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Exploring Spiritual Experience of Young Pilgrims at Religious Sites: (The Case of Razavi Holy Shrine)

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Abstract

Spiritual experiences are essential to individual well-being, offering profound emotional, psychological, and religious benefits. Pilgrimage sites, especially sacred spaces, provide a unique environment for pilgrims to experience personal renewal and spiritual transformation. This study investigates the spiritual experiences of young pilgrims at the Razavi Holy Shrine in Mashhad, Iran, a key pilgrimage site for Shia Muslims. Using an exploratory-descriptive qualitative approach and thematic analysis, the research identifies three main themes: Spiritual Well-being, Connectedness, and Consciousness, each with several subthemes. Spiritual Well-being encompasses positive emotions, energy, happiness, purification, and peace and tranquility, emphasizing the emotional uplift and inner peace experienced by pilgrims. Connectedness includes pilgrims' connection with God, expressing needs and seeking divine favor, receiving blessings and assistance, and fostering ties with religion and holy leaders. This highlights the shrine's role in deepening spiritual bonds and providing divine support. Consciousness involves experiences of detachment from routine life, timelessness, self-reflection, and religious awareness, illustrating how the pilgrimage fosters introspection and spiritual enlightenment. These findings contribute to the understanding of religious pilgrimage and spiritual transformation, offering valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and pilgrimage site administrators. Recognizing the dimensions of spiritual experiences can enhance spiritual tourism and guide future research on spiritual psychology and the transformative power of sacred spaces.

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Introduction

Religiously motivated travel, including pilgrimage, is among the earliest forms of tourism. Such journeys—undertaken by individuals driven by faith—encompass a wide range of activities, including spiritual practices, pilgrimage, religious rituals, cultural engagement, community participation, visits to sacred sites, the pursuit of worldly benefits, aspirations for divine rewards, and access to amenities (Kim et al., 2020). Among travel motivations, spirituality has emerged as a significant driving force, as religion and spirituality remain among the most common reasons for undertaking journeys (Samarathunga et al., 2024).

In recent years, technological advancements have significantly improved travel and communication, contributing to the global expansion of religious tourism in diverse forms. This growth is fueled by increasing interest in spirituality and cultural exchange (Choe, 2024). Religion and spirituality, fundamental aspects of human society for millennia, are engaged with in diverse ways. Individuals incorporate traditional sources—such as books and religious artifacts—as well as contemporary practices like meditation and introspective activities (Caidi et al., 2025). In academic literature, spirituality is sometimes framed as a component of religious tourism or as a distinct domain, given its relevance to other forms of tourism (Şahin & Güzel, 2024).

Increasingly, individuals seek personal meaning through travel—a journey that allows exploration of new destinations while offering profound avenues for spiritual experience. Spiritual tourism is defined as a quest for life's purpose and a transcendent exploration of the self, fostering the integration of body, mind, and spirit, regardless of direct ties to organized religion (Jha & Sachdeva, 2024; Buzinde, 2020; Smith et al., 2010). It is best understood as a physical journey in pursuit of truth and the sacred (Halim et al., 2021). While contemporary spiritual tourism embraces non-religious dimensions, traditional perspectives maintain that religion and spirituality remain intertwined with the sacred and divine. Spirituality continues to underpin religious experience as the primary impetus for seeking the sacred (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Pargament, 1999). Religious tourists are thus driven not only by doctrinal beliefs but also by desires to forge enduring spiritual memories and pursue healing (Carvache-Franco et al., 2024; Blackwell, 2007).

Across diverse religious traditions, sacred sites—such as cathedrals, temples, and mosques—attract millions of visitors seeking spiritual renewal (Petrova, 2024; Padin et al., 2016). It is noted by some researchers that pilgrimage is not solely an act of religious devotion but also serves secular purposes (Albayrak et al., 2018), and it is emphasized by others that deeper spiritual value is thereby imparted (Chang et al., 2020); furthermore, pilgrimage is defined as a journey motivated by religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken individually or collectively to a site considered more sacred or meaningful than

everyday surroundings, with the aim of experiencing a transcendent connection to a sacred object and seeking spiritual, emotional, or physical healing or enrichment (Margry, 2008).

The rise of spiritual and religious tourism reflects society's growing need for connection, meaning, and transcendence. This form of tourism not only bolsters economic development and cultural preservation but also offers unique opportunities for personal transformation (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). Whether through ritual participation, contemplation at sacred sites, or engagement with like-minded seekers, travelers often emerge with renewed purpose and a deeper understanding of themselves and the world (Idris, 2024; Rohit et al., 2024; Brumec, 2024; Willson et al., 2013).

The revived interest in spirituality has spurred enthusiasm for pilgrimages and visits to sacred sites (Kim et al., 2020). Spiritual tourism encompasses revered destinations such as the Vatican for Catholics, the Ganges River, temples, and ashrams in India for Hindus, and Mecca and shrines for Muslims (Halim et al., 2021). A prime example is the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, Iran. As the burial site of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam in Twelver Shiite tradition, the shrine is Iran's most important religious site and a major pilgrimage destination for Shiite Muslims globally. Revered for its spiritual, historical, and cultural significance, it serves as a hub for devotion, religious education, social interaction, and spiritual healing (Ghaemi Nik & Soltanieh, 2024). Annually, millions of domestic and international visitors are drawn to Mashhad to experience the shrine's spiritual ambiance, seek blessings, and strengthen their faith. The shrine also reinforces Shiite beliefs in the infallibility and purity of the Ahl al-Bayt within the cultural pilgrimage system (Keshavarz & Delbari, 2017; Azimi-Hashemi et al., 2013).

Building on the socio-cultural and economic significance of spiritual tourism and pilgrimage (Rosak-Szyrocka et al., 2023; Vijayanand, 2012), it is crucial to explore the internal dimensions of these journeys, which remain understudied. While prior research emphasizes external benefits and cultural impacts (e.g., Shinde & Olsen, 2022; Pourtaheri et al., 2012), a gap persists in understanding pilgrims' spiritual experiences and their influence on travelers' inner lives. Given that tourist experiences shape future behaviors, deeper exploration of pilgrimage's diverse dimensions is necessary (Chen et al., 2020; Chen & Tsai, 2007).

Young travelers, particularly Generations Y and Z, are reshaping the tourism industry. Unlike earlier cohorts, they prioritize immersive, experience-driven journeys and have different behavior and engagement during their trips which might be even more unique in the context of spiritual and religious tourism (Martins & da Costa, 2023; Puiu et al., 2022; Corbisiero et al., 2022). Yet, despite their growing influence, academic research has largely overlooked young visitors' experiences at religious sites in particular in Iran. Accordingly, this study identifies and analyzes key aspects of spiritual experiences of young tourists at the Razavi Holy Shrine. The insights aim to enrich theoretical frameworks and practical strategies, enhancing understanding of pilgrims' experiences, influencing factors, and elements that

could deepen these encounters. Ultimately, this knowledge will aid in improving pilgrimage site management and fostering transformative visitor experiences.

Literature review

Religious and spiritual tourism

Religious tourism, one of the earliest forms of travel, has persisted as a core element of religious traditions throughout history (Ohlan & Ohlan, 2024). It encompasses journeys motivated by religious purposes and has evolved into a major sector within the global tourism industry. With the growing prominence of sacred sites—particularly since the late 20th century—interest in religious destinations has surged among tourists (Shackley, 2008). According to the World Tourism Organization (2008), an estimated 313 million people visit religious sites annually (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Huang & Pearce, 2019; Mróz, 2021), highlighting its substantial role in both domestic and international tourism. This form of tourism not only drives economic growth and development in destinations but also strengthens cultural, political, religious, and social connections between tourists and host communities (Zarb, 2020; Timothy, 2021).

Religious tourism and spiritual tourism are often used interchangeably, yet they exhibit subtle distinctions. Religious tourism is defined as travel to sacred sites or destinations where tourists are motivated—either wholly or partially—by religious beliefs or practices (Verma & Sarangi, 2019; Romanelli et al., 2021). Such journeys can prompt temporary or permanent shifts in tourists' attitudes toward life, their relationship with the divine, and their religious convictions (Chang et al., 2020).

In contrast, spiritual tourism is typically characterized by a quest for meaning, identity, or well-being and is not inherently tied to religious institutions or doctrines (Norman, 2012; Movahed et al., 2023). Religiousness is described as being rooted in specific beliefs and practices, whereas spirituality is defined as the search for life's meaning and purpose (Peteet, 1994). Similarly, sacredness is confined to organized religion, and spirituality is associated with broader existential dimensions such as life's purpose, human existence, and communal bonds (Stifoss-Hanssen, 1999). These distinctions highlight that while religious tourism is anchored in doctrinal rituals, spiritual tourism represents a more expansive, individualized pursuit.

Despite these conceptual differences, the terms “spiritual tourism” and “religious tourism” are often used interchangeably, creating confusion about their boundaries (Halim et al., 2021). Norman (2012) characterizes spiritual tourism as a phenomenon in leisure travel involving a self-conscious pursuit of spiritual betterment, while Willson et al. (2013) define it as an individual search for life's purpose through travel. This ambiguity has prompted scholars to explore the constructs underpinning religion

and spirituality, often integrating interdisciplinary insights to develop a holistic understanding (Willson, 2016).

Pargament (1999) posits that spirituality functions as the focal point of religion, primarily concerned with the quest for the sacred, though he acknowledges that spiritual experiences can transcend religious frameworks. This view aligns with Hay and Socha's (2005) observation of a paradox: despite secularization, reported spiritual experiences are rising, suggesting that "spiritual awareness is natural and universal within the human species." Similarly, studies reveal that spiritual beliefs are not exclusive to religious individuals, as many non-religious people also hold such convictions (Progano et al., 2020).

While these terms have been analyzed from diverse perspectives, neither traditional nor modern sources provide an explicit or universally accepted distinction between them. They are typically seen as interconnected and complementary, with differences largely contingent on contextual usage. Nevertheless, spirituality has gradually evolved meanings that distinguish it from religion (Halim et al., 2021). Often linked to religious practices, spirituality can be interpreted narrowly as adherence to formal doctrines or broadly as a personal response to a divine relationship. While it may involve structured theology and rituals, it is more commonly framed as an individual journey marked by personal transcendence, heightened awareness, and a deepened sense of meaning (Little & Schmidt, 2006).

The relationship between religious and spiritual tourism can be conceptualized as a spectrum. At one end lies religious tourism, characterized by doctrinal observances and rituals; at the other, secular tourism emphasizes personal development, well-being, and leisure (Movahed et al., 2023). Spirituality bridges this spectrum, encompassing both religious and non-religious experiences. For example, Buzinde et al. (2014) categorize pilgrimage experiences into those rooted in spirituality and those fostering social unity, while Chang et al. (2020) identify spirituality as a key dimension of pilgrims' journeys. As spirituality in contemporary society increasingly diverges from religious institutions (Kato & Progano, 2017), the number of spiritual tourists unaffiliated with organized religion has grown (Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Norman, 2011). This expansion reflects spiritual tourism's capacity to accommodate diverse motivations, from the overtly religious to the entirely secular.

In conclusion, the conceptual relationship between religious and spiritual tourism is complex and fluid. Religious tourism is anchored in specific beliefs and practices, often centered on sacred sites such as the Vatican, Mecca, or the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad (Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Spiritual tourism, conversely, spans a broader range of personal and existential quests. This relationship is neither fixed nor easily defined but remains "fuzzy" and open to interpretation (Sharpley, 2016). Understanding this dynamic interplay is critical for grasping tourists' and pilgrims' diverse experiences, which encompass subjective perceptions, emotions, and interactions with destinations (Piramanayagam & Seal, 2021; Boonpat & Suvachart, 2014).

Spirituality and experience

Spiritual tourism is defined as the act of traveling domestically or internationally to visit spiritual sites such as mosques, churches, and temples. Furthermore, this concept is extended to include natural environments—forests, oceans, lakes, spiritual gardens, wildlife parks, botanical gardens, caves, and rock formations—as spaces for expressing gratitude to the divine, seeking forgiveness, and attaining inner peace (Haq & Medhekar, 2019). However, some perspectives frame spiritual tourism primarily as a personal journey aimed at self-discovery, balancing body, mind, and soul, enhancing self-awareness, and fulfilling one's life purpose. While religious tourism is closely tied to faith-based experiences and sacred sites associated with specific traditions, spiritual tourism transcends religious contexts to encompass connections with nature, personal well-being, and existential meaning. Nevertheless, spirituality remains intertwined with religion, just as religious elements can be found within spiritual experiences (Halim et al., 2021).

Tourism experiences encompass the events and situations travelers encounter, with associated feelings, emotions, and perceptions playing a key role in shaping their intention to revisit a destination. Positive travel experiences significantly increase the likelihood of return visits. Moreover, past experiences serve as a foundation for future expectations: enjoyable and fulfilling experiences at a destination make tourists more inclined to anticipate positive outcomes in subsequent trips (Maghrifani et al., 2024).

The concept of spiritual experience in tourism has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent years, reflecting growing interest in travel's transformative and deeply personal dimensions. While religious tourism is primarily associated with pilgrimages and devotional visits to sacred sites, spiritual tourism encompasses a broader spectrum of experiences driven by personal, emotional, and existential motivations (Shinde, 2021; Pargament, 1999; Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Norman's (2012) study categorizes spiritual tourist experiences into five distinct types:

- 1-Spiritual Tourism as Healing: Focuses on addressing aspects of everyday life perceived as challenging or unbalanced. Healing may involve physical rejuvenation, emotional release, or spiritual restoration, often facilitated through visits to sacred sites or wellness retreats.
- 2-Spiritual Tourism as Experiment: Involves exploring alternatives to habitual lifestyles deemed problematic or in need of reevaluation. These experiences, driven by curiosity about unfamiliar spiritual practices or philosophies, promote personal growth and reflect a broader trend in contemporary spirituality: individuals increasingly seek meaning outside traditional religious frameworks.
- 3-Spiritual Tourism as Quest: Characterized by journeys of personal discovery or enlightenment, where the pursuit itself constitutes a spiritual experience. Travelers seeking meaning, identity, or

insight are often drawn to symbolically significant destinations, such as the Ganges River, which attracts visitors across religious backgrounds.

4- Spiritual Tourism as Retreat: Entails withdrawing from daily life, often structured around sacred rituals or periods of renewal. Retreats provide spaces for reflection, meditation, or solitude, enabling tourists to disconnect from routine pressures and reconnect with their inner selves or a higher power. The increasing popularity of silent retreats and stays at monastic communities illustrates this form of spiritual tourism.

5- Spiritual Tourism as Collective: Centers on shared rituals, group pilgrimages, or communal worship to foster unity and belonging. Though less common as isolated experiences, collective spiritual tourism is pivotal in contexts like the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, where millions participate in a shared spiritual journey (Norman, 2012).

These categories illustrate the diverse and multifaceted nature of spiritual tourism, emphasizing its complexity and the varied motivations driving individuals to engage in it (Norman, 2012). The overlap between these dimensions highlights the richness of spiritual tourism, as travelers often blend healing, quest, and retreat motives within a single journey.

Religious tourism represents a significant domain where spiritual experiences are deeply rooted in faith-based practices and sacred encounters. At religious sites, pilgrims engage in rituals, prayers, and communal activities that foster profound spiritual connections (Ezenagu et al., 2022; Albayrak et al., 2018). These experiences extend beyond physical travel, encompassing emotional and cognitive dimensions that contribute to personal transformation (Chang et al., 2020).

However, spiritual experiences at religious sites are not limited to devout practitioners; secular visitors may also report feelings of awe, peace, or transcendence in sacred spaces (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Spirituality has been identified as a central component of pilgrimage experiences, even among those with uncertain religious affiliations. Buzinde et al. (2014) distinguish between spiritual and social dimensions of pilgrimage, noting that spiritual encounters often evoke transcendence, enhancing emotional well-being. Similarly, Chang et al. (2020) identify spirituality as a fundamental aspect of pilgrims' experiences at Tibetan Buddhist sites, underscoring its role in shaping perceptions of the journey.

The spiritual dimensions of tourism frequently intertwine within an individual's experience, creating a multifaceted journey (Nicolaidis & Grobler, 2017). For example, a pilgrim might initially seek healing from physical or emotional ailments (healing dimension). During their stay, participation in unfamiliar rituals or prayers could lead to exploration of new spiritual expressions (experiment dimension). Engaging with the sacred environment may then inspire a quest for deeper meaning or self-discovery (quest dimension).

Stepping away from daily routines to reflect in a serene setting embodies the retreat dimension, while communal prayers with fellow pilgrims fulfill the collective dimension. This interplay demonstrates that spiritual tourism is rarely unidimensional; instead, it weaves together a complex tapestry of motivations and outcomes that foster personal transformation and spiritual growth. Norman (2012) notes that most spiritual tourists exhibit traits from multiple categories, reflecting the phenomenological richness of their experiences.

The spiritual dimensions of tourism significantly influence behavior, particularly revisit intentions. Positive encounters—whether healing, transformative, or communal—increase the likelihood of return visits, as tourists associate these experiences with personal fulfillment (Rohman et al., 2023; Milman & Tasci, 2018). For managers of religious sites, recognizing visitors' spiritual dimensions—whether religious or secular—enables them to cater to pilgrims' needs, enhance satisfaction, and foster transformative journeys (Pande & Shi, 2023; Albayrak et al., 2018). This understanding is essential for designing environments that support diverse spiritual needs, from quiet reflection spaces to facilities for collective rituals.

Furthermore, the growing dissociation of spirituality from organized religion (Kato & Prozano, 2017) suggests that spiritual tourism appeals to a broad audience, including those seeking secular forms of meaning or well-being. Destinations integrating spiritual offerings—such as sacred sites, natural landscapes, or wellness programs—can attract both religious and non-religious tourists, expanding their market appeal. This trend underscores the need for a nuanced approach to destination management that balances sacred heritage with contemporary spiritual demands.

Research background

Recent empirical research has significantly enriched our understanding of spiritual tourism, highlighting its complexity and diverse expressions across cultural and geographical contexts. Cutler and Carmichael (2010) established a comprehensive framework for analyzing the multifaceted nature of tourist experiences. Their study emphasized that spiritual experiences are closely linked to emotional and intellectual fulfillment, demonstrating how introspection, connection with nature, and cultural immersion can catalyze personal transformation and enhance well-being. Building on this foundation, Sharpley (2016), in his work *Tourism and Spirituality*, critically analyzed the dynamic interplay between tourism, religion, and spirituality. He challenged the oversimplified conflation of religious tourism with spiritual experiences, arguing that this approach overlooks the fluidity of religious practices and the impact of commercialization. Sharpley's analysis underscored the role of place and external influences, advocating for interdisciplinary methodologies to capture the evolving essence of spiritual tourism. Jafari et al. (2018), in their study *Religious Experience of Foreign Tourists in the City of Qom*, examined

the quality of religious experiences among international tourists in Qom, Iran. Through exploratory factor analysis, they identified five key dimensions: religious, psychological, pilgrimage, ethical-worship, and cultural-social interactions. While most dimensions received positive evaluations, the cultural-social aspect was underdeveloped, suggesting a need for better integration of cultural elements to enrich visitor experiences. Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021), in *Understanding Memorable Tourism Experiences*, investigated the relationship between visitor engagement, authenticity, and destination image in heritage tourism contexts in Kashan, Iran. Their mixed-methods study revealed that memorable tourism experiences act as critical mediators, influencing both immediate satisfaction and long-term behavioral intentions. Concurrently, Teoh et al. (2021), in a systematic review, proposed a holistic framework for transformative tourism experiences. Their synthesis identified seven categories—general travel, educational, voluntourism, cultural, nature-based, wellness, and niche tourism—and three core dimensions (experience, experience-facilitator, and experience-consumer), illustrating how their interplay generates diverse outcomes for consumers and facilitators. Hung Lee et al. (2021), in their study *Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage*, explored the connection between authentic experiences, perceived benefits, and support for tourism development. Their findings revealed that authentic experiences significantly shape perceived benefits, which in turn drive support for sustainable tourism. This underscores the transformative potential of religious tourism, demonstrating how genuine spiritual encounters foster positive behavioral intentions. More recently, Movahed et al. (2023) provided insights into the spiritual experiences of foreign female tourists in Iran. Their research highlighted that destination characteristics—particularly harmony with nature—play a pivotal role in shaping these experiences, suggesting strategic opportunities for marketing and planning spiritual tourism for women. Additionally, Shekari (2023), in a systematic review, proposed an integrated framework for religious tourist experiences. The model delineates eight facets: cognitive, affective, physical, relational, restorative, spiritual, transformative, and behavioral. By incorporating spiritual and non-spiritual dimensions—such as perceived authenticity, mental engagement, *communitas*, and identity construction—the framework extends prior theories and calls for future research on cross-cultural comparisons and the role of digital technologies.

Collectively, these studies illustrate the breadth and depth of empirical research on spiritual and religious tourism, spanning foundational frameworks, critical analyses, and context-specific investigations. However, a notable gap persists: to date, no study has specifically examined the dimensions of spiritual and religious tourist experiences in Iran—particularly in Mashhad—using an exploratory approach. This study aims to address this gap.

Methodology

This study employs an exploratory-descriptive qualitative approach to investigate individual interpretations and develop a comprehensive understanding of young tourists' experiences. Given the suitability of qualitative methods for exploring subjective phenomena, the research aligns with qualitative data collection and employs thematic analysis to examine the dimensions of spiritual tourist experiences. Thematic analysis is widely recognized for its systematic capacity to identify patterns in textual data, transforming fragmented information into rich, detailed insights that reveal underlying themes (Bagh Sheikhi et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The research focuses on tourists visiting Mashhad, Iran. As Iran's largest religious city and the burial site of the eighth Imam of Twelver Shiite Muslims, Mashhad serves as a major destination for domestic and international pilgrims. This setting offers an ideal context for exploring the spiritual dimensions of tourism.

A convenience sampling method was used to gather data. Participants were recruited from the researchers' immediate network, specifically individuals with prior visitation to Mashhad. Consistent with the qualitative research paradigm, which prioritizes in-depth understanding through smaller, focused samples (Esmaeili Mahyari et al., 2023; Maxwell & Miller, 2008), 15 individuals were selected for in-depth interviews. Interview questions were designed to align with research objectives, and each session was conducted face-to-face, lasting approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, ensuring ethical compliance. Data saturation was achieved after 15 interviews, and the demographic characteristics of participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

City of residence	Age	Gender	Participant code
Kerman	24	Male	P1
Isfahan	26	Male	P2
Tehran	27	Male	P3
Pakdasht	30	Female	P4
Qom	24	Female	P5
Arak	26	Female	P6
Tehran	25	Male	P7
Quchan	32	Male	P8
Hamedan	24	Male	P9
Sari	24	Male	P10
Hamedan	26	Male	P11
Qom	24	Female	P12
Fereydunshahr	27	Male	P13
Tabriz	28	Male	P14
Qom	35	Female	P15

To analyze the qualitative data, this study employed thematic analysis, a widely recognized method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis offers a structured approach to qualitative research, enabling researchers to systematically examine textual data, categorize emerging themes, and interpret findings meaningfully. By adhering to a rigorous six-stage process, this method ensures comprehensive representation of the data while maintaining transparency and replicability. The analysis followed these structured stages:

The first stage involved thoroughly engaging with the raw data to gain an in-depth understanding. The researchers transcribed all recorded interviews verbatim and repeatedly read through the transcripts to immerse themselves in the data. This process enabled the identification of key ideas, recurring concepts, and initial insights. Additionally, researchers took detailed notes during this stage, highlighting significant observations and possible patterns that could emerge in later stages of analysis (Perera, 2023).

Once familiar with the data, the next step was systematic coding. Coding involves assigning labels (codes) to meaningful data segments that capture relevant aspects of participants' experiences. This process was carried out in a structured manner by manually analyzing the transcripts line by line. The coding process was both data-driven (emerging organically from the data) and theory-driven (aligned with the research objectives).

Each code represented a specific characteristic of the spiritual tourist experience. As the coding progressed, similar codes were grouped together, forming a preliminary coding framework that provided a foundation for further thematic development (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

After completing the initial coding, the focus shifted toward theme development—the process of clustering related codes into broader themes. Themes were identified by analyzing how different codes related to each other and whether they could be grouped into meaningful categories. This phase involved an iterative comparison of coded data to recognize patterns and overarching themes that captured the essence of the spiritual tourist experience (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

At fourth stage, the researchers critically examined the preliminary themes to ensure they accurately represented the data. The reviewing process involved two levels; Internal coherence to Ensuring that all data within a theme were meaningfully related, and External distinctiveness that Making sure themes were clearly distinguishable from one another and did not overlap excessively. Themes that lacked sufficient supporting data or were too broad were either refined, restructured, or merged with other relevant themes. Some themes were broken down into sub-themes to better capture nuanced aspects of the tourist experience (Patton, 1990).

Once the themes were finalized, they were clearly defined and named in a way that reflected their core meaning. The fifth stage ensured that each theme provided a unique contribution to the study's

findings and addressed the research objectives. The definitions were supported by direct quotes from participants to illustrate how each theme emerged from the data (Javadi & Zarea, 2016).

The final stage involved weaving together the themes into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions. The themes were interpreted in relation to existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and practical implications for tourism management. The findings were presented with illustrative excerpts from participant interviews to provide depth and authenticity to the analysis.

By following this rigorous thematic analysis approach, the study ensured credibility, transparency, and depth in exploring the complex dimensions of spiritual tourism.

Finally, to evaluate the validity of this study, primary and secondary themes were first identified through their congruence with existing literature, and input from subject-matter experts was subsequently incorporated. Prolonged researcher engagement in the study setting was also employed to reinforce internal validity (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Moreover, For qualitative rigor, confirmability and dependability were adopted as standard criteria for assessing credibility and reliability (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016; Golafshani, 2003). Finally, to verify confirmability and further substantiate the findings, all data interpretations were independently reviewed by experts in control theory.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews revealed a profound and multifaceted range of spiritual experiences at the Razavi Holy Shrine, categorized into three overarching themes: spiritual well-being, connectedness, and consciousness. These themes encompass 12 subthemes, identified through an iterative coding process, capturing the diverse aspects of pilgrims' spiritual experiences. The main themes and their corresponding subthemes will be elaborated on below.

Spiritual well-being is the first major theme of the spiritual experience, encompassing a range of positive emotions, including happiness, peace and tranquility, and purification. Pilgrims described how the sacred ambiance of the shrine, combined with the collective devotion of fellow visitors, created an environment conducive to emotional and spiritual renewal. One participant vividly expressed this experience:

"I experienced a positive feeling and a special spirituality in the shrine, which I think is something unique and the experience and intensity of which is different for everyone. Just sitting in the shrine creates this feeling in me." (P4)

Another participant also highlights this fact:

"There is so much positive energy and good mood in the shrine that every visitor feels good." (P11)

Happiness, too, was a prominent feature, often linked to the sense of being personally invited by Imam Reza and the intimate act of conversing with the divine. This joy was frequently accompanied by a cathartic release, as one participant explained:

"When I am in the shrine, I feel like I am happy and delighted. Because of my presence in the shrine, being able to communicate my problem with Imam Reza and even watching other pilgrims, they all make me happy." (P9)

"I had a special spiritual feeling and a sense of joy. For example, in the shrine itself, I would feel pain and heartache and cry, which would lighten me and bring me to the peak of feeling that it was my best spiritual state." (P14)

Pilgrims also spoke of purification and a resulting lightness, attributing these to entrusting their burdens to a higher power. One shared:

"When I visit the shrine, pray, and talk with Allah and Imam Reza, I feel like I'm pure and my sins are forgiven." (P3)

Peace and tranquility further defined this theme, with the shrine serving as a haven of calm. One participant reflected:

"We felt a sense of peace. I felt a special sense of spirituality and peace when I saw the shrine. I don't know how to describe my feelings about the shrine." (P6)

or as other participants stated:

"I feel light in these religious places. This lightness is achieved as a result of trust. It is something like dividing the work and entrusting part of the work and its responsibility to the will and power of God, which reduces part of the burden on my shoulders and my worries and stresses and gives me a feeling of lightness." (P8)

"I feel good while talking about my problems in the sanctuary. I may even feel heartbroken and hurt while talking about my problems, but afterwards I feel better and sometimes I feel light..." (P9)

The theme of connectedness emphasizes the relational bonds nurtured during the pilgrimage. This dimension includes connections with God, Imam Reza, and religious practices, as well as feelings of being blessed, supported, and able to seek divine assistance. Many pilgrims shared that praying at the shrine strengthened their closeness to God, allowing them to renew their relationship with Allah. The sacred setting provided an opportunity for deep contemplation and self-reflection, enabling them to review their deeds and seek spiritual guidance. As one pilgrim expressed:

"Well, you know! When I visit shrines and I pray, I have great feelings of being connected with Allah. I can empty my heart and sometimes even cry, which all make me more and more connected." (P12)

The closeness and connection are also with Imams, religious leaders, and religion itself:

"It is a very good feeling to accept Imam Reza as a refuge and to be able to communicate with him, talk to him, and pray, and if it is in our best interest, our prayers will be answered." (P10)

Another participant also emphasized:

"At first, I felt a sense of peace and spiritual satisfaction from being in the shrine. I felt like I was in contact with Imam Reza and he could hear me." (P1)

"Connecting with the Imam gives me a feeling of closeness to God. Going and visiting such people creates a sense of comfort in me, and I am eager for it. They are ahead of me on the path of spirituality, so I ask them to guide me and help me move forward." (P7)

One of the profound spiritual experiences of pilgrims is the ability to open their hearts, ultimately expressing their needs and seeking divine favor. This act of sincere supplication brings a deep sense of relief, fulfillment, and spiritual satisfaction.

"In addition, I felt comfortable, as if I knew Imam Reza as my own and I could easily talk to him and tell him about my wishes." (P1)

"When I am in the shrine, I speak to Allah and share my problems, seeking His support and guidance in finding solutions. This brings me a deep sense of calm and peace." (P15)

Pilgrims also feel blessed by Allah for having the opportunity to visit the shrine. They believe that their pilgrimage will bring divine assistance in their lives, strengthening their faith and providing them with guidance and support.

"I felt close to God by praying in the shrine and felt that God was supporting me through my prayers and supplications." (P1)

As another participant said:

"The feeling of arriving and being invited after waiting for a while for the pilgrimage is a good feeling." (P11)

Building on these emotional and relational dimensions, the theme of consciousness reflects a heightened state of awareness and detachment from worldly concerns. Pilgrims described experiencing a sense of detachment from daily life, timelessness, self-reflection, and heightened religious awareness, all nurtured by the shrine's profound spiritual atmosphere.

A common sentiment among pilgrims was a feeling of liberation from material life, as one participant observed:

"I felt peace and purity in the shrine. I felt spirituality and lightness. This feeling is not a material feeling and has no worldly constraints, and one can become light by getting rid of the constraints of the world." (P2)

Time itself seemed to dissolve in the shrine's embrace, with one pilgrim noting:

"It is very enjoyable for me to just sit and be alone with God and Imam Reza. Sometimes I do not realize the passage of time, actually I did not feel it at all." (P4)

This opportunity gave them time to think about themselves profoundly. The setting also encouraged introspection, as one pilgrim recounted:

"The atmosphere and peace of the shrine allow me to think about myself, my life, the hereafter, and everything related to the past, present, and future, also my relationship with God and all I have done so far." (P7)

"I spent most of my time in a corner of the courtyard, alone, contemplating my desires and needs, and asking Imam Reza for help in achieving my goals. The sense of spirituality of the shrine, as if God were present there, allowed me to contemplate my concerns and deal with them calmly." (P1)

Religious activities further amplified this consciousness, with one participant reflecting:

"Pilgrimage also offers me many opportunities to learn more about my religion and beliefs. It provides me with the chance to read, study, and deepen my understanding of religious matters, especially when I am at the shrine, and also by listening to religious sermons..." (P4)

Another participant also mentioned:

"... and early in the morning I went to the shrine, I saw some people who were holding classes in groups, giving Quranic and religious classes, and classes related to spirituality and related books. Seeing and using them gave me a good feeling and helped me get acquainted, and it made me increase my spirituality during the short time I spent in the shrine." (P5)

Together, these elements point to the shrine as a space that elevates spiritual awareness, freeing pilgrims from temporal and material distractions.

In weaving together spiritual well-being, connectedness, and consciousness, the experiences of visitors to the Razavi Holy Shrine reveal a multifaceted spiritual journey. The emotional uplift of well-being and the relational depth of connectedness lay the groundwork for the introspective clarity of consciousness. Collectively, these themes portray the shrine not merely as a physical site but as a transformative realm where pilgrims encounter renewal, relational intimacy, and heightened awareness, underscoring its enduring significance as a sacred destination. The summary of findings is presented in Table 2.

Discussion

The results of this study illuminate the profound and transformative spiritual experiences of young pilgrims at the Razavi Holy Shrine. These experiences coalesced around three primary themes—spiritual well-being, connectedness, and consciousness (as shown in Figure 1)—demonstrating how the shrine's sacred environment nurtures the emotional, relational, and cognitive dimensions of spiritual growth.

Collectively, these themes indicate that the Razavi Holy Shrine operates not merely as a physical location but as a transformative realm in which pilgrims undergo emotional renewal, strengthen their spiritual bonds, and achieve enhanced self-reflection.

Table 2. Findings of data analysis

The main themes	The sub themes	direct quotes
Spiritual Wellbeing	Positive Emotion and energy	Overall, this trip conveys a positive feeling, right up until the moment we leave Mashhad. (P13)
	Happiness	It is apparent that I experienced a distinct spiritual sensation accompanied by a profound sense of happiness. (P2)
	Purification	When I visit the shrine, pray and talk with Allah and Imam Reza I feel like im pure and my sins are forgiven. (P3)
	Peace and tranquility	In the shrine, a sense of spirituality and peace has prevailed for me. (P5)
Connectedness	Connection with God	I have greate feelings of being connected with Allah ... (P12)
	Expressing Needs and Ask for Favour	I ask Imam to guide me and help me move forward (P9)
	Being Blessed and Assisted	The feeling of arriving and being invited after waiting for a while for the pilgrimage is a good feeling (P11)
	Connected with Religion and Holy Leader	It is a very good feeling to accept Imam Reza as a refuge and to be able to communicate with him, talk to him, and pray, and if it is in our best interest, our prayers will be answered. (P10)
Consciousness	Being Detached from Routine Life	This feeling is not a material feeling and has no worldly constraints, and one can become light by getting rid of the constraints of the world. (P2)
	Timelessness	Sometimes I do not realize the passage of time, actually I did not feel it at all. (P4)
	Self reflection	The atmosphere and peace of the shrine aloow me to hink about my self ... (P7)
	Religious Awareness	It provides me with the chance to read, study, and deepen my understanding of religious matters ... (P4)

Spiritual well-being emerged as the primary theme, illustrating how the shrine's sacred environment fosters positive emotions, emotional relief, and spiritual purification. Young pilgrims consistently reported feeling peace, happiness, lightness, and tranquility—states they attributed to the shrine's sanctity, the collective devotion of fellow visitors, and their personal connection with the divine.

These emotional uplifts align with research on the psychological benefits of pilgrimage and sacred spaces, which often facilitate the alleviation of psychological burdens and enhance well-being. The subtheme of purification further underscores the pilgrimage's transformative power: participants

described experiencing spiritual cleansing through prayer and supplication, echoing studies that link religious rituals and pilgrimage to emotional healing and reduced distress.

Happiness and joy also recurred when pilgrims perceived a personal invitation from Imam Reza or experienced intimate communion with the divine. Such positive emotional states mirror findings that sacred-space encounters evoke joy and peace, promoting overall well-being. Pilgrims characterized these moments as deeply cathartic, frequently marked by the release of long-held emotional pain—consistent with psychological theories of emotional expression and spiritual healing.

The second theme, connectedness, highlights the relational bonds pilgrims formed with God, Imam Reza, and the wider community of believers. This sense of spiritual intimacy was nurtured through collective prayer and supplication. In particular, the connection with Imam Reza was described as a source of divine support and guidance, bolstering pilgrims' faith. These accounts reinforce the role of religious rituals and sacred spaces as facilitators of social and spiritual cohesion. Many participants felt blessed and supported by divine favor, reflecting the idea that pilgrimage cultivates a pervasive sense of divine presence and reassurance.

The third theme, consciousness, reflects pilgrims' heightened mindfulness and introspection within the sacred precinct. Participants often reported detachment from routine concerns and a profound sense of timelessness, which enabled deep self-reflection. These experiences align with theories of mindfulness and self-awareness, suggesting that sacred-space practices promote cognitive shifts toward reflection and detachment from worldly distractions. The reported loss of temporal awareness is also consistent with research on altered states of consciousness during religious experiences.

Moreover, the shrine provided a conducive setting for religious contemplation: pilgrims engaged with sacred texts and teachings, deepening their doctrinal understanding. This self-reflection, combined with opportunities for religious learning, underscores the shrine's role as an environment that advances both spiritual growth and theological knowledge.

By integrating the themes of spiritual well-being, connectedness, and consciousness, this study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the transformative impact of pilgrimage to the Razavi Holy Shrine. Pilgrims experience emotional uplift, spiritual intimacy, and cognitive clarity—dimensions that collectively define a sacred journey. Thus, the shrine functions not only as a physical destination but also as a catalyst for spiritual renewal, relational bonding, and cognitive transformation.

These findings advance the literature on the psychological and spiritual benefits of pilgrimage, particularly within Shia contexts. Building on Norman's (2012) five-component model of spiritual tourism, our research refines these dimensions into three interrelated constructs—spiritual well-being, connectedness, and consciousness—that are empirically validated among young Iranian pilgrims.

Finally, we offer the following evidence-based recommendations for shrine managers and planners to enhance the pilgrim experience, particularly for younger visitors. First, the designation of quiet, contemplative zones within the shrine complex can facilitate emotional healing and spiritual purification. Second, the introduction of structured communal rituals or small-group prayer sessions—designed in accordance with young pilgrims’ expressed preferences—may foster stronger social cohesion. Third, training guides and volunteers to convey the shrine’s historical context and sacred narratives can deepen pilgrims’ relational engagement with the site. Eventually, implementing strategic crowd-flow management protocols will help maintain a serene environment, thereby preserving the cognitive clarity and emotional uplift documented in this study. Together, these measures not only improve the immediate pilgrimage experience but also contribute to sustainable tourism development by addressing the specific needs and aspirations of young pilgrims, who represent a critical segment of the pilgrimage tourism market.

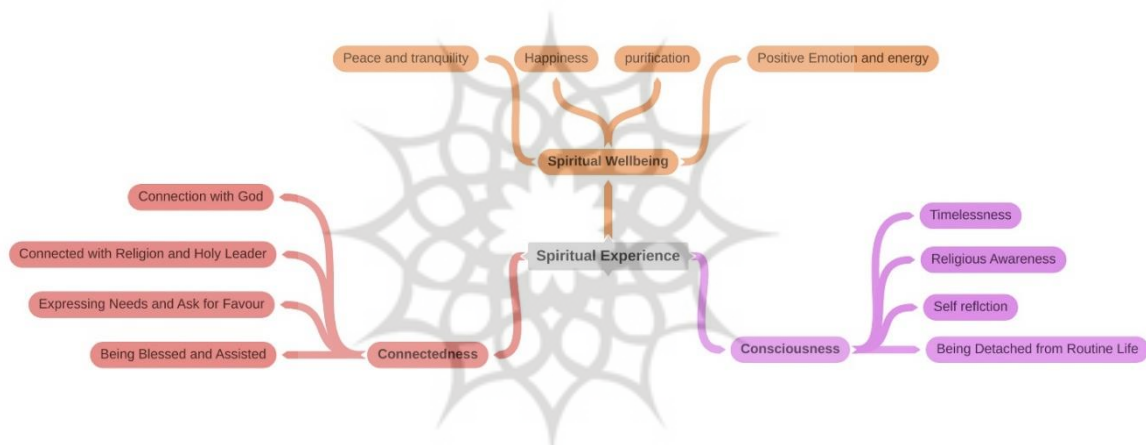


Figure 1. Thematic map derived from findings

Limitations and Suggestions

• Methodological

This study was confined to a single site—the Razavi Shrine—and focused solely on Iranian pilgrims, which restricts broader applicability; future research could explore spiritual experiences across a variety of religious and non-religious settings, including among non-religious tourists. This research captures pilgrims’ experiences at a single point in time—during or immediately after their visit to the shrine—and does not examine how their spiritual state evolves before, during, and after the pilgrimage; conducting longitudinal research that follows pilgrims before their visit, during their pilgrimage, and after they return home would provide deeper insights into the lasting impact of pilgrimage on spiritual well-being. Incorporating quantitative methods such as surveys or questionnaires could provide a more robust understanding of the prevalence and distribution of specific spiritual experiences among pilgrims,

allowing for identification of patterns or correlations between factors such as demographic characteristics and the nature of spiritual experiences. Future studies could investigate how the experiences of pilgrimage at the Razavi Holy Shrine influence pilgrims' lives post-pilgrimage—specifically, how the spiritual transformations reported by pilgrims manifest in their everyday activities, relationships, and coping strategies.

• Contextual

This study identified some factors influencing spiritual experiences—such as the shrine's atmosphere and interactions with fellow pilgrims—but these aspects require more thorough exploration. Environmental factors, including the shrine's physical layout, levels of crowding, and opportunities for solitude, likely play a critical role in shaping pilgrims' spiritual encounters; a detailed analysis of these variables is necessary, as overlooking them could compromise the quality of the spiritual experience and reduce overall pilgrimage satisfaction. Further research could examine how specific rituals performed at pilgrimage sites—such as prayers, recitations, or communal gatherings—contribute to the overall spiritual experience, deepening our knowledge of sacred space interactions.

• Demographic and Cultural

The spiritual experiences described by participants are deeply rooted in Shia beliefs and traditions and may not necessarily apply to pilgrims of other religious backgrounds or those visiting non-Islamic sacred sites; future research could conduct comparative studies across different religious traditions (e.g., Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist pilgrimage sites) to determine whether the themes of spiritual well-being, connectedness, and consciousness are universal or context-dependent. Furthermore, examining the spiritual experiences of international pilgrims would offer a more diverse perspective, deepening our understanding of how cultural differences shape spiritual encounters. Exploring how different demographic groups (e.g., age, gender, education level) experience pilgrimage differently could reveal patterns in spiritual engagement, and investigating how socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds influence pilgrims' interpretations of their experiences would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religious tourism.

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