Understanding tourists in religious destinations: A social distance perspective

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Relationships between people of different faiths visiting the sacred sites of others are complex.
- Social distance is useful to explain why people of different faiths visit the sacred sites of others.
- Four motivational domains of tourists visiting a Buddhist site are identified.
- Tourist-pilgrim is explained adding a cultural/societal dimension on how the terms are defined.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social distance in the relationships between people of different faiths visiting the sacred sites of others, with Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of Buddha, as a case study. The findings of this study suggest that Hindus and Christians visited Lumbini because they considered Buddhists more closely aligned to their own faith than other groups were. Further, this paper examines how people view themselves as tourists, pilgrims, tourists and pilgrims, or none of these labels. The self-identified visitor type varies in terms of motivations. In common with extant religious tourism literature, the study shows that those who identify themselves as pilgrims have higher religious motivations, and those who identify themselves as tourists have higher recreational or cultural motivations. In this study, social distance determined the relational structures, similarities and dissimilarities between travelers of different faiths consuming the same tourism spaces.

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1. Introduction

For millennia people have traveled to sacred sites. Original spirit-seekers visited hallowed places based on a desire to become closer to divinity, seek forgiveness for wrongdoing, worship ancestors and nature gods, or petition deity for blessings. Religiously-motived travel evolved through time to become more formalized and standardized (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Pilgrimage has become so widespread that it is one of the most pervasive forms of human mobility in the world today, and contemporary scholars of religious tourism acknowledge that pilgrim events (e.g. the Hajj and the Kumbha Mela) are the largest gatherings of tourists in the world (Ahmed, 1992; Nyaupane & Budruk, 2009; Shinde, 2008).

Religious places have become some of the most visited and appreciated destinations in the world, not only for adherents but for general tourists as well (Griffiths, 2011). The Ganges River, St Peter's Basilica, the Salt Lake Temple, Borobudur and Prambanan, Angkor Wat, Old Jerusalem, the Taj Mahal and the Baha'i Gardens are world-class examples of attractions for religious and secular tourists (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Olsen, 2009; Shinde, 2008). However, it should be noted that not all sacred sites that appeal to religious adherents and pilgrims necessarily entice general cultural tourists. For every prominent sacred site on the tourist trail, there are thousands more that attract relatively little tourist attention (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). In some cases, non-adherents are not even permitted to visit. Venerated places that attract pilgrims and other tourists are usually world-renowned or globally-branded (e.g. UNESCO), and associated with famous people, events, romantic histories, or exemplary architecture (Ron & Feldman, 2009; Shackley, 2001; Stausberg, 2011).

It is acknowledged in the research literature, however, that people's experiences at sacred places will most likely be different

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based on their religious affiliation or lack thereof (Griffiths, 2011; Shackley, 2001). For faith tourists, such a visit might evoke strong feelings of religious fervor, while for non-religious tourists, visits to the sacred sites of others have a tendency to arouse a sense of wonderment and cultural inspiration, or satisfy some curiosity. Similarly, there is a long-time discourse in the pilgrimage and tourism literature that attempts to clarify differences between pilgrims and tourists, suggesting that they are not one in the same, for their experiences are different and their motives dissimilar (Cohen, 1992a; Turner, 1973). In practical terms it is important to understand different groups' motives and their relationships on site to help avoid intergroup dissonance and provide the best experiences for all visitors. There are several examples of sacred sites shared between different religions, in particular in Israel and in India, which have given rise to conflicts over shared sacred space (Nyaupane & Budruk, 2009; Weise, 2013).

Although there is a large literature on pilgrimage tourism and the potential relationships between pilgrims and other tourists, it is mostly conceptual; there is a lack of empirical work to help provide an understanding of the relationships, similarities and differences. As well, little is known about the relationships between people of different faiths visiting the sacred sites of others. Interpretive mechanisms or conceptual tools for understanding these complex relationships are needed. Social distance theory is one such framework that is useful in guiding research on this topic and providing interpretive strength, yet it has not been utilized in this religious tourism context.

This paper examines all of these issues by examining the experiences of religious tourists and non-religious tourists at the sacred site of Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of Buddha. Buddhist sites are becoming ever more popular tourist attractions (Wong, McIntosh, & Ryan, 2013). Besides a general growing interest in culture and heritage, another reason western tourists are visiting Buddhist holy places in droves might be the growth in westerners' sympathy toward the religion. This change can be viewed from religious and geopolitical perspectives. First, Buddhism allows a secular path to be an appropriate journey to nirvana, the ultimate goal of escaping the mortal cycle of suffering (Hall, 2006). Since Buddha was seen as a wise and enlightened leader, the faith that followed him is considered a way of life and a middle path between pure devotion and everyday life (Humphreys, 1993). Likewise, unlike some faith traditions, Buddhism is more tolerant of different beliefs and rituals, which fact attracts many people, including New Age devotees, who feel disillusioned by formally-organized and dogmatic western religions (Hall, 2006).

Second, the western image of the Himalayas and Tibet, which are often portrayed in the media as the land of Buddhists, has become a romanticized landscape and utopian Shangri-La in the minds of would-be tourists (Klieger, 1992; Kolås, 2004). Like other non-violent freedom fighters, the Dalai Lama is viewed as a peace maker and is admired by millions around the world (Possamai, 2009). His personal connections to the Buddhist Himalayas may also draw people to see the lands revered by him and his followers. Likewise, the west is generally sympathetic to Tibet in its struggle with Chinese occupation since 1959, resulting in some degree of 'solidarity tourism' where sympathizers become political allies for the cause (Schwartz, 1991). While many people have visited Tibet in recent years, they also travel to other mountainous areas in Nepal and India, where the Buddhist leader now resides in exile.

The Buddhist following has grown fervently in North America, Australia and Western Europe, as many Buddhist centers were established over the past few decades (Baumann, 2001). For most native (Asian) Buddhists, the goal of their faith is to reach Nirvana. This is the ultimate goal for a much smaller proportion of western

converts, however, who adhere primarily to the religion for the mental and physical benefits that accrue through its healthy lifestyles and meditation (Baumann, 2001). The postmodern adaptation of western Buddhism to include more women in rituals and leadership positions, the dissolving of the traditional authoritarian configuration, the move from a monastic to a layperson orientation, and the integration of Buddhist practices and the realities of daily life have also been cited as reasons for its increasing popularity (Possamai, 2009).

Using Lumbini as an empirical example, this study investigates the concept of social distance between religious adherents and non-adherents who visit sacred sites to understand their closeness or distance to tourists of other faiths. Second, it explores and identifies the motivational domains of tourists of different religious backgrounds visiting a Buddhist site. Finally, the paper examines how the visitors view themselves in relation to the site being visited, as pilgrims, tourists, pilgrim-tourists, or neither pilgrims nor tourists. This investigation has salient theoretical implications for understanding intercultural behaviors and motives, as well as important management outcomes for religious heritage site managers.

The sections that follow provide the theoretical underpinnings of this study. First, the literature review examines the concept of religious tourism/pilgrimage and other forms of tourism at religious sites to frame the study context and couch it within current thinking about religious tourism, religious motives for travel, and travelers' identity as tourists. Secondly, the notion of social distance is reviewed as a structural and interpretive mechanism to frame the current study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Religious tourism and tourism at religious sites

Religion is a fundamental element of culture and is linked with various elements of people's lives (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003). For instance, religion influences dress, food and drink, social and political views, social attitudes, and travel motivations and behaviors (Levin, 1979; Mattila, Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, & Sasidharan, 2001). Rinschede (1992) explained that travel behavior, including travel patterns, transportation choices, seasonal demand, and socialization processes are all affected by beliefs, especially in the context of religious tourism. Religious site visitors tend to travel with family members or organized groups, and their trip is highly seasonal, influenced not only by climate and weather, but also by the occurrence of holidays, ceremonies, and work schedules.

At some religious sites there are socio-demographic differences in demand for travel products. For instance, most pilgrims to Lourdes, France, are women, owing to the special feminine sentiments associated with Marian shrines, while most pilgrims in Mecca are men because of gendered travel restrictions and social mores associated with Islam (Rinschede, 1992). Some attractions are popular among younger pilgrims, such as Catholic conventions (McIntosh & Zahra, 2013), or among older people such as pilgrimage trips in South Asia (Nyaupane & Budruk, 2009). In other instances, devotees settle temporarily or permanently in places they visit as pilgrims or religious tourists, such as at Lumbini, where more Buddhists are moving into a region that has for centuries been populated predominantly by Hindus and Muslims (Nyaupane, 2009).

In the academic discourse of spiritually-motived human mobility, observers have in the past attempted to differentiate between pilgrims and tourists by suggesting relevant differences between these two seemingly dichotomous groups (Collins-