

CULTURAL TOURISM AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES: A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS TOURISTS

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Abstract: This study examines the connections among cultural tourism, spirituality, and associated factors among religious tourists in Saudi Arabia. It focuses on how cultural tourism impacts spiritual fulfilment, considering visitors' intentions to visit religious sites, while also factoring in cultural competence and trust in tourism brands as moderators. This study involved 244 participants, who were administered self-report surveys during their visits to religious sites and cultural attractions in Saudi Arabia. Data analysis employed Stata-SEM software, utilizing structural equation modelling (SEM) to assess the hypothesized relationships among the variables. The results indicate noteworthy positive associations between cultural tourism and the spiritual experiences of tourists, with mediating effects observed through their intentions to visit religious sites. Additionally, the study identified that cultural competence and trust in tourism brands exerted a moderating influence on the relationship between cultural tourism and spiritual experiences. This research contributes to the advancement of knowledge and practical applications in the realms of spirituality and cultural tourism. It substantiates the proposition that cultural tourism has the potential to influence the spiritual dimensions of visitors. The results underscore the significance of incorporating cultural and spiritual components in tourism marketing and destination management strategies. Moreover, they provide insights for destination stakeholders seeking to enhance cultural tourism initiatives, not only in Saudi Arabia but also in other contexts.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism, Intention to Visit Religious Sites, Cultural Competence, Tourism Brand Trust, Spiritual Experience.

INTRODUCTION

The exploration of destination advertising, comprehension of tourist behaviour, and enhancement of experiential aspects represent focal points within the domain of tourism studies. Within this academic discipline, there is a growing emphasis on and recognition of the significance of the nexus between spirituality and cultural tourism (Mirfakhradini, 2023). The achievement of cultural tourism objectives necessitates a thorough engagement with the history and cultural milieu of a destination. This involves actively participating in local traditions and exploring historical sites and museums (Said et al., 2020). Within the context of tourism and spirituality, individuals articulate their distinct encounters with transcendence, fulfilment, and connection (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020). Recent literature underscores the significance of examining the interplay between spirituality and cultural tourism, focusing on how activities associated with cultural tourism may influence the spiritual experiences of travellers during their journeys (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020; Xiong & Chia, 2024; Yan et al., 2024). Hence, a comprehensive investigation into the relationship between cultural tourism and spiritual fulfilment is imperative, given the burgeoning interest in cultural tourism and the enduring quest for spiritual contentment among tourists.

Numerous investigations have contributed insights into the intersection of spirituality and cultural tourism (Jiang et al., 2024; Wahyuni & Darmawati, 2024). The potential of cultural tourism to augment the spiritual fulfilment of travellers has been highlighted (Kusumastuti et al., 2024). Abror et al. (2023) expound in their research that sacred sites and cultural practices possess the capacity to evoke sentiments of surprise, devotion, and transcendence, thereby enriching tourists' spiritual experiences. The study by Wisker, Kadirov, and Nizar (2023) underscores the role of cultural immersion and active participation in aiding visitors in achieving self-actualization, emotional well-being, and personal development. Additionally, cultural tourism activities, such as immersing visitors in local culture, contribute to shaping favourable perceptions of destination authenticity and cultural education (Caber et al., 2023). Furthermore, cultural tourism is identified as a catalyst for enhancing travellers' spiritual experiences through the stimulation of cultural exploration, interaction, and reflection both prior to and during their journeys (Genc & Gulertekin Genc, 2023). Furthermore, prior scholarly inquiries have demonstrated the impact of visits to religious sites on tourists' spiritual experiences. For instance, Mirfakhradini (2023) examined the notable effects of religious pilgrimages and concluded that such engagements can result in personal development, healing, and spiritual breakthroughs. Parthenis, Moira, and Mylonopoulos (2023) observed that participation in religious rituals facilitates transcendence and spiritual connection among travellers. Shi and Pande (2023) assert that holy places designated for religious tourism hold a sanctified status, serving as locations where individuals can discover guidance, inspiration, and forge a profound spiritual connection. These research findings illuminate the influence of visits to religious sites on tourists' spirituality, illustrating the transformative impact of culture and religion on travellers' perspectives.

While existing literature has extensively examined the drivers and impacts of religious

tourism (Ly & Tan, 2023; Wisker et al., 2023), a deeper exploration of the intersections between spirituality and cultural tourism is warranted. This is particularly crucial as the effects of cultural tourism activities on spiritual well-being remain largely uncharted (Tao-Ing, 2022). Recent research highlights the potential enhancement of spiritual health through cultural tourism and visits to places of worship, but the underlying mechanisms remain unclear (Rahman et al., 2022a). Limited studies have delved into the influence of cultural competency and trust on spiritual experiences during cultural tourism (Nisar et al., 2022; Shirmohammadi & Ghanbari, 2022). Insights into how tourists' cultural sensitivity, comprehension, and trust in tourism organizations impact their spiritual experiences could offer valuable guidance for destination management and marketing (Purnamawati, Jie, & Hatane, 2022). While past studies have focused on renowned cultural and religious monuments such as Jerusalem and the Taj Mahal (Alkhawaldeh, 2022), it is imperative to explore a broader range of cultural tourist destinations, including emerging ones (Sodawan & Hsu, 2022). A comprehensive investigation into how cultural tourism influences spiritual needs across diverse cultures may unveil both commonalities and variations in travellers' spiritual experiences (Rahman et al., 2022b). The literature lacks sufficient exploration in the realm of how cultural tourism influences spirituality, with limited studies conducted (Hung Lee, Jan, & Lin, 2021). Negative consequences, such as cultural commercialization, over tourism, and religious degradation, have been identified (García-del Junco et al., 2021). Addressing these gaps is crucial for informing sustainable tourism strategies and legislation (Agarwal, Kapoor, & Walia, 2021) and elucidating the nuanced relationship between spirituality and cultural tourism.

Numerous psychological, sociological, and tourism theoretical frameworks provide insights into the intersection of spirituality and cultural tourism. Sociological theories pertaining to cultural consumption and identity formation posit that cultural tourism facilitates individuals' comprehension and interpretation of their heritage (Hung Lee et al., 2021). The act of traveling is posited to contribute to self-discovery, emotional stability, and personal growth (García-del Junco et al., 2021). Emphasizing the significance of cultural competence, authenticity, and trust, Robina Ramírez and Fernández Portillo (2020) assert that tourism professionals play a pivotal role in shaping passengers' experiences and perceptions in diverse locales. The present study delves into the intricate dynamics of spirituality and cultural tourism, considering both individual and contextual factors. It specifically explores the impact of cultural tourism experiences on the spiritual health of travellers, scrutinizes the involved factors, and provides recommendations to decision-makers and stakeholders for enhancing the spiritual dimension of cultural tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious tourism, commonly referred to as pilgrimage tourism, exerts diverse socio-cultural, economic, and environmental influences, as acknowledged by scholars and

professionals (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020; Said et al., 2020). These impacts have spurred considerable attention from academia and industry experts. Seekers are drawn to religious sites with the aims of personal growth, cultural exploration, and spiritual enrichment (Yan et al., 2024). Over time, religious pilgrimage has evolved into a global phenomenon known as modern religious tourism. Jiang et al. (2024) document a substantial influx of visitors to sacred sites representing various spiritual faiths annually. These pilgrimage destinations encompass renowned locations such as Jerusalem, Varanasi, sacred mountains, shrines, and temples within the region (Kusumastuti et al., 2024). Religious tourism encompasses a broad spectrum of faiths, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and indigenous spiritual practices (Genc & Gulertekin Genc, 2023; Wisker et al., 2023). In contrast to conventional strategies that focus on specific religions, religious tourism is influenced by multifaceted elements encompassing intricate spiritual, cultural, and recreational activities (Parthenis et al., 2023). Devotion, worship, meditation, rejuvenation, and a divine connection are sought by numerous religious pilgrims (Ly & Tan, 2023). Tao-Ing (2022) highlights that religious tourism facilitates cross-cultural and interfaith interaction, fostering understanding and acceptance among participants from diverse religious backgrounds. Shirmohammadi and Ghanbari (2022) assert that the spending patterns of religious pilgrims, encompassing accommodations, meals, gifts, and contributions to religious institutions, can contribute to the economic development of local communities. However, the commercialization and exploitation of religious history, transforming sacred places and traditions into commodities, raise ethical concerns (Purnamawati et al., 2022). The substantial influx of visitors may strain local infrastructure, habitats, and resources, underscoring the imperative for sustainable management practices at religious tourist venues (Sodawan & Hsu, 2022). Consequently, a comprehensive examination of the economic, social, and cultural impacts of religious tourism is warranted.

"Exploration of cultural tourism" entails visiting a destination to fully engage with its culture and traditions, often involving activities such as museum visits, exploring historical sites, attending festivals, and immersing oneself in local customs (Liao et al., 2021). According to García-del Junco et al. (2021), cultural tourism independently enhances travellers' spiritual experiences. Muaidy (2019) defines a spiritual experience in travel as a sense of transcendence, fulfilment, and connection. While extensive research has been conducted on cultural tourism in the travel industry, there has been comparatively less attention given to spiritual experiences. It is essential to investigate the intersection of spiritual experiences and cultural tourism during travel. Cultural tourism has been associated with visitor satisfaction, cultural awareness, and destination loyalty (Rejikumar et al., 2021), contributing to passengers' comprehension of diverse cultures and enjoyment of their travels. However, there is a need for further research on spiritual experiences and their relationship with cultural tourism. Choe and O'Regan (2020) observed that engaging in cultural tourism activities like visiting holy sites and participating in customs can contribute to visitors' self-awareness and spirituality, requiring more empirical research to understand the impact of cultural tourism on spiritual

experiences (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020). Previous studies (Robina Ramírez & Fernández Portillo, 2020; Said et al., 2020) underscore the strong influence of cultural tourism on visitors' spiritual experiences. As cultural tourism has been shown to enhance satisfaction and understanding of diverse cultures, it is plausible to anticipate that these activities may also enrich spiritual experiences (Shirmohammadi & Abyaran, 2020). Dabphet (2021) suggests that a site's conventions, heritage, and cultural practices can augment visitors' spiritual experiences, inspiring feelings of awe, togetherness, and respect. According to Agarwal et al. (2021), cultural tourism may contribute to an increase in tourists' spiritual experiences overseas. However, further research is essential to test and validate this proposition, aiding in a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between spiritual experiences in tourism contexts and cultural tourism.

H1. Cultural tourism significantly influences the spiritual experience of tourists.

Numerous studies highlight the connection between cultural tourism and tourists' spiritual experiences (Hung Lee et al., 2021). Cultural tourism influences the likelihood of travellers visiting religious sites and experiencing spiritual moments (Rahman et al., 2022b). Alkhalwaldeh (2022) explored the impact of visiting religious sites on spiritual experiences, revealing that such journeys evoke awe, devotion, and transcendence. The desire to engage in cultural tourism is linked to visiting religious locations, potentially leading to spiritual experiences (Nisar et al., 2022). A proposed hypothesis suggests that cultural tourism contributes to spiritual fulfilment by encouraging visits to religious sites, grounded in previous research. Studies examining the connection between cultural tourism, religious site visits, and spiritual encounters indicate that the purpose behind visiting religious sites influences visitors' spiritual experiences (Rahman et al., 2022a). While tourists may not necessarily visit religious locations for spiritual practices, pilgrims, driven by their interest in religious history and rituals, may contribute to increased spiritual experiences during site visits (Shi & Pande, 2023). Despite theoretical and empirical support for the hypothesis, further exploration of the mediation model is needed. Experimental and longitudinal research, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, could shed light on the subjective experiences and motivations of cultural and religious visitors (Caber et al., 2023; Mirfakhradini, 2023). This hypothesis offers insights into the complex relationship between cultural tourism, pilgrimages to sacred locations, and spiritual encounters, potentially informing improvements in tourist regulations and practices.

H2. Intention to visit religious sites significantly mediates the relationship of cultural tourism and spiritual experience of tourists.

The study of cultural competency in tourism has focused on its impact on visitor satisfaction, cross-cultural relationships, and cultural education (Abror et al., 2023). The ability to interact effectively with individuals from diverse cultures enhances visitors'

experiences (Wahyuni & Darmawati, 2024). Research by Xiong and Chia (2024) indicates that culturally competent travellers tend to derive enjoyment from their trips and hold more positive views of the civilizations they encounter. Alkhawaldeh (2022) asserts that cultural competency mitigates miscommunications between visitors and locals, fostering authentic cross-cultural relationships. Despite these insights, the moderating role of cultural competency on spiritual experiences within the context of cultural tourism remains unexplored (Purnamawati et al., 2022). Nevertheless, existing findings suggest that cultural competency may influence various aspects of a visitor's journey. Building upon prior research, the proposed hypothesis posits the significance of cultural competency in cultural tourism and visitors' spiritual experiences. Nisar et al. (2022) indicate that cultural competency may indeed impact tourists' spiritual experiences. Studies reveal that acquiring knowledge about other cultures enhances tourists' connections and overall travel experiences. Travelers possessing familiarity with the cultures they visit are more likely to engage with the spiritual and cultural facets of these destinations, thereby augmenting spiritual experiences through cultural tourism (Rahman et al., 2022a; Shirmohammadi & Ghanbari, 2022). Visitors deeply acquainted with local customs, beliefs, and practices are predisposed to derive spiritual satisfaction from cultural events and religious sites (Rahman et al., 2022a). The third hypothesis underscores the significance of visitor empathy and cultural awareness, examining how cultural competency influences spiritual and cultural tourism. While the hypothesis garners substantial theoretical support, experimental inquiry is imperative to rigorously test the proposed moderation model. Further investigation into spiritual experiences, cultural tourism, and travellers' cultural understanding is warranted (Shi & Pande, 2023). Qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups can uncover intricate cultural practices and competencies affecting the variables (Ly & Tan, 2023). By probing this hypothesis, researchers can gain a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between cultural tourism, cultural competency, and spiritual experiences.

H3. Cultural competence significantly moderates the relationship between cultural tourism and spiritual experience of tourists.

The tourism industry extensively investigates how brand trust influences passenger behavior, satisfaction, and loyalty (Dabphet, 2021). Various studies affirm that passengers' trust in travel brands significantly impacts their decisions and opinions of visited destinations (Rejikumar et al., 2021). Trust in a destination brand, as observed by Hung Lee et al. (2021), positively correlates with passenger satisfaction, likelihood of return, and likelihood of recommending the location. Shirmohammadi and Ghanbari (2022) highlight the influence of trust in tour operators and lodging providers on customers' assessments of service quality and their intention to return to a destination. However, the relationship between trust in tourism brands and the interplay of spiritual experiences and cultural tourism has not been explored (Genc & Gulertekin Genc, 2023). The findings imply that trust in tourism businesses can significantly impact traveller experiences. The fourth hypothesis asserts that trust in tourism

brands strongly influences both cultural tourism and spiritual experiences. Research suggests that confidence in travel brands may shape the spiritual experiences of cultural tourists (Robina Ramírez & Fernández Portillo, 2020). Travelers who trust cultural tourism places may derive more authentic, meaningful, and spiritually rewarding experiences, enhancing their engagement with cultural tourism activities such as guided tours, cultural performances, and heritage sites (Rahman et al., 2022b). While there is theoretical and empirical support for the hypothesis, further research is essential to evaluate the proposed moderation model (Parthenis et al., 2023). Testing this hypothesis can offer valuable insights into the intricate interplay between spiritual experiences, tourist brand trust, and cultural tourism.

H4. Tourism brand trust significantly moderates the relationship of cultural tourism and spiritual experience of tourists.

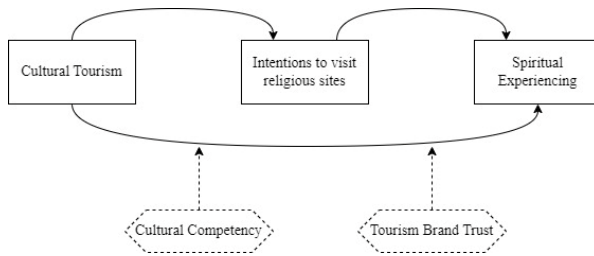


Figure 1: Theoretical Model.

METHODOLOGY

This study involved 244 tourists visiting various sites in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, focusing on religious tourism. The research utilized quantitative analysis to examine the relationships between spirituality, cultural tourism, and relevant factors. Participants explored diverse cultural and religious sites nationwide, responding to standardized questionnaires derived from established measures in previous studies. The questionnaires assessed key elements such as cultural tourism experiences, desire to visit sacred sites, cultural understanding, confidence in tourism companies, and spiritual encounters. Likert-type scales were employed to gauge participants' perspectives and experiences. Cultural tourism was measured using a ten-item scale (Li et al., 2022), intention to visit religious sites with a four-item scale (Kayal, 2023), cultural competence with a thirteen-item established scale (Doorenbos et al., 2016), and tourism brand trust with a four-item scale (Wang, 2022). Data on spiritual experiences were collected using a four-item scale (Wang, 2022).

The study employed Stata-SEM software for statistical analysis to examine the anticipated relationships among variables post data collection. It specifically explored the correlation between the intention to visit religious sites, cultural awareness, and trust in tourist firms. Model fit indicators, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and chi-square fit statistics, were analysed to assess the structural model's fit.

Path coefficients, standard errors, z-values, and p-values were scrutinized to evaluate the significance and strength of relationships between variables. Reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model were assessed through calculations of composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE). R-square statistics were examined to ascertain the percentage of variation in each variable explained by the independent variables in the model.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents Cronbach's Alpha values for the study variables. Cronbach's Alpha assesses the internal consistency of items within a scale or construct, reflecting their ability to measure the same underlying concept. The table displays the Cronbach's Alpha for each variable, revealing a strong internal consistency of 0.843 for "Cultural tourism." This indicates a high degree of interconnectedness and validity among the survey questions related to cultural tourism. Similarly, the "Intention to visit religious sites" exhibits excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.849, affirming the reliability of the variable. The components measuring visitors' intentions to visit religious sites demonstrate internal consistency and accuracy.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha.

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Cultural tourism	0.843
Intention to visit religious sites	0.849
Cultural competence	0.902
Tourism brand trust	0.831
Spiritual experience	0.797

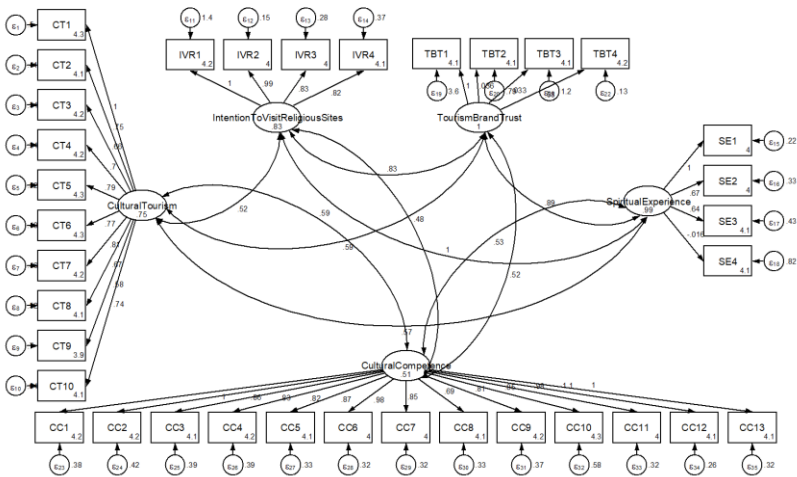


Figure 2: Estimated Model.

Cronbach's Alpha for the variable "Cultural competence" is 0.902, signifying robust internal consistency. The closely interrelated dimensions of tourists' awareness, empathy, and appreciation of diverse cultures provide a reliable measure of cultural competence, as indicated by the data. Similarly, the variable "Tourism brand trust" exhibits strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.831, affirming the dependability of the variable. This suggests that reliable products from the tourism industry are utilized to gauge travellers' trust in cultural tourism companies. Following examination, "Spiritual experience" demonstrates strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha rating of 0.797. The questions assessing travellers' spiritual experiences exhibit a moderate correlation and consistently appraise personal spiritual encounters. In summary, the high Cronbach's Alpha values for each variable in Table 1 affirm the internal consistency of the study's measures. This provides support for the findings derived from the survey response database.

Table 2 presents the validity and reliability assessment for each study variable. In SEM and CFA, construct validity and reliability are evaluated through Composite Reliability and AVE. The table displays the Composite Reliability and AVE for each variable. For the construct "Cultural tourism," the values of 0.894 for Composite Reliability and 0.615 for AVE indicate good validity and reliability. These values surpass the recommended standards of 0.7 for Composite Reliability and 0.5 for AVE, affirming that items related to cultural tourism consistently measure the intended construct and explain a substantial amount of variance in observed variables. Similarly, "Intention to visit religious sites" exhibits strong construct validity and reliability, with a Composite Reliability of 0.902 and AVE of 0.620. These results signify that the measurement of tourists' intention to visit religious sites is reliable and explains a significant portion of the observed variables.

The construct "Cultural competence" demonstrates robust construct validity and reliability, as indicated by a Composite Reliability of 0.933 and AVE of 0.676. These outcomes confirm that items related to visitors' cultural competency accurately assess the intended construct and account for a substantial portion of the observed variance. Regarding "Tourism brand trust," a Composite Reliability of 0.862 and AVE of 0.654 reflect strong construct validity and reliability. The trust tourists place in brands associated with cultural tourism destinations consistently measures the target construct and elucidates a considerable amount of variance in observed variables.

Finally, "Spiritual experience" attains a Composite Reliability of 0.893 and AVE of 0.586, indicating good construct validity and reliability. These values affirm that items assessing travellers' spiritual experiences accurately measure the intended construct and explain a moderate amount of variance in observed variables. Table 2 underscores the robust composite reliability and AVE values for each variable, providing validation for the study's overall validity and attesting to the robustness of the SEM analysis.

Table 2: Validity and Reliability Confirmation.

Variable	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Cultural tourism	0.894	0.615
Intention to visit religious sites	0.902	0.620
Cultural competence	0.933	0.676
Tourism brand trust	0.862	0.654
Spiritual experience	0.893	0.586

Table 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

Measurement	OIM Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
CT1	1	(constrained)				
CT2	0.738	0.068	10.514	0.000	0.605	0.864
CT3	0.543	0.061	8.671	0.000	0.424	0.656
CT4	0.864	0.068	12.386	0.000	0.731	0.796
CT5	0.864	0.079	10.601	0.000	0.709	0.818
CT6	0.633	0.066	9.330	0.000	0.504	0.755
CT7	0.317	0.063	4.869	0.000	0.193	0.436
CT8	0.594	0.069	9.893	0.005	0.495	0.808
CT9	0.841	0.079	11.872	0.002	0.693	0.846
CT10	0.591	0.063	9.136	0.000	0.468	0.707
IVR1	1.000	(constrained)				
IVR2	0.782	0.063	11.959	0.000	0.658	0.899
IVR3	0.701	0.082	8.302	0.000	0.540	0.854
IVR4	0.866	0.056	14.898	0.000	0.756	0.776
CC1	1.000	(constrained)				
CC2	0.822	0.075	10.084	0.000	0.675	0.778
CC3	0.750	0.061	11.468	0.000	0.631	0.862
CC4	0.822	0.058	13.179	0.000	0.708	0.743
CC5	0.728	0.069	13.672	0.000	0.684	0.872
CC6	0.800	0.063	11.849	0.000	0.677	0.915
CC7	0.771	0.063	11.319	0.000	0.647	0.888
CC8	0.748	0.064	10.873	0.000	0.623	0.866
CC9	0.847	0.066	11.886	0.000	0.717	0.784
CC10	0.711	0.065	10.231	0.000	0.584	0.830
CC11	0.780	0.064	11.282	0.000	0.654	0.899
CC12	0.808	0.064	11.784	0.000	0.683	0.741
TBT1	1.000	(constrained)				
TBT2	0.670	0.057	10.795	0.000	0.558	0.776
TBT3	0.684	0.059	10.730	0.000	0.568	0.792
TBT4	0.856	0.063	12.557	0.000	0.733	0.788
SE1	1.000	(constrained)				
SE2	0.802	0.063	11.689	0.000	0.678	0.735
SE3	0.809	0.068	10.988	0.000	0.676	0.751
SE4	0.732	0.060	11.214	0.000	0.615	0.850

Table 3 presents the CFA results for the measurement model. The standardized factor loadings (OIM Coef.), standard errors, z-values, p-values, and 95% confidence intervals for each item are provided. The CFA results affirm the validity of the measurement model, as each observed variable consistently and reliably measures its latent construct with factor loadings exceeding 0.5. The statistically significant z-values and low p-values indicate that all factor loadings are of high significance, thereby validating the measurement model. Factors such as cultural tourism, intention to visit religious places, cultural competence, tourist brand trust, and spiritual experience are effectively represented by the observed variables. These robust findings strongly support the convergent validity of the measurement model.

Table 4: Measurement Items Fitness Statistics.

Variable	Indicator	Original Sample
Cultural tourism	CT1	0.793
	CT2	0.784
	CT3	0.698
	CT4	0.754
	CT5	0.812
	CT6	0.837
	CT7	0.861
	CT8	0.775
	CT9	0.720
	CT10	0.654
Intention to visit religious sites	IVR1	0.632
	IVR2	0.698
	IVR3	0.902
	IVR4	0.848
Cultural competence	CC1	0.882
	CC2	0.834
	CC3	0.801
	CC4	0.662
	CC5	0.604
	CC6	0.720
	CC7	0.774
	CC8	0.815
	CC9	0.837
	CC10	0.758
	CC11	0.648
	CC12	0.640
Tourism brand trust	TBT1	0.837
	TBT2	0.861
	TBT3	0.775
	TBT4	0.820
Spiritual experience	SE1	0.851
	SE2	0.755
	SE3	0.787
	SE4	0.804

Table 4 provides the fitness statistics for each measurement item related to the inquiry variables. The Original Sample values, reflecting the indicator reliability scores, elucidate the efficacy of each item in measuring the latent construct. In the case of cultural tourism, all indicator reliability ratings fall within the range of 0.654 to 0.861, indicating satisfactory reliability. Similarly, for intention to visit religious sites, cultural competency, tourist brand trust, and spiritual experience, the indicator reliability ratings range from 0.604 to 0.902, signifying robust reliability of survey items. This suggests that the constituent items of each variable effectively capture the intended constructs, thereby affirming the validity and reliability of the measurement model in the research.

Table 5 presents the chi-square fit statistics for the measurement model. A likelihood ratio of 10791.839 allows for a comparison between the saturated and proposed models. The significant difference between the proposed and saturated models is evident, with a chi-square result of 0.000. Additionally, the chi-square value of 10003.552 and p-value of 0.001 indicate a significant difference between the baseline and saturated models. These fit statistics collectively affirm that the proposed measurement model effectively captures cultural tourism, intention to visit religious sites, cultural competence, tourism brand trust, and spiritual experience.

Table 5: Chi-Square Fit statistics.

Fit statistic	Value	Description
Likelihood ratio	10791.839	model vs. saturated
p > chi2	0.000	
chi2_bs (2356)	10003.552	baseline vs. saturated
p > chi2	0.001	

Table 6 contrasts goodness-of-fit statistics between the estimated and saturated models. The SRMR values for both models are provided, with the saturated model exhibiting an SRMR of 0.052 compared to the estimated model's 0.077. The lower SRMR score for the saturated model indicates a better fit to the data than the estimated model. Despite this, the calculated model's SRMR value of 0.077 remains within an acceptable range, suggesting a good fit with the data. These goodness-of-fit statistics illustrate the effective linkage of spiritual experience, cultural competency, intention to visit religious places, and tourist brand trust in the estimated model.

Table 6: Model Goodness of Fit Statistics.

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.052	0.077

Table 7 displays R-square statistics for each variable in the structural model. The coefficient of determination, or R-square, elucidates the extent to which the model's independent variables account for the variance in the dependent variable. Cultural

tourism attains an R-square score of 0.615, signifying that the model's independent variables explain 61.5% of its variation. Intention to visit religious places, cultural competency, and tourism brand trust have R-square values of 0.660, 0.425, and 0.539, respectively. These R-square values indicate that the independent variables in the structural model elucidate a substantial portion of each variable's variance. These statistics provide insights into the predictive capability of the structural equation model and the influence of independent factors on dependent variables.

Table 7: R-Square Statistics.

Variable	R Square
Cultural tourism	0.615
Intention to visit religious sites	0.660
Cultural competence	0.425
Tourism brand trust	0.539

Table 8 outlines the outcomes of the path analysis, delineating the direct and moderating impacts of cultural tourism on passengers' spiritual experiences, intention to visit religious sites, cultural competency, and trust in tourism brands. Notably, the analysis unveils a significant positive path coefficient of 0.263 ($z = 2.628, p < 0.05$), indicating that cultural tourism exerts a substantial influence on passengers' spiritual experiences. This discovery underscores the transformative capacity of cultural tourism encounters in enhancing travellers' spiritual fulfilment.

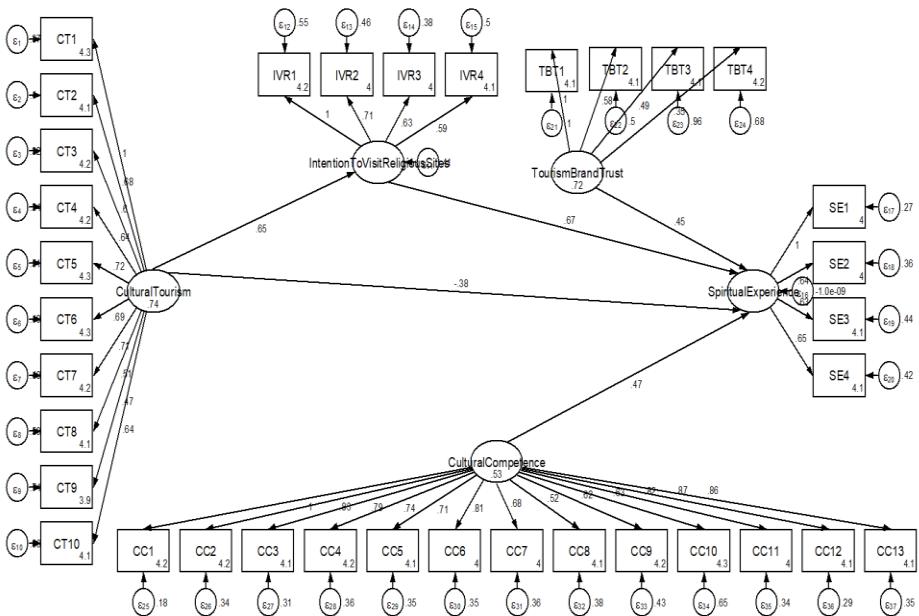


Figure 3: Structural Model for Direct and Mediated Path Analysis.

Secondly, the findings indicate a significant mediating role of the intention to visit religious places in the relationship between visitors' spiritual experiences and cultural tourism, represented by a path coefficient of 0.848 ($z = 1.704$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that the desire of tourists to visit places of worship serves as a vital pathway through which participation in cultural tourism activities enhances their spiritual well-being. The connection between the cultural and spiritual dimensions of tourism is underscored by the observation that travellers actively seeking religious experiences are more likely to derive spiritual benefits from engaging with local culture. Moreover, the study reveals that cultural competency plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between visitors' spiritual experiences and cultural tourism, as indicated by a path coefficient of 0.068 ($z = 0.181$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that travellers' awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge of other cultures influence the extent to which they experience spiritual fulfilment through cultural tourism activities. Culturally competent tourists are better positioned to engage with and appreciate the spiritual and cultural aspects of their vacation destinations, enhancing the positive impact of cultural tourism on their spiritual experiences.

Table 8: Path Analysis.

	OIM Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Cultural tourism significantly influences the spiritual experience of tourists.	0.263	0.095	2.628	0.000	0.077	0.450
Intention to visit religious sites significantly mediates the relationship of cultural tourism and spiritual experience of tourists.	0.848	0.472	1.704	0.000	0.649	0.821
Cultural competence significantly moderates the relationship between cultural tourism and spiritual experience of tourists.	0.068	0.362	0.181	0.009	0.561	0.641
Tourism brand trust significantly moderates the relationship of cultural tourism and spiritual experience of tourists.	0.200	0.097	1.971	0.000	0.390	0.300

Moreover, the findings reveal a significant moderating effect of tourism brand trust on the relationship between spiritual experiences and cultural tourism (path coefficient: 0.200, $z = 1.971$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that a key determinant of tourists' spiritual well-being lies in their level of trust in travel companies associated with destinations emphasizing cultural tourism. By fostering confidence and reliability in travellers, tourism brands have the potential to enhance overall satisfaction with cultural tourism experiences and establish deeper connections with the spiritual and cultural dimensions of destination locations. In summary, the results of the path analysis underscore the intricate interplay between spiritual fulfilment in tourism contexts and cultural tourism, cultural competency, intention to visit religious sites, trust in the tourism brand, and visitors' spiritual experiences.

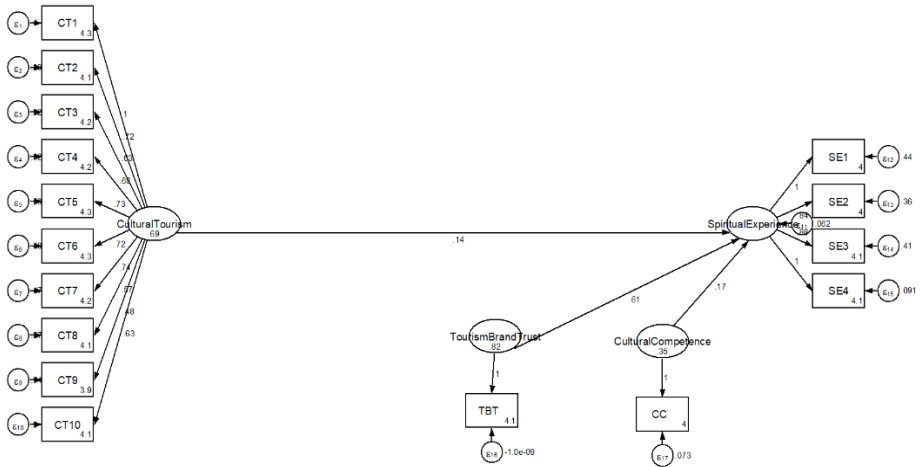


Figure 4: Structural Model for Moderating Path Analysis.

DISCUSSION

This chapter explores the deep connection between cultural tourism and spirituality in Saudi Arabia, uncovering the rich cultural history and religious significance hidden among minarets and souks. Tourists, on a transformative quest for spiritual fulfilment, engage with historical sites and pilgrimage routes to gain insights into the region’s diverse cultural blend. Confirming hypotheses, the study underscores the substantial impact of cultural tourism on travellers’ spiritual experiences. Past research suggests that these activities have the potential to enhance personal growth, self-awareness, and emotional well-being (Hung Lee et al., 2021). Tourists engaging in cultural tourism, specifically visiting museums, historical sites, and participating in local rituals, reported experiencing a sense of wonder, connection, and transcendence. These activities were found to contribute positively to their emotional and spiritual well-being during their travels.

This study reveals that travellers’ religious motivations play a pivotal role in linking cultural tourism with spiritual experiences. Those deriving pleasure from religious site visits are more likely to experience spiritual benefits from cultural tourism. The exploration emphasizes the influence of intention in connecting religious site visits and tourists’ spiritual experiences, providing insights into the mechanisms of cultural tourism and spirituality. The results have implications for tourism management and marketing strategies, enriching our understanding of the complex relationship between spirituality and cultural tourism. The study confirms the hypothesis through experimentation, underscoring the impact of cultural tourism on spiritual contentment. It also underscores the need for further research, considering factors such as visitors’ cultural knowledge, trust in tourism brands, and the socio-cultural environment of the destination (Shi &

Pande, 2023). Identifying gaps in current research would improve our understanding of the transformative potential of cultural tourist experiences, enhancing the spiritual aspects of tourism for international visitors.

The third and fourth hypotheses provide insights into the interplay among cultural tourism, tourism brand trust, and cultural competency, influencing travellers' spiritual experiences. Cultural competency acts as a mediator in the relationship between cultural tourism and spiritual experiences, emphasizing the role of awareness, sensitivity, and understanding in achieving spiritual contentment during travel (Parthenis et al., 2023). Culturally competent visitors can better appreciate the cultural and spiritual aspects of destinations. Additionally, tourists' trust in tourism companies plays a significant role in connecting cultural tourism with spiritual experiences, highlighting the importance of trust in the authenticity and reliability of cultural tourism organizations for meaningful and transformative experiences (Mirfakhradini, 2023). Trusting tourism companies enhances travellers' experiences and strengthens their connection with the cultural and spiritual aspects of visited destinations. Tourism branding and marketing play a crucial role in shaping travellers' perceptions, emphasizing the role of destination management groups in building and sustaining trust through transparent communication.

This study unveils the intricate interplay among cultural tourism, cultural competence, tourism brand trust, and tourist spiritual experiences, providing empirical support for our hypotheses. The findings carry implications for destination management, tourism marketing, and education, emphasizing the importance of cultural understanding, brand trust, and authentic cultural encounters for international travellers. The report underscores the need for further research on cultural tourism and spirituality, considering factors such as tourist motivations, socio-cultural backgrounds, and destination contexts. Addressing these gaps can aid researchers and practitioners in devising more effective strategies to enhance the spiritual dimensions of cultural tourism experiences, fostering sustainable global tourism. The acceptance of all four hypotheses underscores the significant impact of cultural tourism on travellers' spiritual experiences in Saudi Arabia. Cultural exploration and spiritual awakening converge in Jeddah's bazaars and Medina's mosques, offering tourists a deep sense of connection. Visitors seek both cultural and spiritual experiences at sacred sites, engaging with cultural and religious attractions. The intricate interplay of cultural competency and trust in tourism brands unveils the complex dynamics shaping tourists' spiritual experiences. Our findings indicate that cultural tourism in Saudi Arabia has transformative potential, enabling travellers to explore and spiritually enrich their understanding of the country's cultural and religious heritage.

The aim of this research was to explore the intricate relationship between spirituality and cultural tourism, investigating key variables such as the inclination to visit sacred sites, cultural competency, and trust in travel agencies. Through empirical analysis, the study examined the influence of cultural tourism on travellers' spiritual fulfilment,

considering variables such as engagement with places of worship, familiarity with local customs, and trust in travel companies. The findings emphasize the potential impact of cultural tourism on participants' spiritual experiences, underscoring the significance of spiritual and cultural elements in destination management and tourism promotion. While the study acknowledges its limitations, it calls for further research to deepen our understanding of these intricate processes. The theoretical implications and practical applications of this work in the realms of spirituality and cultural tourism underscore the need for ongoing exploration and overcoming obstacles to enhance the experiences of global travellers.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research significantly advances understanding in tourism, cultural studies, and spirituality. It contributes theoretical insights by elucidating the intricate interplay between cultural tourism, religious site visits, cultural competence, tourism brand trust, and tourist spiritual experiences. Experimental validation of links between cultural tourism, intention to visit religious sites, cultural competency, and tourism brand trust underscores the transformative impact of cultural education and participation on travellers' spirituality. The study highlights the mediating role of the aim to visit religious places, emphasizing the interconnectedness of cultural and spiritual factors in travel decisions. Moreover, the moderating effects of cultural competence and tourism brand trust reveal how individual and contextual factors influence travellers' spiritual experiences, shedding light on the socio-cultural dynamics of tourism and spirituality. The theoretical implications provide a foundation for future transdisciplinary research in these domains.

This research holds practical insights for destination management organizations, tourist marketers, and practitioners aiming to enhance cultural and spiritual tourism experiences. The findings underscore the significance of cultural and spiritual elements in destination marketing and development plans, offering the potential for attracting travellers seeking meaningful experiences. Destination management organizations can leverage cultural tourism's transformative capacity to diversify services and stimulate cultural destination economies. Recognizing the mediating role of the intention to visit religious sites allows marketers to emphasize the spiritual relevance of attractions, appealing to travellers' interests. The moderating effects of cultural competency and brand trust indicate that enhancing cultural understanding, sensitivity, and confidence in tourism companies can improve travellers' spiritual experiences. Investing in cultural education, professional training, and brand trust activities can result in more immersive and meaningful cultural tourism experiences. This research provides actionable tactics for stakeholders to capitalize on spirituality and cultural tourism synergies, promoting sustainability and enriching tourist experiences.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This research offers valuable insights, yet its limitations warrant consideration for future investigations. The reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce biases, impacting validity. Combining observational and qualitative data in future studies can mitigate these issues. The cross-sectional design hinders causation and temporal analysis, which could be addressed through longitudinal or experimental approaches. The study's focus on cultural tourism and spirituality overlooks personal motives, socio-cultural factors, and destination characteristics, suggesting the need for comprehensive examinations of additional variables and their interconnections to better understand travellers' multi-dimensional experiences. Prospective research in cultural tourism and spirituality can explore various dimensions. Investigating how cultural tourism fosters intercultural discourse, cross-cultural understanding, and social cohesion among tourists from diverse cultures presents a promising avenue. Exploring the impact of cultural tourism on host communities in terms of authenticity, legacy preservation, and empowerment constitutes another area for study. With the increasing prevalence of virtual and augmented reality in tourism, future research could delve into how these technologies enhance cultural and spiritual experiences at remote or inaccessible cultural heritage sites. Comparative analyses of cultural tourism and spirituality across different geographic, cultural, and religious contexts are essential to discern cross-cultural similarities and differences in visitors' experiences and perspectives. Additionally, understanding how cultural tourism and spirituality influence sustainable tourism development by addressing issues such as over tourism, cultural commercialization, and environmental conservation in cultural tourist destinations warrants further investigation. Future research has the potential to unravel the intricate linkages between cultural tourism, spirituality, and socio-cultural changes in contemporary tourism destinations.

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APPENDIX 1

Cultural Tourism

1. How often do you engage in cultural activities during your travels?
2. To what extent do you seek out cultural experiences when visiting new destinations?
3. How important are cultural attractions and events in influencing your travel decisions?
4. How much do you enjoy immersing yourself in the local culture when traveling?
5. How likely are you to participate in cultural tours or heritage walks during your trips?
6. How interested are you in experiencing traditional customs and rituals of different cultures?
7. How much do you value learning about the history and traditions of the places you visit?
8. How satisfied are you with the variety of cultural activities available at tourist destinations?
9. How important are cultural experiences in enhancing your overall travel experiences?
10. How likely are you to recommend cultural destinations to others based on your experiences?

Intention to Visit Religious Sites

1. How likely are you to visit religious sites during your travels?
2. How important are religious landmarks and pilgrimage sites in influencing your travel plans?
3. To what extent do you consider religious experiences as a significant aspect of your travel itinerary?
4. How motivated are you to explore the spiritual significance of different religious sites?

Cultural Competence

1. How knowledgeable do you feel about the cultural customs and traditions of different regions?
2. How comfortable are you interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds?
3. To what extent do you respect and appreciate cultural differences?
4. How often do you seek opportunities to learn about new cultures and perspectives?
5. How confident are you in your ability to adapt to unfamiliar cultural settings?
6. How important do you consider cultural sensitivity in your interactions with people from different cultures?
7. How open-minded are you towards experiencing unfamiliar cultural practices?
8. How often do you engage in cross-cultural communication?

9. How aware are you of your own cultural biases and prejudices?
10. How willing are you to immerse yourself in cultural experiences outside your comfort zone?
11. How respectful are you towards cultural traditions and norms different from your own?
12. How well do you understand the social norms and etiquette of different cultures?
13. How interested are you in learning about the cultural heritage and customs of various ethnic groups?

Tourism Brand Trust

1. How much do you trust the information provided by tourism brands about cultural destinations?
2. How reliable do you perceive tourism brands to be in delivering quality cultural experiences?
3. How confident are you in the authenticity and integrity of tourism brands associated with cultural tourism?
4. How likely are you to choose destinations endorsed by trusted tourism brands for cultural experiences?

Spiritual Experience

1. How often do you feel a sense of awe or reverence when visiting cultural or religious sites?
2. To what extent do you feel a spiritual connection to the places you visit during your travels?
3. How meaningful are your experiences at religious sites in fulfilling your spiritual needs?
4. How satisfied are you with the level of spiritual fulfilment you experience during your travels?