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## Exploring the Emotional Dimensions of Religious and Spiritual Tourism: A Study of Visitors to the Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan

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### Abstract

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Prior research has extensively examined the motivating factors driving tourists to visit religious sites; however, there has been a noticeable gap in understanding the emotional experiences of tourists during these visits. The primary objective of this study is to explore and quantify the emotional states, arousal levels, and overall satisfaction of tourists while visiting religious destinations. The study draws upon data gathered from 149 tourists who visited the Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Descriptive statistical methods are employed to assess and compare different demographic groups within the sample. The results of this study reveal that visiting religious places evokes a profound sense of inner peace and happiness among tourists, transcending religious boundaries. Remarkably, even tourists practicing religions other than the one associated with the visited site reported feeling blessed during their visits. Participants described a heightened sense of inner contentment and noted that the physical and mental pressures they carried seemed to dissipate during their pilgrimage. These findings contribute significantly to our comprehension of the multifaceted dimensions of religious and spiritual tourism, shedding light on the pivotal factors that drive individuals to embark on transformative journeys. By delving into the emotional and experiential aspects of religious and spiritual tourism, this study underscores the importance of emotional well-being and inner fulfilment as crucial motivators in tourists' engagement with religious sites.

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## Introduction

Faith Tourism, also known as religious tourism, encompasses the evaluation of touristic trips individuals undertake to practice and explore their religious beliefs. These trips occur outside their regular places of residence, work, and everyday needs. Faith Tourism can be understood as a subset of tourism that focuses on religious, spiritual purposes, excluding travel for professional reasons (such as work-related travel for priests, for instance), as defined by the UNWTO (United Nation World Tourism Organization) in 1995 (UNWTO, 2024). According to a report by Future Market Insight (FMI), it is projected that faith-based tourism will reach a significant market value of approximately US\$ 15.07 billion in 2023. This accounts for 3% to 5% of the total revenue generated in the broader tourism sector, emphasizing the economic significance of the faith-based tourism market (FMI, 2023)

Religious travel is an emerging tourism sector, with 900 million tourists visiting religious sites yearly (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). According to the UNWTO, religious tourism represents a substantial portion of international travel (UNWTO, 2019). Religious tourism consists of pilgrimage, faith-based events, social gatherings, missionary travel, etc., and it has also signified dimensions of mental engagement, emotional connection, personal spiritual motivations, enlightenment, knowledge, and social relationships (Yang et al., 2023). Religious tourism, also amalgamated with spiritual tourism, sacred tourism, or faith tourism, encompasses two primary subtypes: pilgrimage, which involves traveling for religious or spiritual reasons, and the exploration of religious monuments and artifacts, which falls under the sightseeing category (Dang, 2021). Travel based on religious orientation is a significant part of the tourism industry for many nations, as modern travellers desire to gain religious knowledge and spiritual experiences, explore various cultures, and be motivated to visit sacred destinations (Sestino et al., 2023). Religious tourism involves exploring religious sites that hold significance either to one's own faith or to others too. These sites, which include cathedrals, temples, mosques, and gurudwaras are witnessing a rising number of visitors worldwide. According to Yang et al. (2023), these locations draw people because of their religious and spiritual significance, as well as for recreational, educational, and cultural reasons. According to Heidari et al. (2018), academics contend that the enduring tradition of religious pilgrimage can be responsible for the remarkable growth of modern tourism. Thus, religious tourism helps economies grow and prosper in terms of per capita income and increases employment opportunities (Papazoglou et al., 2021).

It has been observed by Kurmanaliyeva et al. (2014) that there has been growing interest in religious tourism as it provides an opportunity for dialogue between various faiths, observing ceremonies and rituals, and living through the religious cult process. Furthermore, religious tourism offers travelers avenues for personal reflection, renewal of faith, and a great chance to connect with the traditions and ancient beliefs of sacred destinations (Piewdang et al., 2013). Religious tourism has

a wide potential to expand visitors' experiences, enrich social networks, build positive emotions, and absorb meaningful impressions (Kamath et al., 2023). Religious organizations will focus on managing various activities around this tourism, especially during festivals and holidays (Sestino et al., 2023). Management will take care of transportation and stay services, organizing exhibitions, museums, and avenues for buying souvenirs. Organizers will try to provide satisfaction and enriching emotional and sensory experiences for the visitors (Kurmanaliyeva et al., 2014). For religious destinations, the above activities provide economic benefits as income will be generated through various tourist-related services.

Spirituality and tourism are very well connected in the modern world. Tourists are attracted to places that offer an interactive experience of spiritual aspects such as analysis of feelings, inner dispositions, affections with yoga practice, and other well-being dispositions (Lu et al., 2017). These days, travel plays a key role in gaining spiritual well-being and self-betterment. Such tourism will help people gain spiritual experiences, fulfillment, and betterment compared to any religion (Wang & Blasco, 2022). The travelers are gaining spiritual meaning in their life through visiting religious sites and exploring sacred monuments (Dang, 2021). Today's modern-age followers are combining religious, faith, and sacred forms of travel options to gain spiritual experiences (Yang et al., 2023). Spirituality portrays a human being's mental and emotional well-being, social wellness, and human beliefs, principles, and ideologies; all these aspects of an individual will bring him or her closer to faith and religion (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). There are many dimensions of spirituality, such as devotion, worship, convictions, pilgrimages, and rites, that are relatable to the religion. This amalgamation of various beliefs and feelings leads to social bonds and total human well-being (Papazoglou et al., 2021).

In today's fast-paced world, it has been observed that a quest for a meaningful life should go beyond materialism. According to these observations, spiritual tourism has emerged as a trend that helps individuals in their personal growth and transformative journey to relate to nature and the divine (Lu et al., 2017). This type of tourism involves activities such as visiting sacred sites, pilgrimages, and destinations for spiritual practice and helps to achieve overall well-being (Kurmanaliyeva et al., 2014). The spiritual tourism industry has witnessed tremendous growth, with an exponential increase in travelers seeking spiritual well-being, the purpose of life, and detouring from modern hustle life (Wang & Blasco, 2022). Spiritual tourism also represents travel, discovery, and spiritual fulfillment. It offers exposure to various experiences, from visiting temples, churches, and monasteries to enjoying meditation treats, yoga workshops, and various other ceremonies. Such types of activities always foster personal growth, embracing different cultures through self-reflection (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). According to the UNWTO, there is much economic output with these specialized forms of tourism,

religious and spiritual, with a steady increase in international tourists contributing positively to the economies of various countries (UNWTO, 2024).

Moreover, spiritual tourism has numerous socio-cultural implications. As tourists are exposed to different religions, beliefs, diverse cultural practices, languages, rituals, festivals, food, etc., it will profoundly contribute to society's upliftment (Zou et al., 2023). The cultural exchange will endorse sustainability, the prevention of local economies, and the safeguarding of tribal communities and indigenous systems (Papazoglou et al., 2021). The study by Piewdang et al. (2013) opined that spiritual tourism also focuses on the environment, sustainability, society, social-cultural aspects, and overall economics. Religious site management always manages administration works that revolve around visitors' stay, transportation, and an overall convenient, safe experience, which leads to great spiritual exposure for the tourists (Yan & Jia, 2021).

In today's modern era, it has become imperative to collect information on tourists' behaviors when they prefer religious or spiritual places (Zou et al., 2023). This information system will share key aspects of consumer behavior, such as social, personal, demographic, geographic, and behavioral factors that influence tourists' decisions and whole journey (Yan & Jia, 2021). As this new form of tourism is picking up the pace, especially with the younger generation, and with its great impact on individuals' lives and society, it has become important to understand various motivational factors that drive travelers' interest in these upcoming travel destinations, which are religion-based (Sestino et al., 2023). There are many factors, especially personal beliefs, cultural background, transformative experiences, and socio-economic influences, that have a profound impact on religious or spiritual tourism (Lu et al., 2017). Understanding these motivations and studying deeper into this subject will help tourism planners, policymakers, and travel site marketers formulate effective strategies to serve the market in a better way. Research on tourist behavior has focused primarily on motivational factors to visit the destination or tourist satisfaction after a visit. However, despite strong research on religious tourists and pilgrimage, little research has considered the potential for measuring the tourist pleasure of visit and arousal to influence tourists' approach and satisfaction (Yang et al., 2023).

This research aims to explore the role of feelings, emotions, and experiences and the tendency towards religious sites and satisfactions after their visit. The foundation of this study is the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) mechanism (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which measures individual behaviors and responses. This theory was used in different contexts and settings to measure human interaction and response. Previous studies in the context of religious and spirituality tourism, have focused on other influences such as beliefs, culture, experiences, and social-economic conditions that will impact religious and spiritual tourists (Sestino et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). This study will bridge the gap by conducting an exploratory study on emotional states, arousal levels, and the overall

satisfaction of visiting religious sites. These feelings, emotions, and hidden arousals will work as motivational factors that influence individuals' decisions to undertake religious and spiritual tourism. This study will provide valuable insights into the underlying factors that shape tourists' motivations within this niche segment. Methodologically, survey questionnaires had been conducted with religious and spiritual tourists to explore their motivations, experiences, and feelings.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to both the theoretical and practical realms. Identifying key motivational factors such as feelings, arousal, and pleasantness will enhance the understanding of the dynamics within religious and spiritual tourism and shed light on the various important drivers that motivate individuals to embark on their transformative journeys. Moreover, the insights gained from this research will assist tourism planners and destination marketers in developing tailored strategies to cater to the diverse needs of religious and spiritual tourists.

## **Background of the Study**

### ***Religious Tourism***

All around the year, millions of tourists travel for their reasons of faith, religion, cultural heritage, values, and behaviors. The pilgrimages are fostering a great experience for the travelers by fulfilling their spiritual needs and special attachments through their emotions and feelings. People's deep love and long-lasting affections for religious places have promoted the tourism industry to manifolds (Sestino et al., 2023). When tourists communicate with the cultural ambience, enjoy grand statues of the deities, and are religion art and carvings of the buildings, they feel a great depth of connection with their religious sites. (Yan & Jia, 2021).

There are many key aspects of religious tourism, like pilgrimages, which are an essential part of many religious traditions, and visiting temples, shrines, mosques, temples, or other religious sites. Travelers all around the world are participating in religious events, festivals, ceremonies, rituals, and practices of the host community; such cultural exchanges will enhance religious harmony and appreciation (Piewdanga et al., 2013). Furthermore, many religious sites are world-renowned for their historical and architectural heritage; visitors will be attracted to visit these places to experience the art, architecture, and history associated with the pilgrimages (Collins-Kreiner, 2020).

Religious tourism has always been a significant and substantial cultural and economic phenomenon, with tourists traveling to temples, mosques, churches, etc. for their cultural experiences and connection with their faith. It has also helped many economies grow as local communities near the popular religious sites have shown tremendous development in accommodations, transportation, food, and souvenirs (Terzidou et al., 2017). There are many activities that travelers would like to perform, like gaining knowledge about the history of religious sites; moreover, many rituals and social-cultural

beliefs are also being performed. Modern and young tourists are always looking forward to the cultural and experiential experience of visits to sacred sites. They value positive emotions, pleasure, trust, and affection for these religious places (Kamath et al., 2023). While religious tourism provides tremendous cultural and economic benefits, it is also posing challenges such as environmental impact, overcrowding, and commercial greed. The host government and religious site management must formulate long-term strategies to overcome these threats with proper planning and a conservation mindset (Heidari et al., 2017).

### ***Spiritual Tourism***

Spiritual tourism also referred as religious tourism or visiting pilgrimage for spirituality or religious reasons. Tourists will seek to visit sacred places, show interest in religious ceremonies, connections with their faith, spiritual enlightenment, or also gaining knowledge about historic glimpses attach with the spiritual tourism. This form of tourism is world famous and significant aspect of global economy (Zou et al., 2023).

The key aspects of spiritual tourism are to visit religious sites and perform prayers, customs, duties as per the beliefs with various religions of the world. Some examples can be Mecca for Muslims, Jerusalem for Christians, Varanasi for Hindus, or Bodh Gaya for Buddhists. These sites hold very special place among the visitors due to historical and religious significance (Leong et al., 2024). Furthermore, authors (Papazoglou et al., 2021) have researched other interesting aspects of spiritual tourism which are cultural exploration, wellness and retreats, festivals celebrations, educational enlightenment, interfaith, natural beauty, and sustainability. Travellers may be visiting pilgrimages to learn more about the local and national culture, their communities' traditions, values, beliefs etc. which fulfils their motivation to visit the popular sites (Yang et al., 2023; Piewdang et al., 2013). Spirituality have been recognised in terms of serenity and tranquillity of the sacred sites, such environment has been proved conducive for yoga, meditation practices to achieve relaxation and inner growth (Duntley, 2014). Travelers often plan their trips to religious places during specials festivals and celebrations. These experiences allow them to witness the vibrancy and uniqueness of all the expressions associated with different religions, moreover these emotions will fulfil their inner spiritual growth (Papazoglou et al., 2021). It has been observed that spirituality will enhance personal growth, self-discovery, seeking wisdoms from religious gurus and leaders. This type of travel will also promote peaceful coexistence of all the religions as spiritual tourists also get engaged in many interfaith activities which brings harmony in the society (Miao et al., 2022).

In extension of above key points which are the important aspects of spiritual tourism, ethical and sustainable tourism have also been highlighted in today's modern era. Young and modern travellers

are concerned about corporate social responsibility shown by the management of the popular religious places (Terzidou et al., 2017). Governments have also intervened in keeping up the responsible and ethical practices followed by the tourists, management towards local communities and natural environment around the sacred sites. Spiritual tourism provides a unique and meaningful dimension to travel, allowing tourists to connect with various faiths, beliefs, traditions and achieve inner peace and harmony (Gohary et al., 2022).

### ***Emotional Experiences***

Religious tourism has been profoundly popular as symbolic and spiritual properties have generated diverse emotions in the tourists. Leong et al. (2024), have conceptualized many emotional behaviours such as experiencing, reflections after the visit, deep thinking, and active involvement in the religious visits. These emotional arousal serves as a motivation for the tourists to choose travel destinations and planning around it. Their satisfaction and delightedness are the most sought post visit evaluations. There could be positive or negative outcomes as per the tourist's hedonic characteristic and overall experience a satisfaction from the religious site visit. (Yu et al., 2023).

Kurmanaliyeva et al., (2014) have opined that religious tourism often revolves around emotional experiences as it is deeply connected with beliefs, spirituality, and cultural heritage. One of the important emotional feeling aroused is spiritual fulfilment, travellers will feel connection with their faith. Visiting sacred temples where journeys can be difficult, can inculcate range of emotions including joy, relief, and devotion (Sestino et al.,2023). Peace, enrichment, and personal growth are few positive feelings gained during engagement in prayers and participation in religious rituals. Religious festivals and celebrations will associate with inclusivity, diversity, equality among various faiths tourists. Emotional responses also include excitement, happiness, and sense of unity with fellow participants (Tsai, 2021). Some individuals prefer religious tourism for seeking emotional, physical, or spiritual healings, moreover sense of divine, devotion and hope related connections will also be felt by the tourists.

Moreover, the sense of awe and reverence will connect travellers with the rich heritage and local culture of the religious sites. Engaging with the local community during religious rituals, customs, traditions will deepen the acceptance and sense of belongingness (Terzidou et al., 2017). Furthermore, Yang et al. (2023) and Othman et al. (2013) have found that encounters with religious leaders, such as monks, priests, spiritual guides will also bring positive feelings and their preachings are emotionally impactful. These leaders will provide reflection, guidance, understanding, inspiration, and gratitude whether through meditation, prayers, solitude moments in sacred spaces. Overall, religious tourism has

a great potential to implicit range of emotional experience, self- introspection, and spiritual fulfilment, celebrations, and a cultural connection (Zou et al., 2023).

There are many ways in which spiritual tourism can evoke emotional responses. The first one is inner peace, calmness, emotional well-being, and tranquility feelings aroused after visiting serene and sacred places (Yan & Jia, 2022). Experiencing the beauty of nature, whether it is a mountain, river, or forest, can generate emotions of gratitude and connection with the divine. Spiritual tourism provides opportunities for personal reflection and introspection in many ways, such as through meditation, mindfulness, clarity, and a sense of purpose (Leong et al., 2024). Exploration of multicultural sacred sites and diverse cultures and traditions during spiritual tourism will lead to emotional upheaval. Learning about beliefs, customs, rituals, and folk art will evoke empathy, appreciation, and an understanding of the richness of human evolution. Participating in festivals and celebrations will be emotionally uplifting; music, dance, happiness, unity, shared rituals, and mannerisms are many of the various forms of positive feelings felt by tourists (Wang & Blasco, 2023). Tsai (2021) also researched that meeting with spiritual gurus can be highly impactful on the well-being of humankind in terms of emotional and psychological aspects. These encounters with spiritual leaders will provide guidance, inspiration, and wisdom, which leads to a feeling of reverence and gratitude.

Furthermore, spiritual tourism is sometimes pursued for healing and renewal purposes; these experiences may lead to feelings of hope, renewal, and a sense of healing. Tourists will also enjoy mind-body balancing practices such as yoga and meditation retreats, which enhance mind-body connection and a sense of balance during these immersive experiences (Lu et al., 2017; Othman et al., 2013). Spiritual tourism will boost community services and charity volunteering opportunities; thus, gratitude and humility will be imparted to humans's minds and hearts. Deep appreciations towards the universe and interconnections with all the living beings are very few and important emotions attached to the spiritual settings (Gohary et al., 2022).

Spiritual tourism is like a transformative journey for many tourists, leading to their personal growth and inner development. Participants learn to face new challenges, embrace new perspectives, and develop a new consciousness, which leads to feelings of empowerment, liberation, and evolution (Zou et al., 2023). Spiritual tourism is often interlinked with emotional upliftment, as tourists seek to connect with their inner selves, search for the meaning of life, and explore various dimensions of spirituality. It brings a holistic approach to the whole travel plan, bringing profound impact on individuals (Yan & Jia, 2022).



### ***Behavioural Response***

The study on tourists' behavior has gained importance as travelers have shown great interest in visiting religious sites for many purposes (Zou et al., 2023). There are many influences on the decision-making process of tourists when they select a particular religious site to visit. These influences come from various personal factors like age, lifestyle, opinions, interests, education, and occupation in society (Yang et al., 2023). There is a strong connection between social factors such as friends and peers' recommendations and the role of family in the final decision of the traveler (Sestino et al., 2023). Kamath et al. (2023) have opined that cultural heritage tourism will trigger emotional and cognitive experiences for tourists. Natural serenity, human connectivity, and cultural identity will charge up the positive emotional experience among the tourists. Furthermore, environment, socially responsible behavior, and conservation of the old sites are also crucial cognitive factors. Both emotional and cognitive factors will increase tourists's satisfaction and loyalty to heritage destinations and motivate them to revisit them (Zou et al., 2023). Understanding these motivations and studying deeper into this subject will help tourism planners, policymakers, and travel site marketers formulate effective strategies to serve the market in a better way (Lu et al., 2017).

People visit religious sites with many different motivations, such as an affective bond of attachment (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). Moreover, the provision of a diverse range of experiences designed to meet visitors' specific needs is essential to improving their satisfaction and stimulating repeat visitation for the heritage site resources (Tsai, 2021). After a visit to religious and spiritual destinations, tourists feel empowered, educated, relaxed, and socially involved. Many cues, such as cultural symbols, atmosphere, values, and spatial characteristics of the sites, will influence tourists' behavior positively; thus, satisfaction and loyalty feelings will be formed towards sacred sites (Zou et al., 2023).

Sestino et al. (2023) have also researched the awe feeling that has been noticed in various tourists' experiences. This awe-inspiring behavior could be some sort of confusion, exclamation, fear, or complex emotion. These different notions and perceptions can also alleviate the overall travel experience and satisfaction level (Yu et al., 2023).

It has also been observed that sustainable development goals are also one of the important factors revolved around religious tourism sites, as tourists are aware of these global issues. They will prefer those religious and spiritual pilgrimages that are ecologically sustained, biodiverse, and inclined toward long-term environmental economics and strategies (Lu et al., 2017). It has been observed that, in the modern era, the number of young-age travelers is substantial, and they strongly believe that environmentally sustainable strategies need to be followed by the management of religious sites. This

phenomenon will bring back these modern and young travelers' intention to visit the sites again and embark on feelings of loyalty (Yang et al., 2023). The management of the religious and spiritual sites should bring these issues to their teams and move forward to include them in their long-term strategy to maintain the sites. If proper maintenance and sustainable actions are taken, they will help gain popularity among travelers. Therefore, there are a range of ways to develop more sustainable forms of tourism, which include lengthening stays, guide/driver capacity building, and partnership working with tour operators to improve marketing, increase satisfaction rates, and diversify the product (Lu et al., 2017).

Heidari et al. (2018) have observed new phenomena in religious tourism, like memorable religious experiences (MRE), which have generated interest in revisiting religious places. The factors impacting a positive experience are interaction with the local community and the natural beauty of the place (Zou et al., 2023). Loyalty has been measured from not only the behavioral aspect of revisiting the religious site again but also from the perspective of attitudinal, where visitors are recommending others to visit. Overall satisfaction, destination image, place attachment, and emotional solidarity are some of the few factors of loyalty (Kamath et al., 2023).

## **Methods**

### **Case Study**

#### ***Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan***

The Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan, is also known as Zenkov Cathedral, and it is one of the prominent landmarks located in Panfilov Park. Panfilov Park is a popular recreational area for tourists and has been named after the 28 Panfilov heroes, Soviet soldiers who sacrificed their lives during World War II. It is the second-tallest wooden building in the world and carries significant historical and cultural aspects for the city. This religious place was completed in 1907; the cathedral stands 56m (183 ft), and beneath the colorful exterior of this Russian Orthodox cathedral lies a strong foundation (www.advantour.com, 2024). The eye-catching golden domes and beautiful bright color schemes of the Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan, attract many visitors from all around the world (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan**

There are many key points about the Ascension Cathedral, such as the fact that construction has been done without the use of nails, which is an impressive architectural innovation. The cathedral is built in a Russian Orthodox architectural style, featuring distinctive and visually appealing design. All the exterior has been painted in a vibrant yellow, green, and white color, and its wooden construction provides unique character and warm vibes around. The interiors are extravagant, as they are decorated with religious icons and paintings, which have historical significance. This cathedral has survived earthquakes during its century-long existence (wlovealmaty.com, 2024).

The Ascension Cathedral is not only a religious site but a great example of the architectural heritage of Almaty and Kazakhstan, as it attracts tourists and locals to get glimpses of its great cultural richness. The temple is a pilgrimage for many Christians, a colorful attraction for all non-Christians, and gives a feeling of inner peace to the tourists (Kyrgyzstantravel.com, 2024).

### **Measurements**

All the items are adapted from previous validated measurements. We adapted most of the items from the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) mechanism (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and conceptualized it in spiritual tourism. A few items were adapted from Moghavvemi and Hassani (2019) and Chang et al. (2020) to measure spirituality, physicality, and unpleasantness. Likert scales (1-5), from strongly disagree to strongly agree, are used to measure tourist perceptions and feelings towards their church visit experience.

### **Sampling Procedures**

The data was collected from the tourists who visited Ascension Cathedral. A researcher distributed the printed questionnaire after they visited the church (Table 1) through convenient sampling. Data were collected from respondents aged 18 and above. The researcher collected 180 questionnaires, but 31 were excluded from the analysis due to missing data. The data was analyzed through SPSS.

### **Results**

Among the various demographic groups, married female tourists, tourists in the age range of 31 to 39, and tourists with a diploma exhibited a higher presence than any other category. Tourists visit this church for a multitude of compelling reasons. Many come to offer prayers for their families or friends or learn about Christian teachings. Observing Christian practices firsthand allows visitors to immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of religious customs. The church's architectural style, a testament to centuries of craftsmanship, draws those seeking to experience its unique charm. For history enthusiasts, it is an opportunity to observe and appreciate the cultural heritage and historical significance embedded within the church's walls. Some are motivated by a spiritual yearning, craving a personal connection to a religious site that exudes an aura of tranquillity and devotion. The church's iconic architecture, with its ancient roots, provides a remarkable glimpse into the past, leaving an indelible impression on all who venture inside. Tourists discovered this church through a variety of sources to gather information and insights. Word-of-mouth recommendations from the residents of the local community provided an authentic and personal perspective on the church's significance. Many visitors have been guided by the warm hospitality of the local people, who often share stories and

historical tidbits. Platforms like TripAdvisor, the church's social media, and the Tourism Kazakhstan website served as reliable sources of information.

**Table 1. Participant characteristics**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Female	85	57
	Male	64	43
<i>Marital status</i>	Single	51	34
	Married	98	66
<i>Age range</i>	Below 30	25	16
	31-39	47	31
	40-45	35	23
	Over 46	42	28
<i>Education</i>	Diploma	87	58
	Degree	15	10
	Master	47	31
<i>Religion</i>	Christian	84	56
	Muslim	65	43
<i>Reasons to visit Church</i>	Pray for families or friends	38	25
	To learn about Christianity teachings/Christian	21	14
	Observe Christian practices	19	12
	Experience the style of Church	16	10
	To fulfil my curiosity	16	10
	Observe Culture	11	7
	Observe Heritage / History	9	6
	For spiritual reason, interested to have personal interaction with religious site, observe iconic architecture, experience ancient architecture	19	12
<i>Sources of information about this Church</i>	Words of Mouth	34	22
	The local people guided me	41	27
	Trip Advisor	22	14
	Church's social media	16	10
	Tourism Kazakhstan Website	16	10
	Others	16	10
	Photo shared from my friends in social media	4	2

Note. n = 149.

The items were compared through the mean and standard deviation (Table 2). The results show that Christian and Muslim tourists share positive perceptions and experiences during their visits to the Ascension Cathedral, with some nuanced differences in their emotional responses and levels of attachment. These findings could inform efforts to cater to the specific needs and expectations of these tourist groups and enhance their overall experience at the site. Both Christian and Muslim tourists reported high levels of mental peace associated with their visit to the church, with Muslims slightly higher at 4.45 compared to Christians at 4.40. Christian tourists indicated a slightly higher level of happiness (4.63) compared to Muslim tourists (4.48) during their visit to the church. There was a slight difference in perception, with Christian tourists (4.25) reporting slightly lower mental self-comfort compared to Muslim tourists (4.45). Both groups felt a sense of calm during their visit, with Christians at 4.35 and Muslims at 4.29. Christian tourists reported a slightly lower level of inner happiness (4.17) compared to Muslim tourists (4.23). Both groups perceived a religious atmosphere during their visit, with Christians at 4.23 and Muslims at 4.18. Muslim tourists (4.37) reported a higher inclination to think about themselves during their visit compared to Christian tourists (4.15). Both groups considered visiting the church a great achievement, with Christians at 4.45 and Muslims at 4.35. Both groups felt a degree of spiritual attachment, with Christians at 4.12 and Muslims at 4.17. Muslim tourists felt slightly closer to the church during the pilgrimage (4.18) compared to Christian tourists (3.99). Both groups felt blessed during their pilgrimage, with Christians at 4.37 and Muslims at 4.43. Christian tourists (4.33) indicated a slightly more positive attitude towards the church compared to Muslim tourists (4.25). Christian tourists (4.23) felt more purified after the pilgrimage compared to Muslim tourists (3.98). Both groups expressed a desire to spend time in the church, with Christians at 4.24 and Muslims at 4.17. Muslim tourists (4.51) reported feeling more inspired by the pilgrimage compared to Christian tourists (4.39). Both groups felt that the pressure of body and mind could be released during the pilgrimage, with Christians at 4.30 and Muslims at 4.28. Christian tourists (3.56) perceived a lower improvement in physical condition compared to Muslim tourists (3.65) because of the pilgrimage. Muslims expressed a slightly higher sense of ebullience (4.29) and enthusiasm (4.20) towards the pilgrimage compared to Christian tourists (4.10 and 4.07, respectively). Both groups expressed an intention to revisit the church in the future, with Christians at 3.93 and Muslims at 4.08.

**Table 2. Mean comparison: Christian and Muslim tourists**

<b>Link to the Church website: <a href="https://cathedral.kz/ru">https://cathedral.kz/ru</a></b>	<b>Mean 149</b>	<b>SD 149</b>	<b>Christian 84</b>	<b>Muslim 65</b>
<b>Positive Emotions and Experiences</b>				
Visiting this Church makes me feel mental peace	4.42	0.659	4.40	4.45
Visiting this Church makes me feel happy	4.56	0.661	4.63	4.48
Visiting this Church makes me feel mental self-comfort	4.34	0.741	4.25	4.45
Visiting this Church makes me feel calm	4.32	0.671	4.35	4.29
Visiting this Church makes me feel inner happiness	4.19	0.852	4.17	4.23
Visiting this Church makes me experience religious atmosphere	4.21	0.681	4.23	4.18
Visiting this Church helped me understand and think more about myself.	4.25	0.716	4.15	4.37
Visiting this Church is a great achievement for me.	4.41	0.707	4.45	4.35
I felt a sense of becoming one with this Church during my visit.	4.19	0.888	4.11	4.29
I feel I have a spiritual attachment to this Church.	4.14	0.726	4.12	4.17
I felt I was very close to this Church during pilgrimage.	4.07	0.717	3.99	4.18
I felt blessed during pilgrimage.	4.40	0.705	4.37	4.43
I would have a positive attitude toward this Church	4.30	0.721	4.33	4.25
I feel I have been purified after pilgrimage.	4.12	0.70	4.23	3.98
I like to spend much time in this Church	4.21	0.895	4.24	4.17
I feel a sense of inspiration about pilgrimage.	4.44	0.720	4.39	4.51
<b>Positive Benefits of Pilgrimage</b>				
I feel the pressure of body and mind can be released during pilgrimage.	4.29	0.791	4.30	4.28
Pilgrimage participation improved my physical condition.	3.56	0.76	3.56	3.65
I feel a sense of ebullience toward pilgrimage.	4.18	0.745	4.10	4.29
I feel a sense of enthusiasm toward pilgrimage.	4.13	0.808	4.07	4.20
I will visit this Church again in the future	3.99	1.094	3.93	4.08
<b>Mixed Emotions</b>				
Visiting this Church Induces fear in me	1.73	0.835	1.67	1.82
<b>Intention to visit again</b>				
I intent to visit this Church in next few months	4.48	0.67	4.40	4.57

## Discussion

This study explores the emotional experiences of tourists visiting the Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan, shedding light on the complex dynamics of religious and spiritual tourism. The study focuses on the emotional states, arousal levels, and overall satisfaction of tourists, aiming to bridge the

gap in understanding the nuanced aspects of these experiences. The findings reveal intriguing insights into the emotional dimensions of religious tourism, encompassing feelings of inner peace, happiness, and a sense of spiritual connection transcending religious boundaries. The research highlights the profound impact of religious tourism on individuals' emotional well-being, emphasizing the role of feelings, arousal, and overall satisfaction as crucial motivators. The results of this study are consistent with previous studies such as Kurmanaliyeva et al. (2014), Sestino et al. (2023), Moghavvemi and Hassani (2019), which indicated the emotional aspect of religious tourism as it connected with their beliefs and spirituality. Common feelings among tourists belonging to any religion are joy, relief, peace, enrichment, and personal growth. The results of the study show that the measurements from the SOR model can be used to measure tourist arousal, pleasure, and approach towards religious sites to measure their experience and future actions. The study challenges the conventional focus on external factors such as destination attributes, cultural background, or socio-economic influences by placing emotions at the forefront of the tourist experience.

One notable finding is the shared positive perceptions and experiences among Christian and Muslim tourists visiting the Ascension Cathedral. Despite differences in religious beliefs, both groups reported high levels of mental peace, happiness, and a sense of achievement during their pilgrimage. This suggests that the emotional benefits derived from religious tourism may transcend specific religious affiliations, fostering a sense of unity among diverse groups of visitors. While the overall emotional experiences were positive for both groups, nuanced differences emerged. For instance, Christian tourists reported slightly higher levels of happiness and a more positive attitude towards the church, while Muslim tourists indicated a higher inclination towards self-reflection during their visit. These results suggested that the spiritual and religious significance of the church that Christian tourists visited contributed to their overall sense of joy and deeper emotional connection to religious institutions and their role in their faith. However, for Muslims, the experience of visiting church prompted them to think more about their beliefs and spirituality. These differences can be due to various factors, such as cultural background, religious teachings, and individual interpretations of religious practices.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This research tested the SOR model in the context of spiritual tourism, and the results show that the measurement is able to examine tourist emotions, feelings, and experiences. The research makes a significant theoretical contribution by placing emotions at the forefront of the tourist experience in religious tourism. By focusing on emotional states, arousal levels, and overall satisfaction, the study enriches existing tourism theories, moving beyond traditional frameworks that primarily consider



cognitive and behavioural aspects. By delving into emotional states, arousal levels, and overall satisfaction, this research contributes to bridging the gap between psychological and experiential elements in tourism theories. It recognizes that the emotional experiences of tourists are integral to the overall satisfaction and transformative potential of religious tourism, providing a foundation for future theoretical development in this direction. This research did not test all the components of the SOR model and their relationship in the context of spiritual tourism, while future research can use this model to examine the influence of arousal and pleasantness on approach and visit intention or satisfaction. The findings contribute to cross-cultural psychology and emotion theory by revealing a shared emotional experience among Christian and Muslim tourists. This challenges previous assumptions that emotional responses to religious tourism are highly context-dependent and highlights the potential for emotional universality across diverse cultural and religious backgrounds (Yan & Jia, 2021).

### **Managerial Implications**

Organizing events, workshops, and guided tours that facilitate cross-cultural interactions can enrich the overall visitor experience and promote peace and harmony. In addition, addressing environmental sustainability concerns is crucial for preserving sacred sites and ensuring their long-term viability as tourism destinations. Implementing sustainable practices, such as the preservation of the building and its natural surroundings, can mitigate the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and enhance the site's appeal to conscientious travellers. Recognizing the historical and cultural significance of sacred sites is essential for preserving their authenticity and integrity. Destination managers should invest in cultural preservation initiatives, such as restoration efforts, heritage interpretation programs, and educational exhibits, to provide visitors with a deeper understanding of the site's heritage and significance. Crafting targeted marketing campaigns that highlight the unique experiences and offerings of faith tourism can attract a diverse range of travellers and increase destination visibility.

### **Limitation and Future Research**

This study has some limitations; we adopted convenience sampling in our research, and future researchers could use a probability sample that is broader and more representative. The limited sample size from one of the religious sites, Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan, might make it difficult to generalize the overall study. Moreover, in-depth qualitative analysis methods and other stakeholders' perspectives would have strengthened research findings.

The research paper calls for further exploration of the emotional dimensions of religious tourism and urges future studies to delve deeper into the motivational factors that drive individuals to embark

on transformative journeys. Understanding the diverse needs of religious and spiritual tourists can inform the development of tailored strategies to enhance their experiences, benefiting both the visitors and the destinations.

## **Conclusions**

The exploration of faith tourism, encompassing both religious and spiritual dimensions, has revealed significant insights into the motivations, experiences, and emotional responses of tourists visiting sacred sites such as the Ascension Cathedral. The findings indicate that religious and spiritual tourism holds immense potential as a driver of cultural exchange and personal enrichment. The study underscores the diverse motivations and experiences of tourists, ranging from seeking spiritual fulfilment and personal growth to cultural exploration and social engagement.

The comparison between Christian and Muslim tourists' perceptions and experiences at the Ascension Cathedral revealed nuanced differences in emotional responses and levels of attachment. While both groups reported positive experiences overall, Christian tourists tended to express slightly higher levels of happiness and a more positive attitude towards the church. On the other hand, Muslim tourists reported higher levels of mental peace and a stronger sense of spiritual attachment during their pilgrimage. The findings of this study indicate that visiting religious sites induces positive emotions and inner peace among followers of all religions, regardless of whether the site holds significance to them personally. This intriguing result opens up opportunities for destination managers in marketing, allowing them to promote the destination to diverse religious and belief groups. These findings have important implications for tourism planners, policymakers, and destination marketers. By understanding the specific needs and expectations of different tourist groups, tailored strategies can be developed to enhance their overall experience at sacred sites.

Religious and spiritual tourism represents a dynamic and evolving aspect of the tourism industry, offering travellers opportunities for personal reflection, cultural exchange, and spiritual growth. By recognizing and harnessing the transformative potential of faith tourism, destinations can not only drive economic prosperity but also promote intercultural understanding and global harmony. As travellers continue to seek meaningful experiences beyond materialism, the importance of religious and spiritual tourism is poised to grow, contributing to a more interconnected and spiritually enriched world.

In conclusion, this study contributes significantly to the evolving field of religious and spiritual tourism, emphasizing the centrality of emotional experiences in shaping the tourist journey. The findings not only enhance our comprehension of the motivations behind religious tourism but also

offer practical insights for stakeholders in the tourism industry to cater to the evolving needs of this niche market.

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