

# Media and Tourism in Shaping Sacred Sites: Empirical Insights From African Pilgrimage Destinations

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**Abstract:** In the digital era, social media plays a crucial role in shaping tourist preferences and behaviours, particularly in pilgrimage tourism. Social media platforms shape destination selections and enrich the overall travel experience through user-generated content. This paper explores a shifting demand characteristic in pilgrimage tourism due to the rise of the experience economy and widespread social media use. It also examines the managerial implications and strategic use of social media marketing in promoting religious sites. A quantitative research design was employed, using numerical data to draw conclusions. Primary data was collected through a standardised questionnaire completed by 450 respondents, supplemented by interviews. Data was analysed using IBM SPSS Version 29, applying descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate methods. The findings were anticipated to highlight social media's significant impact on pilgrimage tourism, particularly in influencing destination image and motivating travel behaviour. The study adds to existing literature by focusing on sub-Saharan pilgrimage destinations, a region often underrepresented in tourism studies. It recommends leveraging social media tools as effective strategies for promoting pilgrimage destinations and engaging potential visitors.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Pilgrimage Tourism; Destination Image; Tourist Preference; Digital Era

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## 1. Introduction

Religious tourism is a centuries-old phenomenon that attracts people from all walks of life and all around the world. It is an integral aspect of many people's life. Pilgrimage and spiritual tourism are frequently regarded as fundamental components of religious practice. The current environment, particularly due to the widespread use of technology, has significantly altered the pattern and process of religious tourism (George, 2025). Technology manages everything swiftly and efficiently, including pilgrims' oversight, ticket generation, the safety and security of pilgrims. The technology assists in premises, easing movement, maintaining the religious sites, limiting entry, educating pilgrims, and providing religious mementos (Hossain, 2025). Technology has made it possible for making journeys to religious tourism sites more convenient, accessible, and even pleasant.

Digital technologies have developed at a rapid pace, transforming the nature of tourism worldwide. The influence is special evident in the evolving relationship between media communication and tourist behaviours. In this emerging context, pilgrimage tourism is defined as travelling that is motivated by religious or spiritual motives—underwent a significant revolution. Whereas the basis of pilgrimage tours earlier was faith in sacred traditions, today's pilgrimage experiences are being intermediated by social media and other digital platforms. Pilgrims and tourists consume and co-create media, share their experiences online, and make decisions about travel based on digital interactions (Caidi et al., 2023). Media and tourism exert tremendous effects on pilgrimage destination journeys since they influence pilgrims' perceptions and experiences. Broadcast images of sacred sites, political personalities, and religious masses influence visitors' expectations and patterns, while the visual projection of religious offerings regulates their on-site experiences (Terzidou et al., 2018). This demonstrates the ability of media to mediate the relationship between pilgrims and destinations by influencing destination selection and the nature of the pilgrimage journey.

Pilgrimage destinations such as Ngome Marian Shrine in South Africa, the Kibeho Shrine in Rwanda, and Our Lady of Peace Basilica in Côte d'Ivoire attract both local and international pilgrims/ tourists because religious diversity and spirituality are an integral part of everyday cultural life. African pilgrimage destinations have remained relatively invisible in both media representation and tourism research. Social media offer these sacred sites a new opportunity to increase visibility, shape perceptions, and attract visitors through digital storytelling.

## 2. Problem Statement

Despite growing scholarly interest in social media and tourism, few studies have investigated the intersection of media communication and pilgrimage tourism. The study on pilgrimage tourism has focused on religious or anthropological approaches rather than communication and marketing perspectives (Al-Ajarma & Buitelaar, 2021). Moreover, most pilgrimage destinations do not have any mediated approaches to reach their audiences

using social media. In the absence of such an approach, these destinations are at the risk of remaining invisible to an increasingly digitally driven global tourism market. Understanding the influence of social media, therefore, can help pilgrims and managers of pilgrimage destinations in the design of communication approaches that attract visitors in a way that respects the spiritual integrity of the sacred sites.

### **3. Research Aim and Objectives of the Paper**

This paper seeks to establish how social media and its related media communication practices influence pilgrimage destination journeys, through its effect on destination image formation, travel motivation and visitor engagement.

#### **3.1 Objectives of the Paper**

- To establish how social media-based communication influences the perception of African pilgrimage destinations within the study area.
- To determine the influences of social media-driven destination image on destination choice and travel behaviour of pilgrimage travellers.

#### **3.2 Research Questions**

What social media and related media communication practices influence pilgrimage destination journeys through their effect on destination image formation, travel motivation, and visitor engagement?

##### *3.2.1 Subsidiary Questions*

- How does social media communication influence the perception of African pilgrimage destinations in the study area?
- How can social media-driven destination images influence pilgrimage travellers' travel choices and behaviours?

### **4. Literature Review**

The study explores on the complex relationship between pilgrimage experiences and the use of social media by pilgrims and tourists. When examining the influence of social media on pilgrims' experiences and spiritual development, it is critical to include the broader socio-political dimensions inherent in pilgrimage practices. The issues of power, authority, and representation all play a significant role in determining the dynamics of pilgrimage travel and pilgrim encounters. This study also seeks to investigate the shifting demand characteristic in pilgrimage tourism as a result of the emergence of the experience economy and broad social media use.

#### **4.1 Social Media and Tourism Behaviour**

Social media has transformed the way tourists' access, share, and evaluate information about travel. Choonhawong and Phumsathan (2022) indicate that social media influences subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and intention to travel for tourists. According to Alghamdi & Abdulwahid (2024) show that social media marketing activities greatly influence the image of destinations, trust, and travel intentions in most tourism contexts. In this regard, social media has become a strong channel of communication that increases the interaction between a destination and its potential travellers, filling the gaps that traditional marketing could not achieve.

In Africa, this transformation has been accelerated by an increase in access to the internet through mobile. Digital platforms allow for the virtual promotion of culturally and spiritually significant for sacred sites through visual storytelling, expanding their potential market to global audiences (Aydogan & Talay, 2025). Pilgrimage destinations evolutions are crucial because, through social media visibility, credibility is created and user-generated narratives attract niche tourist segments.

#### **4.2 Destination Image Formation via Social Media**

Destination image is a composite tourist perception of a place, composed of both cognitive and affective elements. Social media has become central in the construction of this perception. According to Bonilla-Quijada et al. (2022), there is a strong positive relationship between social media engagement and the perceived

attractiveness of destinations. Other popular social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, are also good at constructing aspirational images that manage to balance authenticity with aesthetic appeal (Suryana et al., 2023).

These visuals can powerfully influence the way in which pilgrimage destinations are perceived by potential pilgrimage tourism. For instance, imagery used to depict rituals, landscapes, and communal worship enhances an emotive connection even before one embarks on a journey. Social media facilitates the participatory nature in which pilgrims are able to co-create these images, individual experiences turning into the collective representation of faith.

### **4.3 Media and Pilgrimage Tourism in the Digital Era**

In recent times, scholars have increasingly examined the role of media in mediating spiritual experiences. Caidi et al. (2023) coined the term "holy selfie" to describe how pilgrims document their journeys as acts of digital devotion and self-representation. According to Hussain et al (2023) a study on social media and the spiritual journey found that social media enriches pilgrimage experiences through real-time sharing, reflection, and community building.

Al-Ajarma & Buitelaar (2021) investigated the representation of the Mecca pilgrimage on social media, exposing how digital platforms have contested and reframed traditional religious stories. Such studies illustrate the fact that social media does not just record pilgrimage but changes the way pilgrims relate to the sacred. Pilgrimage is closely related to local culture and identity, understanding this digital mediation is crucial in promoting culturally sensitive communication strategies in the sacred sites.

### **4.4 Integrated Conceptual Framework for Media and Tourism Pilgrimage**

Three approaches explain the media and tourism intersection in pilgrimage: the tech-behaviour, cultural-constructivist and socio-political perspective on mediator roles. Tech behaviour primarily focuses on theories based on behavioural intention and emphasises the role that social media plays as determinant in influencing these decisions based on perceptions of usefulness and information searching efforts on these platforms (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Muna & Jocabson, 2014). The cultural constructivist perspective delves deeper into examining collective meaning and destination imaging constructions made on these platforms through stories, images and feelings associated with pilgrimage destinations and experiences (Mak, 2017; Hunter, 2016). Mediated representation theories relate to pilgrimage and online representation, and these mediations primarily focus on pointing toward determinations based on roles on power and control as they relate to pilgrimage destination representation on these platforms.

A comparison among these lenses reveals they offer insights into various aspects within the mediated pilgrimage phenomenon. Tech behaviouralist models emphasise reason and travel intention, while cultural constructivist lenses focus on the appeal of collective digital storytelling. Different lenses highlight that an integrative approach needs consideration of several variables interplaying within modern pilgrimage practices on the internet.

This study proposes conceptual framework, the mediated pilgrimage journeys' model, that integrates the three approaches to offer a more comprehensive understanding. This model considers pilgrimage as a multi-layered process involving digital behavioural influence, cultural and symbolic co-creation and socio-political mediations. By incorporating all three streams, behaviour, culture and politics and considering pilgrimage as a multi-layered and more complex process involving decision making, emotion and representation. This integrated model recognises that pilgrimage today encompasses a process of decision making, an act of shared emotions, spiritual and a representation of process.

## **5. Research Methods and Design**

This paper describes the methodological approaches and techniques used in the study. A quantitative research design was chosen, implying that techniques of research inquiry were applied during data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Leavy, 2022). This study employed a quantitative research design, based on numerical data and descriptive statistics for results. A quantitative approach to research design was used to determine the levels of relationship that exist between social media communication, destination image, and pilgrimage travel behaviour in order to draw conclusions. The design is excellent for gathering data on these topics: "To establish how social media-based communication influences the perception of African pilgrimage destinations within the study area." and "To determine the influence of social media-driven destination image on destination choice and

travel behaviour of pilgrimage travellers." The research objectives are addressed through observations and questionnaires of pilgrims/ tourists on organised religious journeys to sacred sites.

A convenience sampling technique and non-probability sampling was used to choose 450 respondents from various African pilgrimage destinations in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. For this study, a convenience sampling method which is a non-probability sampling design – non-random sampling was used to select the pilgrims as the respondents, municipal officials of the three district municipalities, one metropolitan municipality and church leaders. Convenience sampling was used in order to select participants that were readily and easily accessible and those perceived to be more knowledgeable about the subject of the research. The reason for using convenience sampling was that the researcher felt that it was simple, practical, economical, quick, and did not require an elaborate sampling frame, which was not available. Taherdoost (2016) advocates that convenience sampling often helps to overcome many of the limitations associated with research. The sample size was sufficient to accomplish the research objectives and draw conclusions (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Data was gathered using a standard survey form. The instrument's questions were classified as category variables (responds profile).

Data collection was carried out through an online survey disseminated on social networking sites and religious networks. The survey was pretested for validity with a selection of established scales to measure social media engagement, cognitive and affective destination image, and behavioural intentions. IBM SPSS Version 29 was used for statistical analysis, focusing on descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate techniques-regression. Complementing the quantitative insights, 15–20 survey with pilgrims and destination managers was conducted to explore its perspectives. The quantitative approach ensures nuance in understanding how media communication shapes pilgrimage journeys. This paper explores a shifting demand characteristic in pilgrimage tourism due to the rise of the experience economy and widespread social media use.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the analysis of the sample in this study (Kim, Lee, & Kim 2017). Mann-Whitney U tests were employed in data analysis to seek for correlations between variables (Hodges et al., 2023). Variables such as age and gender were recoded into two distinct groups. In this study, descriptive statistics were employed to determine the frequency of respondents' profile (in percentages) and the mean scores of responses in the first step of data analysis. The intention of descriptive statistical analysis is to provide a comprehensive picture of a population's features (Chawla & Sondhi, 2011). It is the process of defining a population, evaluating each member of that population, and computing a summary value (such as mean scores or standard deviation). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise information on the research sample in this study (Kim, Lee & Kim, 2017). For the purposes of data analysis, Mann-Whitney U tests were performed to check for correlations between variables (Bolboacă, Jäntschi, Sestraş, Sestraş & Pamfil, 2011). Variables such as respondents' age groups, level of education were recoded into two categories using Mann-Whitney U tests.

## 6. Findings

The section presents and analyses sociodemographic data before delving into respondents' traits and travel patterns. This was done primarily to examine and determine the demography of the research region. The study used analysis to determine which demographic categories played a significant role in survey completion and achieving study objectives (refer to Table 1). Socio-demographic factors for respondents include gender, age, marital status, and education level. Table 1 highlights the aforementioned characteristics.

**Table 1: Respondents' profile (N=410)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	46
	Female	54
Age	18-35	59
	36 and above	41
Marital status	Single	41
	Married	30
	Divorced	14
	Separated	9

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
	Widowed	5
Level of education	No Western Education	15
	Primary	8
	Secondary	15
	Tertiary education (Diploma)	17
	Tertiary education (Degree)	46

Source: Own elaboration

According to the statistics presented in Table 1, 46% of respondents were males and 54% were females. The majority of pilgrims were female, which could explain the proportion. These findings were based on the fact that more females than males undertake religious pilgrimages in the study area. This also reflect that the females are more into social media than the males, so their decisions, could be influenced by social media platforms into choosing the pilgrimage destination of their choice. According to Nugraha and Widyaningsih (2021); Shuo, Ryan, & Liu (2009) female religious pilgrims account for a higher percentage. Approximately 59% were between the ages of 18 and 35, with 41% aged 36 to 56 or beyond. Youths composed the majority of respondents to the survey. Tiessen (2012) and Liro (2021) discovered that young people are more likely to visit religious pilgrimages than other age groups. The young generation in the study area takes an active role in local development, which might account for this trend, and they are also the content cocreators which could inform their decisions through the social media platforms.

The respondents were asked concerning their marital status. This was done to ascertain the number of married respondents that participated in the survey, as marriage is often associated with maturity. As seen in Table 1, approximately 41% of respondents in the study area were single, whereas 30% married. Divorced individuals accounted for 14%, separated for 9%, and widowed for 5%. Given the controversies surrounding religious tourism, it's worth investigating whether respondents' marital status influenced their responses to questionnaires. Dillman and Christian (2005) found that married respondents tend to provide more reliable data in study.

According to Aminrad et al. (2013), education, and social media platforms could boost awareness and knowledge of one's surroundings. Therefore, respondents' education levels were considered as a significant variable in this study. According to the statistics, 17% of respondents have earned tertiary degrees or diplomas. 46% of respondents held a tertiary education (degree), this group of respondents might have a great influence on social media platforms and at their level of study could also motivate into engaging more with different gadgets to alleviate the knowledge. The study revealed that the majority of respondents had post-matriculated education. 15% of respondents had only secondary education or no Western education in any form. Only around 8% of the respondents in the final group had finished primary school. The majority of respondents were youngsters who completed matric but did not pursue higher education. The education level of the respondents was crucial because the purpose of the survey was to give a meaningful insight into how respondents reflected on the influence of destination image, digital mediation, motivation, and behaviour about the pilgrimage destinations.

Respondents were asked about their perceptions on social media-based communication influences on pilgrimage destinations. Approximately 50% of all respondents said "yes," 38% said "no," and 12% said "not sure." The respondents' assertions are perhaps due to a lack of understanding the influences of social media in promoting media communication and the pilgrimage tourism in the African pilgrimage destinations. Fernandes et al. (2012) concluded that religious tourism accounts for an insignificant proportion of overall tourism.

Regardless of the nature of the data presented in Table 2, the ensuing in-depth responses might support the conclusion that there is a demand for tourism facilities and/or products in the study area.

**Table 2: Influences of social media in religious Tourism sites \_ Perceptions and meaning (N=410)**

Statements	Category	Mean	Std. Dev.	Frequency (%)
Do you think social media have an influence on promoting the African pilgrimage destinations?	Yes	1.9488	1.64289	50
	No			38
	Not sure			12
Do you understand the concept 'pilgrimage'?	Yes	1.7049	.89455	55
	No			20
	Not sure			25
Do the local people of the pilgrimage destination perceive the contribution of social media in promoting the sacred sites as the mediation of tourism opportunities?	Yes	1.7878	.78889	40
	No			42
	Not sure			18
Are there any facilities and products that are promoted for tourists and pilgrims in the social media?	Yes	1.9707	.65533	22
	No			59
	Not sure			19
Would you regard the social media platform as a tool for promoting African pilgrimage destinations as a contributing factor to the economic development of the study area?	Yes	1.5640	.63503	51
	No			41
	Not sure			8

The objective of the study is to determine respondents' perception of social media as an influence of the tourism prospects presented by the pilgrimage places in the study area. The associated research question concerns whether locals Tourists to the pilgrimage site perceive the opportunities for tourism accessible through pilgrimages in the study area. The study presents data analysis and interpretation in the subsections that follow in order to achieve the study's objective. The data in Table 2 illustrate that there is no obvious promotion of accommodation facilities through the social media platform in the study area.

Table 2 indicates that the majority of respondents (55%) comprehend the term 'pilgrimage'. Those who stated that they were unsure about their knowledge of the concept under discussion accounted for 25% of all respondents. Approximately 20% of all respondents were unable to understand pilgrimage.

### 6.1 Perception on the Contribution of Social Media on the Tourism Opportunities

The study attempted to assess respondents' perceptions of (1) socioeconomic benefits that might be acquired through tourists' visits, e.g., multiplier impact, and (2) socioeconomic benefits that can be gained from religious-related activities, such as multiplier effect. Table 2 shows that local communities did not consider social media as having an impact on the tourism prospects available at pilgrimage destinations. The majority (42%) stated that they did not perceive social media's contribution to the socioeconomic opportunities that could be derived from visits to pilgrimage destinations, 40% said they perceived, and 18% said they were unsure whether there were socioeconomic opportunities that could be derived from traveling to pilgrimage destinations or not through the social media. Based to the findings, respondents were not convinced that social media might increase tourism opportunities resulting from pilgrimage destinations.

Based on the responses presented above, it is plausible to conclude that the pilgrims' lack of knowledge stems from their view that pilgrimage destinations are primarily for spiritual repair. This contradicts Rifai's (2015) argument that, in addition to spiritual services, religious tourism gives prospects for socioeconomic development. Nicolaidis (2016; 2015) agrees that economic opportunities can be realised if pilgrimage destinations are well-developed and/or sustainably managed.

## 7. Influences of Destination Images

The Mann-Whitney U bivariate test was employed in this study to compare differences between independent variables (respondents' profile), which were recoded to nominal (2 groups), and dependent variables (influences of destination images in the African pilgrimage destinations), which were ordinal (Likert-scale). The results in

Table 3 reveal that some respondents' profiles differ in terms of the influences of destination image of African pilgrimage destinations.

**Table 3: Reliability test and comparing respondents' perceptions on the influences of destination image of African pilgrimage destinations compared with respondents' socio-demographic variables – 'age and gender'**

No.	Statements	Significant Results	
		Actual Results	Explanation
1	There is need for media influences in promoting African pilgrimage destinations in the study area.	N.S.	N.S.
2	The media platforms could elevate development of pilgrimage destinations could inspire and motivate respondents' engagement with the study area.	N.S.	N.S.
3	Social media have a potential for enhancing socio-economic status for the study area.	N.S.	N.S.
4	Pilgrimage destinations in the study area could enhance the socio-economic development.	Z = -2.064 p value = .039	*Age group 18 to 35 significantly agree more than Age group 36 and above.
5	Religious pilgrimages can be seen as place to be visited.	Z = -2.648 p value = .008	**Age group 18 to 35 significantly agree more than Age group 36 and above.
6	Involvement of local people might enhance the influences of promoting African pilgrimage destinations.	N.S.	N.S.
7	Availability of media platforms could increase the digital mediation of African pilgrimage destinations in the study area	Z = -2.513 p value = .012	*Females significantly agree more than males.

**Note:**<sup>a</sup> Questionnaire were itemised along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1, Strongly agree; 2, Agree; 3, Neutral; 4, Disagree; 5, Strongly disagree.

<sup>b</sup> Mann-Whitney U test significance: N.S, no significant results; \*,  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p < 0.01$ .

No socio-demographic influence regarding 'age' and 'gender'

Pilgrims and local communities were asked to indicate their perceptions of 'the need for media influences in promoting African pilgrimage destinations within the study area and these variables were compared with the respondents' profile (age and gender). The pilgrims and local communities' the media platforms could elevate development of pilgrimage destinations to inspire and motivate respondents' engagement within the study area' show no significant relationships with the following statements compared with the respondents' profile: 'there is need to develop pilgrimage destinations in the study area', 'pilgrimage destinations in the study area could enhance the socio-economic development, and 'social media platforms might enhance socio-economy of the study area'. However, those who are 18 to 35 years old significantly agree more than those who are 36 and above:  $Z = -2.064$ ,  $p$  value = .039, with these statements: 'religious pilgrimages can be seen as place to be visited'. Again, those who are 18 to 35 years of age strongly agree more than those who are 36 and above:  $Z = -2.648$ ,  $p$  value = .008, with this statement 'religious pilgrimages can be seen as socio-economic enhancement'. The results also indicate that the females significantly agree more than males:  $Z = -2.513$ ,  $p$  value = .012, with this statement 'involvement of local people might enhance the influences of promoting African pilgrimage destinations.' Interestingly, this evidence suggests that pilgrims and local communities' perceptions of 'the enhancement of socio-economic development' has some relationship with the respondents' profile (age and gender). These results were supported by research findings of Sati (2018).

## **7.1 Multivariate Analysis**

The reliability test (using Cronbach's Alpha) was used in the third stage of data analysis to check for the level of internal consistency of variables used to explain seven dimensional entrepreneur attributes (drive and enthusiasm, efficiency and effectiveness, innovation and networking, learning and resource acquisition, level of preparedness for risk taking, use of technology, and visionary and achievement motivation). Bryman & Cramer (1990) posit that the basic rationale for multivariate analysis is to allow the researcher to discount the alternative explanations of a relationship that can arise when a survey or correlational design has been employed. According to Ezeudji, November & Haupt (2016), Cronbach's Alpha should be calculated as a reliability parameter to verify the internal consistency of the variables within a study. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.5 to 0.7 are acceptable in social science research to explain adequate variable consistency (Chawla & Sondh, 2011; George & Mallery, 2003). Low Cronbach's Alpha scores, according to Tavakol & Dennick (2011), might occur when there is a poor correlation among questionnaire variables used in the analysis, or when only a few variables are employed to explain a given factor.

## **8. Conclusion**

Based on the study objectives, the researchers discovered that the concept of pilgrimage is not well understood in the studied area. It was also shown that respondents were unsure of the tourism opportunities that could arise from pilgrimages. The purpose was to find out whether pilgrims and destination managers consider these African religious pilgrimages as a sacred site to be promoted in the social media platforms. This study underlines the transformative role of media communication in developing pilgrimage tourism. Social media is not only a promotional channel but a participatory medium by which pilgrims create and share their experiences. On one hand, it can provide increased visibility and allow for cross-cultural exchange; on the other, it opens up ethical discussions related to authenticity, commercialisation, and the sacrality of pilgrimage.

The study finds that destination image plays a significant mediating role in social media engagement and travel behaviours. Therefore, media communication initiatives, which effectively blend spiritual authenticity with digital storytelling, could be meaningful investments for pilgrimage destinations aiming at increasing visitation. According to the study, pilgrimage destinations can boost the study area's facility status by promoting it on social media channels. The study also revealed that religious pilgrimages have economic benefits, which can alter attitudes of pilgrimage destinations. As a result, it is reasonable to conclude that pilgrimage destinations are perceived to have tourism potential in the communities under consideration.

## **9. Discussion**

The findings of this study contribute to the broader theoretical debates on the mediatisation of religion and tourism. The growth of digital pilgrimage demonstrates how media can actively build, rather than simply represent, the sacred experience. Pilgrims' "holy selfies" and shared stories show how devotion and self-expression are intertwined in digital domains (Caidi et al., 2023). From the perspective of communication science, this is also a good example of the shift from traditional models of one-way communication-a destination-to-tourist direction-to more participatory and dialogical modes of meaning-making. Pilgrimage destinations have historically relied on word-of-mouth, social media now functions as a powerful equaliser, offering global visibility with minimal investment. However, the adoption of digital tools needs to be attuned to sociocultural sensitivities.

Al-Ajarma and Buitelaar in 2021 warn against reducing pilgrimage to spectacle, emphasising that media narratives should maintain sacred meaning. This paper further informs the knowledge of the "experience economy" (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) in which value resides in creating memorable and emotionally arousing experiences. Pilgrimage journeys, when communicated through digital media, are hybrid experiences in which spirituality merges with digital connectivity. From the point of view of communication scholars, this leads to a paradigm shift: media platforms are no longer peripheral to tourism but at the core of the co-creation of travel experiences. Ultimately, integrating media communication into pilgrimage tourism management offers a pathway for sustainable and inclusive development in sub-Saharan Africa. Digital storytelling can foster cultural understanding, invigorate local economies, and amplify community involvement, provided that communication strategies remain ethically based and context sensitive.

## Ethics Declaration

The ethical clearance for this paper was obtained from the University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee: **UZREC 171110-030 PGD 2019/04**. All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with institutional ethical standards.

## Artificial Intelligence Declaration

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used in conceptualizing, drafting, analysing data and writing this paper.

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