

Athens Journal of Tourism

Quarterly Academic Periodical, Volume 13, Issue 3

Published by the Athens Institute

URL: <https://www.athensjournals.gr/ajt> Email: journals@atiner.gr

e-ISSN: 2241-8148 DOI: 10.30958/ajt

September 2026

Athens Journal of Tourism

Quarterly Academic Periodical, Volume 13, Issue 3, September 2026

Published by the Athens Institute

URL: <https://www.athensjournals.gr/ajt> Email: journals@atiner.gr

e-ISSN: 2241-8148 DOI: 10.30958/ajt

Front Pages

PAULETTE HEBERT & ADITYA JAYADAS

[Exploring Novelty as an Aspect of Tourism & Wine Preferences](#)

ANUSARA SAWANGCHAI

[From Vacation to Workation: Transforming Phuket into a Digital Nomad Hub](#)

AZWIFANELI NEMUSHUNGWA

[From Spiritual Practice to Economic Asset: Sacred Travel and Regional Development in Limpopo, South Africa](#)

RAHMATINA AWALIAH KASRI, FADLUL IMANSYAH,

M. ARIEF MUFRAINI, M. DAWUD ARIF KHAN,

AGUNG SRI HENDARSA & RISNA TRIANDHARI

[Towards an Integrated Pilgrimage Services: A Religious Tourism Framework for Optimising Quality and Value Capture](#)

Athens Journal of Tourism

Published by the Athens Institute

Editors

- **Dr. Peter Jones**, Professor of Management, University of Gloucestershire, UK.
- **Dr. Evangelia Kasimati**, Head, Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit, Athens Institute & Researcher, Department of Economic Analysis & Research, Central Bank of Greece, Greece.
- **Dr. Vincenzo Asero**, Academic Member, Athens Institute & Assistant Professor, University of Catania, Italy.
- **Dr. Peter Walther Baur**, Deputy Head, Arts & Culture Unit, Athens Institute & Associate Professor, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

<https://www.athensjournals.gr/ajt/eb>

Administration of the Journal

1. Vice President of Publications: Dr Zoe Boutsioli
2. General Managing Editor of all Athens Institute's Publications: Ms. Afrodete Papanikou
3. ICT Managing Editor of all Athens Institute's: Mr. Kostas Spyropoulos
4. Managing Editor of this Journal: Ms. Eirini Lentzou

Athens Institute is an Athens-based World Association of Academics and Researchers based in Athens. Athens Institute is an independent and non-profit Association with a Mission to become a forum where Academics and Researchers from all over the world can meet in Athens, exchange ideas on their research and discuss future developments in their disciplines, as well as engage with professionals from other fields. Athens was chosen because of its long history of academic gatherings, which go back thousands of years to Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. Both these historic places are within walking distance from Athens Institute's downtown offices. Since antiquity, Athens was an open city. In the words of Pericles, Athens "...is open to the world, we never expel a foreigner from learning or seeing". ("Pericles' Funeral Oration", in Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War). It is Athens Institute's mission to revive the glory of Ancient Athens by inviting the World Academic Community to the city, to learn from each other in an environment of freedom and respect for other people's opinions and beliefs. After all, the free expression of one's opinion formed the basis for the development of democracy, and Athens was its cradle. As it turned out, the Golden Age of Athens was in fact, the Golden Age of the Western Civilization. Education and (Re)searching for the 'truth' are the pillars of any free (democratic) society. This is the reason why Education and Research are the two core words in Athens Institute's name.

The *Athens Journal of Tourism* (AJT) is an Open Access quarterly double-blind peer reviewed journal and considers papers from all areas of tourism and related disciplines such as culture, leisure, recreation, geography, urban planning, heritage, sports, historical cities, landscape, architecture etc. The AJT considers theoretical and empirical papers as well as case studies and policy papers. The journal's aim is to be useful to both academics of tourism research and the practitioners of the tourism industry. Many of the papers published in this journal have been presented at the various conferences sponsored by [the Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit](#) of the Athens Institute. All papers are subject to Athens Institute's Publication Ethical Policy and Statement. A journal publication might take from a minimum of six months up to one year to appear. All papers are subject to Athens Institute's [Publication Ethical Policy and Statement](#).

Athens Journal of Tourism
ISSN NUMBER: 2241-8148 - DOI: 10.30958/ajt
Volume 13, Issue 3, September 2026
Download the entire issue ([PDF](#))

Front Pages i-viii

[Exploring Novelty as an Aspect of Tourism & Wine Preferences](#) 161

Paulette Hebert & Aditya Jayadas

[From Vacation to Workation: Transforming Phuket into a Digital Nomad Hub](#) 181

Anusara Sawangchai

[From Spiritual Practice to Economic Asset: Sacred Travel and Regional Development in Limpopo, South Africa](#) 199

Azwifaneli Nemushungwa

[Towards an Integrated Pilgrimage Services: A Religious Tourism Framework for Optimising Quality and Value Capture](#) 223

*Rahmatina Awaliah Kasri, Fadlul Imansyah,
M. Arief Mufraini, M. Dawud Arif Khan,
Agung Sri Hendarsa & Risna Triandhari*

Athens Journal of Tourism

Editorial and Reviewers' Board

Editors

- **Dr. Peter Jones**, Professor of Management, University of Gloucestershire, UK.
- **Dr. Evangelia Kasimati**, Head, Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit, Athens Institute & Researcher, Department of Economic Analysis & Research, Central Bank of Greece, Greece.
- **Dr. Vincenzo Asero**, Academic Member, Athens Institute & Assistant Professor, University of Catania, Italy.
- **Dr. Peter Walther Baur**, Deputy Head, Arts & Culture Unit, Athens Institute & Associate Professor, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Editorial Board

- Dr. Francesco Favia, Academic Member, ATINER & President, Apulia Open University, Italy.
- Dr. Mary L. Tanke, Distinguished Professor, Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management Biscayne Bay Campus, Florida International University, USA.
- Dr. Cláudia Ribeiro de Almeida, Adjunct Professor, University of Algarve, Portugal.
- Dr. Cinthia Rolim de Albuquerque Meneguel, Teacher and Researcher, Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Sao Paulo, Brazil.
- Dr. Kevin Mearns, Professor, Department of Environmental Sciences, UNISA, South Africa.
- Dr. Ige Pimar, Professor and Member, University Executive Board, Department of Business Administration, Yasar University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Studies, Turkey.
- Dr. Henry Thompson, Professor Emeritus, Department of Economics, Auburn University, USA.
- Dr. Andrew Yiannakis, Professor, University of New Mexico, USA.
- Dr. Mzobanzi Erasmus Mnguni, Head, Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Durban University of Technology, South Africa.
- Dr. Kathryn Velander, Academic Member, ATINER & Reader, Edinburgh Napier University, UK.
- Dr. Moustafa Ahmed El-Sayed Ahmed Mekawy, Associate Professor, University of Sadat City, Egypt.
- Dr. Alexander Balzan, Associate Professor, Politecnico Gran Colombiano University, Colombia.
- Dr. Graham Busby, Associate Professor, Faculty of Business, School of Tourism and Hospitality, Plymouth University, UK.
- Dr. Phylis Floyd, Academic Member, ATINER & Associate Professor, Department of Art, Art History & Design, Michigan State University, USA.
- Dr. Michael Scantlebury, Academic Member, ATINER & Associate Professor, Grand Valley State University, USA.
- Dr. Rodanthi Tzanelli, Academic Member, ATINER & Associate Professor of Cultural Sociology, School of Sociology & Social Policy, University of Leeds, U.K.
- Dr. Essam Abdel Salam Gouda, Academic Member, ATINER & Assistant Professor, College of Engineering, Al-Azhar University, Egypt.
- Dr. Tarek Abdelsalam, Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Modern Sciences and Arts (MSA), Egypt.
- Dr. Aytug Arslan, Assistant Professor, İzmir Katip Çelebi University, Tourism Faculty, Department of Tourist Guidance, Turkey.
- Dr. Sonia Khan, Assistant Professor in Tourism, H.P. University, Shimla, India.
- Dr. Ozlem Karakul, Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts, Selçuk University, Turkey.
- Dr. Per Ake Nilsson, Associate Researcher, Holar University & MidSweden University, Sweden.
- Dr. Roselyne N. Okech, Assistant Professor, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada.
- Dr. Marianna Strzelecka, Assistant Professor, Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, College of Merchandising, Hospitality and Tourism, University of North Texas, USA.
- Dr. Maria Belen Kraser, Teacher in Seminary Gestion of natural resources and environment, and Didactic of Geography, Universidad Nacional del Sur- UNS, Brazil.
- Dr. Azila Azmi, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, University of Technology MARA (Pulau Pinang), Malaysia.
- Dr. Lois Ann Burgess, Lecturer, School of Management and Marketing, University of Wollongong, Australia.
- Dr. Joseph Mensah-Ansah, Lecturer, GIMPA Business School, Ghana.
- Ms. Suchitra Wagle, Academic Member, ATINER & PhD and Researcher, Indian Institute of Technology, India.
- Ms. Hatice Ozgul Ozhisar, Academic Member, ATINER & Ph.D. Candidate, Middle East Technical University, & Expert, Ministry of Tourism, Turkey.

- **Vice President of Publications:** Dr Zoe Boutsili
- **General Managing Editor of all Athens Institute's Publications:** Ms. Afrodete Papanikou
- **ICT Managing Editor of all Athens Institute's Publications:** Mr. Kostas Spyropoulos
- **Managing Editor of this Journal:** Ms. Eirini Lentzou

Reviewers' Board

[Click Here](#)

President's Message

All Athens Institute's publications including its e-journals are open access without any costs (submission, processing, publishing, open access paid by authors, open access paid by readers etc.) and is independent of presentations at any of the many small events (conferences, symposiums, forums, colloquiums, courses, roundtable discussions) organized by Athens Institute throughout the year and entail significant costs of participating. The intellectual property rights of the submitting papers remain with the author. Before you submit, please make sure your paper meets the [basic academic standards](#), which includes proper English. Some articles will be selected from the numerous papers that have been presented at the various annual international academic conferences organized by the different divisions and units of the Athens Institute for Education and Research. The plethora of papers presented every year will enable the editorial board of each journal to select the best, and in so doing produce a top-quality academic journal. In addition to papers presented, Athens Institute will encourage the independent submission of papers to be evaluated for publication.

The current issue is the third of the thirteenth volume of the *Athens Journal of Tourism (AJT)*, published by the [Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit](#) of Athens Institute.

Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute



Athens Institute for Education and Research

A World Association of Academics and Researchers

20th Annual International Conference on Mediterranean Studies 22-26 March 2027, Athens, Greece

The [Center for European & Mediterranean Affairs](#) organizes the 20th Annual International Conference on Mediterranean Studies, 22-26 March 2027, Athens, Greece sponsored by the [Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies](#). The aim of the conference is to bring together academics and researchers from all areas of Mediterranean Studies, such as history, arts, archaeology, philosophy, culture, sociology, politics, international relations, economics, business, sports, environment and ecology, etc. You may participate as stream leader, presenter of one paper, chair a session or observer. Please submit a proposal using the form available (<https://www.atiner.gr/2027/FORM-MDT.doc>).

Academic Members Responsible for the Conference

- **Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos**, President, Athens Institute & Honorary Professor, University of Stirling, U.K.
- **Dr. Steven Oberhelman**, Professor of Classics, Holder of the George Sumey Jr Endowed Professorship of Liberal Arts, and Associate Dean, Texas A&M University, USA, Vice President of International Programs, ATINER and Editor of the Athens Journal of History.
- **Dr. Nicholas Pappas**, Vice President of Academic Membership, Athens Institute & Professor of History, Sam Houston University, USA.
- **Dr. David Philip Wick**, Director, Arts, Humanities and Education Division, Athens Institute & Professor of History, Gordon College, USA.
- **Dr. Yannis Stivachtis**, Director, Center for European & Mediterranean Affairs and Associate Professor, Jean Monnet Chair & Director of International Studies Program, Virginia Tech – Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, USA.

Important Dates

- Abstract Submission: **15 September 2026**
- Submission of Paper: **22 February 2027**

Social and Educational Program

The Social Program Emphasizes the Educational Aspect of the Academic Meetings of Athens Institute.

- Greek Night Entertainment (This is the official dinner of the conference)
- Athens Sightseeing: Old and New-An Educational Urban Walk
- Social Dinner
- Mycenae Visit
- Exploration of the Aegean Islands
- Delphi Visit

Conference Fees

Conference fees vary from 400€ to 2000€
Details can be found at: <https://www.atiner.gr/fees>



Athens Institute for Education and Research

A World Association of Academics and Researchers

23rd Annual International Conference on Tourism

7-12 June 2027, Athens, Greece

The [Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit](#) of ATINER organizes its **23rd Annual International Conference on Tourism, 7-12 June 2027, Athens, Greece** sponsored by the [Athens Journal of Tourism](#). The aim of the conference is to bring together academics and researchers from all areas of Tourism. You may participate as stream leader, presenter of one paper, chair a session or observer. Please submit a proposal using the form available (<https://www.atiner.gr/2027/FORM-TOU.doc>).

Important Dates

- Abstract Submission: **10 November 2026**
- Acceptance of Abstract: 4 Weeks after Submission
- Submission of Paper: **10 May 2027**

Academic Member Responsible for the Conference

- **Dr. Valia Kasimati**, Head, [Tourism, Leisure & Recreation Unit](#), Athens Institute & Researcher, Department of Economic Analysis & Research, Central Bank of Greece, Greece.
- **Dr. Peter Jones**, Co-Editor, [Athens Journal of Tourism](#) & Professor of Management, University of Gloucestershire, UK.

Social and Educational Program

The Social Program Emphasizes the Educational Aspect of the Academic Meetings of Athens Institute.

- Greek Night Entertainment (This is the official dinner of the conference)
- Athens Sightseeing: Old and New-An Educational Urban Walk
- Social Dinner
- Mycenae Visit
- Exploration of the Aegean Islands
- Delphi Visit
- Ancient Corinth and Cape Sounion

More information can be found here: <https://www.atiner.gr/social-program>

Conference Fees

Conference fees vary from 400€ to 2000€

Details can be found at: <https://www.atiner.gr/fees>

Exploring Novelty as an Aspect of Tourism & Wine Preferences

By Paulette Hebert* & Aditya Jayadas[±]

Novelty seeking is an important driver of tourism, encouraging travelers to explore destinations, cultures, and experiences beyond their everyday routines. As wine tourism continues to grow worldwide, understanding the factors that influence consumers' willingness to explore unfamiliar wines has become increasingly important for wine tourism, the wine industry, and hospitality education. This exploratory mixed-methods study examined differences in wine-related novelty preferences between university students and non-student adults. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, an online survey was administered to a convenience sample of 52 participants, including 26 university students (mean age = 24.88 years, SD = 6.41) and 26 non-student adults (mean age = 56.83 years, SD = 13.04). The questionnaire measured wine-related novelty seeking, perceived wine knowledge, and the importance of wine purchasing attributes using five-point Likert-scale items. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the two groups, while responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using conventional content analysis. Non-student adults reported significantly lower fear of trying unfamiliar wines ($p = .02$), higher perceived wine knowledge ($p < .001$), and placed greater importance on wine quality ($p < .001$) than university students. Although university students reported a stronger preference for familiar wines, no significant differences were observed between the groups in their willingness to try unusual, exotic, or foreign wines. Qualitative findings indicated that non-student adults demonstrated greater confidence when selecting unfamiliar wines, whereas university students more frequently preferred familiar wines, suggesting that differences in prior wine experience and perceived knowledge shaped confidence in wine selection. Overall, the findings suggest that openness to wine-related novelty varies across life stages and may be influenced by previous exposure and perceived knowledge. These results provide practical insights for wineries, wine tourism operators, and hospitality educators seeking to design targeted marketing strategies, wine tourism experiences, and educational programs for consumers with differing levels of wine knowledge and experience.

Keywords: wine tourism; novelty seeking; wine preferences; consumer behavior; hospitality education

Introduction

Novelty seeking has long been recognized as one of the primary motivations underlying tourism behavior. Travelers increasingly seek destinations and experiences that differ from their everyday routines, providing opportunities for learning, exploration, entertainment, cultural immersion, and personal enrichment.

*Professor, Oklahoma State University, USA.

[±]Professor, Oklahoma State University, USA.

As tourism has evolved, travelers have shifted from passive sightseeing toward more authentic and experience-driven activities that engage multiple senses and create memorable experiences (Santos et al. 2019, Kotur 2023). Among these emerging forms of experiential tourism, wine tourism has become one of the fastest-growing niche sectors worldwide, attracting visitors interested in wine, regional culture, and hospitality (Charters & Ali-Knight 2002, Kotur 2023).

Wine tourism extends beyond simply tasting wine. It encompasses visits to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals, tasting events, educational programs, and culinary experiences that collectively provide immersive cultural and sensory experiences. These activities allow visitors to develop a deeper appreciation for wine while interacting with local traditions, landscapes, and wine producers (Bruwer & Rueger-Muck 2019, Santos et al. 2019). Research has shown that memorable wine tourism experiences are influenced not only by wine quality but also by educational opportunities, hospitality, scenery, authenticity, and emotional engagement (Saayman & Van Der Merwe 2015, Crespi-Vallbona & Mascarilla-Miró 2020). Consequently, wineries increasingly focus on creating experiential offerings that enhance visitor satisfaction and encourage repeat visitation by delivering value beyond the product itself (Carlsen & Boksberger 2015).

Consumer behavior plays a central role in wine tourism because visitors differ considerably in their motivations, purchasing decisions, and willingness to explore unfamiliar wines. Previous research has demonstrated that wine purchasing behavior is influenced by factors including prior wine knowledge, perceived quality, country of origin, price, label design, recommendations, and previous winery experiences (Barth & Salazar 2010, Lockshin & Corsi 2012, Sherman & Tuten 2011). Among these influences, novelty has emerged as an important factor shaping consumer preferences. Individuals with greater openness to novelty are generally more willing to experiment with unfamiliar wines, sample wines from different regions, and seek authentic tasting experiences (Barber et al. 2021). Conversely, consumers with limited wine knowledge or experience may rely on familiar wines to reduce uncertainty and increase confidence in their purchasing decisions (Ellis & Mattison Thompson 2018).

Age and previous experience may further influence novelty-seeking behavior. Studies have reported that younger and older consumers often differ in their motivations for visiting wineries and selecting wines (Alonso et al. 2007, Getz & Carlsen 2008). Younger generations frequently value social interaction, innovation, and technology-enhanced experiences, whereas older adults often place greater emphasis on education, product quality, and authenticity (Stergiou et al. 2018). Similarly, younger consumers have been shown to exhibit unique wine purchasing habits and attitudes toward wine innovation, although they may possess less confidence and experience than older consumers (Garcia et al. 2013, Castellini & Samoggia 2018). Repeated exposure to wine experiences has also been shown to influence consumer preferences over time, suggesting that familiarity and accumulated experience contribute to greater willingness to explore unfamiliar wines (Tempere et al. 2019). Furthermore, personality characteristics may influence openness toward novel products, with individual differences contributing to consumers' willingness to experiment with different wine styles (Saliba et al. 2009).

The continued expansion of wine tourism has also increased demand for hospitality professionals with knowledge of wine, sensory evaluation, and visitor experiences. Consequently, hospitality and tourism education programs have expanded wine-related curricula through experiential learning, sensory education, winery visits, and more recently, virtual wine tours that provide authentic learning opportunities while strengthening students' professional competencies (Carmer et al. 2024, Shi et al. 2025). These educational innovations highlight the growing importance of understanding how students perceive wine and whether their willingness to engage with unfamiliar wines differs from that of more experienced adult consumers.

Despite considerable research examining wine tourism, consumer behavior, and generational differences, relatively little attention has been given to directly comparing novelty-seeking behaviors between university students and non-student adults. Such comparisons are important because the two groups differ in age, life experience, purchasing power, exposure to wine, and confidence in evaluating unfamiliar products. A better understanding of these differences may assist wineries, tourism marketers, and hospitality educators in developing tourism experiences, marketing strategies, and educational programs that effectively engage diverse consumer groups. In addition, understanding the role of novelty may contribute to broader efforts aimed at expanding participation in wine tourism and encouraging consumers to explore a wider range of wine experiences as the industry continues to grow globally (Torres et al. 2021).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare wine-related novelty preferences between university students and non-student adults using survey data. Specifically, this study examined differences in willingness to try unfamiliar wines, perceived wine knowledge, and the importance placed on various wine attributes. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare responses between the two groups, while qualitative responses were analyzed using content analysis to provide a richer understanding of participants' perceptions of wine, familiarity, and novelty.

Literature Review

Wine tourism has attracted increasing scholarly attention as researchers seek to better understand the factors that influence consumers' motivations, preferences, and experiences within this rapidly expanding segment of the tourism industry. Existing literature suggests that wine tourism extends beyond wine consumption to encompass education, cultural immersion, gastronomy, and authentic destination experiences that create emotional and memorable connections between visitors and wine-producing regions (Santos et al. 2019, Kotur 2023). Among the many factors influencing wine tourism, novelty seeking has emerged as an important determinant of consumer behavior, affecting individuals' willingness to explore unfamiliar wines, participate in new experiences, and engage with different wine cultures (Barber et al. 2021). At the same time, consumer characteristics such as age, previous wine experience, and wine knowledge have been shown to influence purchasing decisions, perceptions of quality, and preferences for wine-related experiences (Alonso et al. 2007, Lockshin & Corsi 2012). Furthermore, the continued growth of wine tourism has increased the importance

of hospitality education in preparing future professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to meet evolving consumer expectations (Carmer et al. 2024, Shi et al. 2025). The following sections review the literature related to wine tourism as an experiential activity, novelty seeking and wine consumer behavior, age-related differences in wine preferences, and the role of wine education in hospitality, thereby establishing the theoretical foundation for the present study.

Wine Tourism as an Experiential Activity

Wine tourism has evolved into a multidimensional form of experiential tourism that combines wine appreciation with education, gastronomy, cultural heritage, and social interaction. Rather than simply visiting wineries to purchase wine, contemporary wine tourists seek meaningful experiences that engage multiple senses and foster emotional connections with destinations (Bruwer & Rueger-Muck 2019, Santos et al. 2019). These experiences often include vineyard tours, guided tastings, food and wine pairings, interactions with wine producers, and opportunities to learn about regional history and wine production practices.

The experiential nature of wine tourism has become increasingly important as wineries seek to differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace. Visitors derive value not only from the quality of the wine itself but also from the authenticity of the experience, the surrounding landscape, the quality of hospitality, and opportunities for personal learning (Carlsen & Boksberger 2015). Similarly, memorable wine tourism experiences have been associated with high-quality service, attractive winery settings, educational opportunities, and positive emotional responses that encourage repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Saayman & Van Der Merwe 2015). Crespi-Vallbona and Mascarilla-Miró (2020) further reported that wine enthusiasts increasingly seek authentic cultural experiences that combine local gastronomy, history, and social interaction, highlighting the importance of experiential value within wine tourism.

As wine tourism continues to expand internationally, researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding visitor motivations and preferences to develop tourism experiences that appeal to diverse consumer segments (Kotur 2023). Consequently, wineries are increasingly designing experiences that balance education, entertainment, authenticity, and sensory engagement to enhance visitor satisfaction, create memorable visitor experiences, and strengthen destination competitiveness (Jones & Comfort 2019). More recently, wine tourism has expanded beyond traditional winery visits to include virtual tastings and online experiences, demonstrating the industry's ability to adapt while maintaining opportunities for consumer engagement, education, and experiential learning (Amarendra & Das 2022). These innovations further highlight the importance of understanding how consumers respond to novel wine experiences across different delivery formats.

Novelty Seeking and Wine Consumer Behavior

Novelty seeking represents an important component of consumer decision-making within wine tourism. Consumers who seek novelty are generally more

willing to experiment with unfamiliar wines, explore new grape varieties, and sample wines from different countries or regions (Barber et al. 2021). Barber et al. (2021) demonstrated that novelty interacts with perceptions of authenticity, regional identity, and price to influence consumers' evaluations of wine quality and purchasing intentions, suggesting that novelty extends beyond curiosity to become an important determinant of consumer behavior.

Wine purchasing decisions are influenced by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic product characteristics. Intrinsic characteristics include taste, aroma, and perceived quality, whereas extrinsic characteristics include price, country of origin, packaging, branding, and label design (Lockshin & Corsi 2012). Sherman and Tuten (2011) reported that wine labels serve as influential marketing tools by shaping consumer expectations before tasting, particularly among less experienced consumers. Similarly, Barth and Salazar (2010) found that previous winery experiences and tourism activities significantly influence future wine purchasing behavior, illustrating the close relationship between tourism experiences and consumer decision-making.

Wine knowledge also plays a critical role in shaping purchasing behavior. Ellis and Mattison Thompson (2018) found that consumers with greater objective and subjective wine knowledge were significantly more likely to exhibit variety-seeking behavior than individuals with limited wine knowledge. As consumers gain experience through repeated exposure, they become increasingly comfortable experimenting with unfamiliar wines and relying less on familiar brands (Tempere et al. 2019). These findings suggest that confidence, familiarity, and accumulated experience may influence openness toward novelty and ultimately shape wine preferences.

Individual characteristics may further contribute to differences in novelty-seeking behavior. Saliba et al. (2009) demonstrated that personality traits influence taste preferences and consumer responses to wine, indicating that willingness to explore unfamiliar wines may vary according to individual psychological characteristics. Together, these findings suggest that novelty seeking is a multifaceted construct influenced by experience, knowledge, personality, and previous exposure to wine.

Age Differences in Wine Preferences

Age has been identified as an important factor influencing wine tourism experiences and consumer preferences. Alonso et al. (2007) reported that visitors of different age groups often evaluate winery experiences differently, with older adults placing greater emphasis on educational experiences, hospitality, and product quality. Younger visitors, in contrast, frequently value social interaction and entertainment alongside wine consumption.

Research examining generational differences has produced similar findings. Getz and Carlsen (2008) observed that Generation X and Generation Y wine tourists differed in their travel motivations, suggesting that younger visitors were more likely to seek lifestyle-oriented and experiential activities. Likewise, Stergiou et al. (2018) found that Generation Z visitors preferred interactive experiences, technology integration, and opportunities for active participation during winery visits, reflecting evolving tourism expectations among younger consumers.

Consumer behavior studies have similarly demonstrated age-related differences in wine purchasing patterns. Garcia et al. (2013) found that younger consumers often exhibit distinctive wine consumption habits, with purchasing decisions influenced by affordability, peer influence, and familiarity. Castellini and Samoggia (2018) further reported that Millennials generally express positive attitudes toward wine innovation and experimentation, although purchasing decisions remain strongly influenced by previous experience and confidence in evaluating wine quality.

Collectively, these studies suggest that age and life experience contribute to differences in wine-related attitudes, purchasing decisions, and openness to unfamiliar wines. However, despite growing interest in generational differences, limited research has directly compared university students with older non-student adults regarding their willingness to explore unfamiliar wines and perceptions of novelty. Such comparisons may provide valuable insights into how life experience and accumulated wine knowledge influence consumer behavior.

Wine Education and Hospitality

The rapid growth of wine tourism has increased demand for hospitality professionals with specialized knowledge of wine, sensory evaluation, customer service, and destination experiences (Charters & Ali-Knight 2002, Carlsen & Boksberger 2015, Santos et al. 2019, Kotur 2023). Consequently, hospitality education programs have expanded wine-related curricula to include experiential learning opportunities that prepare students for careers within the hospitality and tourism industries (Carmer et al. 2024, Shi et al. 2025).

Carmer et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review demonstrating that structured wine education enhances students' sensory evaluation skills, product knowledge, confidence, and professional preparedness. Experiential learning activities, including wine tastings, vineyard visits, and sensory exercises, allow students to develop practical competencies while strengthening their understanding of consumer behavior.

Technological innovations have further expanded opportunities for wine education. Shi et al. (2025) demonstrated that live virtual wine tours provide effective experiential learning environments by connecting students directly with wineries and industry professionals. These immersive learning experiences improve engagement while increasing students' understanding of wine production, regional culture, and hospitality operations.

Developing wine literacy has become increasingly important as hospitality graduates are expected to understand both the technical characteristics of wine and the experiential factors that influence consumer satisfaction. Greater knowledge and confidence may also encourage students to become more willing to experiment with unfamiliar wines, potentially increasing their appreciation of wine tourism experiences. Understanding differences in wine-related novelty between students and non-student adults may therefore assist educators in designing learning experiences that foster confidence, curiosity, and professional competence.

Research Gap

The existing literature demonstrates that wine tourism has become an increasingly important form of experiential tourism and that novelty, wine knowledge, previous experience, and age all influence consumer behavior. Previous studies have examined motivations for wine tourism, purchasing behavior, memorable winery experiences, wine education, and generational differences (Alonso et al. 2007, Bruwer & Rueger-Muck 2019, Carlsen & Boksberger 2015, Lockshin & Corsi 2012). However, relatively little research has directly compared openness toward wine-related novelty between university students and non-student adults. Given the increasing importance of experiential wine tourism and hospitality education, a better understanding of how these groups differ in their willingness to explore unfamiliar wines may provide valuable insights for wineries, tourism marketers, and hospitality educators seeking to appeal to consumers with varying levels of knowledge and experience.

Methodology

Research Design

This exploratory mixed-methods study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine differences in wine-related novelty preferences between university students and non-student adults. The study formed part of a broader investigation exploring wine preferences, wine knowledge, and novelty-seeking behaviors. Quantitative methods were used to compare responses between the two groups, while qualitative data collected through open-ended questions provided additional insights into participants' perceptions and experiences. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed the researchers to compare differences between the two participant groups while also providing a richer understanding of participants' perspectives regarding wine preferences and novelty.

Participants

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited using a convenience sampling approach. A total of 52 participants completed the online survey and were divided equally into two groups consisting of 26 university students and 26 non-student adults.

The student group ranged in age from 21 to 43 years, with a mean age of 24.88 years ($SD = 6.41$). The non-student adult group ranged in age from 34 to 79 years, with a mean age of 56.83 years ($SD = 13.04$). The inclusion of these two groups enabled comparisons between individuals at different life stages and with varying levels of experience and familiarity with wine.

Survey Instrument

Data were collected using an online questionnaire consisting of demographic questions, structured Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions. Demographic information included participants' age, gender, ethnicity, and educational background.

The survey was organized into three primary quantitative constructs: wine-related novelty seeking, perceived wine knowledge, and importance of wine purchasing attributes, followed by two open-ended questions. Responses to the quantitative items were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*), with higher scores representing greater agreement or perceived importance. A summary of the survey constructs and representative items is presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. *Summary of Survey Constructs and Representative Items*

Construct	No. of Items	Representative Survey Items
Wine-related novelty seeking	8	Preference for trying unusual wines, enjoyment of unfamiliar wines, willingness to drink exotic wines, trying wines at social gatherings, interest in wines from different countries, preference for familiar wines, fear of unfamiliar wines, and frequency of sampling new wines
Perceived wine knowledge	1	Self-rated knowledge about wines
Importance of wine purchasing attributes	8	Importance of color, quality, price, country of origin, taste, grape variety, alcohol content, and label and packaging when selecting wines
Open-ended questions	2	Favorite wines and reasons for preference; influence of wine color on perceptions of taste

The open-ended questions were included to provide richer qualitative insights into participants' preferences and perceptions of wines. Participants were asked to describe their favorite wines and explain why they preferred them, as well as discuss whether the color of wines influenced their perception of its taste.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize participants' characteristics and survey responses. Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare university students and non-student adults across the three quantitative constructs, including wine-related novelty seeking, perceived wine knowledge, and the importance of wine purchasing attributes. Statistical significance was established at an $\alpha = 0.05$.

Responses to the two open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. Qualitative responses were reviewed repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data before being coded into meaningful units. Similar codes were grouped into categories

and synthesized into broader themes representing participants' wine preferences, purchasing considerations, and perceptions of how wine color influences taste. Representative participant quotations were selected to illustrate the identified themes.

Results

The quantitative findings are presented according to the three primary survey constructs: wine-related novelty seeking, perceived wine knowledge, and importance of wine purchasing attributes. Participants' demographic characteristics are presented first to provide context for the study sample, followed by comparisons between university students and non-student adults using independent-samples *t*-tests. Qualitative findings from the open-ended questions are presented in a subsequent section using conventional content analysis to further explain participants' perceptions of wine preferences and novelty.

Participant Characteristics

A total of 52 participants completed the survey, including 26 university students and 26 non-student adults. The university student group ranged in age from 21 to 43 years ($M = 24.88$, $SD = 6.41$), whereas the non-student adult group ranged from 34 to 79 years ($M = 56.83$, $SD = 13.04$).

The university student group consisted primarily of females ($n = 23$, 88.5%), with three males (11.5%). Participants represented diverse ethnic backgrounds, including White ($n = 11$), Asian or Asian American ($n = 6$), Hispanic or Latino ($n = 3$), Native American or Alaska Native ($n = 2$), Black or African American ($n = 1$), and other or multiracial backgrounds ($n = 3$). Most students were undergraduate students, while the remaining student participants were graduate students enrolled in design-related programs. As expected, the majority reported annual household incomes below \$25,000 and most consumed wine occasionally or approximately once per month.

The non-student adult group included 17 females (65.4%) and nine males (34.6%), with ages ranging from 34 to 79 years. Participants were predominantly White ($n = 21$), with the remaining participants identifying as Hispanic or Latino ($n = 1$), Native American or Alaska Native ($n = 1$), or other ethnic backgrounds ($n = 3$). This group represented a broad range of occupations, including university faculty, staff, administrators, retirees, and industry professionals, and generally reported higher educational attainment and household incomes than the university students. Wine consumption patterns among non-student adults were more frequent, with many participants reporting consuming wine weekly or several times per week.

Across both groups, participants were primarily US residents, although several individuals reported being born outside the United States, including Vietnam, Nepal, Iran, Sri Lanka, Germany, Mexico, and Turkey. Preferences for red, white, and both wine types were represented in both groups, and the majority of participants indicated they would be willing to try a wine with an intriguing bold color. Supermarkets and specialty liquor stores were the most frequently reported locations for purchasing wine, followed by wineries, restaurants, bars, and online retailers. A summary of the participant demographic characteristics is presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2. *Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Characteristics	University Students (n = 26)	Non-student Adults (n = 26)
Age, Mean (SD)	24.88 (6.41)	56.83 (13.04)
Age Range	21–43	34–79
Female	23 (88.5%)	17 (65.4%)
Male	3 (11.5%)	9 (34.6%)
Predominant Ethnicity	White (42.3%)	White (80.8%)
Highest Education	Primarily undergraduate	Primarily bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees
Primary Occupation	University students	Faculty, staff, administrators, retirees, industry professionals
Typical Wine Consumption	Occasional to monthly	Weekly to several times per week
Common Wine Purchase Locations	Supermarkets, specialty liquor stores	Supermarkets, specialty liquor stores, wineries

Wine-Related Novelty Seeking

Participants' responses to the eight wine-related novelty seeking items are illustrated in *Figure 1*. Overall, both university students and non-student adults expressed positive attitudes toward exploring new wines, with mean ratings exceeding the midpoint of the scale for most items.

Although university students reported slightly greater agreement with statements related to trying unusual wines ($M = 3.69$ vs. 3.42), enjoying unfamiliar wines ($M = 4.23$ vs. 4.15), enjoying new wines at dinner parties ($M = 4.40$ vs. 4.31), trying wines from different countries ($M = 4.65$ vs. 4.42), and preferring familiar wines ($M = 4.08$ vs. 3.42), these differences were not statistically significant ($p > .05$). Likewise, non-student adults reported slightly higher ratings for drinking exotic wines ($M = 3.46$ vs. 3.24) and constantly sampling new wines ($M = 3.36$ vs. 2.80); however, these differences also did not reach statistical significance.

One notable exception emerged regarding fear of trying unfamiliar wines. University students reported significantly greater fear of trying wines they had never previously consumed ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.29$) than non-student adults ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.95$), and this difference was statistically significant ($p = .02$). Although students generally demonstrated enthusiasm toward trying new wines, they simultaneously expressed a stronger preference for familiar wines and greater hesitation toward unfamiliar wine selections.

Overall, these findings suggest that while both groups exhibited relatively high levels of openness toward wine-related novelty, non-student adults appeared more confident when encountering unfamiliar wines.

Perceived Wine Knowledge

Participants' perceived wine knowledge is presented in Figure 2. Non-student adults rated themselves as significantly more knowledgeable about wines ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.11$) than university students ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.57$). Independent-samples t -test results indicated that this difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Figure 1. Comparison of Wine-related Novelty seeking between University Students and Non-student Adults

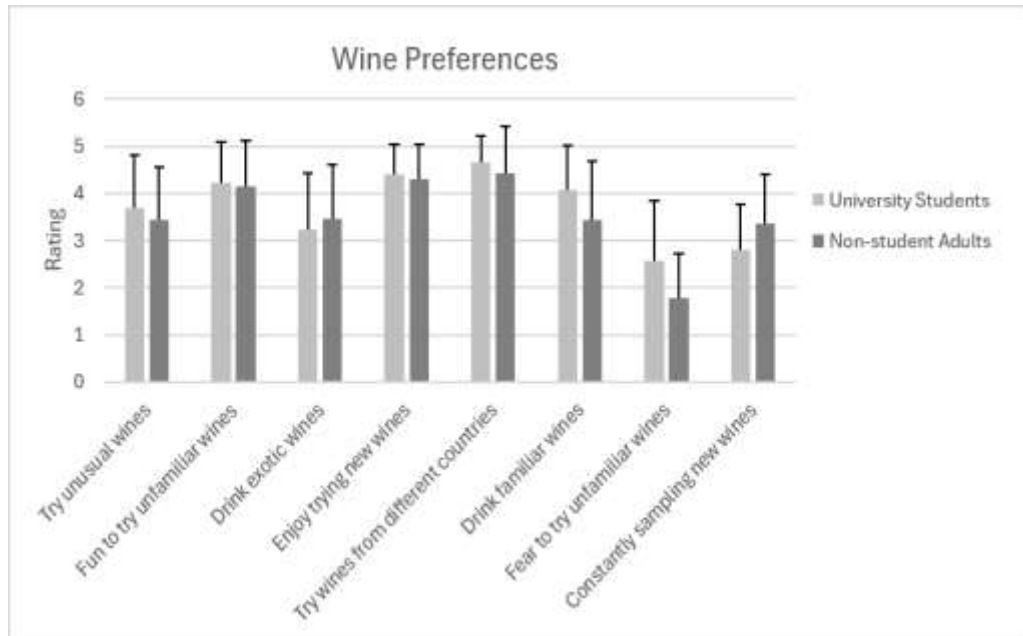
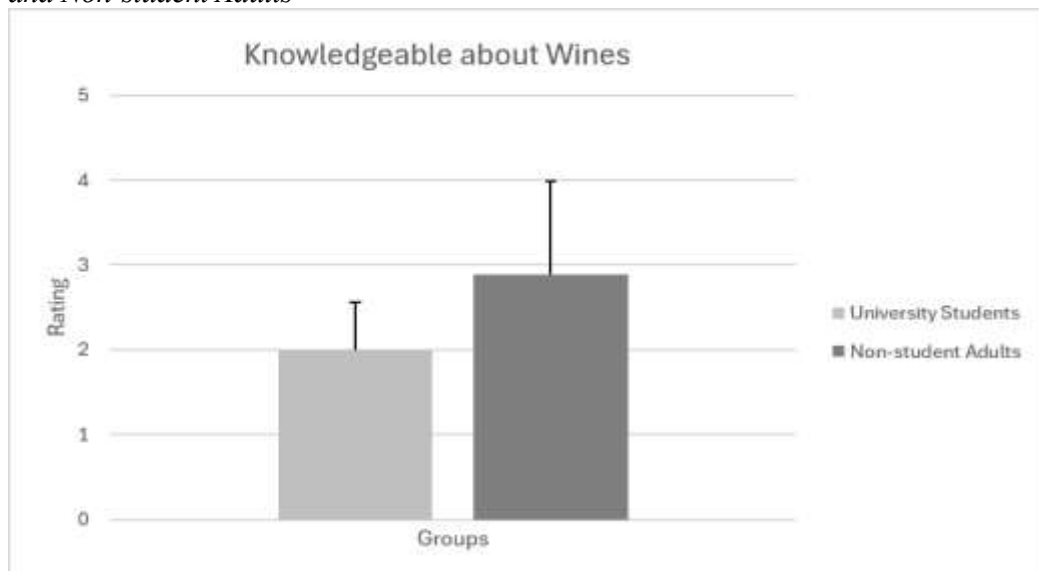


Figure 2. Comparison of perceived Wine Knowledge between University Students and Non-student Adults



Importance of Wine Purchasing Attributes

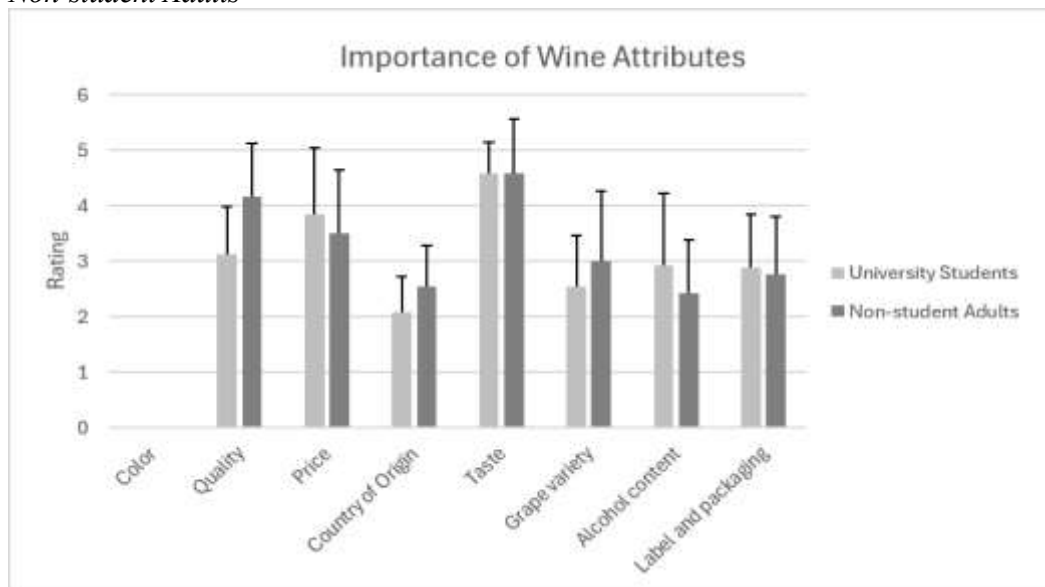
Although both groups rated their overall wine knowledge below the upper end of the scale, the findings suggest that non-student adults possessed greater confidence in their understanding of wine. This greater perceived knowledge may help explain their lower hesitation toward trying unfamiliar wines observed in the previous analysis.

Participants evaluated the importance of several attributes when selecting a wine, including color, quality, price, country of origin, taste, grape variety, alcohol content, and label and packaging. Mean ratings for these attributes are presented in *Figure 3*. Taste received the highest ratings among both university students and non-student adults ($M = 4.58$ for both groups), indicating that taste was the most influential factor in wine selection regardless of participant group. Color received the lowest importance ratings and did not differ significantly between the two groups ($p = .703$).

Among the remaining attributes, non-student adults placed significantly greater importance on wine quality ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.90$) than university students ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.77$), and this difference was highly significant ($p < .001$). Although non-student adults also assigned slightly greater importance to country of origin ($M = 2.54$ vs. 2.08) and grape variety ($M = 3.00$ vs. 2.54), these differences were not statistically significant.

Conversely, university students placed slightly greater importance on price ($M = 3.85$ vs. 3.50), alcohol content ($M = 2.92$ vs. 2.42), and label and packaging ($M = 2.88$ vs. 2.77), although none of these differences reached statistical significance. No significant differences were observed for taste, country of origin, grape variety, alcohol content, or label and packaging ($p > .05$).

Figure 3. Importance of Wine purchasing attributes among University Students and Non-student Adults



Collectively, these findings suggest that although both groups considered taste to be the primary determinant of wine selection, non-student adults placed greater emphasis

on wine quality, whereas university students appeared to consider several product characteristics more evenly when evaluating wines.

Overall Quantitative Findings

Across the three quantitative constructs, relatively few statistically significant differences were observed between university students and non-student adults. Significant differences emerged only for fear of trying unfamiliar wines, perceived wine knowledge, and the importance of wine quality. In each case, non-student adults demonstrated greater confidence and experience with wine than university students. However, the absence of significant differences across many of the remaining novelty-seeking behaviors and wine purchasing attributes suggests that both groups shared broadly similar attitudes toward exploring new wines despite differences in experience and perceived knowledge.

Qualitative Findings

Responses to the two open-ended questions were analyzed using conventional content analysis to identify recurring themes describing participants' wine preferences and perceptions. Although participants responded to the same questions, differences emerged in the topics they emphasized. University students primarily described favorite wines based on sensory preferences, personal experiences, and social contexts, whereas non-student adults more frequently discussed how visual characteristics, particularly wine color, influenced their expectations of taste and quality. The findings for each participant group are presented separately below.

University Students

Five major themes emerged from the university students' responses: taste preferences, cultural and regional connections, health and dietary preferences, occasions and social context, and wine characteristics and quality (Table 3).

Taste preferences were the most frequently discussed theme. Students commonly described wines in terms of sweetness, boldness, crispness, dryness, and effervescence. One respondent shared, *"I really like Moscatos—sweet are my favorite. My favorite winery is Kunde, and I love their Cuvee."* Another preferred bold red wines, explaining, *"California Cabernet because it is typically stronger and more bold."* Others preferred dry white wines, noting, *"I prefer a dry white like a dry Riesling or Gewürztraminer."* These responses suggest that students primarily described wines using sensory characteristics and overall enjoyment.

Several respondents also described cultural and personal influences on their wine preferences. One participant expressed appreciation for an Italian wine, stating, *"Nero d'Avola—I love the complex flavors and feel safe about it being produced in Italy."* Another described a favorite wine they had personally produced, highlighting a unique connection to the wine-making process. Health and lifestyle considerations also influenced some participants' preferences. For example, one respondent explained, *"Pinot Grigio because it is low in carbs. I try to limit my carbs when possible,"* while

another preferred wines that were organically produced or "clean-crafted."

Students also associated wine with enjoyment, celebrations, and social interaction. One respondent described orange wine as *"fun, tasty, light, and just really fun to drink!"* while another preferred a familiar Pinot Noir *"when I just want wine and don't have to think about any part of it."* Finally, several participants emphasized memorable wine characteristics, including complexity, balance, and effervescence. One respondent reflected on a particularly memorable tasting experience by stating, *"The best wine I ever drank was a Gevrey-Chambertin grand cru. Full-bodied and mellow, subtle fruit but not sweet, balanced tannins. Phenomenal wine."* Overall, university students described their favorite wines using sensory qualities, personal experiences, and social contexts rather than technical evaluations of wine.

Table 3. Themes Identified from University Students' Qualitative Responses

Theme	Description	Representative Quote
Taste Preferences	Preferences for sweet, crisp, bold, sparkling, and dry wines	<i>"I really like Moscatos—sweet are my favorite."</i>
Cultural and Regional Connections	International wines and personal wine-making experiences	<i>"Nero d'Avola—I love the complex flavors..."</i>
Health and Dietary Preferences	Low-carbohydrate and clean-crafted wines	<i>"Pinot Grigio because it is low in carbs."</i>
Occasions and Social Context	Social gatherings, celebrations, and relaxation	<i>"Orange wine... it's fun, tasty, light..."</i>
Wine Characteristics and Quality	Complexity, balance, effervescence, and memorable tasting experiences	<i>"The best wine I ever drank was a Gevrey-Chambertin grand cru..."</i>

Non-Student Adults

Among non-student adults, six themes emerged: influence of color on taste perception, preference for red versus white wines, clarity and quality perception, associations between color and flavor intensity, willingness to experiment with different wine colors, and clarity as an indicator of wine quality (Table 4).

Many respondents indicated that wine color influenced their expectations before tasting. One participant explained, *"I'd think it does subconsciously. Reds I associate with a richer flavor and more dryness."* Another commented, *"I like darker reds. They are stronger and more bold. A lighter red leads me to think the wine is lighter."* Others suggested that specific colors affected purchasing decisions. For example, one respondent noted, *"I do not prefer U.S. Chardonnay. When I see that gold color, it's a turn off for me."*

Several respondents emphasized that clarity rather than color itself influenced their perceptions of wine quality. One participant explained, *"It is more the clarity than the color itself that matters to me."* Others expressed reluctance to purchase cloudy or unusually pale wines because they associated these visual characteristics with lower quality.

Although many respondents associated darker wines with richer flavors and

lighter wines with milder or sweeter characteristics, opinions were not unanimous. One participant stated, *"No, I don't think the color influences my perception of taste. I will drink both red or white wines."* Others expressed openness to trying wines with unusual or intriguing colors. As one respondent explained, *"I am typically willing to try a new wine if there is something intriguing about the color."* Overall, non-student adults frequently linked visual characteristics with expectations regarding flavor, quality, and overall wine experience, suggesting that appearance played an important role in shaping their perceptions before tasting.

Table 4. Themes Identified from Non-student Adults' Qualitative Responses

Theme	Description	Representative Quote
Influence of Color on Taste Perception	Color influenced expectations of flavor intensity, sweetness, and dryness	<i>"Reds I associate with a richer flavor and more dryness."</i>
Preference for Red versus White Wines	Preferences based on wine style and color	<i>"I strongly prefer white wine."</i>
Clarity and Quality Perception	Visual clarity influenced perceptions of wine quality	<i>"It is more the clarity than the color itself that matters to me."</i>
Associations Between Color and Flavor Intensity	Darker wines associated with stronger flavors; lighter wines with milder flavors	<i>"I like darker reds. They are stronger and more bold."</i>
Willingness to Experiment	Participants were generally willing to try wines with intriguing colors	<i>"I am typically willing to try a new wine if there is something intriguing about the color."</i>
Clarity as an Indicator of Quality	Cloudiness or pale color sometimes reduced perceived quality	<i>"If the wine has a cloudy color, I probably wouldn't choose it."</i>

Discussion

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature examining consumer behavior within wine tourism by comparing wine-related novelty preferences between university students and non-student adults. Overall, both groups demonstrated positive attitudes toward exploring new wines, supporting previous research that identifies novelty seeking as a fundamental motivation underlying wine tourism and experiential consumption (Bruwer & Rueger-Muck 2019, Carlsen & Boksberger 2015, Santos et al. 2019). Participants in both groups expressed high levels of interest in trying unfamiliar wines and wines from different countries, suggesting that exploration and new experiences are valued regardless of age. These findings are consistent with Barber et al. (2021), who reported that novelty and authenticity contribute to positive wine experiences, and with Lockshin and Corsi (2012), who emphasized that modern wine consumers increasingly seek experiences that extend beyond product consumption.

Despite these similarities, several meaningful differences were observed between the two participant groups. Non-student adults reported significantly lower fear of trying unfamiliar wines, greater perceived wine knowledge, and placed greater

importance on wine quality than university students. These findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that wine knowledge and prior experience influence consumers' confidence when selecting unfamiliar wines (Ellis & Mattison Thompson 2018, Tempere et al. 2019). Similarly, Alonso et al. (2007) found that age influences winery experiences, with older visitors placing greater emphasis on wine quality and overall appreciation of the wine experience. Although university students expressed enthusiasm for trying new wines, they also reported a stronger preference for familiar wines, suggesting that openness to novelty may coexist with a desire for familiarity among less experienced consumers. This observation aligns with Castellini and Samoggia (2018) and Garcia et al. (2013), who reported that younger consumers often demonstrate interest in experimentation while relying on familiar products because of limited experience and confidence.

The qualitative findings further complemented the quantitative results by illustrating differences in how participants described wine. University students primarily discussed wine using sensory characteristics, personal preferences, and social experiences, whereas non-student adults more frequently referenced color, clarity, quality, and other evaluative characteristics. These observations are consistent with previous research results indicating that greater wine knowledge influences both purchasing behavior and the criteria consumers use when evaluating wines (Ellis & Mattison Thompson 2018, Sherman & Tuten 2011). Furthermore, the emphasis placed on visual characteristics by non-student adults supports earlier findings that color and appearance contribute to expectations regarding wine quality and taste before consumption (Barber et al. 2021, Tempere et al. 2019). Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that while both university students and non-student adults demonstrate an interest in novel wine experiences, differences in perceived knowledge and previous experience may influence how individuals evaluate and approach unfamiliar wines.

Limitations

This study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the relatively small sample size limits the statistical power of the analyses and the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Second, participants were recruited from a single geographic region, and the results may not reflect the perceptions and experiences of individuals living in areas with different cultural backgrounds or more established wine tourism industries. Third, the use of convenience sampling may have introduced selection bias, as participants who chose to complete the survey may have had a greater interest in wine than the general population. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported measures of wine preferences and novelty seeking, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability bias. Finally, because the research employed a cross-sectional design, it provides only a snapshot of participants' attitudes and behaviors at one point in time and does not allow conclusions regarding causal relationships or changes in wine preferences over time. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable preliminary insights into differences in novelty seeking and wine preferences between university students and non-student adults and offers a foundation for future research in wine tourism and consumer behavior.

Future Research

Future research should build upon the findings of this exploratory study by recruiting larger and more geographically diverse samples to improve the generalizability of the results. Including participants from established wine tourism regions would provide valuable insights into how regular exposure to wineries and wine culture influences openness to novelty and wine preferences. Future studies may also benefit from comparing multiple age groups and varying levels of wine experience to better understand how novelty seeking evolves across the lifespan. In addition to self-reported attitudes, researchers should examine actual wine purchasing and consumption behaviors to determine whether stated preferences translate into real-world decision-making. Exploring individual characteristics, such as sensation seeking, food neophobia, openness to experience, risk tolerance, and cultural background, may further explain differences in willingness to try unfamiliar wines. Finally, longitudinal studies that follow participants before and after wine education programs, tasting experiences, or wine tourism visits could provide a deeper understanding of how knowledge and experience shape novelty seeking and wine preferences over time.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for the wine tourism industry, wineries, hospitality educators, and tourism marketers. First, the observed differences in openness to unfamiliar wines between university students and non-student adults suggest that wine tourism marketing strategies may be more effective when tailored to specific age groups and levels of wine experience. Younger consumers may respond more positively to marketing campaigns that emphasize exploration, education, and guided discovery, whereas more experienced adult consumers may be attracted to messages highlighting wine quality, authenticity, regional heritage, and exclusive tasting experiences.

The findings also suggest opportunities for wineries to develop experiences that accommodate consumers with varying levels of wine knowledge and confidence. For example, wineries may consider offering beginner-focused tasting experiences that introduce novice consumers to different wine styles in an approachable and educational environment. Such experiences could reduce uncertainty and increase confidence among younger or less experienced visitors. Conversely, wineries may develop more advanced tasting flights, vertical tastings, or region-specific experiences designed for knowledgeable consumers seeking greater complexity and novelty.

From an educational perspective, the results highlight the value of incorporating experiential wine education into hospitality and tourism curricula. Structured wine tastings, winery visits, sensory evaluation activities, and interactions with industry professionals may increase students' familiarity with diverse wine styles while improving their confidence in evaluating and selecting unfamiliar wines. Emerging educational approaches, such as virtual winery tours and immersive learning experiences, may further enhance students' understanding of wine tourism and prepare them for careers within the hospitality industry.

Finally, these findings may assist tourism organizations and destination marketers in designing wine tourism experiences that appeal to diverse visitor segments. Recognizing that consumers differ in their willingness to experiment with unfamiliar wines may allow destinations to develop more personalized experiences that balance familiarity with opportunities for discovery. Such targeted approaches may improve visitor satisfaction, encourage repeat visitation, and contribute to the continued growth and sustainability of wine tourism.

Conclusion

This exploratory mixed-methods study contributes to the growing body of literature on wine tourism by examining wine-related novelty preferences among university students and non-student adults. As wine tourism continues to expand globally, understanding the factors that influence consumers' willingness to explore unfamiliar wines has become increasingly important for wineries, tourism destinations, and hospitality educators. By combining quantitative analyses with qualitative insights, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how age, perceived wine knowledge, and previous experience may shape wine-related attitudes and behaviors.

Although both groups expressed interest in wine, several meaningful differences emerged. Non-student adults reported significantly lower fear of trying unfamiliar wines, greater perceived wine knowledge, and placed greater importance on wine quality than university students. In contrast, university students demonstrated a stronger preference for familiar wines, suggesting that limited exposure and lower confidence may influence their willingness to experiment with unfamiliar wine varieties. However, no significant differences were observed for several other novelty-related behaviors, indicating that openness to wine experiences may be more nuanced than previously understood.

Overall, the findings suggest that novelty seeking within wine tourism is influenced not only by individual curiosity but also by life experience, familiarity, and confidence in evaluating wine. By comparing two distinct populations, this study extends current understanding of consumer behavior within wine tourism and provides a foundation for future research examining how education, experience, and exposure shape wine preferences over time. As the wine tourism industry continues to evolve, a better understanding of consumer differences will contribute to the development of more engaging, inclusive, and meaningful wine tourism experiences for diverse visitor populations.

References

- Alonso, A. D., Fraser, R. A., & Cohen, D. A. (2007). Does age matter? How age influences the winery experience. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 1(2): 131-139.
- Amarendra, B., & Das, A. K. (2022). Adapting for resilience: exploring the advent of virtual experiences in pandemic-era wine tourism offerings. *Athens Journal of Tourism* 9(4): 209-226.

- Barber, M., Sung, B., Lee, S., & Cheah, I. (2021). Exploring the influence of novelty and authenticity in wine consumption: the moderating effect of regionality and price. *International Journal of Wine Business Research* 33(2): 288-311.
- Barth, S., & Salazar, J. (2010). Wine tourism and consumer behaviors related to wine purchases. *Journal of Tourism Insights* 1(1): 2.
- Bruwer, J., & Rueger-Muck, E. (2019). Wine tourism and hedonic experience: A motivation-based experiential view. *Tourism and Hospitality Research* 19(4): 488-502.
- Carlsen, J., & Boksberger, P. (2015). Enhancing consumer value in wine tourism. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* 39(1): 132-144.
- Carmer, A., Kleypas, J., & Orlowski, M. (2024). Wine sensory experience in hospitality education: a systematic review. *British Food Journal* 126(4): 1365-1386.
- Castellini, A., & Samoggia, A. (2018). Millennial consumers' wine consumption and purchasing habits and attitude towards wine innovation. *Wine Economics and Policy* 7(2): 128-139.
- Charters, S., & Ali-Knight, J. (2002). Who is the wine tourist? *Tourism Management* 23(3): 311-319.
- Crespi-Vallbona, M., & Mascarilla-Miró, O. (2020). Wine lovers: Their interests in tourist experiences. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 14(2): 239-258.
- Ellis, D., & Mattison Thompson, F. (2018). The effect of wine knowledge type on variety seeking behavior in wine purchasing. *Journal of Wine Research* 29(2): 71-86.
- Garcia, T., Barrena, R., & Grande, I. (2013). The wine consumption preferences of young people: a Spanish case study. *International Journal of Wine Business Research* 25(2): 94-107.
- Getz, D., & Carlsen, J. (2008). Wine tourism among Generations X and Y. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal* 56(3): 257-269.
- Jones, P., & Comfort, D. (2019). The role of resilience in research and planning in the tourism industry. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 7(1): 1-16.
- Kotur, A. S. (2023). A bibliometric review of research in wine tourism experiences: insights and future research directions. *International Journal of Wine Business Research* 35(2): 278-297.
- Lockshin, L., & Corsi, A. M. (2012). Consumer behaviour for wine 2.0: A review since 2003 and future directions. *Wine Economics and Policy* 1(1): 2-23.
- Saayman, M., & Van Der Merwe, A. (2015). Factors determining visitors' memorable wine-tasting experience at wineries. *Anatolia* 26(3): 372-383.
- Saliba, A. J., Wragg, K., & Richardson, P. (2009). Sweet taste preference and personality traits using a white wine. *Food Quality and Preference* 20(8): 572-575.
- Santos, V. R., Ramos, P., Almeida, N., & Santos-Pavón, E. (2019). Wine and wine tourism experience: A theoretical and conceptual review. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes* 11(6): 718-730.
- Sherman, S., & Tuten, T. (2011). Message on a bottle: the wine label's influence. *International Journal of Wine Business Research* 23(3): 221-234.
- Shi, X., Shi, J., Li, M., & Guo, Z. (2025). Enhancing Student Learning Experience in Wine Tasting: Live Virtual Wine Tours as a Pedagogical Approach. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education* 1-13.
- Stergiou, D. P., Airey, D., & Apostolakis, A. (2018). The winery experience from the perspective of Generation Z. *International Journal of Wine Business Research* 30(2): 169-184.
- Tempere, S., Pérès, S., Espinoza, A. F., Darriet, P., Giraud-Héraud, E., & Pons, A. (2019). Consumer preferences for different red wine styles and repeated exposure effects. *Food Quality and Preference* 73: 110-116.
- Torres, J. P., Barrera, J. I., Kunc, M., & Charters, S. (2021). The dynamics of wine tourism adoption in Chile. *Journal of Business Research* 127: 474-485.

From Vacation to Workation: Transforming Phuket into a Digital Nomad Hub

By Anusara Sawangchai*

The rapid expansion of remote work and digital technologies has transformed the way individuals engage with travel and professional life. In recent years, the concept of workation has emerged as a hybrid form of mobility in which individuals combine professional responsibilities with leisure travel. This shift has contributed to the rise of digital nomads, a growing group of professionals who rely on digital infrastructure to work remotely while residing temporarily in different destinations. As a result, tourism destinations around the world are increasingly exploring strategies to attract this emerging segment of long-stay travelers. This conceptual study examines the potential transformation of Phuket from a traditional vacation destination into a digital nomad hub within the evolving landscape of workation tourism. The study aims to explore the conceptual foundations of workation and analyze how tourism destinations can adapt to the needs of remote professionals. By synthesizing insights from the existing literature on tourism development, digital nomadism, and remote work mobility, the paper discusses the attributes that help destinations attract digital nomad communities. Particular attention is given to factors such as digital infrastructure, co-working environments, accommodation options, lifestyle quality, and supportive destination ecosystems that enable individuals to maintain productivity while experiencing travel. Phuket is considered a relevant case due to its established tourism infrastructure, international accessibility, appealing lifestyle, and growing digital connectivity. Traditionally recognized as one of Thailand's leading leisure tourism destinations, Phuket possesses several characteristics that align with the preferences of remote workers and digital nomads seeking extended stays. The study discusses how integrating tourism amenities into professional work environments could help Phuket diversify its tourism market and position itself within the global network of workation destinations. The paper also highlights theoretical and practical implications related to the transformation of tourism destinations in the digital era. The findings contribute to broader discussions on the evolving relationship between tourism, work, and lifestyle mobility. From a practical perspective, the study suggests that investments in digital infrastructure, development of co-working spaces, flexible accommodation arrangements, and supportive policy frameworks may strengthen Phuket's attractiveness for digital nomads. Overall, the study provides conceptual insights into how established tourism destinations may adapt to changing travel behaviors and the growing demand for workation experiences in the contemporary global tourism environment.

Keywords: Digital Nomads; Remote Work; Tourism Development; Destination Competitiveness.

*Assistant Professor, Faculty of Management Sciences, Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand.

Introduction

The global tourism landscape has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, shaped by technological advancement, shifting work cultures, and evolving traveler motivations (Khalid et al. 2023, Schifilliti et al. 2025). Traditionally, tourism has been associated with leisure travel in which individuals temporarily escape their daily routines to relax, explore new environments, and experience different cultures. However, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and remote work arrangements has begun to blur the boundaries between work and travel (Wilkesmann & Bassyouny 2025). As organizations increasingly adopt flexible work models and professionals gain the ability to perform their tasks from virtually any location, a new form of mobility has emerged that integrates productivity with leisure. This phenomenon, widely referred to as workation, represents a shift from conventional vacation practices toward a more flexible lifestyle in which individuals combine professional responsibilities with travel experiences (Khongsawatkiat & Agmapisarn 2024). Workation reflects broader changes in the global labor market and the digital economy. Advances in high speed internet, cloud computing, collaborative software, and mobile technologies have enabled many professionals to perform their duties remotely without being tied to a fixed office location. As a result, a growing population of remote workers, freelancers, entrepreneurs, and digital professionals now seek destinations that allow them to maintain their work commitments while enjoying the lifestyle benefits of travel (Wąsowicz-Zaborek 2025b). These individuals, often described as digital nomads, typically prioritize destinations that offer reliable digital infrastructure, a supportive community, affordability, cultural experiences, and high quality living environments. Consequently, tourism destinations around the world are increasingly positioning themselves to attract this new segment of travelers who remain for extended periods and contribute to local economies in ways that differ from traditional short term tourists (Mancinelli & Bozzi 2026).

Within this evolving context, the concept of transforming established tourism destinations into digital nomad hubs has gained increasing attention. Destinations that were historically known primarily for leisure tourism are now exploring strategies to accommodate remote workers who combine professional activities with travel experiences (Voll et al. 2023). This transformation involves more than simply attracting visitors; it requires the development of supportive ecosystems that include digital infrastructure, co working spaces, accommodation suited for longer stays, networking opportunities, and policies that facilitate remote work mobility. Such developments create opportunities for destinations to diversify tourism demand, stabilize visitor flows across seasons, and stimulate local economic development through longer visitor stays and deeper engagement with local communities (Su et al. 2025).

Phuket, one of Thailand's most prominent tourism destinations, presents a compelling case for examining the transition from vacation oriented tourism toward workation based mobility. For decades, Phuket has been internationally recognized for its beaches, cultural attractions, hospitality services, and vibrant tourism economy. The island has long attracted millions of international tourists seeking leisure experiences, making tourism a central pillar of the local economy. At the

same time, Phuket possesses several characteristics that align closely with the needs of digital nomads and remote workers (Pongwat et al 2026). These include an appealing tropical environment, relatively affordable cost of living compared with many Western countries, a well established hospitality sector, diverse accommodation options, and an increasingly connected digital infrastructure. Such attributes position Phuket as a potential destination not only for short term vacationers but also for long stay remote workers seeking a productive yet lifestyle oriented environment (Bahri 2024, Sawangchai et al. 2024).

The emergence of digital nomadism and workation trends has also been reinforced by broader global developments that encourage remote work mobility. Many organizations have recognized the productivity and flexibility benefits associated with remote work arrangements, while individuals increasingly value experiences that combine professional growth with personal well being and lifestyle exploration (Heo et al. 2026). In this context, destinations that can successfully integrate tourism amenities with professional work environments are likely to gain a competitive advantage in the evolving global tourism market. Phuket's tourism infrastructure, international accessibility, and established reputation as a world class destination provide a foundation upon which such transformation can occur (Kitika & Suwatcharapinun 2024).

Despite the growing popularity of workation and digital nomad travel, the conceptual understanding of how traditional tourism destinations can strategically reposition themselves as digital nomad hubs remains limited. Much of the existing discourse focuses on the lifestyle aspects of digital nomads or the economic benefits associated with longer visitor stays, yet fewer studies examine how destinations can transition from conventional leisure tourism models toward hybrid tourism and work ecosystems (Acuner et al. 2025). Understanding this transformation is particularly important for destinations like Phuket that already possess mature tourism industries but seek to adapt to new travel behaviors and technological realities.

This conceptual study, therefore, explores the transition from vacation-oriented tourism to workation-driven mobility, with a specific focus on Phuket as an emerging digital nomad hub. The paper aims to examine the conceptual foundations of workation, identify the destination attributes that support digital nomad communities, and discuss how Phuket can strategically position itself within this evolving global landscape. By analyzing the intersection between tourism development, remote work culture, and digital infrastructure, the study contributes to the broader discussion on the future of tourism destinations in an increasingly mobile and digitally connected world. Ultimately, understanding the potential of workation tourism may provide insights for policymakers, destination managers, and tourism stakeholders seeking to adapt to changing traveler expectations while promoting sustainable and innovative tourism development. The study critically explore the conceptual foundations of workation and digital nomadism, systematically applying these established frameworks specifically to the context of Phuket, while simultaneously examining how a well-established, mature tourism destination with a long history of mass leisure tourism can strategically reinvent and reposition itself to accommodate the growing demand from remote workers, digital nomads, and long-stay professionals seeking destinations that offer both productive work environments and high-quality lifestyle experiences.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Workation and Digital Nomadism

The concept of workation has emerged as a response to changing patterns of work and travel in the digital age. Traditionally, vacations were associated with temporary leisure activities during which individuals disengaged from professional responsibilities. In contrast, workation represents a hybrid arrangement where individuals continue to perform their professional tasks while staying in travel destinations that offer leisure and lifestyle benefits (Koll et al. 2025). This shift reflects broader transformations in the global workforce where technological advancements allow many occupations to be performed remotely. Remote communication platforms, cloud based systems, and portable digital devices have significantly reduced the need for workers to remain physically present in traditional office environments (Mancinelli & Bozzi 2026).

Digital nomadism is closely linked with the workation phenomenon. Digital nomads are individuals who rely on digital technologies to carry out their professional work while moving between different locations. Unlike conventional tourists who visit destinations primarily for leisure purposes, digital nomads often remain in a location for extended periods, combining daily work routines with exploration and cultural experiences (Moussa et al. 2022, Orel et al. 2025). This lifestyle is increasingly attractive to professionals such as software developers, designers, consultants, writers, marketers, and entrepreneurs who can operate independently of geographic constraints.

The motivations behind workation and digital nomad mobility extend beyond economic considerations. Many remote workers seek greater autonomy, flexibility, and improved quality of life. The ability to work from attractive destinations offers opportunities to experience new cultures, environments, and lifestyles while maintaining professional productivity. As a result, destinations that offer pleasant living conditions, reliable digital connectivity, and vibrant social environments have become particularly appealing to this group of travelers (Swetha et al., 2026).

Workation also represents a transformation in the way tourism is conceptualized. Instead of being limited to short term leisure visits, tourism experiences are becoming integrated into everyday life for remote workers. This integration blurs the traditional distinction between work spaces and leisure spaces, leading to the emergence of destinations that function simultaneously as tourism hubs and temporary professional environments (Wąsowicz-Zaborek 2025a). The growing popularity of this lifestyle indicates that tourism destinations may increasingly need to adapt their infrastructure and services to accommodate individuals who require both productive work settings and leisure opportunities.

Destination Attributes for Digital Nomad Hubs

The transformation of tourism destinations into digital nomad hubs requires a set of supporting attributes that differ from those traditionally associated with leisure tourism. While natural attractions and recreational experiences remain important, digital nomads typically evaluate destinations based on additional factors related to

their professional and lifestyle needs (Zhou et al. 2024). One of the most critical elements is reliable digital infrastructure. High speed internet connectivity, widespread availability of Wi Fi, and stable communication networks are essential for remote workers who depend on digital tools to perform their tasks and maintain communication with clients or employers (Chivandi & Mlilo 2024, Mitra & Paul 2025). Accommodation options also play an important role in attracting digital nomads. Unlike short term tourists who often stay in hotels for brief periods, digital nomads usually prefer accommodation suitable for extended stays. Serviced apartments, co living spaces, and rental properties that offer comfortable work environments are particularly appealing. Such accommodation arrangements allow remote workers to establish temporary routines while maintaining productivity and work life balance (Bednorz et al. 2025).

Another important attribute is the availability of co working spaces and professional environments. Co working spaces provide dedicated work areas, meeting rooms, and networking opportunities for remote professionals. These environments not only support productivity but also foster a sense of community among individuals who may otherwise experience social isolation while working remotely. The presence of such facilities contributes to the development of collaborative ecosystems where digital nomads can interact, exchange ideas, and build professional networks (Eban 2025, Rasethuntsa 2023).

Cost of living is also a significant factor influencing the choice of destination. Many digital nomads seek locations where living expenses are relatively affordable compared with major metropolitan areas in their home countries. Destinations that offer safety, reasonable accommodation costs, affordable food options, and accessible transportation systems are more likely to attract long-stay remote workers (Ji et al. 2024, Raza & Salman 2025). At the same time, lifestyle quality remains an essential consideration. Pleasant climate, cultural diversity, safety, recreational opportunities, and vibrant social environments contribute to the overall attractiveness of a destination for workation experiences.

Government policies and visa regulations can also influence the development of digital nomad hubs. Some destinations have introduced specialized visas or long stay permits designed specifically for remote workers (Akgiş İlhan et al. 2025). Such policies facilitate extended stays and provide legal frameworks that support international mobility for professionals who work online. Supportive regulatory environments, combined with infrastructure development and community engagement, play a critical role in shaping destinations that successfully attract digital nomad populations (Poulaki et al. 2023). Table 1 explains the destination attributes of Phuket.

Table 1. *Destination Attributes for Digital Nomad Hubs and Evaluation of Phuket*

Attribute	Description	Phuket
Digital Infrastructure	High-speed internet, Wi-Fi, and reliable communication networks essential for remote workers (Berinato 2014, Halford 2005).	Phuket have high speed internet offerings and fiber services.
Co-Working Spaces	Dedicated professional workspaces, meeting rooms, and community environments that support productivity and networking (Bouncken & Reuschl 2018, Fuzi 2015).	Phuket have a lot of co working spaces with basic facilities, hotels with dedicated meeting rooms and coffee shops with stable WIFI.
Accommodation Options	Serviced apartments, co-living spaces, and flexible long-stay rentals that integrate work and living needs (Molz 2012, Yrigoy 2019).	Phuket offers diverse range from luxury resorts to long-stay apartments.
Affordability / Cost of Living	Reasonable accommodation, food, and transportation costs relative to nomads' home countries (Inkson & Myers 2003, Mayerhofer et al. 2004).	Phuket is more affordable relative to Western cities
Lifestyle Quality	Pleasant climate, cultural diversity, safety, recreational opportunities, and vibrant social environments (Benson & O'reilly 2009, Florida 2017).	Phuket has tropical environment, beaches, cultural attractions, and diverse leisure options with premium facilities.
International Accessibility	Air connectivity and transportation networks enabling convenient travel to and from global destinations (Dobruszkes & Mondou 2013, Graham 2006).	Phuket have international airport with direct connections to major regional and global hubs
Supportive Policy and Visa Framework	Long-stay visas, remote work permits, and regulatory frameworks that facilitate extended professional residency (Kofman 2014, Koskela & Beckers 2024).	Thailand have introduced various visas for short and long term stays.

Phuket as an Emerging Workation Destination

Workation is when people work remotely from a leisure destination, blending their professional responsibilities with vacation experiences (Voll et al. 2023). Further, Shin et al., (2024) defines workcation is when someone travels to a destination and works from there, mixing their daily work life with the experience of being a tourist. Phuket has long been recognized as one of Thailand's most prominent tourism destinations, attracting visitors from around the world due to its natural beauty, hospitality services, and cultural attractions. Historically, tourism development in Phuket has focused primarily on leisure-oriented experiences such as beach tourism, recreational activities, and short-term holiday stays. However, the evolving dynamics of global travel and remote work have created opportunities for Phuket to expand its tourism profile beyond conventional vacation tourism (Pattanameteewit 2025). Several characteristics make Phuket particularly suitable for

the development of workation tourism. The island offers a combination of attractive environmental conditions, established tourism infrastructure, and accessibility that aligns with the preferences of digital nomads. Its tropical climate, coastal landscapes, and diverse leisure activities provide an appealing lifestyle environment for individuals who wish to balance work responsibilities with relaxation and exploration. At the same time, Phuket's hospitality sector provides a wide range of accommodation options ranging from luxury resorts to long stay apartments that can support extended visitor stays (Acuner et al. 2025).

The presence of international airports and transportation connectivity further strengthens Phuket's position as a potential hub for remote workers. A remote worker is an employee who carries out their job responsibilities from home or any location outside the traditional office, enabled by digital technology (George et al. 2022). Accessibility allows digital nomads to travel conveniently between Phuket and other regional or global destinations, which is particularly important for individuals who maintain international professional networks. In addition, the growth of digital infrastructure and increasing availability of co working spaces on the island have begun to create environments that support professional productivity alongside tourism experiences (Chuanchen & Wei 2025). Local communities and businesses in Phuket are also increasingly recognizing the potential benefits associated with attracting digital nomads. Digital nomads are people who use technology to work from anywhere in the world, freely choosing where and how often they move, while blending their work and travel lifestyle (Cook 2023). Unlike short term tourists who may spend only a few days in a destination, digital nomads typically remain for weeks or months, contributing to local economies through accommodation, dining, transportation, and other services. Their longer stays can help stabilize tourism demand and create more consistent economic activity for local businesses (Basu 2024).

At the same time, the transformation of Phuket into a digital nomad hub requires careful consideration of sustainable development and community integration. Balancing the needs of long stay remote workers with the interests of local residents and traditional tourism markets is essential for maintaining social and economic harmony. Infrastructure planning, environmental management, and community participation will play important roles in shaping how workation tourism evolves within the destination (Hunt & Thaveeseng 2024). The study of Lacarcel & Huete (2023), mentions a long-stay tourist is someone who moves to a new destination and stays for an extended period because they are looking for a better quality of life. Further, a lifestyle migrant is someone who chooses to relocate to another place not out of necessity, but simply because they want to live a better, more fulfilling life. As global mobility patterns continue to evolve, Phuket's potential transition from a conventional vacation destination to a workation oriented hub represents an important area of conceptual exploration. Understanding the attributes that support digital nomad communities and examining how these attributes align with Phuket's existing tourism ecosystem provides valuable insights into the future development of tourism in the digital era (Moussa et al. 2024, Rillo et al. 2025).

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual research design to explore the transformation of Phuket from a traditional vacation destination into a potential digital nomad hub within the context of workation tourism. Conceptual research focuses on developing theoretical understanding and synthesizing existing knowledge to explain emerging phenomena (Salawu et al. 2023). In this study, the methodology is based on an extensive review and interpretation of existing academic literature, industry reports, policy discussions, and tourism development perspectives related to workation, remote work mobility, and digital nomadism (Arslan 2024).

The research process involves examining scholarly discussions on the evolution of tourism behavior, particularly the shift from short term leisure travel toward hybrid travel patterns that combine work and tourism experiences. Relevant literature on digital nomads, remote work environments, tourism destination development, and lifestyle mobility is analyzed to identify key themes and conceptual relationships (Heo et al. 2026). Through this approach, the study integrates insights from tourism studies, mobility studies, and digital economy perspectives in order to understand how emerging forms of travel influence destination development strategies.

In addition to academic literature, the study considers secondary sources that discuss the characteristics of destinations that attract digital nomads. These include discussions related to digital infrastructure, accommodation patterns, community environments, lifestyle factors, and tourism ecosystems that support extended stays (Hannonen 2025). By synthesizing these perspectives, the research develops a conceptual understanding of how established tourism destinations may adapt their structures to support workation based travel. The analysis is interpretative in nature and aims to explain the conditions and attributes that may facilitate the positioning of Phuket as a digital nomad hub. This methodological approach allows the study to explore theoretical implications and propose insights for tourism development, destination management, and future research related to workation tourism.

Discussion of the Study

The emergence of workation represents a significant shift in the relationship between tourism, work, and mobility. The traditional understanding of tourism has long been centered on temporary leisure travel where individuals disengage from their professional responsibilities for their well-being (Khalid et al. 2026). However, the increasing adoption of remote work has altered this conventional model by allowing individuals to maintain productivity while traveling. This transformation has created new opportunities for tourism destinations that are capable of supporting both professional activities and leisure experiences (Cook 2023). In this context, Phuket demonstrates considerable potential to evolve from a conventional vacation destination into a workation oriented hub that attracts digital nomads and remote professionals. One of the key elements that supports this transformation is Phuket's established tourism infrastructure. The island has long developed accommodation facilities, hospitality services, transportation networks,

and recreational attractions that cater to international visitors. These existing resources provide a strong foundation for accommodating long stay visitors who seek both comfort and convenience during their workation experiences (Pongwat et al. 2026). Digital nomads often require environments that allow them to balance work commitments with relaxation and social engagement, and Phuket's lifestyle environment offers many of these qualities.

Digital connectivity is another important factor influencing the feasibility of Phuket as a digital nomad destination. Reliable internet access and the availability of co working spaces are essential for individuals who rely on digital platforms to conduct their professional activities (Grimley et al. 2026). As the demand for remote work environments grows, destinations that invest in digital infrastructure and professional working environments are more likely to attract long stay remote workers. Phuket has already begun to see the emergence of co working spaces and digital communities that support this evolving form of mobility (Engelhardt & Rogers 2026).

The economic implications of attracting digital nomads are also significant. Unlike traditional tourists who typically stay for short durations, digital nomads often remain in destinations for several weeks or months. Their extended stays contribute to local economies through spending on accommodation, food, transportation, and other daily services (Klimsch & Puapradit 2023). This form of tourism may create more stable economic activity compared with highly seasonal tourism patterns. As a result, the development of workation tourism may help diversify tourism markets and provide more consistent economic opportunities for local businesses (Treesuk 2025, Tsonev & Basmadzhieva 2023). At the same time, the transformation of Phuket into a digital nomad hub requires careful planning and sustainable management. The growth of long stay remote workers may influence housing markets, local infrastructure demand, and community dynamics (Boonkrong et al. 2025). Ensuring that tourism development benefits local communities while preserving environmental and cultural resources is essential for maintaining long term sustainability. Collaboration between policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and local communities will therefore be necessary to manage the opportunities and challenges associated with workation tourism (Khongsawatkiat & Agmapisarn 2024). Overall, the shift from vacation-based tourism toward workation-oriented mobility reflects broader changes in the global economy and workforce. Phuket's combination of lifestyle attractiveness, tourism infrastructure, and accessibility positions it as a promising location for the development of digital nomad communities (Boonkrong et al. 2025). By recognizing these emerging trends and strategically adapting its destination development, Phuket may strengthen its position in the evolving global landscape of workation tourism.

Implications of the Study

Conclusion of the Study

The growing phenomenon of workation represents a fundamental transformation in the intersection of tourism, work, and mobility. This study has examined Phuket's potential to transition from a conventional leisure destination into a

competitive hub for digital nomads and remote professionals, drawing on the island's established tourism infrastructure, lifestyle appeal, and emerging digital ecosystem. The analysis demonstrates that the convergence of remote work adoption and evolving travel behaviors has created new opportunities for tourism destinations that can support hybrid work-leisure experiences. Phuket's existing strengths, including its hospitality infrastructure, international accessibility, and developing co-working environment, position it favorably within the expanding global workation market. The economic benefits of attracting long-stay remote workers, such as reduced seasonal dependence and sustained local spending, further reinforce the strategic value of pursuing workation-oriented destination development. However, realizing this potential requires deliberate investment in digital infrastructure, flexible accommodation models, and coherent policy frameworks that support extended-stay visitors while safeguarding community well-being and environmental sustainability. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to broader discussions on lifestyle mobility, destination competitiveness, and the evolving boundaries of tourism in the digital economy. The workation model challenges traditional conceptualizations of tourists and travel purposes, suggesting that tourism must expand its frameworks to account for hybrid forms of mobility in which professional and leisure activities are deeply integrated. Ultimately, Phuket's ability to position itself as a premier workation destination depends on coordinated efforts among policymakers, tourism authorities, local businesses, and community stakeholders. By strategically aligning infrastructure development, destination branding, and regulatory support with the needs of the growing digital nomad population, Phuket can strengthen its relevance and resilience within the rapidly evolving global tourism landscape.

Theoretical Implications of the Study

The transformation of tourism by the emergence of workation and digital nomad mobility is a growing area of interest in tourism and mobility studies (Ji et al. 2024). This conceptual study contributes to the theoretical understanding of how tourism destinations evolve in response to changes in global work patterns and digital connectivity. Traditionally, tourism research has focused largely on leisure travel, seasonal visitation patterns, and short-term tourist experiences (Ladkin et al., 2023). The rise of remote work challenges these traditional frameworks by introducing new forms of mobility in which travel is no longer limited to leisure purposes but becomes integrated into everyday professional life.

One theoretical implication of this study is the expansion of the conceptual boundaries of tourism. The emergence of workation demonstrates that tourism experiences are increasingly embedded within broader lifestyle practices. Individuals who participate in workation do not separate work and leisure in the same way as traditional tourists (Stich et al. 2025). Instead, they engage in a hybrid form of mobility that combines professional productivity with recreational experiences. This shift suggests that tourism scholars may need to reconsider traditional definitions of tourists, travelers, and tourism experiences. The integration of work and travel suggests that tourism can serve not only as a leisure activity but also as a component of lifestyle mobility in the digital economy (Bassiyouny & Wilkesmann 2023).

The study also contributes to the growing literature on digital nomadism and lifestyle migration. Digital nomads represent a distinct category of mobile professionals who rely on digital technologies to sustain their work while relocating across destinations (Gupta et al. 2026). Unlike conventional migrants who relocate permanently or tourists who travel temporarily, digital nomads occupy an intermediate space characterized by temporary yet extended stays in different destinations. The conceptual exploration of Phuket as a digital nomad hub highlights the importance of understanding how destinations adapt to this emerging form of mobility. By focusing on the transformation of a well-established tourism destination into a workation environment, the study contributes to theoretical discussions on the relationship among tourism infrastructure, lifestyle mobility, and digital work practices.

Another important theoretical implication relates to destination development and competitiveness. Traditional tourism competitiveness models often emphasize factors such as natural attractions, cultural heritage, hospitality services, and accessibility (Song & Xu 2024). While these factors remain important, the emergence of digital nomad tourism introduces additional elements that influence destination attractiveness. These include digital infrastructure, co-working environments, extended stay accommodation, and supportive social ecosystems. The study suggests that the competitiveness of tourism destinations in the digital era may increasingly depend on their ability to support remote work environments alongside leisure tourism experiences.

The study also highlights the intersection between tourism development and the digital economy. As remote work becomes more widely accepted across industries, tourism destinations may begin to function as temporary living and working environments for globally mobile professionals. This phenomenon challenges traditional distinctions between tourism spaces and residential spaces. From a theoretical perspective, the emergence of workation destinations reflects the broader restructuring of spatial relationships between work, residence, and leisure. Destinations such as Phuket may therefore be understood not only as tourism locations but also as temporary professional environments within global digital networks (Shin et al. 2024).

Furthermore, the study contributes to conceptual discussions on sustainable tourism development. The attraction of digital nomads who stay for longer durations may influence tourism patterns by reducing dependence on short-term mass tourism flows. Longer stays can encourage deeper engagement with local cultures, communities, and everyday environments (Jiwasiddi et al. 2024). At the same time, the presence of long-stay visitors may introduce new social and economic dynamics that require careful management. Understanding these dynamics contributes to broader theoretical debates about how tourism destinations can evolve to balance economic opportunities with social and environmental sustainability. Finally, this study provides a foundation for future research. As workation continues to grow as a global trend, researchers may explore various aspects, including the motivations of digital nomads, the experiences of local communities, the economic impacts of long-stay remote workers, and the policy frameworks that support digital nomad mobility. The conceptual insights generated through this study, therefore, contribute to the development of future research agendas in tourism, mobility studies, and digital economy research.

Practical Implications of the Study

In addition to its theoretical contributions, this study offers several practical implications for policymakers, tourism authorities, destination managers, and local stakeholders interested in developing Phuket as a workation destination. The growing global community of digital nomads and remote professionals presents new opportunities for tourism destinations seeking to diversify their visitor markets and strengthen economic resilience. Understanding how Phuket can position itself as an attractive destination for workation tourism may help stakeholders design strategies aligned with emerging travel behaviors. One practical implication relates to the importance of digital infrastructure development. Reliable and high speed internet connectivity is a fundamental requirement for remote workers who depend on digital platforms to perform their professional tasks. Tourism authorities and local governments may therefore consider prioritizing investments in digital infrastructure across the island. Expanding internet coverage, ensuring stable connectivity, and supporting digital service providers can significantly enhance Phuket's attractiveness to digital nomads who require dependable communication networks for their work.

Another practical implication involves the development of co working spaces and professional environments. Dedicated workspaces equipped with modern facilities can play an important role in supporting productivity for remote professionals. The presence of co working spaces also fosters networking opportunities and social interaction among digital nomads. Local entrepreneurs and businesses may explore opportunities to establish co working hubs that integrate professional facilities with social and community activities. Such environments can contribute to the development of vibrant digital nomad communities within the destination.

Accommodation strategies also represent an important area for practical development. Since digital nomads often stay for longer periods compared with traditional tourists, accommodation providers may consider offering flexible rental arrangements and facilities that support both living and working needs. Serviced apartments, co-living spaces, and long-stay packages can be particularly attractive to remote professionals seeking comfortable environments for extended stays. Hotels and resorts may also adapt certain facilities to accommodate guests who require quiet workspaces and reliable connectivity. Marketing and destination branding strategies can also benefit from recognizing the growing demand for workation experiences. Tourism promotion efforts may highlight Phuket's lifestyle, cultural diversity, natural attractions, and supportive work environment. Emphasizing the ability to combine productivity with relaxation may help position Phuket as an appealing destination for digital nomads seeking balance between professional responsibilities and personal well being. Digital marketing campaigns, partnerships with remote work communities, and international promotion initiatives may further strengthen Phuket's visibility within global digital nomad networks.

Finally, policy frameworks may play a crucial role in facilitating workation tourism. Governments may consider regulatory measures that support long-stay visitors who work remotely while residing temporarily in the destination. Clear guidelines related to visas, taxation, and residency arrangements can help create an environment that encourages international professionals to choose Phuket as a

workation destination. By aligning policy initiatives with tourism development strategies, Phuket may strengthen its capacity to attract digital nomads while ensuring responsible and sustainable tourism growth. Overall, the practical implications of this study highlight the importance of strategic planning and collaboration among multiple stakeholders. By recognizing the opportunities presented by workation tourism and developing supportive environments for remote professionals, Phuket may successfully transition from a traditional vacation destination into a dynamic hub for digital nomad communities in the evolving global tourism landscape.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research adopts a conceptual approach and does not include empirical data or field-based evidence. As a result, the arguments presented rely primarily on interpretations of existing literature and theoretical discussions on workation, digital nomadism, and tourism development. Second, the study focuses specifically on Phuket as a potential digital nomad hub, which may limit the generalizability of the insights to other tourism destinations with different socio-economic and infrastructural conditions. Third, the study does not examine the perspectives of key stakeholders such as residents, tourism businesses, policymakers, or digital nomads themselves. Their experiences and perceptions could provide deeper insights into the practical realities of workation tourism. Future research may address these limitations by conducting empirical investigations, surveys, or case studies that explore the impacts and experiences associated with workation tourism in Phuket and similar destinations.

Acknowledgment

This paper was presented at the 22nd Annual International Conference on Tourism, held in Athens, Greece, on 8–12 June 2026.

Reference

- Acuner, E., Mete, B., & Özer, K. (2025). Beyond Borders: Exploring Digital Nomadism through the Push-Pull Lens. *Journal of Tourism, Sustainability and Well-Being*, 13(4), 287–308.
- Akış İlhan, Ö., Poyraz, M., & Günay, S. (2025). The multi-step movements of digital nomads: A network perspective on destination connectivity. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 14673584261421812.
- Arslan, E. (2024). From tourists to nomads: unveiling the transformative potential of digital nomads in travel and tourism. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 16(3), 269–281.
- Bahri, M. T. (2024). Evidence of the digital nomad phenomenon: From "Reinventing" migration theory to destination countries readiness. *Heliyon*, 10(17).
- Bassiyouny, M., & Wilkesmann, M. (2023). Going on workation—Is tourism research ready to take off? Exploring an emerging phenomenon of hybrid tourism. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 46, 101096.
- Basu, M. (2024). *Tech-driven horizons: Pioneering sustainable tourism for environmental resilience and SDGs triumph*.

- Bednorz, J., Orel, M., & Solvak, M. (2025). What makes a digital nomad destination? The case of small states. *Tourism Geographies*, 1–20.
- Benson, M., & O'reilly, K. (2009). Migration and the search for a better way of life: a critical exploration of lifestyle migration. *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), 608–625.
- Berinato, S. (2014). To raise productivity, let more employees work from home. *Harvard Business Review*, 92(1), 12.
- Boonkrong, P., Simmachan, T., Sittimongkol, R., & Lerdsuwansri, R. (2025). Data-driven approach in provincial clustering for sustainable tourism management in Thailand. *Thailand Statistician*, 23(3), 481–500.
- Bouncken, R. B., & Reuschl, A. J. (2018). Coworking-spaces: how a phenomenon of the sharing economy builds a novel trend for the workplace and for entrepreneurship. *Review of Managerial Science*, 12(1), 317–334.
- Chivandi, A., & Mlilo, T. (2024). Cloud Computing and Mobile Technologies as a Marketing Strategy towards Innovation and Business Growth among Small Tourism Enterprises. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 11(2), 147–168.
- Chuanchen, B. I., & Wei, Y. (2025). The Financial Impact of a Change in Thailand's Visa Regulations for Chinese Visitors. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 5(4), 1109–1126.
- Cook, D. (2023). What is a digital nomad? Definition and taxonomy in the era of mainstream remote work. *World Leisure Journal*, 65(2), 256–275.
- Dobruszkes, F., & Mondou, V. (2013). Aviation liberalization as a means to promote international tourism: The EU–Morocco case. *Journal of Air Transport Management*, 29, 23–34.
- Eban, F. (2025). A Research on Digital Nomad's Opinions on Destination Selection and Co-Working Spaces. *Yüziüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 67, 164–182.
- Engelhardt, R. A., & Rogers, A. P. (2026). The built heritage of nomadic coastal communities in Southeast Asia. *Built Heritage*, 10(1), 9.
- Florida, R. (2017). The economic geography of talent. In *Economy* (pp. 305–317). Routledge.
- Fuzi, A. (2015). Co-working spaces for promoting entrepreneurship in sparse regions: the case of South Wales. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 2(1), 462–469.
- George, T. J., Atwater, L. E., Maneethai, D., & Madera, J. M. (2022). Supporting the productivity and wellbeing of remote workers: Lessons from COVID-19. *Organizational Dynamics*, 51(2), 100869.
- Graham, A. (2006). Have the major forces driving leisure airline traffic changed? *Journal of Air Transport Management*, 12(1), 14–20.
- Grimley, E., Das, P., Woods, O., & Kong, L. (2026). How do you fix knowledge in place? Digital nomads and infrastructural stickiness. *Tourism Geographies*, 28(1), 102–121.
- Gupta, S., Jaiswal, R., & Gupta, S. K. (2026). Digital nomads: a systematic literature review and future research agenda. *Tourism Review*, 81(1), 396–414.
- Halford, S. (2005). Hybrid workspace: Re-spatialisations of work, organisation and management. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 20(1), 19–33.
- Hannonen, O. (2025). Emergent geographies of digital nomadism: conceptual framing, insights and implications for tourism. *Tourism Geographies*, 27(3–4), 568–578.
- Heo, J., Zhang, T., & Hua, N. (2026). The growing phenomenon of digital nomads: Merging work and travel in the hospitality and tourism industry. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Cases*, 14(1), 29–36.
- Heo, J., Zhang, T., Hua, N., & Zhao, X. (2026). Exploring the Dual-Aspect Well-Being of Digital Nomads in Tourism and Hospitality: A Conceptual Framework. *Journal of Smart Tourism*, 6(1), 3–16.
- Hunt, B., & Thaveeseng, H. (2024). The Rethinking Kho Yao Noi Community-Based Tourism from Crisis to Sustainability. *Journal of Roi Kaensarn Academi*, 9(6), 136–149.

- Inkson, K., & Myers, B. A. (2003). "The big OE": Self-directed travel and career development. *Career Development International*, 8(4), 170–181.
- Ji, Y., Kim, S.-M., & Kim, Y. (2024). A way to attract digital nomads to tourist destinations in the new normal era. *Sustainability*, 16(6), 2336.
- Jiwasiddi, A., Schlagwein, D., Cahalane, M., Cecez-Kecmanovic, D., Leong, C., & Ractham, P. (2024). Digital nomadism as a new part of the visitor economy: The case of the "digital nomad capital" Chiang Mai, Thailand. *Information Systems Journal*, 34(5), 1493–1535.
- Khalid, R., Raza, M., & Prideaux, B. (2026). An investigation of urban experiencescape and restorative environment for wellness tourism. *International Journal of Spa and Wellness*, 9(1), 20–39.
- Khalid, R., Raza, M., Selem, K. M., Ghaderi, Z., & Raza, H. (2023). Natural disaster is a wakeup call before it becomes social disaster and tourophobia of eco-destinations. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 28(11), 1226–1240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2023.2293789>.
- Khongsawatkiat, N., & Agmapisarn, C. (2024). Workation Destination Attractiveness in Urban Locations: Insights from Hybrid Thematic Analysis. *Thammasat Review*, 27(2), 225–268.
- Kitika, C., & Suwatcharapinun, S. (2024). Smart district with the comparison on urban studies of internet infrastructure and new digital activities A case study of Chiang Mai Old City, Thailand. *International Review for Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development*, 12(3), 200–217.
- Klimsch, L., & Puapradit, A. (2023). Management, Business, and Economics. *IJMBE*, 81.
- Kofman, E. (2014). Towards a gendered evaluation of (highly) skilled immigration policies in Europe. *International Migration*, 52(3), 116–128.
- Koll, E., Wang, X., & Lin, M. S. (2025). Digital nomadism as a form of travel: A phenomenological study of going on a workation. *Tourism Management*, 110, 105185.
- Koskela, K., & Beckers, P. (2024). Typologizing digital nomad visas: Comparing policy rationales from tourism to wealth accumulation to immigration. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 26(5), 407–425.
- Lacarcél, F. J., & Huete, R. (2023). Digital communication strategies used by private companies, entrepreneurs, and public entities to attract long-stay tourists: a review. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 19(2), 691–708.
- Ladkin, A., Mooney, S., Solnet, D., Baum, T., Robinson, R., & Yan, H. (2023). A review of research into tourism work and employment: Launching the Annals of Tourism Research curated collection on tourism work and employment. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 100, 103554.
- Mancinelli, F., & Bozzi, A. (2026). Workation destinations: 're-imaging' tourism cities for digital nomads. *Tourism Geographies*, 28(1), 63–79.
- Mayerhofer, H., Hartmann, L. C., Michelitsch-Riedl, G., & Kollinger, I. (2004). Flexpatriate assignments: a neglected issue in global staffing. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 15(8), 1371–1389.
- Mitra, A., & Paul, S. (2025). The Role of Digital Infrastructure in Shaping Digital Nomad Tourism: A Comparative Analysis of Urban and Rural Nomad Hubs. In *Transforming Remote Work and Tourism in the Digital Nomad Era* (pp. 201–238). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Molz, J. G. (2012). *Travel connections: Tourism, technology and togetherness in a mobile world*. Routledge.
- Moussa, M. H. B., Helal, D. I., & Gaber, M. H. A. (2022). How digitalization in tourism led to moral disengagement of employees: Differential impacts on X, Y, Z generations in Egyptian hotels. *Athens J. Tour*, 9, 195–208.
- Moussa, M. H. B., Saber, M., & El-Yamani, M. I. (2024). Graduates' employability: hospitality industry 4.0 and skill gaps in Egypt. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 11(1), 45.

- Orel, M., Cook, D., Voll, K., & Vogl, T. (2025). Identity, practice, and place: a tripartite framework for contemporary digital nomadism. *World Leisure Journal*, 1–23.
- Pattanameteewit, R. (2025). Tourism Management Model to Support Tourists Digital NOMADs Sumui Island, Surat Thani Province. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 2779–2791.
- Pongwat, A., Law, R., & Piuchan, M. (2026). Connectivity vs. Community: Re-Evaluating Destination Quality for the Digital Nomad and Workationer Market. *Sustainability*, 18(5), 2181.
- Poulaki, I., Mavragani, E., Kaziani, A., & Chatzimichali, E. (2023). Digital nomads: Advances in hospitality and destination attractiveness. *Tourism and Hospitality*, 4(3), 483–498.
- Rasethuntsa, B. C. (2023). Tourism Safety and Security: Strategies Adopted by Some African Economies. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 10(4), 295–306.
- Raza, M., & Salman, A. (2025). Tourism Built on Disasters is Always Resilient: An Implication of Destination Branding Strategies to Respond to Crisis in Thailand. *International Journal of Operations and Quantitative Management*, 31(4), 239–263.
- Rillo, A. D., Carvao, S., Ruescas, J., Julian, M., Kumar, P., Rodak, F., Torres, I., Chopin, C., & Conilleau, J. (2025). *ASEAN Tourism Outlook 2025 The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967. The Member States are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam. The ASEAN Secretariat is based in Jakarta, Indonesia.*
- Salawu, R., Shamsuddin, A., Bolatitio, S., & Masibo, S. (2023). Theoretical and conceptual frameworks in research: Conceptual clarification. *European Chemical Bulletin*, 12(12), 2103–2117.
- Sawangchai, A., Khalid, R., Raza, M., Alshuaibi, M. S., Valeri, M., & kasuma, J. (2024). Sustainability and Technology Go Hand in Hand to Achieve Excellence in Thai Family Businesses: A Big Data Analytical Perspective. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 1–16.
- Schifilliti, V., Vitellaro, F., & Zamparo, G. (2025). Destination image and personality in workation tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 28(21), 3487–3505.
- Shin, H., Lee, J., & Kim, N. (2024). Workcation (workation) travel experiences, satisfaction and revisit intentions: Focusing on conceptualization, scale development, and nomological network. *Journal of Travel Research*, 63(5), 1150–1168.
- Song, J., & Xu, B. (2024). Evaluation model of urban tourism competitiveness in the context of sustainable development. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, 1396134.
- Stich, J.-F., Díaz Andrade, A., & Kuepers, W. M. (2025). Combining work and vacation: workation as an attractive work arrangement. *Personnel Review*, 54(6), 1501–1520.
- Su, C.-J., Moriya, K., Lorgnier, N., & Lan, Y.-F. (2025). Exploring the linkage between remote work and workation in a DT-ANN approach: an East Asia perspective. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 1–24.
- Swetha, M. S., Sahasra, S., Suman Jambar, D., Prakash, N., Sheila Eveline, N., & Rupashree, R. (2026). Workations and Vacations in Financial Well-Being Among Digital Nomads' Travel Decisions. In *Empowering Business Through Technology: Innovations Shaping Our Future* (pp. 891–905). Springer.
- Treesuk, W. (2025). Managing the Sharing Economy in Thailand's Tourism Industry: Strategic Approaches from Phuket Province. *Journal of Design, Management and Technology Innovation*, 2(2).
- Tsonev, N., & Basmadzhieva, S. (2023). Opportunities for digitalization in marketing management of health tourism in Bulgaria. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 10(1), 21–44.
- Voll, K., Gauger, F., & Pfnür, A. (2023). Work from anywhere: Traditional workation, coworkation and workation retreats: A conceptual review. *World Leisure Journal*, 65(2), 150–174.

- Wąsowicz-Zaborek, E. (2025a). From Remote Work to Workation. In *Gen Z at Work in Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 12–25). Routledge.
- Wąsowicz-Zaborek, E. (2025b). Workation as a new mode of work—analysis of top European destinations. *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-Economic Series*, 68, 159–174.
- Wilkesmann, M., & Bassiouny, M. (2025). From leisure to labor: How workations are reshaping hospitality and destination marketing in the era of New Work. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 36, 100991.
- Yrigoy, I. (2019). Rent gap reloaded: Airbnb and the shift from residential to touristic rental housing in the Palma Old Quarter in Mallorca, Spain. *Urban Studies*, 56(13), 2709–2726.
- Zhou, L., Buhalis, D., Fan, D. X. F., Ladkin, A., & Lian, X. (2024). Attracting digital nomads: Smart destination strategies, innovation and competitiveness. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 31, 100850.

From Spiritual Practice to Economic Asset: Sacred Travel and Regional Development in Limpopo, South Africa

By Azwifaneli Nemushungwa*

Sacred travel represents an important yet under-measured dimension of tourism and regional development in South Africa. This study examines the potential contribution of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Easter pilgrimage to Moria, Limpopo Province, to regional economic development. Using a qualitative narrative review approach, the study synthesises scholarly literature, official tourism statistics and documentary evidence to examine the economic pathways, livelihood opportunities and sustainability challenges associated with large-scale pilgrimage. The analysis is guided by Tourism Multiplier Theory, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model. The study conceptualises pilgrimage as generating visitor expenditure that may stimulate economic linkages in transport, trade, retail and accommodation, with potential effects on local income, employment, micro-enterprise development and broader regional economic activity. However, the findings indicate that the developmental benefits of sacred travel are neither automatic nor necessarily locally retained. Economic leakages, unequal participation, inadequate infrastructure, environmental pressures, security requirements, seasonality and governance challenges may constrain its contribution to inclusive development. Historical evidence confirms that the Moria pilgrimage has generated substantial economic effects, while recent evidence demonstrates its continuing significance as a major source of religious mobility. Nevertheless, there remains insufficient contemporary destination-level evidence on pilgrim expenditure, local business turnover, employment, household income, economic leakages, and public infrastructure costs. The study, therefore, avoids assigning a contemporary monetary value to the pilgrimage and instead identifies the conditions under which sacred travel may function as a regional development asset. It concludes that the developmental value of the Moria pilgrimage depends on strengthening local economic participation and expenditure retention, improving destination governance and infrastructure, managing environmental and social pressures, and safeguarding the sacred destination's spiritual and cultural integrity. The study highlights the need for future primary research to measure the magnitude, distribution and sustainability of pilgrimage-related economic benefits and costs.

Keywords: Sacred travel; religious tourism; pilgrimage; ZCC; Moria; regional development; local economic development; livelihoods; tourism multiplier; Limpopo

*Senior Lecturer, Economics Department, Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, University of Venda, South Africa.

Introduction

Sacred travel is an established form of human mobility and an increasingly relevant dimension of contemporary tourism. Pilgrimage generally involves journeys motivated by religious devotion, spiritual fulfilment and participation in sacred practices, while religious tourism encompasses a broader range of travel associated with religious sites, events, heritage and cultural experiences. Beyond their spiritual significance, these forms of mobility generate flows of visitors, expenditure, and services that can influence destination economies, local enterprises, and community livelihoods. Recent tourism scholarship increasingly emphasises the importance of understanding these effects in relation to local participation, stakeholder engagement and sustainable destination development (Nilsson & Aquino 2021, Pisarović et al. 2025).

The economic significance of religious travel is increasingly evident in South Africa. The *Domestic Tourism Performance Report* for the second quarter of 2025 indicates that religious travel accounted for 15.2% of domestic overnight trips, compared with 5.5% in the corresponding quarter of 2024, while expenditure associated with religious tourism increased from R599.3 million to R2.5 billion. The report identifies the return of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Easter pilgrimage to Moria in April 2025 as an important contributor to this increase. These figures indicate that religious travel has become a substantial component of domestic tourism. However, national and provincial statistics provide limited information about how this expenditure is distributed across local households, formal businesses, informal enterprises, transport operators and external suppliers.

This distinction is important because tourism activity does not necessarily translate automatically into inclusive local development. The economic contribution of tourism depends partly on the participation of host communities, the strength of local supply chains and the extent to which expenditure is retained within the destination. Research published in the *Athens Journal of Tourism* highlights the importance of stakeholder participation and local involvement in shaping tourism outcomes, particularly in rural destinations (Nilsson & Aquino 2021, Thetsane 2019). Similarly, recent evidence from rural tourism demonstrates that tourism can contribute to income diversification and employment, while benefits may remain constrained by inadequate infrastructure, limited skills, and unequal access to tourism opportunities (Yeboah et al. 2025). These insights are particularly relevant to pilgrimage destinations where visitor concentrations may be large but highly seasonal.

The ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria provides an important context for examining the relationship between sacred travel and local economic development. After a five-year interruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the pilgrimage resumed in April 2025. The Public Utility Transport Corporation (PUTCO), a major South African bus operator, reported transporting approximately 30,000 ZCC pilgrims using nearly 500 buses during the pilgrimage period. Although these figures illustrate the considerable scale of pilgrimage-related mobility, they do not provide a direct measure of its economic impact. In particular, they do not reveal average expenditure per pilgrim, total revenue generated at Moria, employment created, turnover among local enterprises, tax contributions, or the proportion of pilgrimage-related expenditure retained within surrounding communities. The key analytical

challenge, therefore, is not the absence of evidence demonstrating the significance of religious travel, but the limited availability of disaggregated, destination-level data needed to assess how pilgrimage-generated economic activity is distributed and translated into local development.

Historical evidence nevertheless demonstrates that pilgrimage can generate substantial regional economic linkages. Saayman et al. (2014) found significant production and household income effects associated with the ZCC pilgrimage to Moria, particularly in trade and accommodation, transport and communication, and financial and business services. However, those estimates pertain to the 2011 pilgrimage and should not be interpreted as evidence of Moria's contemporary economic value. The present study, therefore, distinguishes between documented historical impacts and potential contemporary economic pathways, avoiding the attribution of current monetary values in the absence of primary destination-level data.

The relevance of this issue extends beyond expenditure to local livelihoods and enterprise participation. Pilgrimage periods can create temporary markets for food vendors, transport operators, accommodation providers, retailers and producers of religious merchandise. Such opportunities may contribute to income diversification and local enterprise development, particularly in rural communities. Recent AJT research similarly shows that tourism can create employment, stimulate purchases of local products and support community income, while inadequate infrastructure and unequal access to tourism opportunities can constrain these benefits (Yeboah et al. 2025). The developmental outcome, therefore, depends not simply on the number of visitors but on the extent to which local enterprises participate in tourism value chains.

At the same time, large-scale sacred travel can generate costs and competing pressures. Concentrated visitor flows can place additional demands on roads, transport systems, water and sanitation, waste management, emergency services and public safety. Tourism scholarship increasingly emphasises the need to assess these pressures alongside economic benefits and to incorporate environmental governance, stakeholder coordination and destination sustainability into tourism planning (Nilsson & Aquino 2021, Pisarović et al. 2025, Toanoglou et al. 2025). In addition, commercial expansion around sacred spaces may create tensions between economic activity and the religious and cultural meanings attached to the destination. Sustainable development therefore requires a balance between economic opportunities, community interests, environmental management and the preservation of sacred values.

The research gap addressed by this study consequently extends beyond the general observation that religious tourism is under-researched. Although national statistics demonstrate the growing importance of religious travel in South Africa, limited systematic evidence connects the scale of pilgrimage mobility at Moria with destination-level expenditure, local economic retention, informal enterprise development, livelihood outcomes, economic leakages and infrastructure and environmental costs. The existing evidence demonstrates that Moria can generate substantial economic activity, but it remains unclear how this activity is distributed, how much value is retained locally and whether pilgrimage contributes to sustained and inclusive regional development.

Against this background, the study examines sacred travel as a potential regional development asset in Limpopo Province, using the ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria as the principal case. The study addresses four research questions:

RQ1: What economic pathways are associated with sacred travel and the ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria in Limpopo Province?

RQ2: How does pilgrimage-related activity contribute to local livelihoods, informal-sector participation and micro-enterprise development?

RQ3: What infrastructural, environmental, security, governance and social challenges constrain the sustainable development of sacred travel in Limpopo?

RQ4: To what extent can sacred travel be conceptualised as a regional economic development asset in Limpopo Province?

Correspondingly, the study aims to: (i) examine the economic pathways through which sacred travel contributes to regional economic activity; (ii) assess its implications for livelihoods, informal enterprises and local economic participation; (iii) critically examine the infrastructural, environmental, security, governance and social challenges associated with large-scale pilgrimage; and (iv) develop a balanced conceptualisation of sacred travel as a potential regional development asset.

The study adopts a qualitative narrative review integrating tourism multiplier theory, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model. Given the absence of current primary expenditure and household-level data, the study does not claim to calculate the total economic impact of the Moria pilgrimage. Rather, it synthesises available scholarly literature, official tourism evidence and documented cases to identify economic pathways, opportunities and constraints. This limitation is important: future empirical studies using pilgrim surveys, household interviews, enterprise surveys and expenditure data will be necessary to estimate expenditure per pilgrim, employment effects, local multipliers, economic leakages, distributional outcomes and the costs imposed on host communities.

The study contributes to the literature by moving beyond the assumption that pilgrimage automatically generates development benefits. It examines how economic benefits may circulate, who captures them, what limits their retention within host communities, and what social, environmental, infrastructural and governance costs accompany large-scale sacred mobility. Sacred travel is consequently conceptualized not as an inherently beneficial form of tourism, but as a conditional development opportunity whose contribution to inclusive regional development depends on local economic participation, expenditure retention, effective destination management, environmental sustainability, and the protection of the spiritual and cultural integrity of sacred places.

Literature Review

Sacred Travel, Religious Tourism and Regional Development

Sacred travel occupies an important position within tourism scholarship because it combines religious motivations with economic, social and cultural processes. Pilgrimage traditionally refers to travel undertaken for spiritual, devotional or ritual purposes, whereas religious tourism encompasses a broader range of activities associated with sacred places, religious events and cultural heritage (Timothy & Olsen 2006, Raj & Griffin 2021). Although the primary motivation for pilgrimage may be spiritual rather than recreational, pilgrims consume transport, accommodation, food, retail and other services, creating economic linkages within destination economies (Olsen 2021, Griffin & Raj 2017). Religious tourism can therefore contribute to regional development by connecting visitor mobility with local markets, employment and enterprise opportunities.

The economic effects of tourism are commonly explained through multiplier processes. Visitor expenditure generates direct effects through purchases made by tourists, indirect effects through local suppliers, and induced effects when tourism-related incomes are subsequently spent within the economy (Archer 1982, Fletcher 1989). Applied to pilgrimage, these mechanisms suggest that expenditure on transport, food, accommodation, religious goods and other services can stimulate economic activity beyond the immediate sacred site. However, the magnitude of these effects depends on the strength of local supply chains and the extent to which expenditure is retained locally. High levels of economic leakage, external ownership and dependence on imported goods can substantially reduce the developmental benefits accruing to host communities (Archer 1995, Tyrrell & Johnston 2006).

This perspective is particularly relevant to rural pilgrimage destinations such as Moria, where large temporary visitor flows may generate substantial demand but do not necessarily translate into equivalent long-term local development. The literature therefore suggests that visitor numbers alone are insufficient indicators of economic impact. Attention should also be given to expenditure patterns, local procurement, employment, enterprise participation and the distribution of benefits among community members.

Pilgrimage, Livelihoods and Local Enterprise

Tourism can contribute to livelihood diversification by creating opportunities for households to combine formal employment with self-employment, informal trading and other income-generating activities (Ashley et al. 2007, Scheyvens 2007). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is useful in this context because it conceptualises livelihoods as dependent on access to different forms of capital, including financial, human, physical, social and natural capital (Scoones 1998). Pilgrimage destinations can provide temporary markets in which households mobilise these resources through food vending, transportation, accommodation, retailing and craft production.

However, livelihood benefits are not necessarily equally distributed. Access to pilgrimage-related markets may depend on capital availability, location, social

networks, licensing arrangements and relationships with destination authorities. Consequently, larger businesses and externally based operators may capture a disproportionate share of expenditure, while local informal traders may remain concentrated in low-margin and highly seasonal activities. Tourism scholarship consequently emphasises the importance of community participation, local ownership and institutional support if tourism is to contribute to inclusive development (Scheyvens 1999, Tosun 2000).

For Limpopo, this literature highlights an important distinction between economic activity generated by pilgrimage and developmental benefits retained by host communities. The presence of traders and service providers around Moria demonstrates market activity, but does not by itself establish the scale, durability or distribution of livelihood benefits. This reinforces the need for destination-level empirical research capable of examining household income, enterprise turnover, employment and expenditure retention.

Pilgrimage, Destination Development and Infrastructure

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) provides a useful framework for understanding how destinations respond to changes in visitor volumes and investment over time (Butler, 1980). Rapid increases in visitor numbers can stimulate infrastructure development, commercialisation and destination recognition, but excessive concentration of visitors may eventually create congestion, resource pressures and declining destination quality. Although originally developed for conventional tourism destinations, the framework is relevant to pilgrimage destinations where visitor flows can be highly concentrated temporally and spatially.

Large-scale pilgrimage can place considerable pressure on transport networks, water supply, sanitation, waste management, accommodation and emergency services. These pressures may generate public costs that are not captured in conventional measures of tourism expenditure (Hall, 2010; Gössling et al., 2012). Consequently, the assessment of pilgrimage as a regional development mechanism should consider both the economic benefits generated by visitors and the infrastructure and environmental costs borne by host communities and public institutions.

This is particularly important for Moria because pilgrimage activity involves exceptionally large concentrations of visitors within a relatively short period. Such concentration can increase economic opportunities while simultaneously intensifying congestion, waste generation, resource consumption and public-safety requirements. The developmental value of pilgrimage therefore depends partly on destination capacity, planning and governance rather than visitor numbers alone.

Environmental, Social and Security Challenges

The sustainability literature cautions against treating tourism growth as synonymous with development. Intensive visitor concentrations can increase pressure on natural resources, waste systems and local ecosystems, particularly where infrastructure expansion does not keep pace with visitor growth (Gössling 2002, Gössling et al. 2012). Pilgrimage destinations may face similar challenges

because religious events often produce highly concentrated periods of mobility and consumption.

Social and security considerations are equally important. Large gatherings can create risks associated with traffic congestion, overcrowding, emergency response and public safety. These challenges require coordination between religious organisations, municipalities, tourism authorities, transport operators and law-enforcement agencies. The literature on sustainable religious tourism therefore increasingly emphasises destination governance and stakeholder coordination rather than focusing exclusively on visitor expenditure (Raj & Griffin 2021).

Furthermore, the economic use of sacred places may create tensions between commercialisation and spiritual authenticity. Commercial activities can enhance local livelihoods and improve services for pilgrims, but excessive commercialisation may commodify religious experiences and alter the cultural meaning of sacred spaces (MacCannell 1976, Cohen 1988). The challenge is consequently to identify forms of commercial activity that support local economic participation without undermining the religious values and cultural identity that attract pilgrims in the first place.

The South African and Limpopo Context

South African scholarship demonstrates that religious tourism can generate significant economic activity while simultaneously raising questions concerning local participation and destination management. Research on pilgrimage has highlighted the capacity of religious gatherings to stimulate transport, trading and other economic activities around sacred destinations (Saayman et al. 2014, Linda 2021, 2024). These studies provide an important foundation for examining Moria as an economic and tourism space rather than solely as a religious site.

Nevertheless, the existing literature remains limited in several respects. First, relatively little recent destination-level evidence quantifies the distribution of pilgrimage expenditure between local households, informal enterprises, formal businesses and external suppliers. Second, insufficient attention has been given to economic leakages and the extent to which pilgrimage-related income translates into sustained livelihood improvements. Third, the social, environmental, infrastructure and security costs associated with very large pilgrimage gatherings remain comparatively underexamined. Finally, the relationship between sacred travel and broader regional development in rural Limpopo has received less attention than the religious and cultural dimensions of pilgrimage.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

The literature therefore establishes that pilgrimage can generate economic activity, diversify livelihoods and stimulate destination development, but it also demonstrates that these outcomes are neither automatic nor evenly distributed. The key gap is not simply the absence of evidence that pilgrimage generates economic benefits; rather, there is insufficient integrated understanding of how pilgrimage expenditure, livelihood opportunities, local economic retention, infrastructure

pressures and social and environmental costs interact within a rural destination such as Moria.

This study addresses this gap by bringing together three complementary perspectives. Tourism multiplier theory explains how pilgrimage expenditure can generate direct, indirect and induced economic effects (Archer 1982, Fletcher 1989). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework explains how pilgrimage-related markets may contribute to household livelihood diversification while recognising unequal access to economic opportunities (Scoones 1998). The Tourism Area Life Cycle model provides a broader destination perspective through which increasing visitor concentration, infrastructure requirements and potential sustainability pressures can be understood (Butler 1980).

Together, these perspectives support a balanced analysis of sacred travel as a potential rather than automatic regional development asset. They also reinforce the need for future primary research involving pilgrims, local households, informal traders, businesses, transport operators and public authorities. Such research would make it possible to quantify expenditure per pilgrim, local business turnover, employment effects, economic leakages, infrastructure costs and the distribution of benefits—dimensions that cannot be reliably established through a narrative review alone.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative narrative review approach to examine how sacred travel, particularly the ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria, may contribute to regional economic development in Limpopo. A narrative review is appropriate where the objective is to integrate diverse forms of conceptual, theoretical and empirical evidence to develop an interpretive understanding of a complex phenomenon rather than statistically aggregate comparable findings (Snyder 2019, Green et al. 2024). Narrative synthesis is particularly useful where evidence is heterogeneous in design, context and outcome measures, making meta-analysis inappropriate (Popay et al. 2006, Mays et al. 2005). The approach is also consistent with qualitative tourism research, which is well-suited to examining the social, economic, and contextual dimensions of complex tourism phenomena (Jennings 2001, Mkono 2016).

Literature Identification and Selection

Relevant literature was identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and institutional and government sources. Search terms included combinations of *sacred travel*, *religious tourism*, *pilgrimage tourism*, *ZCC pilgrimage*, *Moria*, *Limpopo tourism*, *religious tourism and economic development*, *pilgrimage and livelihoods*, *tourism multiplier*, *informal economy*, *sustainable livelihoods* and *tourism destination development*. Reference lists of relevant publications were also examined to identify additional studies.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed scholarly literature, particularly studies addressing religious tourism, pilgrimage, tourism-led economic development, rural

livelihoods and destination sustainability. Relevant institutional and government sources were included where they provided recent statistical or contextual evidence not available in academic publications, particularly tourism statistics and information relating to the 2025 Moria pilgrimage. This combination of scholarly and documentary evidence enables the study to connect theoretical perspectives with contemporary developments in Limpopo.

Analytical Framework and Synthesis

The selected literature was analysed thematically around four dimensions corresponding to the research questions: (i) economic impact pathways; (ii) livelihoods and micro-enterprise development; (iii) infrastructure, environmental, governance and social challenges; and (iv) the potential of sacred travel as a regional development asset. Narrative synthesis was used to compare and integrate findings across different studies and evidence types, while recognising differences in research design, geographical context and measurement (Popay et al. 2006, Mays et al. 2005).

Three complementary theoretical perspectives guide the analysis. Tourism multiplier theory is used to examine how pilgrimage expenditure can generate direct, indirect and induced economic effects through local consumption and supply-chain linkages (Archer 1982, Fletcher 1989). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is applied to assess how pilgrimage-related activities may contribute to household income diversification, enterprise development and livelihood resilience (Scoones 1998). Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model provides a broader destination perspective for considering how increasing visitor flows may influence infrastructure, commercialisation, community participation and destination pressures over time (Butler 1980).

Importantly, the study does not claim to calculate the total economic impact of the Moria pilgrimage. The available evidence does not provide sufficiently disaggregated information on pilgrim expenditure, expenditure per visitor, local business turnover, employment, tax revenues or economic leakages. The analysis therefore uses available quantitative indicators to establish the scale of pilgrimage-related mobility while employing the reviewed literature and theoretical frameworks to interpret potential economic pathways. This distinction prevents theoretical possibilities from being presented as measured economic impacts.

Critical Assessment and Limitations of the Evidence

The review deliberately incorporates both positive and negative dimensions of sacred travel. Evidence concerning employment, enterprise development, local expenditure and livelihood opportunities is considered alongside congestion, infrastructure pressure, waste, environmental impacts, security requirements, unequal distribution of benefits, economic leakages and tensions between commercialisation and spiritual authenticity. This balanced approach is important because tourism development can generate economic benefits while simultaneously producing social, environmental and institutional costs (Sharpley 2000, Saarinen 2006).

A major limitation of this study is the absence of primary data from pilgrims, residents, traders, transport operators, businesses and public authorities, which prevents the estimation of average pilgrim expenditure, visitor numbers, multiplier effects, household income, employment and the distribution of benefits between local and external actors. Future research should therefore use pilgrim expenditure surveys, household and trader surveys, stakeholder interviews and destination-level analyses of expenditure and supply chains to quantify these effects. Nevertheless, the methodology provides a systematic, transparent and critically balanced synthesis of existing evidence, while clearly distinguishing documented economic impacts from theoretically anticipated outcomes in the context of limited contemporary destination-specific data for Moria.

Conceptual Framework

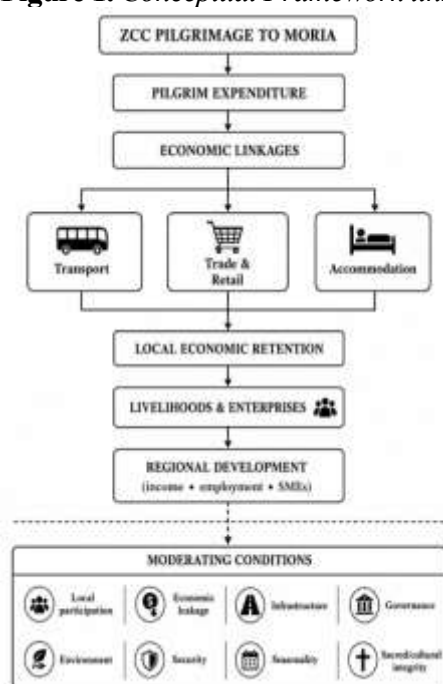
This study conceptualises sacred travel as a potential, rather than automatic, contributor to regional development. The framework integrates Tourism Multiplier Theory (Archer 1982, Fletcher 1989), the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones 1998), and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model (Butler 1980). These perspectives explain how pilgrimage expenditure can stimulate economic activity, create livelihood and enterprise opportunities, while also generating infrastructure, environmental and social pressures.

The framework proposes that the ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria generates visitor demand and expenditure on transport, accommodation, food, retail and other services. This expenditure can produce direct, indirect and induced economic effects. Where local enterprises participate in pilgrimage-related value chains and expenditure is retained locally, these effects can contribute to employment, income diversification, micro-enterprise development and broader regional economic activity. However, economic leakages, inadequate infrastructure, seasonality, environmental pressures, security challenges and weak governance may reduce these benefits.

Thus, the study conceptualises the relationship as:

Sacred travel → Pilgrim expenditure → Economic linkages → Local economic retention → Livelihood and enterprise outcomes → Regional development

This relationship is influenced by local participation, supply-chain linkages, governance, infrastructure capacity, environmental sustainability, security and the protection of sacred and cultural values.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework linking Sacred Travel and Regional Development*

Source: Author's conceptualisation based on Archer (1982), Butler (1980), Fletcher (1989), and Scoones (1998)

The framework, therefore, emphasises that the number of pilgrims alone does not determine the developmental contribution of sacred travel. Rather, regional development depends on the extent to which pilgrimage-generated economic activity is locally retained, equitably distributed and sustainably managed. This provides the conceptual basis for examining Moria as a potential regional development asset while avoiding unsupported claims about its contemporary monetary impact.

Sacred Travel and the Tourism Economy of Limpopo

Limpopo Province occupies an important position within South Africa's domestic tourism economy. The province recorded approximately 8.59 million domestic tourist arrivals in 2023/24, together with R20.1 billion in domestic overnight tourism expenditure and 26.8 million bed nights, making it one of the country's leading domestic tourism destinations (Limpopo Tourism Agency [LTA] 2024). These figures reflect the importance of tourism to the provincial economy and provide the broader context within which sacred travel should be considered. However, aggregate provincial tourism statistics do not adequately distinguish religious travel from other tourism segments, limiting the ability to determine the specific contribution of pilgrimage to local economic development.

Limpopo's tourism economy is traditionally associated with wildlife, nature-based tourism, cultural heritage and leisure travel. Sacred travel represents an additional dimension of this tourism system, particularly through the activities of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) at Moria. The annual ZCC Easter pilgrimage has

historically attracted exceptionally large numbers of participants and has been described as one of the world's largest pilgrimage gatherings. Saayman et al. (2014) estimated that approximately 1.2 million pilgrims attended the 2011 Easter gathering, demonstrating the exceptional scale of religious mobility associated with Moria. Their Social Accounting Matrix analysis further estimated that pilgrimage-related expenditure generated approximately R428.6 million in total production impacts and almost R179.4 million in household-income effects, measured in 2006 prices. The largest production effects occurred in trade and accommodation, transport and communication, and financial and business services.

Subsequent research has also demonstrated that ZCC pilgrims are not a homogeneous group. Kruger and Saayman (2016) identified different pilgrim segments based on motivations including spiritual fulfilment, inner peace, healing, faith exploration, congregational togetherness and religious participation. This finding is economically relevant because differences in pilgrims' motivations, origins, length of stay and behavioural characteristics may influence expenditure patterns and the types of goods and services demanded. Consequently, understanding the economic contribution of pilgrimage requires attention not only to visitor numbers but also to pilgrim characteristics and spending behaviour.

The existing significance of Moria was particularly evident following the resumption of the ZCC Easter pilgrimage in April 2025, after a five-year interruption due to COVID-19. During the pilgrimage, PUTCO reported deploying nearly 500 buses and transporting approximately 30,000 pilgrims to Moria (PUTCO 2025, EWN 2025). At the provincial level, the Limpopo Tourism Agency reported that approximately two million visitors were expected in Limpopo during the broader Easter period; importantly, this figure represents overall Easter visitor activity and should not be interpreted as the number of ZCC pilgrims attending Moria alone (SABC News 2025). These contemporary indicators demonstrate the continuing scale of pilgrimage-related mobility, but they do not provide sufficiently disaggregated evidence on average expenditure per pilgrim, total Moria-specific revenue, local business turnover, employment generated, tax revenue, or the proportion of expenditure retained within surrounding communities. The evidence, therefore, demonstrates substantial mobility without yet providing a reliable contemporary estimate of Moria's destination-level economic contribution.

The economic significance of sacred travel also extends beyond the pilgrimage site itself. Pilgrims require transportation, food, accommodation, retail goods and other services, creating temporary demand across a network of businesses and service providers. Earlier evidence from Moria indicates particularly strong effects in trade, accommodation, transport and communication, suggesting that pilgrimage can connect rural destinations to wider regional supply chains (Saayman et al., 2014). Informal traders and small enterprises may also benefit from increased demand during pilgrimage periods. However, the extent to which these benefits accrue to locally owned enterprises rather than larger external businesses remains insufficiently documented.

The spatial concentration of pilgrimage activity also creates significant pressures. Very large numbers of visitors arriving within a short period can place pressure on roads, traffic management, water, sanitation, waste-management systems, emergency

services and public safety. The resources required to manage pilgrimage therefore represent an important part of its regional economic footprint. Moreover, benefits may be unevenly distributed, with some businesses and households gaining substantially while others experience congestion, competition for resources or disruption to normal economic activity. These considerations reinforce the need to assess both the benefits and costs of pilgrimage rather than treating increased visitor numbers as an automatic indicator of development.

Sacred travel in Limpopo should therefore be understood as a significant but incompletely measured component of the provincial tourism economy. Existing research provides convincing evidence of the historical economic effects of the Moria pilgrimage, while contemporary evidence demonstrates that the pilgrimage continues to generate large-scale mobility. Nevertheless, a substantial evidence gap remains concerning its current destination-level economic contribution. In particular, there is insufficient recent evidence on pilgrim expenditure, local economic retention, informal-sector turnover, employment creation, economic leakages and the costs imposed on public infrastructure and communities. Addressing these gaps is essential for determining whether the growing visibility of sacred travel translates into sustained and inclusive regional economic development.

Implications for Regional Economic Development

The evidence reviewed in this section suggests that the economic significance of sacred travel operates through several interconnected pathways: visitor expenditure, transport demand, trade and accommodation, informal enterprise activity, employment and supply-chain linkages. These pathways correspond closely with tourism multiplier theory and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework developed in previous section. However, the magnitude and distribution of these effects cannot be inferred solely from visitor numbers.

The case of Moria consequently presents an important paradox. On the one hand, the pilgrimage is sufficiently large to generate measurable regional economic effects, as demonstrated by previous empirical research (Saayman et al. 2014). On the other hand, contemporary destination-level information remains insufficient to determine how these benefits are currently distributed or whether they translate into sustained improvements in local livelihoods. Sacred travel should therefore be regarded as a potential regional development asset rather than an inherently beneficial economic activity. Its developmental value depends on local participation, retention of expenditure, infrastructure capacity, effective governance and the management of environmental and social costs.

1. This distinction is central to the present study. Rather than attempting to assign a new monetary value to the Moria pilgrimage without primary expenditure data, the analysis examines the economic pathways, livelihood opportunities and structural constraints through which sacred travel may influence regional development in Limpopo. This approach also identifies the areas in which future empirical research is required to make the contemporary economic contribution of pilgrimage more precisely measurable.

Economic Impact Pathways of Sacred Travel

Sacred travel can influence regional economies through visitor expenditure, transport, accommodation, retail activity, employment, informal enterprise and supply-chain linkages. Pilgrimage expenditure can generate direct effects through visitors' purchases, indirect effects through local suppliers, and induced effects through subsequent household spending. Recent research on religious tourism similarly identifies expenditure, employment, entrepreneurship and local business activity as important channels through which pilgrimage can contribute to destination economies (Raj & Griffin 2021, Olsen 2021, Linda 2024).

The Moria case demonstrates the potential significance of these linkages. Saayman et al. (2014) estimated that the 2011 ZCC pilgrimage generated approximately R428.6 million in production effects and R179.4 million in household-income effects, with particularly strong effects in trade and accommodation, transport and communication, and financial and business services. Although these estimates provide an important historical benchmark, they should not be interpreted as evidence of Moria's contemporary economic value. Changes in prices, visitor behaviour, infrastructure and regional economic conditions make updated measurement necessary.

The economic significance of pilgrimage also depends on local retention. Expenditure on transport, food, accommodation and retail goods contributes more strongly to regional development when these goods and services are supplied by local enterprises. Conversely, reliance on external suppliers can lead to economic leakage and limit the benefits retained by host communities (Linda 2024). Thus, the number of pilgrims alone provides an inadequate measure of economic impact. What matters is the relationship between visitor expenditure, local production, employment, enterprise participation and income retention.

Pilgrimage can additionally provide opportunities for livelihood diversification, particularly among households and micro-enterprises operating in food vending, retailing, transport, accommodation and craft production. However, these opportunities may be seasonal, competitive and unevenly distributed. Recent scholarship therefore cautions against assuming that tourism growth automatically produces inclusive development, particularly where local enterprises face limited finance, skills, infrastructure and market access (Rogerson 2022, Linda 2024).

The economic benefits of pilgrimage must also be considered alongside its costs. Large visitor concentrations can increase pressure on roads, water, sanitation, waste-management systems, emergency services and public safety. Environmental pressures and congestion may impose costs on host communities and other economic activities, while commercial expansion can create tensions between economic objectives and the spiritual character of sacred destinations (Olsen 2021, Raj & Griffin 2021). Consequently, sacred travel should be understood as a conditional development mechanism, whose contribution depends on local economic linkages, equitable participation and effective destination management.

Importantly, the available evidence does not permit calculation of the contemporary total economic impact of Moria. There are insufficient current data on pilgrim expenditure, local business turnover, employment, household income, economic leakages and public-sector costs. The present study, therefore, examines

the pathways and conditions through which sacred travel may influence regional development rather than assigning a new monetary value to the pilgrimage.

Sacred Travel, Livelihoods and Micro-Enterprise Development

One of the most immediate economic effects of large-scale pilgrimage is the creation of temporary markets for goods and services. Pilgrims require food, beverages, transport, accommodation, clothing, religious merchandise and other necessities, creating opportunities for informal traders and small businesses. Religious tourism can therefore contribute to livelihood diversification by providing households with additional sources of income, particularly in rural areas where formal employment opportunities are constrained (Linda 2021, 2024).

At Moria, historical evidence indicates that trade, accommodation and transport have been among the principal sectors benefiting from pilgrimage expenditure (Saayman et al. 2014). These linkages suggest that pilgrimage can connect religious mobility with wider local economic activity. However, the existence of trading opportunities does not necessarily mean that benefits are broadly distributed. Larger businesses and external suppliers may possess greater financial and logistical capacity to capture pilgrimage-related demand, while informal traders may face competition, limited infrastructure and restricted access to formal markets.

Seasonality is another important consideration. Because major pilgrimage activity is concentrated around specific religious events, income from trade may be temporary and unpredictable. Pilgrimage-related activities may therefore supplement rather than replace other household livelihoods. Whether these activities contribute to sustained poverty reduction or enterprise growth cannot be established without household- and business-level evidence.

The developmental value of pilgrimage consequently depends on the extent to which local enterprises are integrated into pilgrimage-related value chains. Access to finance, appropriate trading facilities, business skills, market information and local procurement opportunities could strengthen local participation and increase the proportion of expenditure retained within host communities (Rogerson 2022, Linda 2024). Such interventions, however, should remain sensitive to the religious character of Moria and should not transform a sacred gathering into a purely commercial tourism event.

Infrastructure, Environmental and Social Challenges

The economic opportunities associated with pilgrimage are accompanied by substantial infrastructural and environmental pressures. Large concentrations of visitors over short periods can increase demand for transport, water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare, waste management and emergency services. These pressures are particularly significant in rural destinations where infrastructure capacity may be insufficient for temporary population increases.

Environmental sustainability is similarly important. Large pilgrimages can increase solid-waste generation, water consumption, wastewater production, traffic congestion and pressure on surrounding resources. Without effective planning, these impacts may reduce the destination's long-term attractiveness and sustainability (Olsen 2021, Raj & Griffin 2021).

Public safety and security also require attention. Large gatherings increase the complexity of crowd management, traffic control and emergency response. The resources required to manage pilgrimage activity should therefore be recognised as part of its overall economic and institutional impact rather than treated as external considerations.

A further concern is commercialisation and authenticity. Pilgrimage is fundamentally a religious practice, and increasing commercial activity around sacred spaces can create tensions between livelihood opportunities and spiritual values. Tourism development that prioritises visitor expenditure without protecting religious meaning may undermine the very cultural and spiritual attributes that make the destination significant (Timothy & Olsen 2006, Raj & Griffin 2021).

The sustainability of Moria therefore depends on balancing economic opportunities with infrastructure capacity, environmental protection, public safety and the preservation of spiritual authenticity. These dimensions are essential for determining whether pilgrimage contributes to net and inclusive regional development rather than simply generating high volumes of economic activity.

Governance and Policy Implications

The scale and complexity of pilgrimage require coordinated governance involving religious institutions, local communities, municipalities, tourism authorities, transport operators, businesses and security agencies. Effective coordination is necessary to manage visitor flows, infrastructure, environmental impacts, trading activity and public safety while protecting the religious character of the destination (Olsen 2021).

For Limpopo, sacred travel represents an opportunity to diversify the province's tourism economy and strengthen linkages between pilgrimage activity and local enterprises. However, policy should focus on economic participation and value retention rather than visitor growth alone. Local businesses could be supported through improved access to finance, business development services, market facilities, skills development and opportunities to participate in pilgrimage-related supply chains (Rogerson 2022, Linda 2024).

A major policy constraint remains the limited availability of destination-level evidence. National tourism statistics increasingly identify religious travel as economically significant, but they do not adequately reveal the expenditure, employment, enterprise turnover, leakages or public costs associated specifically with Moria. Establishing a systematic pilgrimage monitoring framework would therefore improve evidence-based planning. Such a framework could track pilgrim numbers, expenditure patterns, local procurement, employment, informal-sector participation, infrastructure use, waste generation and public expenditure.

Governance should also address unequal participation. Without deliberate measures to integrate local enterprises, a significant share of pilgrimage-related expenditure may accrue to external operators. Strengthening local supply chains and community participation could improve the developmental contribution of pilgrimage, while appropriate regulation could prevent overcrowding, unsafe trading conditions and excessive commercialisation.

Overall, sustainable sacred travel requires a balanced governance model that treats pilgrimage simultaneously as a religious practice, a tourism phenomenon and an economic activity. The objective should not be to maximise visitor numbers, but to strengthen locally retained economic benefits while managing environmental, infrastructural, social and cultural costs.

Discussion

The findings indicate that sacred travel is a multidimensional regional economic phenomenon in which religious mobility interacts with transport, trade, accommodation, informal enterprise and household livelihoods. The Moria pilgrimage demonstrates how large visitor flows can create demand across interconnected sectors and potentially stimulate local production, income and enterprise activity. However, the available contemporary evidence does not permit reliable quantification of the magnitude of these effects.

A key finding is that pilgrimage can create opportunities for livelihood diversification and micro-enterprise activity. Food vending, retailing, transport, accommodation and other small-scale activities may provide supplementary income, particularly for households with limited access to formal employment. These opportunities, however, are unlikely to be evenly distributed. Access to finance, trading space, skills, networks and markets can determine which households and enterprises benefit most.

The analysis also highlights the distinction between economic activity and inclusive regional development. Large numbers of pilgrims and substantial expenditure do not necessarily translate into proportional benefits for surrounding communities. External suppliers, larger businesses, seasonal trading and limited local procurement may result in economic leakages. The developmental contribution of Moria therefore depends not only on the amount of expenditure generated, but also on who captures that expenditure and how much is retained within the local economy.

Sacred travel also involves significant costs and trade-offs. Large-scale pilgrimage can place pressure on roads, water and sanitation, waste-management systems, public safety and emergency services. These costs may be borne partly by government and host communities without being reflected in conventional tourism expenditure statistics. Consequently, the regional contribution of pilgrimage cannot be assessed adequately by considering gross economic activity alone.

The findings further reveal a tension between commercial opportunity and spiritual integrity. Pilgrimage creates markets for goods and services, but excessive commercialisation may undermine the religious character of the destination.

Economic development interventions should therefore complement rather than displace the spiritual purpose of Moria.

An important contribution of the study is its identification of a destination-level measurement gap. Although religious tourism is increasingly visible in tourism statistics, available evidence does not adequately establish current expenditure per pilgrim, local business turnover, employment effects, economic leakages, infrastructure costs or the distribution of benefits at Moria. The study therefore deliberately avoids assigning a contemporary monetary value to the pilgrimage.

Overall, sacred travel emerges as a conditional asset for regional development. Its contribution depends on local participation, enterprise capacity, economic linkages, infrastructure, governance and environmental management. Increasing pilgrim numbers alone is unlikely to ensure inclusive development. Greater attention should instead be given to local value creation, expenditure retention, community participation and sustainable destination management.

The Moria case consequently demonstrates the need to shift analytical attention from the number of pilgrims to the economic processes and distributional outcomes generated by their presence. This provides a stronger basis for understanding sacred travel as part of rural and regional development rather than simply as a form of religious tourism.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings have several implications for tourism and regional development policy in Limpopo.

First, sacred travel should be incorporated more explicitly into provincial tourism planning. Moria represents a distinctive form of high-volume domestic mobility and should be considered alongside nature-based, cultural and leisure tourism. Policy attention should, however, focus on improving the local economic value and sustainability of pilgrimage rather than simply increasing visitor numbers.

Second, a destination-specific pilgrimage data system should be developed. Regular data collection should cover pilgrim numbers, origins, length of stay, expenditure, transport use, accommodation, local business activity, employment and informal-sector participation. Such information would allow policymakers to distinguish between overall visitor activity and actual local economic benefits.

Third, policy should strengthen local economic retention. Small businesses and informal enterprises could be supported through entrepreneurship development, appropriate trading facilities, access to finance, skills development and improved market access. Local procurement mechanisms could also encourage larger businesses and pilgrimage-related operators to source goods and services from surrounding communities.

Fourth, pilgrimage planning should integrate infrastructure and environmental management. Water, sanitation, waste management, transport, emergency services and public facilities require adequate planning before major pilgrimage events. Longer-term infrastructure investment should benefit both pilgrims and resident communities.

Fifth, security, traffic and crowd management should form part of an integrated pilgrimage-management system. Effective coordination among religious authorities, municipalities, provincial authorities, transport operators, emergency services and law-enforcement agencies is essential for managing large visitor concentrations safely.

Sixth, development initiatives should protect the religious and cultural integrity of Moria. Commercial activities should be managed in consultation with the ZCC and surrounding communities so that economic development does not transform the sacred destination into a purely commercial tourism space.

Finally, a multi-stakeholder sustainable pilgrimage framework could be established to coordinate the ZCC, government institutions, tourism authorities, municipalities, businesses, transport operators and surrounding communities. The framework could establish priorities for local procurement, enterprise development, infrastructure, environmental management, safety and data collection.

The overarching policy objective should therefore be to move from a visitor-volume approach towards a local-value approach, in which the economic, social, environmental and cultural outcomes of pilgrimage are considered together.

Conclusion

Sacred travel is an important yet under-measured component of Limpopo's tourism and regional economy. The ZCC Easter pilgrimage to Moria generates substantial movements of people and creates demand for transport, food, accommodation, retail and informal economic activities. Historical evidence demonstrates that these activities can generate broader regional economic effects, while contemporary evidence confirms Moria's continuing importance as a major pilgrimage destination.

The central issue identified by this study is not the absence of sacred tourism from tourism activity, but the insufficient disaggregation and systematic measurement of its destination-level economic contribution. Existing evidence demonstrates substantial visitor mobility but does not adequately establish current expenditure, local business turnover, employment, household-income effects, economic leakages or infrastructure costs.

The analysis also demonstrates that pilgrimage should not be regarded exclusively as an economic opportunity. Potential livelihood and enterprise benefits occur alongside congestion, infrastructure pressures, environmental challenges, security requirements, unequal benefit distribution and possible tensions surrounding commercialisation. Sacred travel is therefore best understood as a conditional regional development asset.

Its contribution will depend on the extent to which local communities and enterprises participate in pilgrimage-related economic activity, expenditure is retained within the destination, infrastructure is adequately managed, environmental pressures are controlled and the spiritual character of Moria is protected.

The study consequently shifts attention from how many pilgrims visit Moria to how pilgrimage-generated economic value is created, distributed and retained.

This perspective provides a more appropriate basis for assessing the role of sacred travel in inclusive regional development.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has an important methodological limitation: it relies on a qualitative narrative review and secondary evidence and therefore does not generate new primary estimates of the contemporary economic contribution of the Moria pilgrimage. The available literature provides useful historical evidence, particularly the Social Accounting Matrix estimates of Saayman et al. (2014), but these cannot substitute for current destination-level data.

The absence of primary data limits the ability to determine average expenditure per pilgrim, total pilgrimage revenue, household income effects, local business turnover, employment creation, economic leakages, infrastructure costs and the distribution of benefits among local and external actors. It also limits assessment of environmental and social costs associated with contemporary pilgrimage activity.

Future research should therefore employ mixed-method or quantitative approaches involving pilgrims, local households, informal traders, formal businesses, transport operators, municipalities and religious authorities. Pilgrim expenditure surveys could estimate spending by category and origin; enterprise surveys could measure turnover and employment; household surveys could assess livelihood effects; and input-output or Social Accounting Matrix techniques could estimate multiplier effects. Environmental and infrastructure assessments could additionally quantify waste, water use, congestion and public-service costs.

Such primary research is necessary to move the discussion from identifying plausible economic pathways to measuring the magnitude, distribution and sustainability of pilgrimage-related development effects. It would also allow future studies to determine whether the economic benefits of Moria are sufficiently large and locally retained to justify its treatment as a regional economic development asset.

Avenues for Future Research

The most immediate research priority is collecting destination-specific primary data on the Moria pilgrimage. Future research should establish pilgrims' origins, length of stay, transport expenditure, accommodation expenditure, food and retail spending and other pilgrimage-related consumption.

Research should also examine the distribution of economic benefits by surveying informal traders, small businesses, accommodation providers, transport operators and households surrounding Moria. This would establish changes in turnover, employment and income during pilgrimage periods and identify which groups benefit most.

A further priority is measuring economic leakages and multiplier effects. Reliable expenditure and supply-chain data could be used to estimate direct, indirect and

induced effects and determine how much pilgrimage expenditure is retained within Limpopo.

Future research should also measure the infrastructure and environmental costs associated with large-scale pilgrimage, including waste generation, water and sanitation requirements, traffic congestion, emergency services and public-sector expenditure. Combining these costs with economic benefits would provide a more comprehensive assessment of the pilgrimage's regional contribution.

The social and cultural dimensions require equal attention. Research involving pilgrims, residents and religious authorities could examine perceptions of commercialisation, authenticity, community participation and the changing relationship between sacred practice and tourism.

Finally, longitudinal research would help determine whether pilgrimage generates sustained development or primarily short-term seasonal economic activity. Comparing pilgrimage and non-pilgrimage periods over several years could reveal whether pilgrimage contributes to lasting changes in household income, enterprise development, employment and local investment.

Future research should therefore move beyond documenting the scale of religious mobility towards systematically measuring its economic, social, environmental and distributional consequences. This would provide the empirical evidence required to determine whether Moria can function as a genuinely inclusive and sustainable regional development asset.

References

- Archer, B. H. (1982). The value of multipliers and their policy implications. *Tourism Management*, 3(4), 236–241. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-5177\(82\)90044-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-5177(82)90044-9)
- Ashley, C., De Brine, P., Lehr, A., & Wilde, H. (2007). *The role of the tourism sector in expanding economic opportunity*. Overseas Development Institute.
- Booyens, I., Rogerson, C. M., Rogerson, J. M., & Baum, T. (2022). COVID-19 crisis management responses of small tourism firms in South Africa. *Tourism Review International*, 26(1), 121–137. <https://doi.org/10.3727/154427221X16245632411872>
- Butler, R. W. (1980). The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution: Implications for management of resources. *The Canadian Geographer*, 24(1), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x>
- Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(3), 371–386. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(88\)90028-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-X)
- Fletcher, J. E. (1989). Input-output analysis and tourism impact studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 16(4), 514–529. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(89\)90006-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(89)90006-6)
- Gössling, S. (2002). Global environmental consequences of tourism. *Global Environmental Change*, 12(4), 283–302. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-3780\(02\)00044-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-3780(02)00044-4)
- Gössling, S., Peeters, P., Hall, C. M., Ceron, J.-P., Dubois, G., Lehmann, L. V., & Scott, D. (2012). Tourism and water use: Supply, demand, and security: An international review. *Tourism Management*, 33(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2011.03.015>
- Griffin, K. A., & Raj, R. (2017). The importance of religious tourism and pilgrimage: Reflecting on definitions, motives and data. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 5(3), ii–ix. <https://doi.org/10.21427/D7242Z>
- Jennings, G. (2001). *Tourism research*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Kruger, M., & Saayman, M. (2016). Understanding the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) pilgrims. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 18(1), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2030>
- Linda, N. (2021). *The potential of African religious pilgrimages as a tool for tourism development in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Zululand].
- MacCannell, D. (1976). *The tourist: A new theory of the leisure class*. Schocken Books.
- Mays, N., Pope, C., & Popay, J. (2005). Systematically reviewing qualitative and quantitative evidence to inform management and policy-making in the health field. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 10(Suppl. 1), 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1258/1355819054308576>
- Mkono, M. (2016). The reflexive tourist. *Tourism Management*, 53, 1–3.
- Nilsson, P.-Å., & Aquino, J. (2021). The interplay of stakeholder theory and blind spot theory in rural tourism development. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 8(2), 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajt.8-2-2>
- Olsen, D. H., & Timothy, D. J. (Eds.). (2021). *The Routledge handbook of religious and spiritual tourism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201011>
- Pisarović, A., Janković, M., & Tišma, S. (2025). Sustainable tourism for blue growth. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 12(2), 169–184.
- Popay, J., Roberts, H., Sowden, A., Petticrew, M., Arai, L., Rodgers, M., Britten, N., Roen, K., & Duffy, S. (2006). *Guidance on the conduct of narrative synthesis in systematic reviews: A product from the ESRC Methods Programme*. University of Lancaster.
- Saayman, A., Saayman, M., & Gyekye, A. (2014). Perspectives on the regional economic value of a pilgrimage. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 16(4), 407–414. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.1936>
- Saarenen, J. (2006). Traditions of sustainability in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33(4), 1121–1140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2006.06.007>
- Scheyvens, R. (1999). Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities. *Tourism Management*, 20(2), 245–249. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(98\)00069-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(98)00069-7)
- Scheyvens, R. (2007). Exploring the tourism-poverty nexus. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 10(2–3), 231–254. <https://doi.org/10.2167/cit318.0>
- Scoones, I. (1998). *Sustainable rural livelihoods: A framework for analysis* (IDS Working Paper 72). Institute of Development Studies.
- Sharpley, R. (2000). Tourism and sustainable development: Exploring the theoretical divide. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 8(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580008667346>
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- South African Tourism. (2025). *Domestic tourism performance report: Second quarter 2025*. South African Tourism.
- Thetsane, R. M. (2019). Local community participation in tourism development: The case of Katse villages in Lesotho. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 6(2), 123–140. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajt.6-2-4>
- Timothy, D. J., & Olsen, D. H. (Eds.). (2006). *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203001073>
- Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. *Tourism Management*, 21(6), 613–633. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(00\)00009-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(00)00009-1)
- Toanoglou, M., Krabokoukis, T., & Papadimitriou, E. (2025). A comparative analysis of tourism observatories within the INSTO network: Insights into regional approaches

to sustainability, methodology, stakeholder engagement, and technological innovation. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 12(2), 117–143.

Yeboah, T., Bempong, E., Adjei Veronica, A., Abrafi, K., & Ama Mary, A. (2025). Homestay tourism: A case of Boabeng and Fiema in the Bono East Region of Ghana. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 12(2), 145–168. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajt.12-2-3Download> PDF

Limpopo Tourism Agency. (2024). *Annual report 2023/2024*. Limpopo Tourism Agency.

PUTCO. (2025). *Incident-free Moria journey*. Public Utility Transport Corporation. <https://putco.co.za/incident-free-moria-journey/>

Towards an Integrated Pilgrimage Services: A Religious Tourism Framework for Optimising Quality and Value Capture

By Rahmatina Awaliah Kasri^{}, Fadlul Imansyah[‡],
M. Arief Mufraini[°], M. Dawud Arif Khan[•], Agung Sri Hendarsa[•] &
Risna Triandhari[°]*

Hajj and Umrah involve complex interactions among public institutions, private service providers, financial institutions, religious organisations, digital platforms, and pilgrims. For Indonesia, the scale of pilgrimage activity creates opportunities for domestic economic participation, while fragmented governance and limited integration may constrain service quality and value capture. This study conceptualises Hajj and Umrah as an integrated religious tourism service ecosystem and develops a framework for improving pilgrim experience and domestic value capture. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, the study combines a desk study, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in the Indonesian pilgrimage ecosystem. The findings identify seven major stakeholder groups and map their activities, positions, and linkages across the pilgrim journey. The study further proposes an integrated governance architecture combining ecosystem orchestration, boundary-spanning, and collaborative governance. Three dimensions of ecosystem performance are identified: pilgrim experience quality, governance and coordination architecture, and domestic value-chain integration. The study contributes to religious tourism literature by extending analysis from individual service encounters toward system-level ecosystem integration and linking pilgrimage service quality with domestic economic value creation and capture.

Keywords: Religious Tourism; Pilgrimage; Service Ecosystem; Ecosystem Governance; Value Capture.

Introduction

Every year, millions of Muslims from across the globe converge on the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina to perform Hajj or Umrah, or engage in religious tourism more generally, as the most spiritually significant acts of worship in Islam. For Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, this pilgrimage is not merely a matter of individual faith. With roughly 87 per cent of its 286

^{*}Lecturer, Department of Economics & Centre for Islamic Economics and Business, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia.

[‡]Hajj Financial Management Agency (BPKH), Republic of Indonesia, Indonesia.

[°]Hajj Financial Management Agency (BPKH), Republic of Indonesia, Indonesia.

[•]Hajj Financial Management Agency (BPKH), Republic of Indonesia, Indonesia.

[•]Hajj Financial Management Agency (BPKH), Republic of Indonesia, Indonesia.

[°]Lecturer, Department of Economics & Centre for Islamic Economics and Business, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia.

million citizens being Muslim (BPS 2026), Hajj and Umrah have become a defining feature of the country's social and economic landscape. In 2024, some 241,000 Indonesians performed Hajj, while annual Umrah departures have long exceeded 1.5 million (BPKH 2025), figures that place Indonesia firmly at the top of global pilgrimage statistics.

The economic dimensions of this movement are hard to overstate. Aggregate spending tied to Indonesian Hajj and Umrah activities is estimated at IDR 20 trillion per year for Hajj and IDR 30-40 trillion for Umrah, touching sectors as varied as financial services, transportation, accommodation, catering, healthcare, halal retail, and telecommunications. And yet, available evidence suggests that only around 25-35 per cent of this spending returns to Indonesia as inward spending, with the majority flowing outward to foreign providers, particularly to Saudi Arabia (BPKH 2025). This pattern indicates that despite the substantial economic activity generated by Indonesian pilgrims, the majority of its value is not retained within the domestic economy. This suggests that Indonesian pilgrims generate wealth on a massive scale, but most of it does not stay in Indonesia.

This is not simply a matter of economic leakage. It reflects two deeply connected structural problems. First, the governance of the Hajj-Umrah ecosystem is fragmented. Dozens of actors are involved, such as government ministries, financial institutions, private travel operators, civil society groups, and international partners, but their roles, relationships, and incentives are poorly coordinated. No single institution holds the authority or capacity to align them effectively. Second, and relatedly, the quality of the pilgrimage experience itself is uneven. When actors operate in silos and services are poorly integrated, the consequences fall directly on pilgrims, including inconsistent health protocols, logistical breakdowns, inadequate guidance, and gaps in protection that can turn a sacred journey into a stressful one.

These problems are well known to practitioners and policymakers, but the scholarly literature has been slower to catch up. Research on Hajj and Umrah has tended to focus on individual pilgrims, their motivations, their satisfaction levels, and their health outcomes (Elgammal et al. 2023, Yezli et al. 2024). Far less attention has been paid to the ecosystem structure and governance that organise and deliver pilgrimage services. Even less has been written about how governance arrangements in sending countries like Indonesia shape both the quality of the experience and the economic value retained at home. This gap is what the present study seeks to address.

With these perspectives in mind, this study pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it develops an operational definition of the Hajj-Umrah ecosystem rooted in contemporary ecosystem theory. Second, it maps the actors, activities, positions, and linkages that constitute its structural architecture along the pilgrim consumer journey. Third, it identifies the governance mechanisms, particularly boundary-spanning and orchestration functions, that can strengthen coordination, service integration, and domestic value capture. The overarching argument advanced in this study is that improving the quality of the pilgrimage experience and strengthening domestic value capture are not competing objectives but are, rather, mutually reinforcing dimensions of a well-governed pilgrimage ecosystem.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section two reviews the relevant literature on religious tourism, ecosystem theory, and governance. Section three describes the

research method. Section four presents findings, including the ecosystem definition, stakeholder map, analysis of governance challenges, and an integrated policy framework. Section five concludes with a discussion of theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Religious Tourism, Pilgrimage, and Service Quality

Religious tourism is among the oldest forms of human travel. Long before the modern tourism industry existed, people journeyed across continents to visit sacred sites, seek healing, fulfil vows, or deepen their spiritual lives (Timothy & Olsen 2006, Ohlan & Ohlan 2024). Pilgrimage represents the most intense expression of this impulse, a journey undertaken not for leisure or curiosity but for purposes that are fundamentally sacred. Scholars have drawn a useful distinction between religious tourism broadly defined and pilgrimage specifically, noting that pilgrimage involves a more structured ritual process, a stronger expectation of personal transformation, and a tighter relationship between the journey and a particular tradition of faith (Collins-Kreiner 2010).

Within this field, Hajj and Umrah occupy a category of their own. No other pilgrimage attracts anything close to the annual volume of participants, nor involves the same degree of logistical complexity on a global scale. Over the past two decades, an increasingly substantial body of research has examined various dimensions of the Hajj and Umrah experience, from what motivates pilgrims to undertake the journey (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson 2010, Elgammal et al. 2023) to how they evaluate the quality of services received (Al-Ansi & Han 2019, Quaium et al. 2023) to the significant public health challenges posed by mass gatherings of this scale (Memish et al. 2014, Yezli et al. 2024). More recently, researchers have begun examining the institutional and governance dimensions of pilgrimage management, recognising that the quality of the sacred journey cannot be separated from the quality of the systems behind it (Taibah & Arlikatti 2015).

Recent research further demonstrates that service quality in Hajj and Umrah is closely connected with pilgrims' trust, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions. Subhan et al. (2023), for example, find that Islamic service quality and trust influence customer satisfaction and intentions to reuse Hajj and Umrah services. This suggests that pilgrimage service quality should be understood not only in terms of individual service encounters but also in relation to the broader relational outcomes experienced by pilgrim.

What remains comparatively underexplored, however, is a systemic view of how pilgrimage services are integrated, or fail to be, across the full journey. Most studies examine discrete aspects of service provision in isolation: accommodation here, transportation there, health services somewhere else. Few have asked how these components fit together as a system, where the critical failure points are, and how institutional arrangements in the sending country shape both the pilgrim's experience and the economic value that remains at home after the journey is done. This is the gap the present study directly confronts.

Ecosystem Theory: From Business to Service Ecosystems

The idea that organisations do not act in isolation but as part of larger, interdependent communities of actors has gained considerable traction in management and strategy research over the last three decades. Moore (1996) was among the first to articulate this insight systematically, drawing a deliberate analogy between biological ecosystems and the economic communities in which businesses operate. His central argument was that competitive success depends less on defeating specific rivals within a bounded industry than on co-evolving productively with a wider network of actors, suppliers, customers, partners, regulators, and others, toward shared purposes. This reframing had significant implications: it shifted attention from dyadic competition to systemic co-creation and from industry structure to network dynamics. Within the tourism context specifically, destinations have been conceptualised as business ecosystems comprising networks of interdependent public and private stakeholders, in which strategic alignment among actors is critical for value co-creation and sustainable competitive advantage (Selen & Ogulin 2015).

Building on this foundation, Adner (2017) introduced a more precise and operationally tractable conception of what an ecosystem actually is. He distinguished between what he called "ecosystem-as-affiliation," essentially a loose community of actors gathered around a focal firm or platform, and "ecosystem-as-structure," which he defined as "the alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal value proposition to materialise. This second conception is analytically more demanding but also more useful as it forces attention onto four specific structural components: activities, actors, positions, and linkages and asks how they must be configured for the ecosystem's core purpose to be realised.

Recent tourism research further supports the relevance of an ecosystem-as-structure perspective to tourism services. Gao et al. (2022) conceptualise the destination tourism service ecosystem as an interconnected system involving service concepts, service ecosystems, and service processes. Their study highlights the importance of considering both core operational systems and the wider supportive environment in which multiple actors interact to create tourism value. This perspective reinforces the relevance of examining tourism services as interconnected systems rather than as isolated service encounters.

Vargo and Lusch (2017), working within the tradition of service-dominant logic, offered a complementary view centred on value co-creation rather than structural configuration. A service ecosystem, in their account, is a relatively self-contained system of resource-integrating actors bound together by shared institutional arrangements and engaged in ongoing, mutual value creation through service exchange. What makes this perspective valuable for understanding pilgrimage is its insistence that value is not simply produced by providers and consumed by pilgrims; it emerges from their interactions. The quality of the Hajj or Umrah experience is not something airlines and hotels deliver; it is something pilgrims passively receive. It is something that takes shape throughout the journey's texture, including the pilgrim's own preparation, engagement, and responsiveness to the services around them.

Recent research on religious pilgrimage similarly emphasises the interdependence of stakeholders in shaping pilgrimage outcomes. Lin (2021), examining the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, finds that pilgrims, religious organisations, and host communities are among the most salient stakeholders and highlights the importance of identifying their respective contributions in pilgrimage management. This provides further empirical support for understanding pilgrimage as a multi-actor ecosystem in which outcomes depend on the contributions and interactions of different stakeholders.

Koch et al. (2022) extended this body of thinking into the digital domain, defining a digital ecosystem as a socio-technical system that connects providers and consumers of assets through digital platforms, enabling brokering, scalability, and positive network effects. In the context of Hajj and Umrah, this lens is increasingly pertinent. Saudi Arabia's *Nusuk* platform now mediates access to a wide range of pilgrimage services, while Indonesia's SISKOHAT system manages domestic Hajj registration and quota data. These digital architectures are reshaping the ecosystem in significant ways. Yet the potential of digital integration to improve service quality and enhance domestic value capture remains, for now, only partially realised.

Taken together, these four perspectives offer distinct yet mutually reinforcing ways of viewing the Hajj-Umrah system. For the purposes of this study, Adner's structural framework serves as the primary analytical lens as its precision makes it well-suited to the mapping task at hand. But it is enriched by Moore's attention to co-evolution, Vargo and Lusch's emphasis on value co-creation, and Koch et al.'s insights into digital enablement.

Ecosystem Governance: Orchestration, Boundary-Spanning, and Collaborative Governance

Mapping an ecosystem's structure is one thing; making it function well is quite another. The governance question, how the system is steered, coordinated, and held accountable, is in many ways the harder problem, and it has attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years. Autio (2022) approached this question through the concept of ecosystem orchestration, defined as the process of coordinating autonomous yet interdependent actors toward a shared, system-level value proposition without relying on hierarchical authority. Orchestration, in their account, works through four interdependent layers: technological (shared platforms and interoperability standards), economic (incentive structures that align individual and collective interests), institutional (rules, roles, and accountability mechanisms), and behavioural (norms, trust, and the willingness to collaborate). The challenge is that all four layers must work in concert. Weakness in any one can unravel the others.

Recent work further develops the ecosystem orchestration perspective by emphasising that orchestration operates across multiple layers of an ecosystem. Autio (2022) highlights technological, economic, institutional, and behavioural dimensions of orchestration and argues that effective ecosystem coordination requires attention to the interactions among these layers. This perspective is particularly relevant to pilgrimage ecosystems, where technological interoperability,

economic incentives, institutional arrangements, and collaborative behaviours need to be aligned simultaneously.

Schotter et al. (2017) contributed a related but distinct concept: the Boundary-Spanning Organization (BSO). Where orchestration focuses on system-level coordination, boundary-spanning focuses on the actors who bridge gaps between institutions, sectors, cultures, and geographies. BSOs are entities designed specifically to connect parties that would otherwise struggle to interact effectively. They do this through five types of activity: ambassador activities (representing the system externally, maintaining its legitimacy), task coordinator activities (aligning the work of different actors), scout activities (monitoring the environment for risks and opportunities), guard activities (protecting the system from external disruption), and service delivery activities (bridging organisational standards with the actual needs of end users). In a system as institutionally diverse and geographically dispersed as the Hajj-Umrah ecosystem, the need for such bridging capacity is acute.

Recent research in the Indonesian pilgrimage tourism context also highlights the importance of institutional arrangements for enabling collaboration among stakeholders. Musleh et al. (2023) find that institutional design and an enabling environment are important conditions for collaborative governance in pilgrimage tourism in Indonesia. Their findings reinforce the need for governance arrangements that can connect actors with different institutional roles and facilitate coordinated action across organisational boundaries.

Ansell and Gash (2008) offered a third angle, focusing on the conditions under which multi-stakeholder collaboration can produce legitimate and durable governance outcomes. Their collaborative governance framework identifies several key determinants of success: the clarity and fairness of institutional design, the quality of facilitative leadership, the degree of trust among participants, and the history of prior cooperation or conflict. Applying their framework to the Hajj and Umrah context adds an important normative dimension: collaboration here is not only an institutional design challenge but a moral one, shaped by Islamic principles of *Shura* (deliberative consultation), *Amanah* (trustworthiness), and *Maslahah* (collective welfare). These values are not external constraints on governance design; they are part of what gives the system its legitimacy in the eyes of the millions who depend on it. This imperative for inclusive stakeholder participation is particularly salient in tourism-dependent communities, where local actors must be meaningfully involved in governance structures to ensure tourism development generates equitable outcomes (Thetsane 2019).

The need for coordinated governance is also evident in the management of emerging risks affecting Hajj pilgrims. Yezli et al. (2024) demonstrate that climate-related heat risks during Hajj require mitigation measures operating at individual, structural, and community levels. Their findings illustrate that resilience in pilgrimage management depends on coordinated interventions across multiple levels rather than on the actions of individual actors alone.

Conceptual Framework

The framework guiding this study brings these theoretical threads together. The Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem is conceived as a structured, multilateral system of actors, activities, positions, and linkages, grounded primarily in Adner's (2017) ecosystem-as-structure approach, with a focal value proposition rooted in the laws related to the management of Hajj and Umrah as well as the financial management, including the delivery of accountable, high-quality pilgrimage services that support Indonesian pilgrims in achieving a *mabrur* Hajj or Umrah. This framework is enriched by the value co-creation dynamics highlighted by Vargo and Lusch (2017), the digital enablement perspective of Koch et al. (2022), and the governance mechanisms of orchestration (Autio 2022), boundary-spanning (Schotter et al. 2017), and collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash 2008). Critically, domestic value capture is treated not as a peripheral economic consideration but as an integral dimension of ecosystem performance, inseparable from the quality of the pilgrimage experience itself.

Research Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design, consistent with established traditions in qualitative inquiry in social research (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The choice reflects the nature of the problem at hand: conceptualising a complex, multi-actor institutional system cannot be accomplished through quantitative measurement alone. What is needed is a mode of inquiry that can capture structural relationships, institutional dynamics, and the meanings that actors assign to their roles within the system. Qualitative methods are well-suited to this task.

The research unfolded in two phases. The first phase was conceptual, centred on a structured review of the relevant literature and a theoretical synthesis across ecosystem theory, governance frameworks, and religious tourism scholarship. This produced the conceptual scaffolding for the ecosystem framework developed. The second was an empirical phase, in which primary data collected from key stakeholders were used to ground, refine, and stress-test the conceptual framework against the realities of Indonesian Hajj-Umrah governance.

Data Collection

Secondary data were gathered through a desk study drawing on academic literature, institutional reports, and regulatory documents. Key regulatory sources included Law Number 14 of 2025 on Hajj and Umrah Pilgrimage Organization, Law Number 34 of 2014 on Hajj Financial Management, and Presidential Instruction Number 15 of 2025 on the development of Indonesia's Hajj Village in Mecca. Institutional reports from BPKH, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, and Danantara were also incorporated.

Primary data were collected through two complementary methods: focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews conducted in between November and

December 2025. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation from all major stakeholder groups in the Hajj and Umrah ecosystem. Key informants were drawn from the following institutions: (1) the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah (MoHU); (2) the Hajj Financial Management Agency (BPKH); (3) the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institution, or well known as Danantara; (4) the National Committee for Islamic Economy and Finance (KNEKS); (5) the Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia/MUI); (6) registered Hajj and Umrah travel operators; and (7) academic experts in Islamic economics and pilgrimage management. FGDs facilitated the observation of inter-stakeholder dynamics and validation of the ecosystem definition and stakeholder mapping, while in-depth interviews enabled deeper exploration of individual institutional knowledge, governance challenges, and strategic priorities.

Data Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The coding process identified overarching themes and conceptual relationships across the data, which were subsequently integrated with the theoretical framework to produce the final conceptual model. To ensure trustworthiness, findings from the desk study, FGDs, and in-depth interviews were triangulated, and preliminary results were shared and discussed with key informants before finalisation.

Findings and Discussion

Conceptualising the Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem: Theoretical Grounding

A recurring problem in policy discussions about Hajj and Umrah management in Indonesia is the absence of a shared, operationally precise definition of the ecosystem itself. Stakeholders from different institutions often mean quite different things when they use the term, which makes coordinated action difficult. Developing a common definition was therefore the first and most foundational task of this study.

To do so, the four ecosystem perspectives reviewed in Section 2 were examined against the empirical characteristics of the Indonesian pilgrimage context. Moore's (1996) business ecosystem model offers a useful intuition: like a business ecosystem, the Hajj-Umrah ecosystem involves a diverse community of co-evolving actors who must collaborate and compete simultaneously to create value. But Moore's framework is too diffuse for policy purposes, as it does not specify what actors must do, in what sequence, or how their activities must be connected. Vargo and Lusch's (2017) service ecosystem perspective offers important insights into value co-creation, but, like other perspectives, it lacks the structural specificity needed for mapping and governance design. Koch et al.'s (2022) digital ecosystem model is relevant to the platform dimensions of Hajj-Umrah management, but its emphasis on digital brokering leaves institutional and regulatory dimensions underspecified.

Adner's (2017) ecosystem-as-structure approach addresses these limitations most directly. By centring analysis on four structural components, activities, actors,

positions, and linkages, it provides a precise and operationally tractable template for mapping the ecosystem and identifying where alignment failures occur. Its analytical attention to the conditions under which a focal value proposition can or cannot be realised maps directly onto the governance and coordination questions at the heart of this study. This study, therefore, adopts Adner's framework as its primary analytical foundation, supplemented by insights from the other three perspectives.

Figure 1. Stakeholder Mapping of the Hajj and Umrah Ecosystem



Source: Authors' Analysis (2025)

Drawing on this theoretical synthesis and informed by the empirical findings from IDIs and FGDs, we define the Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem (EHU) as *"the alignment structure of activities, actors, positions, and linkages comprising the multilateral relationships among diverse stakeholders who must collaborate cohesively to deliver accountable Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage services with service excellence for Indonesian pilgrims, in pursuit of the ultimate objective of a mabrur Hajj and Umrah."* This definition makes the focal value proposition explicit, accountable, and high-quality pilgrimage services that enable the sacred objective to be realised and frames the entire structural architecture as a means toward that end.

Structural Elements of the Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem

Drawing on the integrated ecosystem framework developed in this study, the structural architecture of the Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem can be mapped across four key dimensions: activities, actors, positions, and linkages.

1. Activities and services

The pilgrim's journey, from the moment of registration to the return home, generates demand across an extraordinarily wide range of service categories. These include financial and Islamic investment management, healthcare, tour and travel services, hospitality and accommodation, catering and food processing, transportation and logistics, retail and trade, property and real estate, education and training, information technology, media and communications, telecommunications, and personal care. Beyond these service activities, the ecosystem also encompasses a set of non-service functions that are no less important: regulation and policy formulation, the pilgrimage act itself (performed by pilgrims as the ecosystem's primary beneficiaries), and research, development, and other enabling activities.

2. Actors and stakeholders

The study identifies seven principal groups. *First*, regulators, led by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah (MoHU) and supported by a range of other government bodies, are responsible for formulating policy, setting service standards, and ensuring compliance across the ecosystem. *Second*, pilgrims, whether performing Hajj or Umrah independently or through guided groups, constitute the demand side of the ecosystem and are the primary beneficiaries of its focal value proposition. *Third*, operator and organiser institutions, including airlines, travel agencies, accommodation and catering providers, transporters, and telecommunications companies, design and deliver end-to-end service packages for pilgrims. *Fourth*, financing institutions provide *Sharia*-compliant savings, payment, and financing products that enable pilgrims access to the pilgrimage; BPKH and Islamic banks are the central actors in this group. *Fifth*, investment institutions manage and grow the accumulated Hajj and Umrah funds in accordance with *Sharia* principles; BPKH, BPKH Limited, Danantara, and other state-owned investment entities occupy key positions here. *Sixth*, the halal supporting industry and *dam* (compensation) management institutions: the former comprises small and medium enterprises, cooperatives, village-owned enterprises, and Islamic boarding schools that produce and supply goods and services supporting the pilgrimage experience; the latter collects and distributes *dam* and *qurban* (animal sacrifice during the Eid Adha) payments in accordance with *Sharia* requirements. *Seventh*, and finally, research, development, and enabler actors, including educational institutions, research centres, professional associations, media organisations, and Islamic civil society bodies, generate the knowledge, innovation, and institutional capacity on which the ecosystem's long-term sustainability depends.

3. Positions

The ecosystem's architecture unfolds across five principal phases of the pilgrim consumer journey: registration and Hajj savings; the waiting period and financial management; departure preparation; pilgrimage performance through to return; and the post-pilgrimage phase. Different actor groups are engaged to varying degrees across these phases, such as operators and

financial institutions, involved throughout, and others playing more concentrated roles at specific junctures.

4. Linkages

Four types of flows animate the connections between actors and activities. Financial flows capture payment streams, financing arrangements, and investment returns. Information flows include the data exchange, coordination signals, and communication that keep services synchronised. Service flows represent the actual delivery of pilgrimage-related services to pilgrims. Meanwhile, influence flows encompassing both persuasive forms, such as religious guidance and fatwa, and authoritative forms, such as binding regulations, shape the decisions and behaviours of actors throughout the system.

The Role of Boundary-Spanning Organisation in the Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem

The governance challenges described above provide important context for understanding the critical need for a boundary-spanning mechanism within the ecosystem. The empirical findings from IDIs and FGDs reveal that despite the richness and diversity of the ecosystem, its day-to-day functioning is marked by coordination gaps and integration failures that undermine both service quality and domestic value capture. The most pervasive of these is fragmentation: actors across all stakeholder groups operate largely within their institutional silos, with few effective mechanisms for joint planning or cross-actor coordination. Furthermore, the dominance of foreign providers in high-value segments of the pilgrimage service chain, along with the weakness of enabling infrastructure for digital interoperability, compounds these challenges. These governance gaps collectively point to the need for a mechanism to bridge the institutional, functional, sectoral, and geographical boundaries that currently fragment the ecosystem.

The governance challenges described above share a common root: the ecosystem lacks an actor with the mandate, capacity, and institutional positioning to bridge the boundaries that currently fragment it. This is precisely the function that the Boundary-Spanning Organisation (BSO) framework of Schotter et al. (2017) was designed to illuminate. We argue that the effective functioning of the Ecosystem of Hajj-Umrah (EHU) requires the presence and empowerment of such an entity, which we designate the BSO-EHU, whose organisational capabilities and boundary-spanning activities enable system-level coordination and integration.

The organisational capabilities required of an effective BSO-EHU are substantial. It needs a clear legal mandate and formal institutional authority. Without these, its ability to engage credibly with powerful actors across the ecosystem will be limited. It needs robust coordination systems, structures, and processes capable of managing institutional diversity at scale. And it needs organisational networks that span domestic and international actors alike, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where so much of the pilgrimage service chain is controlled. At the individual level, the boundary spanners working within the BSO-EHU must combine cross-sectoral knowledge, Islamic finance, public policy, and Hajj operations with the relational and communicative skills needed to build trust across institutional boundaries.

In operational terms, the BSO-EHU's work takes five forms. Task coordinator activities, arguably the most critical in this context, involve initiating and sustaining cross-institutional coordination: joint task forces, shared secretariat functions, and regular inter-agency forums. Service delivery activities involve bridging the gap between national service standards and the realities of service delivery in the Holy Cities, acting as a quality accelerator across operator groups. Ambassador activities involve representing the Indonesian ecosystem to Saudi authorities and other external counterparts, maintaining the bilateral legitimacy and continuity on which the system depends. Scout activities involve systematic monitoring of the policy, operational, and market environment for emerging risks and opportunities. Guard activities involve the design and deployment of risk-mitigation mechanisms to protect the ecosystem from external disruptions.

It is important to be clear about what the BSO-EHU is not. It is not a replacement for MoHU's leading role in policy orchestration. Rather, it is a complement, a mechanism through which the ministry's strategic direction can be translated into effective cross-actor coordination at the operational level. Given its financial resources, its positioning at the interface of domestic and international ecosystem actors, and its statutory mandate for Hajj financial development, BPKH, working through its institutional network, including BPKH Limited, could potentially assume significant BSO-EHU functions. Whether BPKH should assume such functions, however, would depend on appropriate legal mandate, institutional arrangements, stakeholder acceptance, and the development of the organisational capabilities required for effective boundary spanning.

An Integrated Religious Tourism Framework for the Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem

Building on the analysis above, we propose an integrated religious tourism framework for the Hajj-Umrah ecosystem organised around three mutually reinforcing dimensions. The framework assumes that governance and coordination architecture functions as the enabling mechanism through which ecosystem actors and services are aligned, thereby supporting pilgrim experience quality and domestic value-chain integration.

Table 1. *An Integrated Religious Tourism Framework for the Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem*

Framework Dimension	Focus	Governance Instruments
Pilgrim Experience Quality	End-to-end service excellence enabling <i>mabrur</i> pilgrimage.	Value co-creation; service standardisation across consumer journey.
Governance & Coordination Architecture	Multi-actor alignment and institutional integration.	Ecosystem orchestration; BSO-EHU; collaborative governance.
Domestic Value Chain Integration	Increasing inward spending and domestic value retention.	Supply chain localisation, digital interoperability, and halal industry development.

Source: Authors' Analysis (2025)

The first is the quality of the pilgrim experience. This dimension encompasses the full range of service attributes that determine whether a pilgrim can perform Hajj or Umrah in a manner consistent with the sacred objective of *mabrur*: safety, health support, spiritual guidance, accommodation quality, transportation reliability, and access to accurate and timely information. It is the ecosystem's primary output, the ultimate reason for its existence. Importantly, the framework treats the quality of the pilgrim experience not as a fixed outcome delivered by providers to passive recipients, but as something continuously co-created through interactions among all ecosystem actors throughout the consumer journey.

The second dimension is governance and coordination architecture. This encompasses the institutional mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, coordination platforms, BSO functions, and collaborative governance processes that enable the ecosystem's diverse actors to align their activities, share information, and solve problems together, reliably delivering high-quality services. It is the enabling condition for the quality of the pilgrimage experience. Without effective governance, even a structurally rich ecosystem will underperform. The framework identifies ecosystem orchestration (Autio 2022), boundary-spanning (Schotter et al. 2017), and collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash 2008) as the three complementary mechanisms through which alignment is achieved.

The third dimension is domestic value chain integration. This refers to the policies, incentives, and institutional arrangements through which Indonesian actors across financial, operational, and supporting industry sectors are progressively positioned to supply a greater share of the services consumed by Indonesian pilgrims, thereby increasing the proportion of pilgrimage-related economic value that stays in Indonesia. This is both an outcome of effective ecosystem governance and a strategic objective in its own right, grounded in Indonesia's national interest in capturing the economic benefits of its position as the world's largest pilgrimage sending country.

These three dimensions are mutually reinforcing in ways that matter for policy. A strong governance architecture enables service integration that underpins high-quality pilgrim experiences. High-quality experiences create a competitive domestic market for pilgrimage services, thereby supporting value chain integration. A well-developed domestic value chain reduces dependence on foreign providers, strengthening the ecosystem's resilience and Indonesia's negotiating leverage with Saudi Arabia. The framework thus describes a virtuous cycle rather than a set of trade-offs.

The framework also situates the Indonesian Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem within the evolving global context of pilgrimage management. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, and its Pilgrim Experience Program in particular, is transforming how Hajj and Umrah are managed at the destination end, moving from a logistics-focused model toward an experience-centred approach that integrates digital services, improved infrastructure, and enhanced quality standards. For Indonesia, this creates both opportunities and pressures. The opportunities lie in access to better Saudi-side services and digital infrastructure. The pressures lie in the need to develop domestic capabilities that can interface effectively with an increasingly sophisticated Saudi system. The framework we propose is designed to help Indonesian actors navigate this evolving context with the governance capacity it demands.

Conclusions, Contributions, Implications and Limitations of the Study

Conclusions

This study set out to develop a conceptual and policy-oriented framework for the Indonesian Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem, one grounded in ecosystem theory and empirically informed by engagement with major institutional stakeholders. Three principal findings emerge. *First*, the Hajj-Umrah Ecosystem could be defined as the alignment structure of activities, actors, positions, and linkages through which diverse stakeholders must collaborate cohesively to deliver accountable pilgrimage services with service excellence in pursuit of a *mabrur* pilgrimage. This definition provides a shared conceptual foundation for ecosystem mapping and governance design that has been largely absent from policy discussions to date. *Second*, the ecosystem comprises seven principal stakeholder groups, namely regulators, pilgrims, operators, financing and investment institutions, the halal supporting industry, dam management institutions, and research/development/enablers, interconnected through financial, information, service, and influence flows across five phases of the pilgrim consumer journey. *Third*, effective ecosystem functioning requires both a competent governance architecture that combines orchestration, boundary-spanning, and collaborative governance and a deliberate domestic value chain integration strategy.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three main theoretical contributions to the literature on religious tourism, ecosystem governance, and pilgrimage value creation.

First, it contributes to religious tourism literature by introducing a structural ecosystem perspective. The study moves the analysis beyond individual pilgrim experiences and provider-level service quality toward the systemic architecture through which pilgrimage services are integrated and value is created across the full pilgrim journey. By conceptualising Hajj and Umrah as an ecosystem of interdependent actors, activities, positions, and linkages, the study extends religious tourism research from an actor-specific perspective toward a system-level understanding of pilgrimage service integration.

Second, it contributes to ecosystem governance literature by extending the application of ecosystem orchestration and boundary-spanning perspectives to a public-sector and religiously embedded context. The study brings together ecosystem orchestration, boundary-spanning, and collaborative governance to explain how autonomous actors with different institutional mandates can be aligned around a shared pilgrimage value proposition. In particular, the proposed BSO-EHU extends the boundary-spanning organisation perspective to a complex pilgrimage ecosystem involving public institutions, private service providers, financial and investment institutions, religious organisations, and actors operating across Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.

Third, it contributes to the conceptualisation of pilgrimage ecosystem performance by connecting service quality with domestic value creation and value capture. Rather than treating pilgrim experience and economic value as separate

objectives, the study conceptualises them as mutually reinforcing dimensions of ecosystem performance. Effective governance and service integration can improve the quality, reliability, safety, and meaningfulness of the pilgrimage experience while simultaneously creating opportunities for greater participation and value retention among domestic actors. This provides a broader conception of pilgrimage ecosystem effectiveness that incorporates both the experiential and economic dimensions of religious tourism.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest several strategic priorities for policymakers and ecosystem actors. First, MoHU should be systematically strengthened in its role as the ecosystem's leading orchestrator, with formal cross-institutional coordination mechanisms, joint task forces, shared secretariats, and regular multi-stakeholder forums put in place to give that role operational substance. Then, BPKH could be considered as a potential institutional actor for selected BSO-EHU functions, subject to appropriate legal mandate, institutional arrangements, and stakeholder coordination, leveraging its financial resources, international position, and institutional networks to bridge the governance gaps created by fragmentation. Next, an integrated supply chain strategy should be developed to progressively increase domestic participation in key service segments, including catering, logistics, and religious content services. Moreover, a comprehensive digital transformation roadmap is needed, with interoperability between Indonesia's SISKOHAT and Saudi's platforms as a priority, and digital service innovation as a strategic tool to improve both the pilgrim experience and ecosystem transparency. Finally, the social and economic potential of the ecosystem should be more deliberately activated through policies supporting SME and halal industry development, linking pilgrimage economic activity to broader national development objectives.

Limitations and Future Research

Notwithstanding the findings above, several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. As a conceptual study with exploratory empirical grounding, the framework developed here has not yet been subjected to systematic, large-scale empirical testing. Future research should develop validated measurement instruments and employ empirical methods, including survey research and social network analysis, to test the relationships and governance mechanisms proposed. The study's empirical component also draws primarily on supply-side institutional perspectives. Consequently, the voices of pilgrims may be underrepresented, and future research that systematically incorporates demand-side data would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how value co-creation unfolds in practice. Finally, as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 continues to reshape the global pilgrimage management environment, longitudinal research will be essential for tracking how the structure and dynamics of the ecosystem evolve over time and for ensuring that the frameworks developed to understand it remain analytically relevant.

References

- Adner, R. (2017). Ecosystem as structure: An actionable construct for strategy. *Journal of Management*, 43(1), 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316678451>
- Al-Ansi, A., & Han, H. (2019). Role of halal-friendly destination performances, value, satisfaction, and trust in generating destination image and loyalty. *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, 13, 51-60.
- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), 543–571. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032>
- Ariwibowo, P., Aziz, N., et al. (2024). *Boundary-spanning activities and organizational performance: Evidence from Indonesia*. Management Research Review.
- Autio, E. (2022). Orchestrating ecosystems: A multi-layered framework. *Innovation: Organization & Management*, 24(1), 96–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14479338.2021.1919120>
- Badan Pusat Statistik (BS). (2026). *Mid year population (thousand people), 2026*. Statistics Indonesia.
- BPKH. (2025). *Laporan Keuangan dan Data Ekosistem Haji dan Umrah*. Badan Pengelola Keuangan Haji.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2010). Researching pilgrimage: Continuity and transformations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37(2), 440-456.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications
- Danantara. (2025). *Potensi Ekonomi Haji dan Umrah Indonesia*. Danantara Indonesia.
- Elgammal, I., Alhothali, G. T., & Sorrentino, A. (2023). Segmenting Umrah performers based on outcomes behaviors: a cluster analysis perspective. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 14(3), 871-891. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-01-2021-0004>
- Emerson, K., Nabatchi, T., & Balogh, S. (2012). An integrative framework for collaborative governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(1), 1-29.
- Gao, Y., Zhang, Q., Xu, X., Jia, F., & Lin, Z. (2022). Service design for the destination tourism service ecosystem: A review and extension. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 27(3), 225–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2022.2046119>
- Iansiti, M., & Levien, R. (2004). *The keystone advantage: What the new dynamics of business ecosystems mean for strategy, innovation, and sustainability*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Jacobides, M. G., Cennamo, C., & Gawer, A. (2018). Towards a theory of ecosystems. *Strategic Management Journal*, 39(8), 2255-2276.
- Kemenhaj. (2025). *Data Penyelenggaraan Ibadah Haji dan Umrah*. Kementerian Haji dan Umrah Republik Indonesia.
- Koch, S., Kramer, J., Naab, T., & Rost, M. (2022). A reference model for digital ecosystems. *Business & Information Systems Engineering*, 64(4), 407-424.
- Lin, C.-P. (2021). The salience of stakeholders in religious tourism: A case study of the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 86, 103091. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.103091>
- Memish, Z. A., Zumla, A., Alhakeem, R. F., Assiri, A., Turkestani, A., Al Harby, K. D., & Al-Rabeeah, A. A. (2014). Hajj: Infectious disease surveillance and control. *The Lancet*, 383(9934), 2073-2082.

- Moore, J. F. (1996). *The death of competition: Leadership and strategy in the age of business ecosystems*. HarperBusiness.
- Musleh, M., Subianto, A., Tamrin, M. H., & Bustami, M. R. (2023). The role of institutional design and enabling environmental: Collaborative governance of a pilgrimage tourism, Indonesia. *Journal of Local Government Issues*, 6(1), 75–90. <https://doi.org/10.22219/logos.v6i1.22218>
- Ohlan, R., & Ohlan, A. (2024). Religious tourism scholarship: current state and future research directions. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 15(3), 800-818. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-05-2023-0152>
- Quaium, A., Al-Nabhan, N. A., Rahaman, M., Salim, S. I., Toha, T. R., Noor, J., & Al Islam, A. A. (2023). Towards associating negative experiences and recommendations reported by Hajj pilgrims in a mass-scale survey. *Heliyon*, 9(5), e15486. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e15486>
- Schotter, A. P., Mudambi, R., Doz, Y. L., & Gaur, A. (2017). Boundary spanning in global organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 54(4), 403-421.
- Selen, W., & Ogulin, R. (2015). Strategic alignment across a tourism business ecosystem. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 2(3), 167-178.
- Subhan, A., Firdaus, A. F., & Najib, M. (2023). The influence of Islamic service quality and trust on customer satisfaction and intention in reusing the services in the implementation of Umrah and Special Hajj pilgrimage. *Jurnal Ekonomi Syariah Teori dan Terapan*, 10(3), 275–289. <https://doi.org/10.20473/vol10iss20233pp275-289>
- Taibah, H., & Arlikatti, S. (2015). An examination of evolving crowd management strategies at pilgrimage sites: A case study of Hajj in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 33(2), 188-212.
- Thetsane, R. M. (2019). Local community participation in tourism development: The case of Katse villages in Lesotho. *Athens Journal of Tourism*, 6(2), 123-140.
- Timothy, D. J., & Olsen, D. H. (Eds.). (2006). *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys*. Routledge.
- Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2017). Service-dominant logic 2025. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 34(1), 46-67.
- Yezli, S., Ehaideb, S., Yassin, Y., Alotaibi, B., & Bouchama, A. (2024). Escalating climate-related health risks for Hajj pilgrims to Mecca. *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 31(4), taae042. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taae042>
- Zamani-Farahani, H., & Henderson, J. C. (2010). Islamic tourism and managing tourism development in Islamic societies: The cases of Iran and Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 12(1), 79-89.

