

The personas and motivation of religious tourists and their impact on intentions to visit religious sites in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide comprehensive, theoretical and practical knowledge that will assist decision-makers in making informed decisions when promoting several religious sites in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Specifically, this study examines the popularity of several religious sites, the personas of prospective visitors and their intentions to visit.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses several methodological approaches to fulfil its main objective, namely, Google Trends analysis, K-means cluster analysis and linear regression analysis.

Findings – The results reveal that several religious sites in the KSA are popular and have potential for further consideration by various stakeholders. In addition, four personas were identified which can aid decision-makers and marketing practitioners in designing suitable plans for prospective visitors based on the participants' motivation and demographics. Furthermore, a significant association was observed among three motivational variables (self-esteem, relationship and physiological needs) and the participants' intentions to visit.

Originality/value – This study makes an original contribution to the literature, as it examines several religious sites in Saudi Arabia in addition to the sites that are part of the practices of Hajj and Umrah. Furthermore, this study provides comprehensive knowledge in this area to assist both future researchers and practitioners.

Keywords Islamic tourism, Religious tourism, Halal tourism, Saudi Arabia, Persona, Motivation, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Google Trends, Facebook Ads

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been economically reliant on the petrochemical sector for several decades (Akhtar & Asif, 2017). This sector is one of the most developed industries in the kingdom and in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and is valued at approximately US\$43.8bn [Gulf Petrochemicals and chemicals Association (GPCA), 2016]. In relation to other GCC countries, 67% of the production capacity in the petrochemical sector is attributable to KSA, making it the highest-performing country in the council [Gulf Petrochemicals and chemicals Association (GPCA), 2016]. Despite the sector's significance to KSA's economy, the country has been promoting the growth of other sectors to diversify its economy and create employment opportunities for its citizens (Nurunnabi, 2017). Furthermore, after the launch of KSA's 2030 vision in 2016, it has prioritised several sectors in its economy and dedicated vision programmes specially designed to transform the vision into reality (Vision 2030, 2016). One of the key programmes in KSA's vision is focused on religious tourism.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, KSA welcomed millions of visitors each year for the purpose of religious tourism (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). Primarily, religious visitors came

Received 17 April 2022
Revised 25 June 2022
3 August 2022
Accepted 5 September 2022

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to the country to perform Hajj and Umrah. However, after the pandemic, the number of religious visitors significantly decreased as the Saudi Government and other countries applied restrictive measures to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Muneeza & Mustapha, 2021). This has affected KSA's economy, resulting in a loss of US\$6bn in income (Alam, 2021). Nevertheless, the country's economy is recovering (Azhar, 2021), and the need for alternative sources of income in the sector has never been more critical.

Notably, KSA's attempt to keep the tourism sector afloat has been commended by the UN Travel Chief, who notes that it has increased its efforts to manage the pandemic and resort to domestic tourism while maintaining precautionary measures to keep its citizens and residents safe (Arab News, 2021). Hence, it is of utmost importance that KSA considers alternative destinations and target markets relevant to the tourism sector, as relying on Hajj and Umrah is not ideal in the face of external and uncontrollable threats. Furthermore, Hajj and Umrah are performed during a limited period each year; hence, complementary destinations for religious tourists are necessary to overcome tourism seasonality (Medina, Martín, Martínez, & Azevedo, 2022).

Consequently, this research's main aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of the potential of numerous religious sites in the country, identify the personas of prospective visitors and examine their intentions to visit. The study begins by examining the limited literature relevant to religious tourism in KSA, as this directs the objective and methodology of Study 1. The results of Study 1 guide the approach used in the second and third studies. Each of the aforementioned studies has a distinct yet related objective and methodology. Finally, the conclusion is provided, followed by theoretical and practical implications, as well as a discussion of the research limitations and future research suggestions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Religious tourism in KSA

Kim, Kim, & King, (2020) defined religious tourism as a "type of tourism in which visitors are motivated partially or exclusively by religious premises". According to existing research, visitors have been making religious journeys since prehistoric times. Such records are documented in the old testament and other preserved testaments of ancient scholars and writers (Jackowski, 2000). Visitors from various religious backgrounds are still making such journeys in many countries, such as China (Zhang et al., 2007), Turkey (Egresi, Bayram, Kara, & Kesik, 2012), India (Shinde, 2010) and many more.

With respect to the religion of Islam, existing research focuses on Hajj (Luz, 2020). Hajj is an Arabic terminology which linguistically means to journey to a holy place to carry out specific rituals and activities (Bakri, 1995). In the Islamic scriptures, it means that specific actions must be performed at a specific time and place and in a specific manner (Bakri, 1995). All Muslims must perform Hajj and Umrah at least once in their lifetime (Bakri, 1995). These rites take place in the holy city of Mecca as well as other surrounding sites (Rinschede, 1992). The statistical reports issued by the Saudi Government provide a thorough and accurate account of the number and nationalities of national and international visitors as well as their gender, means of transportation and dates of arrival and departure (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). These reports are crucial to various stakeholders, such as government officials, researchers, scholars and managers; thus, the government takes extreme measures to ensure the transparency, accuracy and versatility of the gathered data (General Authority for Statistics, 2019).

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, KSA had welcomed millions of pilgrims (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). Table 1 illustrates that as of 2019, approximately 2,371,675 pilgrims had journeyed to perform Hajj and Umrah. However, in conjunction with the Saudi Government, countries have scaled down or suspended their citizens from performing Hajj and Umrah during the pandemic; approximately 10,000 pilgrims performed the ritual in

Table 1 Number of pilgrims over the years

<i>No. of pilgrims</i>	<i>Year (Hijri/Gregorian)</i>
2,789,399	1431/2010
2,927,717	1432/2011
3,161,573	1433/2012
1,980,249	1434/2013
2,085,238	1435/2014
1,952,817	1436/2015
1,862,909	1437/2016
2,352,122	1438/2017
2,371,675	1439/2018
2,489,406	1440/2019

2020, much lower than previous years (Muneeza & Mustapha, 2021). This situation has resulted in devastating consequences for individuals, governments and other stakeholders worldwide (Muneeza & Mustapha, 2021). With respect to KSA, the pandemic has resulted in a substantial economic effect as oil prices and trade and business activities have taken a major hit, which has affected the religious tourism sector. The sector accounts for 7% of KSA's GDP, resulting in a loss of approximately US\$6bn of income to the country (Alam, 2021).

In addition to the holy city of Mecca, Muslim visitors travel to the holy city of Medina. The city is significant as it contains the holy mosque, burial sites, battle sites and other important locations (Rinschede, 1992; Amer, Karban, Majid, Majrashi, & Saleh, 2021). When examining official reports issued by the Saudi Government, the government mainly focuses on statistics related to Hajj and Umrah. However, there is a lack of information with respect to other religious sites in KSA. In addition, research indicates that the country uses religious tourism to promote other sectors of tourism. For instance, the Ministry of Tourism launched a programme to promote other sites in KSA; the programme targeted visitors who arrived in the country to perform Umrah (Ministry of Tourism, 2017).

There are other religious sites that are significant to Muslim visitors such as Quba Mosque ("Masjid Quba") in Medina, which was the first mosque built in Islam; Uhud Mountain, located in Medina, which is the site of one the most important battles in Islamic history; Mosque of the Two Qiblas "Masjid Al Qiblatayn", which is a mosque located in Medina where Prophet Muhammad was commanded to change the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca; Mountain of the Light "Jabal Al Nour", which is a mountain near the city of Mecca where Prophet Muhammad received the first revelation from God; and Ghar Thowr, which is located near the city of Mecca and is where the Prophet and his companion hid from their enemies while fleeing the city. Nevertheless, extant research does not reflect the prospective demand of these sites nor their importance to religious tourism in KSA. Limited research has discussed some of these sites, specifically battle sites, emphasising their importance in attracting tourists despite the controversial association with dark tourism) Akbulut & Ekin, 2018; Amer et al., 2021).

Therefore, there is a need to examine the prospect of the aforementioned sites, in Mecca and Medina, within the context of religious tourism in KSA, as the country is actively developing its tourism sector (Oktadiana, 2020; Alam, 2021). However, the lack of research examining these sites is a challenge to various stakeholders. For instance, government officials, strategists and tourism agencies require a clear understanding of the potential and the characteristics of the prospective target markets that are interested in visiting these significant religious sites. Furthermore, what motivates the target market to establish behavioural intentions to visit? Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to examine those factors crucial to developing adequate strategic plans to facilitate the promotion of religious

tourism in those sites. In addition, these religious sites can compensate for the off-seasons of Hajj and Umrah; thus, leveraging those sites to enhance the overall performance of the tourism sector in the KSA is important (Elgammal, Alhothali, & Sorrentino, 2022).

Furthermore, fulfilling the aforementioned research gaps in the context of religious tourism in KSA would also contribute to the global context of religious tourism. Given its socio-political and economic significance, there is a need to expand the scope of research in the area of religious tourism. Extant research specified that only 1.1% of research in tourism examines religious tourism (Kim, Boo, & Kim, 2013; Rashid, 2018). In addition, the majority of existing research is focused on documenting the changes in religious tourism as opposed to using the findings to define and predict future behaviours of religious tourists (Rashid, 2018). This hinders the development of relevant policies and thus delays the progress of the sector in any nation.

Therefore, to fulfil the main aim of this research, which is to provide a comprehensive examination of the potential of several religious sites in KSA, pinpoint the personas of prospective visitors and inspect their intentions to visit, this research is going to use various tools and theoretical concepts. First, Study 1 uses Google Trends to weigh up the popularity of the previously mentioned religious sites. Second, Study 2 examines present research to determine the demographic and behavioural variables and travel motivation (Rahman, Zailani, & Musa, 2017) of religious tourists using quantitative research methods. Third, Study 3 evaluates various motivational theories, in the context of religious tourism, to determine the optimal theory that can facilitate the attainment of the research's aim and support the research hypotheses, such as extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b), religious and secular motivation (Rybina, 2018), push and pull motivation (Battour, Ismail, Battor, & Awais, 2017) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Oktadiana, Pearce, Pusiran, & Agarwal, 2017; Rahman et al., 2017). Then, the research hypotheses are tested using quantitative research methods, and the results are presented, followed by the concluding remarks.

3. Study 1

The first study aims to evaluate the popularity of several religious sites in KSA. To achieve the objective of this study, Google Trends was used to determine the search frequency of the keywords associated with these religious sites. The results of the trend analysis are discussed below, and further recommendations are given.

3.1 Google trend analysis

Due to the lack of research examining the aforementioned religious sites, Google Trends was used to identify the popularity of the concerned sites as well as the regions that contribute most to that popularity. Notably, popularity reflects the search frequency of the keyword relative to the specified location in Google's search engine. This step assisted in making accurate methodology-related decisions. Extant research in the context of tourism has used Google Trends for similar purposes, specifically to make well-informed forecasts (Pramana, Paramartha, Ermawan, Deli, & Srimulyani, 2021; Vannavanit, 2021; Wickramasinghe & Ratnasiri, 2021). Thus, Google Trends was used to examine the popularity of several keywords associated with several religious sites in KSA. The parameters of the keyword search included the past 12 months – November 2021 – as a timeframe and used the official terminology used by Google's algorithm.

3.2 Results

With respect to the first site, the keyword "Hajj" was used. The trend analysis illustrates that "Hajj" as a search term was extremely popular during the Hajj season, which coincides with

the months of June and July. However, during off-season, the popularity of the query diminished to below average. The countries ranked above average for this keyword were Pakistan, Lebanon and the Maldives (Table 2).

In terms of the keyword “Umrah”, the trend analysis indicates that the term is popular throughout the year. This may be due to the fact that Umrah as a practice can take place at any time. The regions which scored above average in this query were Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Brunei, the KSA, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. With respect to “Masjid Quba”, the results of the trend analysis illustrate that this query is fairly popular throughout the year, mainly in Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia and the KSA. The query “Uhud Mountain” appears to also have a fluctuating popularity during the course of the year, specifically in Pakistan (Table 2).

When the query “Masjid Al Qiblatayn” was searched for, the trend analysis showed that this keyword is relatively popular, mainly in KSA. Regarding “Jabal Al Nour”, the query is popular throughout the year in regions such as KSA, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan. The last query used was “Ghar Thowr”. The results indicate that the query is popular, and several regions scored above average for it, such as Kuwait, Jordan, KSA, Oman, Algeria and Palestine (Table 2).

3.3 Discussion

Overall, the trend analysis confirms the popularity of these religious sites in several countries where the majority of the population is Muslim. Pakistan, Indonesia, KSA, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates appear to be the most interested in these terms. Notably, the most popular keywords were Umrah, Masjid Quba and Jabal Al Nour. Accordingly, tremendous efforts have been employed by the Saudi Government and ministries in facilitating Hajj and Umrah for Muslims worldwide. The results of the trend analysis

Table 2 Popularity of the keywords by region

No.	Keyword	Region	Popularity
1	Hajj	Pakistan	100
		Lebanon	84
		Maldives	73
2	Umrah	Indonesia	100
		Malaysia	99
		Pakistan	98
		Brunei	92
		KSA	83
		United Arab Emirates	75
		Qatar	72
3	Masjid Quba	Pakistan	100
		Malaysia	72
		Indonesia	68
		KSA	64
4	Uhud Mountain	Pakistan	100
5	Masjid Al Qiblatayn	KSA	100
6	Jabal Al Nour	KSA	100
		United Arab Emirates	61
		Pakistan	55
		Kuwait	100
		Jordan	79
7	Ghar Thowr	KSA	66
		Oman	58
		Algeria	55
		Palestine	50

emphasise the potential of other religious sites in addition to the ones which are part of Hajj and Umrah (Table 2) which can be incorporated into the itinerary of pilgrims and visitors. Furthermore, as KSA was the country that exhibited a high interest in the majority of the religious sites, it is recommended to focus on domestic tourism for these sites to allow for development and maturity prior to international tourism. Nevertheless, the trend analysis does not shed light on the characteristics of the prospective target market.

4. Study 2

The findings of the trend analysis support the potential of the aforementioned religious sites to boost religious tourism in KSA. Therefore, the second study aims to identify the persona of the prospective consumers who would be interested in visiting those sites, in particular, the sites that are not considered mandatory by the practices of Hajj and Umrah, namely, Masjid Quba, Uhud Mountain, Masjid Al Qiblatayn, Jabal Al Nour and Ghar Thowr. To do so, a recount of persona creation in the context of religious tourism is provided, followed by the methodology used in the study. The results are presented and discussed to pave the way for Study 3.

4.1 *Persona of religious tourists*

A persona represents a segment of consumers who are presented as an imaginary individual (An, Kwak, Jung, Salminen, & Jansen, 2018) who has shared characteristics and needs (Pruitt & Adlin, 2006). The extant literature emphasises the importance of persona creation in inbound marketing as it is more efficient and cost effective (Lehnert, Goupil, & Brand, 2021; Oktadiana, 2020). Specifically, persona creation can simplify certain data processes and assist decision-makers in identifying consumers' specific needs, goals, challenges, values, how they find information, motivation and more (Onel et al., 2018; Lehnert et al., 2021). Thus, it can enable decision-makers to identify patterns and trends that are present in the data and personify them to represent a segment of consumers (Onel et al., 2018).

Extant research proposes that creating a persona for consumers, within the context of special interest tourism, depends on their demographic and behavioural segmentation as well as travel motivation (Yousaf, Amin, & Santos, 2018; Kang, 2020; Oktadiana, 2020). After examining several papers that evaluated the demographic variables of participants travelling to KSA for religious purposes, gender, nationality, age, education and income were identified (Almuhzzi & Alsawafi, 2017; Rybina, 2018; Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b). Furthermore, the behavioural segmentation variable that is commonly examined is the frequency of visit (Rybina, 2018; Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b).

Based on the limited research available, approximately more than 55% of international religious tourists visiting KSA are male whereas 42.65% are female. With respect to age groups, the most prominent age groups are 30–39 and 40–49. Regarding employment, the majority of religious tourists visiting KSA have a bachelor's degree with a monthly income of US\$500–1,000 and US\$1,000–3,000, respectively. Regarding their past visits to the country, a significant number of visitors travelled to KSA at least once to perform Hajj or Umrah (Almuhzzi & Alsawafi, 2017; Rybina, 2018; Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b).

4.2 *Methodology and data collection*

Due to the lack of an existing database to evaluate the characteristics and motivation for the aforementioned religious sites (Kang, 2020), a questionnaire was distributed to gather the required data. As per the insights of Study 1, the sample consisted of citizens and residents of KSA. The questionnaire was distributed online using Facebook Advertising Manager (Facebook Ads), which guaranteed that the questionnaire was viewed by individuals living

in the country. This tool was used as other popular tools are not available in the region (e.g. Amazon Turk). Furthermore, the tool ensures that audience characteristics are not predetermined, as the only boundary that was set is the location.

Based on existing studies, the questionnaire included questions relevant to the demographic characteristics of religious travellers visiting KSA, including gender, age, education and income (Almuhzzi & Alsawafi, 2017; Rybina, 2018; Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b). Frequency of visit is an important variable to include; however, due to the fact that the participants reside in the country, this variable was not included in the questionnaire. In addition, to identify the motivation to visit the religious sites in KSA, the study adopted the motivational variables that had a significant influence on Muslim visitors' intentions to visit, namely, self-esteem needs (SEN), relationship needs (RN) and physiological needs (PN) (Rahman et al., 2017). The respective items of those variables were modified to reflect the religious sites in KSA (Table 3). Screening questions, such as "please specify your religion", were also incorporated to ensure the representativeness of the sample.

Table 3 Variables and items

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Source</i>
Gender	What is your gender?	Wu and Mursid (2019a, 2019b) Almuhzzi and Alsawafi (2017) Rybina (2018)
Age	What is your age?	
Education	What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?	
Income	Information about income is very important to understand. Would you please give your best guess? Please indicate the answer that includes your entire household income in (previous year)	
Self-esteem needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the possibility of being active upon travel ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for their significant location ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the economic benefit for Islamic societies ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the sufficient shariah-compliant hotels ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values 	Rahman et al. (2017)
Relationship needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia to enhance my relationship with family ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia to enhance my relationship with friends ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the ease of access to communication facilities ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia to meet friendly people 	Rahman et al. (2017)
Physiological needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the availability of Islamic healthcare service practices ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for relaxation ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the availability of halal eating and drinking ■ I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for their historic and heritage wealth 	Rahman et al. (2017)
Intentions to visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I am likely to visit these sites in Saudi Arabia ■ Given the opportunity, I would consider travelling to these sites in the future ■ It is likely that I will actually travel to these sites in the near future ■ Given the opportunity, I intend to travel to these sites in Saudi Arabia 	Kim and Park (2013)

4.3 Results

The questionnaire was sent to individuals who reside in KSA using Facebook Ads. Based on the Ads Manager analytics, the survey had a reach of 34,264 and obtained 451 link clicks. Of those 451 clicks, 203 individuals participated in the study, and only 193 were used for analysis due to incompleteness. All the questionnaires were filled by Muslims, of whom 77.7% were Saudi, whereas 22.3% were non-Saudi. With respect to the demographic statistics of interest to this study, most of the sample were female 71%, whereas 29% were male. In addition, approximately 30% of the sample were between 35 and 44 years old, and 48.7% of the individuals had a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, most of the participants (46.6%) earned less than SAR 10,000 (Table 4).

Regarding the motivation to visit the religious sites in KSA, SEN have the highest mean of 3.99; specifically, the item with the highest mean is "I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values". Furthermore, RN and PN have a mean of 3.62 and 3.70, respectively. This indicates that the opportunity to spend time with family and to visit those religious sites for their historic and heritage wealth are significant motivations for the participants.

To provide a persona that reflects the characteristics and motivation of potential visitors to these religious sites, K-means cluster analysis was used. The analysis resulted in identifying two clusters, whereby the majority of the participants are represented in cluster 2 (Table 5). Each motivational variable is significant for discriminating the resulted clusters (Table 6). After examining the results of the final cluster centres and identifying the individuals that

Table 4 Characteristics of the sample

No.	Variable	#/193	%/100
1	<i>Religion</i>		
	Muslims	193	100
	Non-Muslims	0	0
2	<i>Gender</i>		
	Male	56	29
	Female	137	71
3	<i>Age groups</i>		
	Under 18	9	4.7
	18–24	21	10.9
	25–34	28	14.5
	35–44	58	30.1
	45–54	30	15.5
	55–64	35	18.1
	65+	12	6.8
4	<i>Education</i>		
	Less than a high school diploma	21	10.9
	High school diploma or equivalent (e.g. GED)	39	20.2
	Bachelor's degree	94	48.7
	Post-graduate degree (e.g. Masters or Doctorate)	37	19.2
	Professional degree (e.g. MD, JD)	2	1
5	<i>Income</i>		
	Less than SAR 10,000	90	46.6
	SAR 10,000–19,999	49	25.4
	SAR 20,000–29,999	34	17.6
	SAR 30,000–39,999	8	4.1
	SAR 40,000–49,999	6	3.1
	SAR 50,000–59,999	2	1
	SAR 60,000 or more	4	2.1
6	<i>Nationality</i>		
	Saudi	150	77.7
	Non-Saudi	43	22.3

Table 5 Final cluster centres

Variable	Cluster	
1	2	
SEN	3.42	4.29
RN	2.50	4.18
PN	2.86	4.12
# of participants	64	129

Table 6 The significance of each motivational variable

Variable	ANOVA					
	Cluster Mean square	df	Error Mean square	df	F	Sig.
SEN	32.583	1	0.375	191	86.800	0.000
RN	121.047	1	0.377	191	320.691	0.000
PN	67.160	1	0.378	191	177.860	0.000

represent the clusters the most, four personas were identified. These personas of religious visitors are as follows:

1. Cluster 1

- Saudi, female, age 25–34, with a post-graduate degree who earns approximately SAR 40,000–50,000 who is mainly motivated by enhancing her Islamic knowledge and culture and sharing that knowledge with others.
- Saudi, male, age 65+ with a post-graduate degree who earns SAR 20,000–29,999 who is mainly motivated by enhancing his Islamic knowledge and culture and sharing that knowledge with others.

2. Cluster 2

- Saudi, female 65+ with a bachelor's degree, who earns less than SAR 10,000, who visits religious sites to satisfy her SEN, RN and PN.
- Non-Saudi male 18–24 with a bachelor's degree who earns SAR 10,000–19,000, who visits religious sites to satisfy his SEN, RN and PN.

4.4 Discussion

The descriptive data of the participants' characteristics is comparable to existing research, which indicates that Muslims in the age group of 35–44 and older are the most interested in religious tourism (Table 4). Likewise, most of the participants have a university education and an income of SAR 10,000 or less (Almuhri & Alsawafi, 2017; Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b). Notably, women were more inclined to fill out the survey compared to men, which is comparable to extant research (Almuhri & Alsawafi, 2017). With respect to their motivation, all of the motivational variables were significant to discriminate the final clusters that resulted from the analysis (Table 6).

By examining the distance from the cluster centres, two personas were identified in each cluster. Cluster 1's personas are highly educated, with an income above the average income of Saudi citizens (SAR 11,984) (General Authority for Statistics, 2018). What distinguishes the first cluster is that, despite the importance of all the motivational variables to the cluster overall, individuals close to the centre of the cluster are motivated the most by

SEN, specifically by Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values. This can be supported by recent research, which emphasises the significance of education as a motivation in the context of religious tourism (Ramírez & Portillo, 2020).

The majority of the participants were placed in cluster 2 (Table 5). Based on analysing the individuals closer to the centre of the cluster, two personas were identified (personas of religious visitors). The personas of this cluster have an average income, and the majority of the factors in the motivational variables are significant to them. This supports the extant literature wherein SEN, RN and PN are significant to Muslim tourists (Rahman et al., 2017). Notably, both cluster 1 and 2 have individuals who are 65+, who have earned at least a bachelor's degree and who share SEN as a motivation to visit the religious sites in KSA. This group, due to their age, motivation and financial capabilities, might require decision-makers to tailor their market offerings to fit with their needs and, most importantly, identify the friction points that might hinder their intentions to visit these sites.

Considering the above, it is of utmost importance to evaluate if the aforementioned motivational factors significantly influence the participants' intentions to visit the specified religious sites in KSA.

5. Study 3

Study 1 revealed that the specified religious sites (Table 2) are popular among various countries, specifically, KSA. Therefore, Study 2 evaluated the personas of potential tourists to assist decision-makers in customising their market offerings based on these promising personas. Thus, to confirm the feasibility of these clusters and legitimise the association between their motivation and their intentions to visit these religious sites, Study 3 evaluated that relationship by using linear regression analysis.

5.1 Religious tourists' motivation and intentions to visit

Extant research confirms the association between religious motivation and intentions to visit (Antón, Camarero, & Laguna-García, 2017; Khan, Chelliah, & Ahmed, 2017; Hassani & Moghavvemi, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2020; Kala, 2021). In the context of religious tourism, recent studies have used various motivation theories to identify what motivates Muslim tourists to travel. For instance, extant studies have specified extrinsic motivation such as expected organisational reward and intrinsic motivation such as the enjoyment in the helping others as significant motivations for religious travellers going to KSA (Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b). Furthermore, religious and secular motivation (Rybina, 2018) and push and pull motivation (Battour et al., 2017) were also identified as significant motivations for religious travellers to visit KSA.

Furthermore, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory was used to determine what motivates Muslim travellers (Oktadiana et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2017). The theory has a broad scope and has been used extensively in many contexts. In the context of tourism, it is considered the most used theory as it explains how human behaviour is the result of several needs which manifest in a hierarchal order, and it provides an explanation of why humans' needs are a fundamental aspect in any context (Yousaf et al., 2018). The theory classifies human needs into five distinct categories. First, "physiological needs" reflect humans' basic needs (e.g. food, shelter, water) (Maslow, 1943). These needs represent the basic needs of the visitors to a tourist destination, such as accommodations, restaurants and drinkable water (Yousaf et al., 2018).

Second, "safety needs" represent the importance of safety-related concerns that might influence visitors' intentions to travel to a certain destination. A safe and secure destination is a requirement for any tourist destination. Third, "relationship needs" reflect an individual's ability to establish healthy relationships and a sense of societal belonging. The literature

emphasises that this category has a significant influence in motivating travellers to visit as they value the development of strong bonds with their family members and friends as well as forming friendly relationships with local communities. Fourth, “self-esteem needs” are important to travellers as they want to impress membership and reference groups to acquire a higher social status. Furthermore, tourism is perceived as a challenging activity that can enhance an individual’s skills. Finally, “self-actualisation needs” reflect the visitor’s involvement in activities that benefit society (Maslow, 1943; Yousaf et al., 2018).

Notably, individuals do not share the same needs, thus further segmentation efforts, such as demographic segmentation, are crucial to support individuals’ motivations (Yousaf et al., 2018). Accordingly, this study used Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory as this is the theory that inspired other motivational theories, and it has been proven effective within the context of religious tourism. All of the aforementioned needs were confirmed to have a significant influence on visitors’ intentions to visit a destination (Yousaf et al., 2018); nevertheless, the study implemented the motivational variables that had a substantial influence on Muslim visitors’ intentions to visit, specifically, SEN, RN and PN (Rahman et al., 2017). Therefore, the research hypotheses are as follows:

- H1. SEN have a significant influence on individuals’ intentions to visit.
- H2. RN have a significant influence on individuals’ intentions to visit.
- H3. PN have a significant influence on individuals’ intentions to visit.

5.2 Results

The methodology and data collection are similar to Study 2; see (Table 3) for the research variables. With respect to the results, Cronbach’s alpha was used to evaluate the reliability of the variables that assess the research hypotheses (Table 7). Considering the sample size, the results indicate that all of the variables have an acceptable Cronbach’s alpha (Bujang, Omar, & Baharum, 2018). Furthermore, the descriptive analysis indicates that SEN have a marginally higher mean in comparison to relationship and physiological needs (Table 7). Notably, the following items had the highest mean in the motivational variables: “I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values”, “I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia to enhance my relationship with family” and “I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for their historic and heritage wealth”. Concerning behavioural intentions, the variable had an overall mean of 4.27 (Table 7).

To assess the research hypotheses for Study 3, linear regression analysis was used. For the first hypothesis, the result indicates that SEN have a significant influence on individuals’ intentions to visit ($F = 39.392$, $P = 0.001^*$). Regarding the second hypothesis, the analysis confirms that RN have a significant influence on individuals’ intentions to visit ($F = 18.378$, $P = 0.001^*$). For the third hypothesis, the result indicates that physiological needs have a significant influence on individuals’ intentions to visit ($F = 21.654$, $P = 0.001^*$) (Table 8).

5.3 Discussion

Existing research confirms the relationship between religious motivation and intention to visit (Antón et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2017; Hassani & Moghavvemi, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2020; Kala, 2021). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory was used to evaluate the influence of three motivational variables on the participants’ intentions to visit several religious sites in KSA. The theory has been used extensively in the tourism and religious tourism contexts (Oktadiana et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2017; Yousaf et al., 2018), as it provides a comprehensive explanation of what motivates individuals to visit a destination. The results of Study 3 confirm the research hypotheses and affirm the findings of previous research that SEN, RN and PN are significant motivational variables for Muslim visitors (Table 8). Notably,

Table 7 Means and Cronbach's alpha

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>	<i>Source</i>
Self-esteem needs	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the possibility of being active upon travel	4.06	0.73	Rahman et al. (2017)
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for their significant location	4.18		
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the economic benefit for Islamic societies	3.78		
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the sufficient shariah-compliant hotels	3.69		
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values	4.28		
	Total	3.99		
Relationship needs	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia to enhance my relationship with family	3.78	0.84	Rahman et al. (2017)
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia to enhance my relationship with friends	3.53		
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the ease of access to communication facilities	3.52		
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia to meet friendly people	3.66		
	Total	3.62		
Physiological needs	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the availability of Islamic healthcare service practices	3.40	0.68	Rahman et al. (2017)
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for relaxation	3.56		
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for the availability of halal eating and drinking	3.53		
	I would like to visit those religious sites in Saudi Arabia for their historic and heritage wealth	4.31		
	Total	3.70		
Intentions to visit	I am likely to visit these sites in Saudi Arabia	3.78	0.80	Kim and Park (2013)
	Given the opportunity, I would consider travelling to these sites in the future	3.53		
	It is likely that I will actually travel to these sites in the near future	3.52		
	Given the opportunity, I intend to travel to these sites in Saudi Arabia	3.66		
Total	4.27			

Table 8 Linear regression results

<i>Independent variable</i>	<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>F value</i>	<i>P value</i>
Self-esteem needs	Intentions to visit	39.392	0.001*
Relationship needs		18.378	0.001*
Physiological needs		21.654	0.001*

despite that SEN were the most prominent among the motivational variables, relationship and physiological needs are areas of concern that should be addressed by different stakeholders, which is also evident in the extant research (Khan & Callanan, 2017; Floren, Rasul, & Gani, 2020; Hassani & Moghavvemi, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The religious tourism sector in KSA is focused on Hajj and Umrah. The Saudi Government has been issuing statistical data that reflects visitors' demographics and behavioural variables relevant to those practices ([General Authority for Statistics, 2019](#)). Prior to the pandemic, the practices of Hajj and Umrah were generating a significant income to the country as millions of Muslims performed those practices annually. Visitors were also interested in visiting the holy city of Medina as it contains the holy mosque and other significant sites ([Rinschede, 1992](#); [Amer et al., 2021](#)). However, the extant literature is extremely limited with respect to other religious sites in KSA ([Akbulut & Ekin, 2018](#); [Amer et al., 2021](#)), and the official reports are only limited to Hajj and Umrah.

Accordingly, this study evaluated the popularity of several religious sites, namely, Quba Mosque, Uhud Mountain, Mosque of the Two Qiblas, Mountain of the Light and Ghar Thowr. Study 1 used Google Trends to evaluate the popularity of those sites. This tool has been used recently by researchers, in the context of tourism, for the purpose of making well-informed decisions and forecasts ([Pramana et al., 2021](#); [Vannavanit, 2021](#); [Wickramasinghe & Ratnasiri, 2021](#)). The results of Study 1, Study 2 and Study 3 illustrate that Google Trends is a useful tool that can be used to estimate if a particular site has potential in the context of tourism in general and religious tourism in particular, as the tool provides information on the frequency of search relative to a location.

Google Trends directed the methodological approach of Study 2 and Study 3 as the results of Study 1 indicated that the used keywords were mostly popular in Pakistan, Indonesia, KSA, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, and that KSA was the country where most of the terms were highest in popularity. Hence, Study 2 focused on Saudi citizens and residents, as directed by the results of Google Trends. The main purpose of Study 2 is to assist decision-makers in providing personas for prospective visitors to these religious sites. The characteristics of the personas that resulted from the cluster analysis indicate the importance of three motivational needs: SEN, RN and PN. Notably, even though all the motivational needs are significant to the participants, one cluster showcased that SEN are the most prominent. This was further supported by Study 3, where all the motivational variables had a significant influence on the participants' intentions to visit.

The findings of this study corroborate the results of extant research that examines the demographics and motivation of visitors to religious sites in KSA, countries where the majority of the population is Muslim, and religious tourists in general ([Almuhrzi & Alsawafi, 2017](#); [Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b](#); [Ramírez & Portillo, 2020](#)). Specifically, it has been found that religious tourists are motivated predominantly by SEN ([Khan & Callanan, 2017](#); [Floren et al., 2020](#); [Hassani & Moghavvemi, 2020](#)). Still, relationship and physiological needs are also significant, as they have a strong impact on visitors' satisfaction and intentions to revisit ([Rahman et al., 2017](#)).

7. Theoretical and practical implications

This paper provided a comprehensive evaluation of the potential of several religious sites in KSA, provided distinct personas of prospective visitors and confirmed their intentions to visit. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, these sites have not been previously examined in the literature. The literature of religious tourism in KSA is quite limited, and the available research has mainly focused on Hajj and Umrah ([Alam, 2021](#)). Therefore, this study provides much-needed insights to assist future researchers as well as direct the efforts of decision-makers in their strategic and operational plans to capitalise on these religious sites, especially for economic purposes following the Covid-19 pandemic. Such findings are necessary to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the context of Islamic marketing ([Hossain, Yahya, & Kiumarsi, 2018](#)).

In addition, there is limited research available that examines the personas of religious tourists; thus, this study used the limited research available that explores persona creation, in general using quantitative methods (An et al., 2018; Kang, 2020). Accordingly, due to the importance of persona creation in simplifying data processes and assisting decision-makers in understanding consumers' needs (Onel et al., 2018; Lehnert et al., 2021), this study presented four personas, using k-means cluster analysis, for visitors in the context of religious tourism. Such information warrants policy and decision-makers as well as practitioners to aggregate real-time data from individuals who visit these sites in Mecca and Medina to identify their personas more profoundly and leverage that information to cater to their needs and optimise the sites' potential and visitors' satisfaction. Of note, the presented personas can also be used to support further information acquisition through qualitative methods.

In addition, Google Trends and Facebook Ads were used in this research. Google Trends has been used in the context of tourism (Pramana et al., 2021; Vannavanit, 2021; Wickramasinghe & Ratnasiri, 2021), but it proved to be comparably useful in the context of religious tourism. Moreover, Facebook Ads has not been used in previous research, as many researchers opted for other tools such as Amazon Turk. However, due to the unavailability of Amazon Turk in the region, Facebook Ads was a suitable alternative as the researcher can specify the desired location and eliminate any biases in the sample.

Furthermore, this study used Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as it has proven effective in the context of tourism (Yousaf et al., 2018). Accordingly, this study provides further support to the theory's application in the context of Islamic tourism and emphasises the importance of the following three motivational needs to Muslim visitors: SEN, RN and PN (Rahman et al., 2017).

8. Limitations and future research

Due to the novelty of this research, there were numerous challenges relevant to the available literature and research methodology. Extant research has used available data and/or existing data bases as foundation for persona creation (An et al., 2018; Kang, 2020). However, due to the unavailability of such data, this study had to resort to primary instead of secondary data. Nevertheless, the government might consider gathering data relevant to the visitors of religious sites to facilitate the creation of personas based on larger sample sizes.

In addition, the variables, that were examined in the third study, directly assess the influence between motivation and intentions to visit. Hence, future research can examine the mediating/moderating effect of variables that can influence this relationship within the scope of this study. For instance, extant research has identified destination image and tourist loyalty as mediators that influence intentions to visit (Kanwel et al., 2019). Furthermore, destination trust and reputation have been found to have a moderating effect that influences the association between motivation and intentions to visit (Su, Lian, & Huang, 2020). Another moderating variable that could be assessed is imagination proclivity. Recent research has determined that imagination proclivity has a significant moderating effect that can impact the association between motivation and intentions to visit (Hosany, Buzova, & Sanz-Blas, 2020). Of note, this variable is particularly relevant to policymakers and decision-makers in KSA, as the kingdom is actively developing and implementing its digital tourism strategy (Arab News, 2022).

Moreover, as per Study 2, the variables that were identified to determine religious tourists' personas were gender, age, income, education, frequency of visit and motivation. Thus, future research might consider using structural equation modelling (SEM) and incorporating the previous variables as indicators to the persona construct. Structural equation models are "statistical procedures for testing measurement, functional, predictive and causal hypotheses" (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012, p. 8). In recent years, SEM has become a very popular

technique used by researchers (Tomarken & Waller, 2005), especially in health, managerial, behavioural and social sciences (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012).

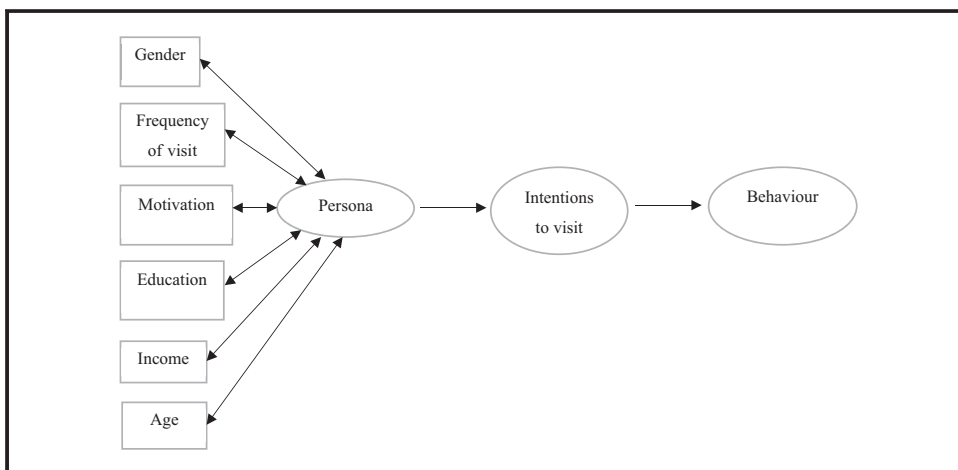
What distinguishes SEM from first generation statistical methods is its ability to provide researchers with comprehensive techniques for evaluating and adjusting theoretical models (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Furthermore, SEM determines the theoretical model's restrictions, generality and range of convenience (Kline, 2015); for instance, SEM considers measurement errors while testing research hypotheses (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). Moreover, SEM provides researchers with suggestions with respect to novel hypotheses that were not previously considered; thus, it makes way for new research directions (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) can be used as a measurement model to incorporate the personas of religious tourists as a construct and determine its impact on their intentions to visit and behaviour as CFA identifies the theorised relationships between observed variables and the research's constructs. In addition, CFA allows the assessment of the theoretical model's validity and reliability (Hair, 2014) and decides the goodness of fit indices (Byrne, 2016). The proposed conceptual model (Figure 1) is as follows:

Furthermore, Facebook Ads was used to distribute the questionnaire to citizens and residents in KSA. The questionnaire reached 34,264, and 451 individuals clicked on the link. Nevertheless, only 203 individuals filled the survey, and 193 were used for analysis. The data collection via Facebook Ads resulted in an adequate sample size comparable to existing research (Almuhzzi & Alsawafi, 2017). Future research might consider using the same methodology used in this paper to further evaluate the appropriateness of Facebook Ads as an alternative to other tools. Furthermore, even though several similarities were observed among several studies with respect to the respondents' demographic characteristics (Almuhzzi & Alsawafi, 2017; Wu & Mursid, 2019a, 2019b), future research can test the motivational variables in other countries where the majority of the population is Muslim (Table 2) – this has been indicated in previous research as an important area of investigation (Kim et al., 2020).

In addition, since the aforementioned sites examined in this study are located within the vicinity of the cities of Mecca and Medina, future research has to investigate the possible challenges that might arise with regulating additional tourism activities in these two cities. As per the data provided by the Saudi Government (Table 1), millions of pilgrims visit the

Figure 1 Proposed conceptual model using SEM



cities of Mecca and Medina every year (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). Hence, one possible challenge is the urban growth and changing city structure required to meet the need of visitors. Extant research indicated that commercialising religious sites has resulted in the loss of the sites' historical urban fabric, cultural heritage and parcelisation of lands (Maroufi & Rosina, 2017).

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