, the core theme of each paper was extracted. Studies that addressed sustainability—either explicitly or implicitly—were then separated, counted, and expressed as a percentage of the total. These papers were subsequently organised according to the clusters in which they appeared within the bibliometric analysis.

Table 7. A Matrix Detailing the Connections Between Sdgs and Clusters (Authors' Elaboration)

Clusters		Cluster 1- Red	Cluster 2- Green	Cluster 3- Blue	Cluster 4- Brown	Total	
Number of papers that referred to sustainability along with main themes		7	21	12	0	40	
Percentage		6.5	19.4	11.1	0.0	37.0	
SDGs						Total	% of each SDG covered
1. No poverty		0	3	0	0	3	7.50%
9. Industry Innovation and Infrastructure		1	13	2	0	16	40%
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities		4	17	1	0	22	55%
12. Responsible Consumption and Production		1	2	0	0	3	7.50%
13. Climate Action		0	7	1	0	8	20%
14. Life Below Water		0	1	0	0	1	2.50%
15. Forests, Desertification, and Biodiversity		1	1	0	0	2	5%

Table 7 plays a critical role in addressing RQ3 by quantifying the extent to which existing research engages with environmentally relevant SDGs. It not only identifies dominant sustainability priorities but also reveals significant gaps, thereby linking bibliometric patterns with substantive sustainability outcomes. It indicates that out of 108 papers, only 40 (37%) directly or indirectly address the SDGs. As expected, Cluster 2 (religious tourism and environmental sustainability) contains the highest number of relevant papers, with 21 studies (19.4%), followed by Cluster 3 (religious tourism and geopolitics, 11.1%) and Cluster 1 (religion-based tourism, 6.5%). Among the SDGs, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is the most frequently addressed (55%), followed by SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) (40%) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (20%). This can be attributed to the spatial concentration of religious tourism in urban and semi-urban pilgrimage centres, facing immediate challenges related to infrastructure, crowd management, and heritage preservation.

Table 7 summarises how each SDG aligns with the thematic clusters. For example, SDG 11, SDG 9, and SDG 13—most prominently represented in Cluster 2—primarily appear in studies examining the

environmental consequences of increasing tourist flows to sacred destinations, including rising commodification, cultural erosion, and biodiversity loss. However, the lack of focused research on climate resilience, carbon emissions, and adaptation strategies highlights a significant gap in the literature. In contrast, SDG 1 (No Poverty) (7.5%), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (7.5%), and SDG 15 (Life on Land) (5%) receive considerably less attention. As discussed earlier, this could be because religious tourism research has traditionally prioritised cultural and experiential dimensions over systemic environmental or ecological analysis.

Figure 8 provides a visual representation of the cluster–SDG matrix presented in Table 7. The heatmap highlights the uneven distribution of sustainability-related research across thematic clusters. Cluster 2 demonstrates the strongest engagement with SDGs, particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). In contrast, Cluster 4 shows no identifiable SDG engagement. The visualisation further illustrates that sustainability concerns remain concentrated within a limited segment of the religious tourism literature rather than being systematically integrated across all research themes.

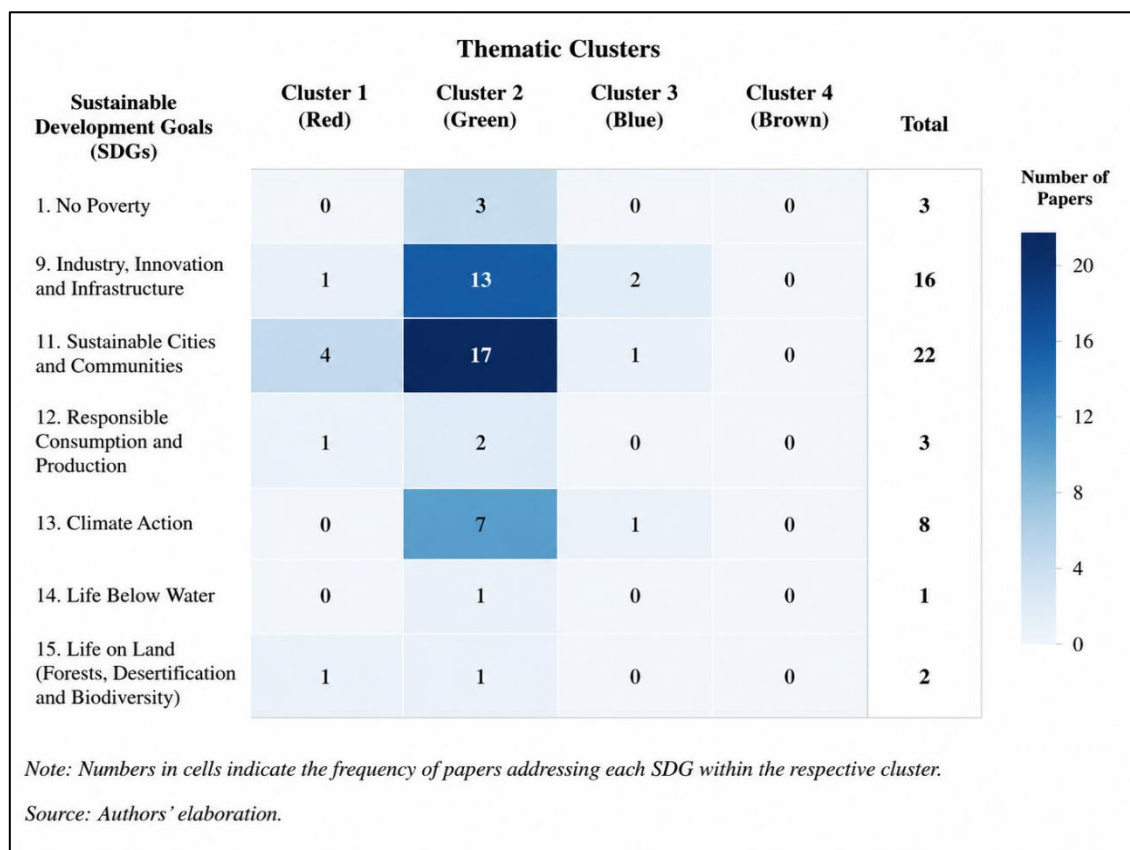


Figure 8. Heatmap of SDG Engagement Across Thematic Clusters

Overall, the findings demonstrate that despite the rapid expansion of religious tourism, research addressing its environmental implications remains limited and insufficiently prioritised. Notably, the distribution of clusters reveals uneven engagement with SDGs. Cluster 2 aligns most closely with SDG-oriented discourse, particularly SDG 11 and SDG 13, whereas other clusters show minimal integration of

sustainability concerns. This uneven distribution indicates that environmental sustainability remains compartmentalised rather than embedded across the field.

The dominance of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) in the literature is not incidental. As religious tourism is inherently place-bound and spatially concentrated, these destinations experience high-density, episodic influxes of pilgrims. This immediately translates into challenges related to crowd management, urban infrastructure, waste generation, and heritage preservation. As a result, scholars tend to frame environmental concerns through an urban sustainability lens, which aligns directly with SDG 11. Moreover, the neglect of SDGs 1, 12, 14, and 15 is not due to irrelevance but arises from disciplinary silos, methodological constraints, and a site-centric framing of religious tourism that privileges immediate, visible impacts over systemic socio-ecological processes. SDG 1 (No Poverty) is treated as an indirect development spillovers rather than as a core analytical variable in religious tourism research. Second, SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) requires a systems-level perspective on resource flows, supply chains, and lifecycle impacts, which is largely absent in religious tourism studies. Third, the marginalisation of SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) are partly explained by a geographical and ecological mismatch. Most religious tourism sites are inland or urban, creating minimal direct engagement with marine ecosystems. Similarly, assessing biodiversity and ecosystem impacts requires ecological methods that lie outside the dominant tourism research toolkit.

Although SDG 13 (Climate Action) appears in a subset of studies (20%), its treatment remains fragmented and largely indirect, especially when compared to SDG 11. This limited engagement is surprising given that religious tourism is deeply entangled with climate-sensitive geographies and carbon-intensive mobility systems.

First, many prominent pilgrimage destinations are located in ecologically fragile and hazard-prone regions—including Himalayan shrines, riverbank cities, and arid zones—which are increasingly exposed to climate-induced risks such as floods, landslides, heat stress, and water scarcity. Events such as recurrent flooding in Kedarnath or extreme weather disruptions in pilgrimage circuits illustrate how climate change directly threatens both visitor safety and destination viability. Despite this, the literature tends to frame such events as isolated disasters rather than manifestations of broader climate vulnerability, thereby under-theorising SDG 13.

Second, religious tourism is characterised by mass, periodic mobility, often involving long-distance travel by air, rail, and road. These mobility patterns generate significant carbon emissions, particularly during peak pilgrimage seasons (e.g., Hajj, Kumbh Mela), yet carbon accounting and emission analysis remain largely absent from the literature. This reflects a broader disciplinary gap where tourism studies acknowledge environmental degradation but seldom quantify or model tourism-related carbon footprints in faith-based contexts.

Third, the current body of research is predominantly reactive rather than anticipatory. While some studies acknowledge environmental stress, there is limited focus on climate adaptation and resilience strategies, such as climate-resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, carrying capacity regulation, or

sustainable mobility planning for pilgrimage routes. This indicates that SDG 13 is engaged at the level of problem recognition, but not at the level of policy design or systems transformation. Overall, while SDG 13 is implicitly relevant to religious tourism, it remains conceptually under-integrated, empirically under-measured, and strategically underdeveloped, highlighting a critical gap in linking climate vulnerability and carbon impacts with faith-based mobility systems.

The detailed analysis and the results derived from the bibliometric procedures led to the identification of five key research agendas that can advance scholarly understanding of the relationship between religious tourism and environmental sustainability:

Examining New Approaches to the Conceptualisation of Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is evolving rapidly, giving rise to new concepts such as spiritual retreats, New Age spiritual travel, volunteer-oriented religious tourism, faith-based cruises, religious conferences, and Christian camps (Iliev, 2020). Existing research also shows that many individuals visit sacred places for non-religious purposes, including sports, social interaction, and cultural exchange (Amaro et al., 2018). Despite these developments, the literature still lacks a comprehensive, integrative perspective. In this context, exploring interfaith and interreligious tourism—where individuals from different faith traditions visit each other's sacred sites—offers considerable potential for enhancing dialogue, fostering mutual understanding, and strengthening social cohesion.

A persistent challenge within the religious tourism literature concerns the lack of a universally accepted definition of the concept. Scholars variously define religious tourism as pilgrimage, faith-based travel, spiritual journeys, or visits to sacred sites motivated by cultural, recreational, or personal interests (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). This conceptual diversity has important implications for sustainability research because different definitions capture different forms of mobility, visitor behaviour, and environmental impacts. As a result, studies adopting narrow pilgrimage-oriented definitions may overlook broader sustainability challenges associated with spiritual tourism, heritage visitation, and emerging forms of religious travel, thereby affecting how the relationship between religious tourism and environmental sustainability is understood and operationalised.

Mapping the SDG Goals Pertaining to Religious Tourism

The literature reveals a clear gap in research examining how religious tourism influences environmental sustainability (see Section 6). Policymakers frequently prioritise short-term economic gains over long-term social and ecological outcomes (Hall, 2008). This study argues that although religious tourism may not directly affect every SDG, it can shape several of them—both positively and negatively—in ways that remain insufficiently explored.

For instance, SDG 8 can be advanced through employment opportunities created for local communities, which may also contribute to reducing inequality (SDG 10). Promoting responsible behaviour among visitors (SDG 12) can help mitigate environmental pressures, while cultural preservation and

opportunities for intercultural engagement support peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16). Similarly, collaboration among religious groups, governments, and private organisations strengthens the broader agenda of sustainable development (SDG 17).

Future studies can apply this framework to investigate the climate vulnerabilities of sacred sites and propose targeted adaptation strategies to safeguard religious tourism destinations.

Lessons Learnt from Virtual Religious Tourism

During the pandemic, virtual religious tourism emerged as a vital resource, with institutions offering online prayers, virtual tours, and digital gatherings to maintain connection and spiritual support (Nyika et al., 2022; Di Giovine, 2020). Although these digital tools proved invaluable during periods of restriction, they cannot fully replicate the embodied experience of physical pilgrimage. As conditions return to normal, future research can explore the lessons learned from virtual engagement and examine how religious institutions and destinations might continue integrating digital elements to enhance global accessibility and inclusivity.

Exploring potential for conflict resolution and peace building

Another promising research direction concerns the relationship between religious tourism and conflict resolution (Qu et al., 2022). Faith plays a vital role in cultural dialogue and conflict mediation (Raj & Griffin, 2020). Future studies can investigate how participation in religious tourism shapes travellers' religious identities, perceptions of other faiths, and attitudes toward intergroup relations. Researchers may also explore how religious tourism has contributed to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in communities with a history of religious tension.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has synthesised and presented a comprehensive overview of existing research on religious tourism—a distinct subset of tourism—and its relationship with environmental sustainability. The analysis offers a holistic perspective on the key articles, authors, and institutions contributing to this field.

RQ1: What is the current status of research on religious tourism?

The findings indicate that scholarly interest in religious tourism began to rise significantly only after 2018. High-quality journals such as *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, *Tourism Geographies*, and *Tourism Recreation Research* now publish extensively on this topic, underscoring its growing academic prominence. However, despite this growth, the field remains relatively recent, with a concentration of contributions from a limited number of countries. Israel emerges as the leading country in terms of research output, followed by South Africa, the USA, the UK, Canada, Hong Kong, and India. Among authors, Collins-Kreiner N. is the most influential contributor, followed by Kliot N. and Olsen D.J (refer to Figure 9).

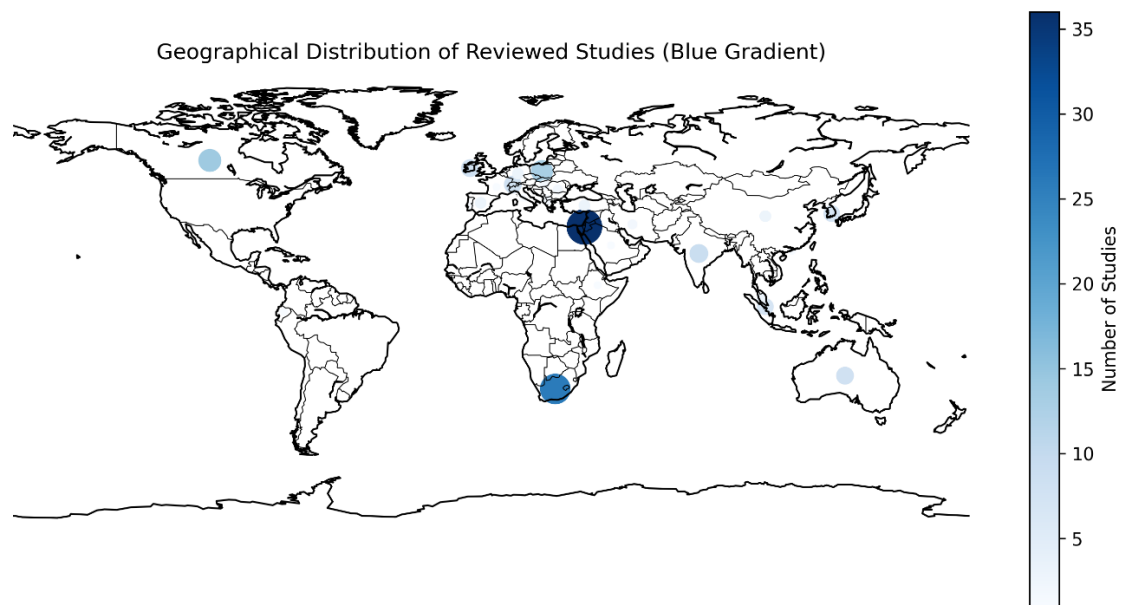


Figure 9. Geographical Distribution of Reviewed Studies Across Countries Using a Monochromatic Blue Gradient. Darker Shades Indicate Higher Research Concentration. The Figure Highlights a Strong Regional Concentration of Studies in Israel And South Africa, With Comparatively Limited Representation Across Other Regions, Indicating Geographical Imbalances in the Literature.

RQ2: What research contexts and themes have been examined in the existing literature?

Insights from co-word, co-citation, and dynamic co-citation analyses categorised the existing body of literature into four broad thematic clusters (see Section 5):

- (a) foundational conceptualisations of religious tourism,
- (b) environmental sustainability and community impacts,
- (c) geopolitical and identity-related dimensions, and
- (d) disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

These clusters bring forth the evolution of the field from conceptual and descriptive studies toward more applied and context-specific enquiries. However, sustainability-related research remains largely confined to a single cluster, indicating that environmental concerns have not yet been fully integrated across all thematic areas.

RQ3: To what extent do current studies investigate environmental impacts and align with SDGs?

The findings reveal that only 40 out of 108 studies (37%) engage directly or indirectly with environmentally relevant SDGs. Among these, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) emerges as the most frequently addressed, followed by SDG 9 and SDG 13. This concentration reflects the spatial and infrastructural challenges associated with pilgrimage destinations.

At the same time, several SDGs—such as SDG 1, SDG 12, SDG 14, and SDG 15—remain significantly under-represented. This indicates a fragmented and selective engagement with sustainability,

where environmental considerations are addressed in isolation rather than as part of a comprehensive sustainability framework.

RQ4: What future research themes could further advance this domain?

Additionally, insights from leading publications helped identify potential research agendas for future scholars. These include themes such as reconceptualising religious tourism to include virtual and interfaith tourism, integrating the SDG framework into empirical research, examining climate challenges, and exploring the role of religious tourism in fostering social cohesion and conflict resolution. Collectively, these findings highlight the need to move beyond descriptive analysis towards more theoretically grounded and policy-relevant research.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

To advance religious tourism as a specialised subset of tourism studies, future researchers can draw on the contributions of leading scholars and institutions highlighted in this review. The thematic clusters identified in the analysis offer a structured foundation, guiding scholars toward significant publications that can serve as anchoring points for further inquiry. Given the critical connection between tourism and environmental sustainability, researchers may also use the findings of this study to direct greater attention to the underexplored SDGs and propose innovative strategies that encourage stronger integration of sustainability practices within religious tourism.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATION

Finally, this study contributes to methodological advancement by proposing a multi-layered approach combining PRISMA-based systematic review, bibliometric analysis, and qualitative content analysis. Additionally, the study introduces an SDG-based coding framework, a set of metrics that help clarify how, and to what extent, various SDGs are addressed within this domain. These methodological tools can support more rigorous, targeted, and impactful research in the years ahead.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer several practical insights for industry practitioners and policymakers seeking to deepen the existing knowledge base on religious tourism and environmental sustainability. Policymakers can draw on the results related to addressed and unaddressed SDGs to develop strategies that maximise alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Governments may also use these insights to create guidelines that encourage the growth of virtual religious tourism, ensuring that such digital practices remain inclusive, accessible, and secure.

Additionally, industry practitioners can utilize these insights to identify emerging market trends and operational challenges within religious tourism. These insights can support evidence-based planning, destination management, and long-term sustainability initiatives.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE FOR RESEARCH

This study is limited by its reliance on Scopus as the sole database, which restricts the sectoral coverage of publications included in the analysis. Future research could benefit from examining papers indexed in additional databases and comparing the results across multiple sources. To further enrich the analysis, scholars may also incorporate grey literature such as newspaper articles, books, and magazines, which can provide broader contextual insights into religious tourism and its environmental dimensions. Next, the SDG mapping is based on content analysis, which involves a degree of interpretive judgement. Although predefined indicators and iterative coding were employed to enhance consistency, some level of subjectivity in identifying SDG linkages cannot be entirely eliminated. These limitations suggest that future research could benefit from multi-database approaches and more standardised or automated coding frameworks to improve robustness and replicability.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

By synthesizing factors from various theoretical perspectives e.g. economic theories, community empowerment models, and technological frameworks, the research presents a comprehensive understanding of self-reliance in the tourism context, this integration enhances theoretical models relating to community development and self-sufficiency. The study contributes to the literature by developing a reliable and validated measurement scale (SRTD) that summarise multiple dimensions of self-reliance in tourism, including Economic Empowerment, Infrastructural Empowerment, Community Empowerment, Demand and Supply, and Technological Empowerment. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of self-reliance and tourism in economic growth (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988; Ghadge et al., 2020) but lacked a comprehensive measurement framework. This study addresses that gap by providing a multi-dimensional scale that includes specific constructs like sustainable well-being and efficiency, which are under represented in earlier works of (Boley and McGehee, 2014; Ranasinghe and Pradeepamali, 2019; Jeong et al., 2021; Neuts et al., 2021). While earlier studies often relied on individual constructs to discuss self-reliance and community empowerment by taking economic (Kasturi, 1997; Pereznieta and Taylor, 2014; Surya et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2023; Boley and McGehee, 2014), social (Achmad, 2023; Yang et al., 2020; Sarr et al., 2021; Mandulangi, 2021) political and psychological empowerment (Boley and McGehee, 2014; Ranasinghe and Pradeepamali, 2019), this research integrates multiple dimensions, the empirical model constructed herein aligns with the thoughts of (DeVellis and Thorpe, 2021; Hinkin, 2005) but improves their approach by measuring self-reliance as an integrated system with multiple interrelated components instead of separate entities, suggesting that self-reliance is influenced by broader socio-political dynamics. The findings point to Infrastructural Empowerment as a critical factor for fostering self-reliance. This suggests a pressing need for investments in local infrastructure (roads, utilities, etc.) that supports tourism. Drawing from existing research, like that of (Josa and Aguado, 2019), policymakers should prioritize developing infrastructure that enhances both tourism appeal and local community access to services. Also identifying Technological Empowerment as a key factor in measuring Atmanirbharta in tourism highlights the crucial role of technology, an

aspect frequently mentioned but rarely explored in depth in existing literature, signals a requirement for policies encouraging the adoption of technology within the tourism sector. This includes providing training for local businesses to use digital tools effectively, as advocated in the studies of (Kim and Kim, 2017).

The findings of the study focus on Atmanirbharta which aligns with India's cultural and socio-economic context, emphasizing local culture, heritage, and resources in tourism development, based on discussions about local identities and practices by (Acha-Anyi et al., 2015). This study reinforces the idea that tourism cannot be universally defined but should be tailored to specific regional and community needs, a detail often missed in broader economic studies. The emphasis on Community Empowerment as a dimension of selfreliance underscores the need for policies that support local initiatives. This aligns with (Kundu, 2012), who highlighted the role of grassroots participation in economic development. Policymakers should design interventions that promote local governance structures and involve community members in decision-making processes related to tourism development. The SRTD serves as a diagnostic tool in aiding strategic planning and resource allocation, which fosters tourism rooted in local identity, benefiting communities and promoting sustainability. The multi-dimensional nature of self-reliance highlighted by the study advocates for sustainable tourism practices, reinforcing findings from earlier literature (Ghadge et al., 2020) that underscore the need for environmentally responsible tourism development. Policymakers should create incentives for businesses that adopt sustainable practices, ensuring that environmental considerations are integrated into tourism planning. The study emphasizes the cultural relevance of self-reliance, echoing (Acha-Anyi et al., 2015), who noted the importance of local identity in tourism. Policy frameworks should take into account the unique cultural heritage and practices of different regions when developing tourism strategies, ensuring that local identities are celebrated and leveraged in marketing and development. Investing in training programs aimed at enhancing the skills and capacities of local tourism operators and communities is essential. This aligns with existing literature (Laverack, 2006) that emphasizes the role of community empowerment. Training programs can focus on sustainable practices, business management, and customer engagement to attract conscientious travelers. Implementing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks can help assess the impacts of self-reliance initiatives in tourism, policymakers should adopt indicators that measure economic impact, community well-being, and environmental sustainability, facilitating a proactive approach to policy adjustments. These implications call for a collaborative approach between government, communities, and tourism stakeholders, ensuring that policies are well-informed and tailored to enhance self-reliance in the tourism sector effectively. Policymakers should design interventions that promote local governance structures and involve community members in decision-making processes related to tourism development. Policymakers can use it to design interventions supporting local businesses, enhancing community participation, and encouraging sustainable practices.

The rigorous evaluation of the psychometric properties of the measurement scale provides a methodological template for researchers aiming to assess psychological constructs in social sciences. The findings outline a theoretical framework that can guide future empirical research on self-reliance in the tourism

industry. Scholars can build on this framework to explore the impacts of self-reliance dynamics on tourist behavior, local economies, and community development.

Limitations and Future Research

The study, while methodologically rigorous, has certain limitations. The developed scale is context-specific to India, particularly Himachal Pradesh, which may limit its generalizability to other regions. The use of convenience sampling may introduce bias, despite the large sample size. The cross-sectional design restricts the ability to capture changes over time. The reliance on self-reported data may lead to response bias, including social desirability effects. Finally, the practical applicability of the scale across different contexts and stages of community development requires further exploration. Future research should examine the long-term economic impact of self-reliance, the role of social capital, and its relationship with variables like tourist satisfaction, community well-being, and environmental sustainability. Comparative studies across regions or countries and qualitative research could enrich the framework by exploring lived experiences and regional differences. Applying the Atmanirbhar scale to varied samples, ideally using random sampling, can further validate its robustness. Overall, future research should focus on cross-cultural validation, longitudinal analysis, and extended reliability testing to strengthen the scale's robustness and applicability.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the multi-dimensional construct of Atmanirbharta, or self-reliance, within the tourism sector in Himachal Pradesh, India. It involved the development and validation of a comprehensive scale (SRTD) designed to assess the various components that contribute to self-reliance. A total of 600 valid responses were collected across the Kangra, Kullu, and Mandi districts. This study successfully develops a reliable and valid measurement Scale (SRTD) filling a significant gap in existing researches by identifying key dimensions such as Sustainable Well-being, Innovation and Empowerment, the findings offer a comprehensive framework for understanding and promoting self-reliance in the tourism sector. Each dimension reflects how multi-faceted self-reliance is, emphasizing it is not just any economic concept but a holistic approach that brings together elements of society and governance. These insights provide actionable guidance for policymakers and practitioners, emphasizing the importance of local engagement, technological adoption, and sustainable practices. This study not only bridges significant gaps but also challenges and extends existing understandings of self-reliance in tourism, offering a more nuanced and actionable framework for future research and practice. Ultimately, this research reinforces the role of tourism in driving economic growth and community empowerment in alignment with the goals of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The author is not an Editorial Board Member/Editor-in-Chief/Associate Editor/Guest Editor and was not involved in the editorial review or the decision to publish this article. The authors declare that we have no financial interests/personal relationships

which may be considered as potential competing interests. This study did not involve any experiments or procedures performed on humans or animals. Therefore, the ethics statement is not applicable.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Dwub3sxAVY1hOc6x7NPXd5GA3ry06Sen?usp=drive_ and are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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