

THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISTS' SATISFACTION WITH HAJJ SERVICES ON THEIR EXPERIENCE AT THE SACRED PLACES IN SAUDI ARABIA

Thowayeb H. HASSAN*

King Faisal University, Department of Social Studies, College of Arts, Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, e-mail: thassan@kfu.edu.sa
Helwan University, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Cairo, Egypt, e-mail: thowayeb.hassan@fth.helwan.edu.eg

Ahmed Hassan ABDOU

King Faisal University, College of Arts, Department of Social Studies, Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, e-mail: Aabdou@kfu.edu.sa

Mostafa A. ABDELMOATY

Independent Researcher, Giza, Egypt, e-mail: drsafaseefo@gmail.com

Mohamed NOR-EL-DEEN

Department of Social Studies, College of Arts, King Faisal University, Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, e-mail: mnoreldeen@kfu.edu.sa

Amany E. SALEM

King Faisal University, Department of Social Studies, College of Arts, Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, e-mail: asalem@kfu.edu.sa
Helwan University, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management, Cairo, Egypt, e-mail: amany.ibrahim@fth.helwan.edu.eg

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Abstract: To identify the impact of satisfaction with the provided services (food quality, transportation, accommodation, medical services and the religious guidance) on the spiritual experience of religious tourists, as well as the potential moderating role of pilgrims' demographic characteristics on the relationship between service satisfaction and experience. A structured survey was distributed among the domestic pilgrims in Mecca, Saudi Arabia who performed Hajj under the control of three licensed agencies. Results showed that the satisfaction with transportation services and religious guidance were independent antecedent predictors of the spiritual experience. Furthermore, pilgrims' age had significantly moderated the relationship between satisfaction with medical services and experience. National authorities can effectively improve the spiritual experience by providing comfortable means of transportation and reliable religious scholars to guide the pilgrims at different sacred destinations.

Key words: religious tourism, hajj, service quality, satisfaction, experience, Saudi Arabia

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of tourism and religion has increasingly grabbed the attention of scholars worldwide. Although this is mainly oriented about anthropological or sociological aspects (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Henama and Apleni, 2018), the geographical and historical disciplines are also discussed (Aulet and Vidal, 2018; Cortese et al., 2019). Indeed, religion is a powerful motivating factor for travel and an important driver of tourist attractions which formulate the casual interest (Di Giovine and Choe, 2019). The travel to religious destinations has been facilitated by the recent improvement in communication and transport which promotes accessibility. Pilgrimage to different destinations brings significant economic, social and political benefits, since pilgrimage has extended from a fundamentally religious journey to transformative, secular or non-religious journeys as well (Koshim et al., 2021). Pilgrimage is inspired by the major faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism, and the Islamic Hajj to Mecca is no exception. The Muslim Hajj pilgrims visit four main places in their journey, including Mecca, Arafat, Muzdalifa and Mina. The Ministry of Pilgrimage takes the responsibility of hajj management, and it is supervised by the Supreme Hajj Committee (Ministry of Hajj: Supreme Hajj Committee, 2022). The annual gathering of Islamic Hajj is successfully implemented by the co-operation between the aforementioned official parties and other related ministries, such as those of Information and Culture, Health, Telecommunications, and Information Technology, as well as the Saudi Red Crescent and the National Guard. Private companies may also play an integral role by providing transport, accommodation and other services to tourists, and the involvement of other service providers outside the tourism niche should not be neglected. Actually, handling the influx of a large number of pilgrims is an exceptional logistical challenge, where novel technological advancements are continually applied to the running of traditions that lasted for years (Hassan et al., 2022). This is apparent in the flux of a large fleet of buses along the superhighway from Jeddah to Mecca to transfer pilgrims to their destinations, where they are housed in dedicated, air-conditioned tents in Mina. In the latter region, there are thousands of drinking fountains, hundreds of medical clinics and many telephone banks in the pilgrimage sites.

On the other hand, despite these arrangements, pilgrims may encounter some dangers and threats. Older pilgrims are subject to the risks of injury and disease in such a physically-exhausting journey (Ahmed et al., 2006). These risks are

* Corresponding author

usually exacerbated by the crowds, which would additionally represent a significant risk for getting infected with communicable diseases. Therefore, medical services should be adequately adopted to manage the anticipated health problems during Hajj (Al Masud et al., 2016; Yezli et al., 2019). As a consequence, it is necessary to implement satisfactory safety measures, which have been incorporated as an essential component of the Saudi 2030 Vision Realization Programs to improve the Hajj experience (Vision 2030, 2019). In essence, the fundamental objectives of the Pilgrim Experience Program included facilitating the access to the sacred places for pilgrims, providing high-quality services and enriching the cultural and religious experience (Vision 2030, 2019). However, these objectives could be effectively achieved by conducting research and studies that investigate the current issues while signifying and improving the positive areas of service quality. Within this area of interest, the role of potentially influencing moderating factors would reveal fruitful explanatory results. These moderators would enrich our understanding of the relationship between different theoretical constructs; thus, moderators have been frequently included in multiple marketing research studies (Homburg and Giering, 2001). Demographic factors provide an interesting area of research as significant moderators in the tourism industry (Velázquez et al., 2011). Accordingly, the objectives of the current study are two-fold: 1) to assess the impact of the perceived satisfaction with Hajj services and the actual pilgrimage experience; 2) to explore the moderating effect of demographic characteristics on the relationship between pilgrims' satisfaction with the provided services and the experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Satisfaction with Hajj services

Unlike other pilgrimages for other religions, Hajj is mandatory for Muslims, and the number of pilgrims has increased considerably during the past decades. This is because the overall numbers of Muslim populations have increased worldwide, transportation has become cheaper, and more Muslims from developing countries can afford the Hajj expenses (Al-Mulali et al., 2020). Hajj satisfaction is generally perceived as the same way as customer satisfaction in service industries. In the spiritual and religious contexts, it is expected that satisfaction with the provided services would increase the Islamic religious commitment, and this might be reflected on the overall experience. Services are the deeds, performance, or efforts exerted by service providers in order to satisfy the needs and expectations of customers and make a good impression (Ulfy et al., 2021). Based on the importance of service quality on pilgrims' satisfaction, improving the services has become one of the priorities of the national authorities in Saudi Arabia. The Hajj services investigated in the current study are listed below.

Food

Food services and tourism have long been linked to each other. Food services have been a matter of research in the Muslim-friendly tourism field (Algarni et al., 2016), and they are important drivers of tourist satisfaction (Nield et al., 2000). Additionally, food contributes to improving the national economy of tourist destinations and an integral part of tourism development (Elmont, 1995). Tourists' experience with food and meals in a given destination can be memorable and enjoyable, and it can go beyond the mere functional purpose of food ingestion. Multiple researchers have underlined the importance of food experience as a source of tourists' satisfaction. For example, Hendijani (2016) showed that the ingredients and heritage of food experience among tourists visiting Indonesia were significantly associated with greater levels of satisfaction regarding the destinations. Kala and Barthwal (2020) assessed the impact of various types of food and restaurant experience on the satisfaction of tourists in selected religious destinations in India. Results indicated that tourists' satisfaction was positively influenced by the quality of food service and physical attributes of restaurants (Kala and Barthwal, 2020). Furthermore, tourist experience can be augmented by targeting the improvement of food quality at destinations. Son and Xu (Son and Xu, 2013) have shown that religious food in a Buddhist temple can be an effective way of tourist attraction, particularly among Western tourists. The reasons for which the food was a significant attractive factor were primarily focused on considering the food as a means for sensory pleasure, as a way for novelty-seeking or a symbol for prestige (Son and Xu, 2013). Biblical food was also a significant factor for religious tourism in the Holy Land, and it was an important contributing factor in developing and promoting the religious experience for Christian pilgrims (Timothy and Ron, 2013).

Accommodation

Accommodation is one of the unique features of religious tourism assets in each religious destination. Many religious research papers stressed that religious tourists sought to stay overnight in accommodations near the sacred places with a place of worship (mosques, churches, etc.) inside and available worship tools (the Quran, the Bible, etc.), which are readily available to the tourists in their rooms/tents (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Weidenfeld, 2006). Besides, tourist satisfaction is linked to providing heightened service quality measures. This is related to the essential tourism products, including package tours and accommodation, which are primary components of the religious tourism infrastructure (Hung, 2015; Linderman, 2013). By using the case of Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Krešić et al. (2013) showed that the experience of pilgrims was significantly moderated by their satisfaction regarding the accommodation facilities, souvenir shops and restaurants at one of the major shrines to the Virgin Mary worldwide. Therefore, the authors recommended improving the performance of destination's infrastructure to increase tourists' satisfaction (Krešić et al., 2013). Linderman (2013) demonstrated that pilgrims' rest houses are exemplified by a Royal palace in India. This type of accommodation follows the concept of religiously-inspired hospitality, and it was associated with an improved pilgrims' experience (Linderman, 2013).

Transportation

The development of roads and motorized transport vehicles has increased the magnitude of religious tourism and the number of religious tourists in multiple destinations across the world (Chiffolleau, 2016; Hassan et al., 2022). Local

transport services represent a key attribute of the local infrastructure, and the importance of effective transportation is more prominent in crowded religious destinations (Malodia and Singla, 2017). In a recent analysis, of, Malodia and Singla (2017) investigated the difference in expectations and experience among religious visitors to the Chardham, which is a sacred site in the North Himalayas, India. Approximately one third of the tourists had booked a complete package tour (transport included), and 37.2% of them used the transport services of travel agents only. Results showed that the scores of the actual experience of tourists were generally lower than those of the expectations. The authors attributed these differences to the development of transportation means in other Himalayan regions, which raised the individual expectations. Therefore, the article recommended the development of transport facilities at the spiritual and religious destinations to ensure tourists' satisfaction (Malodia and Singla, 2017). In another study, it was found that the expectations of pilgrims are not solely decided by the motivations of travel, but are also formed by their expectations of the easiness of transport and other related attributes of the local infrastructure (Olsen and Timothy, 2006).

Medical services

Hajj service providers are concerned with providing high-quality logistical services that warrant ensuring the health and safety of pilgrims. This is an essential part of the health logistic services. The hygienic and sanitary measures are important in mediating the satisfaction of religious tourists as indicated in previous studies carried out in the Naina Devi shrine, (Kumar and Singh, 2015) The Sabarimala Temple (Joseph et al., 2020) and Thakurani Jatra (Painuly and Goutami, 2019) in India. In the Islamic Hajj, dedicated multidisciplinary medical teams carry out multiple meetings starting immediately at the beginning of the Hajj season each year to assess the situation and address the potential problems (Al-Harbi, 2000). Recently, the Saudi government has allocated multiple facilities, logistics and human resources, which are available permanently or seasonally in Mecca and the sacred places. In addition to the health facilities and the manpower, a number of health measures are undertaken, including curative, preventive and promotive healthcare measures. For example, international and national pilgrims have to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and other diseases which are endemic in some countries, such as cerebrospinal meningitis and yellow fever (Badahdah et al., 2019; Hoang et al., 2020). The Saudi Ministry of Health recommends maintaining adequate personal hygiene measures, such as washing hands, using clean towels and napkins, and wearing face masks, as well as preserving high levels of house and environmental cleanliness and avoiding overcrowding to mitigate the risk of disease transmission (Ministry of Health, 2011).

Religious guidance

Pilgrims' guidance is an important aspect in the Hajj journey. Islamic pilgrimage is full of rituals which should be carried out via following specific rules. This might require a good level of Shari'ah knowledge. Guides usually provide instructions on what pilgrims to perform at distinct sites. Traditionally, the guides are given in a written form. Furthermore, tour operators have to assign an Islamic scholar who performs the guidance before and during Hajj and helps pilgrims to perform each ritual accurately. More recently, several electronic forms and mobile applications are readily available to assist pilgrims. In general, religious guidance includes providing the required knowledge during rituals that may be considered unsafe if performed incorrectly, such as during the stone throwing and circulating around the Kaabah in a crowded context. A considerable proportion of pilgrims have died at these stages in the past before implementing relevant guidance services (Islam, 2021). It is therefore expected that any violation of guidance services would affect pilgrims' satisfaction and experience. Based on the mentioned observations of service domains, we developed our hypotheses to include the followings:

H1a: Perceived satisfaction with food services has positive effects on religious tourists' experience.

H1b: Perceived satisfaction with accommodation services has positive effects on religious tourists' experience.

H1c: Perceived satisfaction with transportation services has positive effects on religious tourists' experience.

H1d: Perceived satisfaction with medical services has positive effects on religious tourists' experience.

H1e: Perceived satisfaction with religious guidance services has positive effects on religious tourists' experience.

The moderating effect of demographic characteristics

Personal characteristics may play a role in perceiving the service quality and its relationship with customer satisfaction and experience. This is consistent in the aviation and tourism industries, where gender, income levels, and country of residence were significant moderators of the relationship between the perceived service quality and memorable tourism experience and customer satisfaction (Pitchayadejanant and Nakpathom, 2016; Shabnam et al., 2022). In the religious tourism sector, to the best of our knowledge, the role of moderating factors in explaining the aforementioned relationships has been scarcely investigated. Nugraha and Widyaningsih (2021) have recently assessed the potential factors that may influence the relationships between the expectations of and attitudes towards Umrah visit, as well as the motivations for Umrah visit. The authors found that participants' gender moderated the relationship between participants' expectations and attitudes, whereas religiosity moderated the relationship between the motivations and expectations (Nugraha and Widyaningsih, 2021). An understanding of the existence of the personal characteristics regarding how the dimensions of service quality would impact their satisfaction and overall experience in order to consider these potential differences in the future strategic planning carried out by decision makers (Karatepe, 2011). Therefore, as indicated in **Figure 1**, we sought to assess the moderating role of demographic characteristics and the satisfaction with different Hajj services as follows:

H2a: Demographic characteristics have a moderating role on the relationship between satisfaction with the food services and Hajj experience.

H2b: Demographic characteristics have a moderating role on the relationship between satisfaction with the transport services and Hajj experience.

H2c: Demographic characteristics have a moderating role on the relationship between satisfaction with the accommodation services and Hajj experience.

H2d: Demographic characteristics have a moderating role on the relationship between satisfaction with the medical services and Hajj experience.

H2e: Demographic characteristics have a moderating role on the relationship between satisfaction with the religious guidance services and Hajj experience.

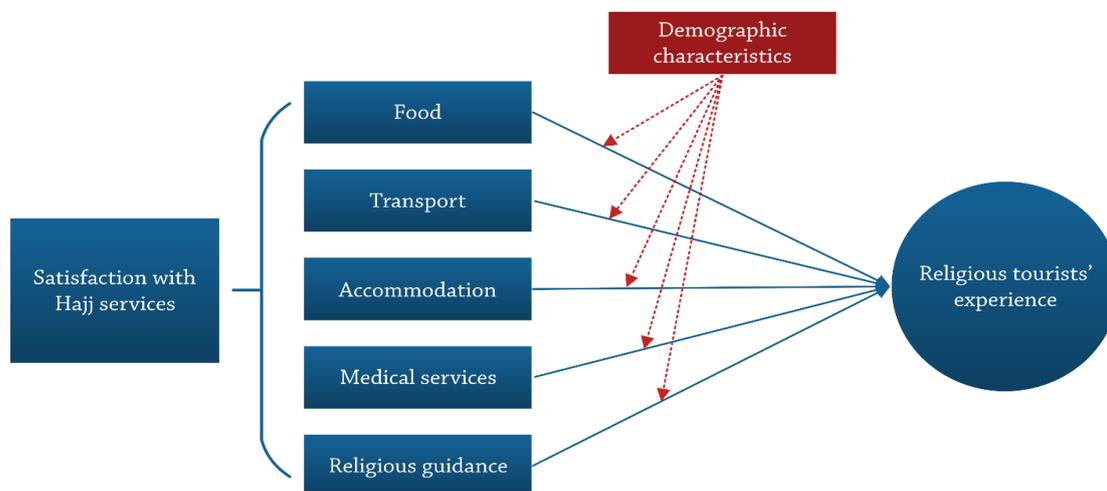


Figure 1. The research hypotheses of the current study

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study procedures and the study sample

The study population included domestic pilgrims who had come to visit the sacred places for performing Hajj in 1442H/2021. Owing to the strict health restrictions which had been applied during the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2021, the national authorities announced that the Hajj had been limited to citizens and local residents of different nationalities who were residing inside Saudi Arabia and international pilgrims were not allowed to enter the Kingdom to perform Hajj. As a consequence, the national Ministry of Hajj and Umrah has launched an official website to enable pilgrims to register the Hajj, and this could be attained through one of a number of licensed agencies as specific tour packages. These included three packages, namely Camp Hospitality Package, Distinguished Camp Hospitality Package and Towers Special Package. The aim of these packages is to provide advocacy support (religious guidance) and the essential services (food, medical services, accommodation and transportation) at discounted prices through dedicated human competencies and high-quality elements. In the current study, an electronic survey was developed on Google Forms, and a relevant link was distributed to pilgrims via the authenticated agencies. Data was collected during the period between 09 August and 17 October 2021.

The study instrument

The used survey was developed based on selected items from previously published articles (Al-Tawfiq and Memish, 2014; Conlon, 2008; Islam, 2021; Serhan and Serhan, 2019; Tabi and Adams, 2016). The questionnaire consisted of three main domains and 39 items. The first part was concerned about the demographic and Hajj-related characteristics (7 items), including participants' age, gender, nationality, educational level and the Hajj package. The second domain comprised of participants' responses with the provided services. The domain included five subdomains, including satisfaction with food services (7 items), satisfaction with transportation (4 items), satisfaction with accommodation (4 items), satisfaction with medical services (7 items) and satisfaction with the religious guidance (7 items). The responses were retrieved on a five-point Likert scale, ranging between 1 = Extremely dissatisfied to 5 = Extremely satisfied. The third domain included items about pilgrims' spiritual experience (3 items). The responses were graded on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.

Statistical analysis

Survey analysis was conducted using RStudio (R version 4.1.1). Categorical variables were expressed as frequency and percentage, and numerical variables were presented as mean and standard deviation (SD). Survey items were incorporated into a confirmatory factor analysis to assess the convergence and discriminant validity of different domains and subdomains. Additionally, a correlation matrix was constructed to explore the bivariate associations between the domains, and the results were presented as Spearman's correlation coefficients. Subsequently, a structural equation model (SEM) was established, and the model fit was investigated using Tucker-Lewis's index (TLI), comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The impact of service satisfaction on religious tourists' experience was assessed by conducting a multivariate linear regression analysis. We used the beta coefficient (β) and the respective 95% confidence intervals (95% CIs) to present the results of the regression analysis. Moderation analysis was conducted by adding interaction terms for the moderator and independent variable in the regression model. A p value of < 0.05 indicated statistical significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the participants

We received valid responses for a total of 216 respondents. The demographic characteristics are demonstrated in Table 1. All participants had received the COVID-19 vaccine. Almost one-quarter of pilgrims were Saudis (25.1%) and Egyptians (24.2%). Additionally, more than half of them had obtained a Bachelor degree, and were females (60.2%) and married (60.5%). The majority of the participants were allocated to the Distinguished camp hospitality Hajj package (76.4%, Table 1).

Confirmatory factor analysis

The applied SEM model in the current study used the traditional approach that employs the maximum likelihood (ML) method for numerical variables. The ML methodology produces standard efficiency results in studies with medium to large sample sizes (Bollen, 1989). In general, the data was fitted and the confirmatory factor analysis showed adequate fitting criteria ($\chi^2 = 266.30$, degree of freedom [df] = 155, CFI = 0.936, TLI = 0.921, RMSEA = 0.058, SRMR = 0.064, $p < 0.0001$).

Questionnaire items were significantly loaded

to their relevant domains as shown in Table 2. The indicators of the internal consistency showed that Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.58 and 0.89 and composite reliability between 0.68 and 0.89. Additionally, AVE values were equal to or greater than the recommended threshold (≥ 0.50 , Table 2) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants (Data is expressed as frequencies and percentages * indicates that the variable has one missing record)

Parameter	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age*	18-25	76	35.3%
	26-40	94	43.7%
	41-65	45	20.9%
Nationality*	Saudi	54	25.1%
	Egyptian	52	24.2%
	Jordanian	24	11.2%
	Sudanese	21	9.8%
	Syrian	17	7.9%
	Yemeni	13	6.0%
	Others	34	15.8%
Gender	Female	130	60.2%
	Male	86	39.8%
Marital status*	Single	68	31.6%
	Married	130	60.5%
	Other	17	7.9%
Educational level	No degree	1	0.5%
	Secondary School	12	5.6%
	Diploma	20	9.3%
	Bachelor	133	61.6%
	Master	26	12.0%
	PhD	24	11.1%
Hajj package	Camp Hospitality Package	12	5.6%
	Distinguished camp hospitality package	165	76.4%
	Towers special package	39	18.1%

Table 2. Results of the confirmatory factor analysis

Domains and items	SFL	AVE	C α	CR
Satisfaction with food services		0.52	0.74	0.68
Freshness of food	0.79			
Taste and flavor of food	0.64			
Satisfaction with the transportation		0.58	0.58	0.70
Bus lighting	0.99			
Bus heating	0.41			
Satisfaction with the accommodation		0.65	0.78	0.79
Equipping the tents with gypsum board	0.71			
Air conditioning	0.89			
Satisfaction with medical services		0.59	0.87	0.88
Improve ventilation	0.79			
Routine cleaning to help maintain healthy facilities.	0.85			
Medical facilities equipment	0.79			
Availability of sterilizers	0.78			
Availability of ambulance centers	0.62			
Satisfaction with the religious guidance		0.57	0.89	0.89
Tour guides have the knowledge of Islamic culture	0.68			
Tour guides were capable of solving problems and conflicts emerged from your arrangements	0.74			
Tour guides were polite	0.68			
Tour guides were able to cooperate with other service staff e.g. driver	0.84			
Tour guides were capable pilgrims of handling complaints probably	0.80			
Tour guides were able to cope with unexpected urgent incidents	0.79			
Pilgrims' experience		0.50	0.73	0.73
Religious travel gives me spiritual fulfilment	0.63			
Visit to sacred places heals me spiritually	0.71			
Religious sites make me appreciate the historic value of the place	0.72			

C α : Cronbach's Alpha; CR: Composite reliability; AVE: Average variance extracted; SFL: Standardized factor loading

The discriminant validity of the employed construct was tested by calculating the square roots of AVE and comparing these values to the results of the correlation between different domains. Each domain was statistically unique as indicated by the fact that the Spearman's correlation coefficients were lower than the square roots of AVEs (Table 3).

Participants satisfaction with Hajj services

In the food services subdomain, the majority of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the taste and flavor of food (78.7%) and the freshness of food (77.3%). Similarly, a great proportion of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with air conditioning in the accommodation (76.4%) and routine cleaning procedures as an important medical service (81.5%). The most significant item about which the participants were satisfied in the religious guidance domain was the fact that tour guides were able to cooperate with other service staff (72.7%, Figure 2).

Table 3. Spearman’s correlation coefficients and the analysis of discriminant validity* <0.05 ; ** < 0.01 ; *** <0.0001

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Food	1					
2. Transport	0.30***	1				
3. Accommodation	0.20**	0.26***	1			
4. Medical services	-0.05	0.05	0.20**	1		
5. Religious guidance	0.14*	0.14*	0.10	0.43***	1	
6. Experience	0.11	0.14*	0.15*	0.16*	0.25***	1
AVE	0.52	0.58	0.65	0.59	0.57	0.50
Square root of AVE	0.72	0.76	0.81	0.77	0.75	0.71
Mean	3.68	3.80	4.03	4.17	3.82	4.39
SD	0.89	0.78	0.81	0.80	0.86	0.70

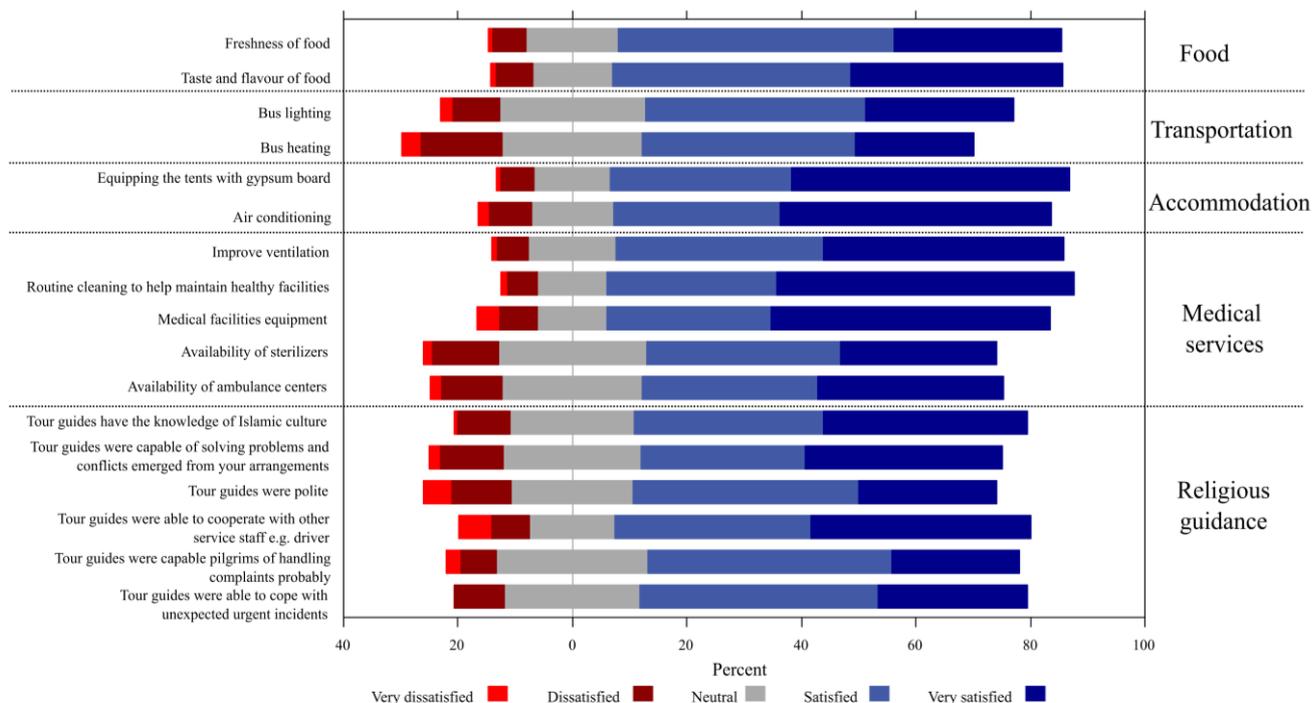


Figure 2. Participants’ responses regarding their satisfaction levels with the provided services during the Hajj

Participants’ responses regarding their Hajj experience

During Hajj, the highest satisfaction levels were exclusively related to the fact that Hajj heals the individual spiritually (90.28%), visits to religious areas brings the participants closer to the God (87.5%) and the spiritual fulfilment that could be obtained with religious travel (87.0%, Figure 3).

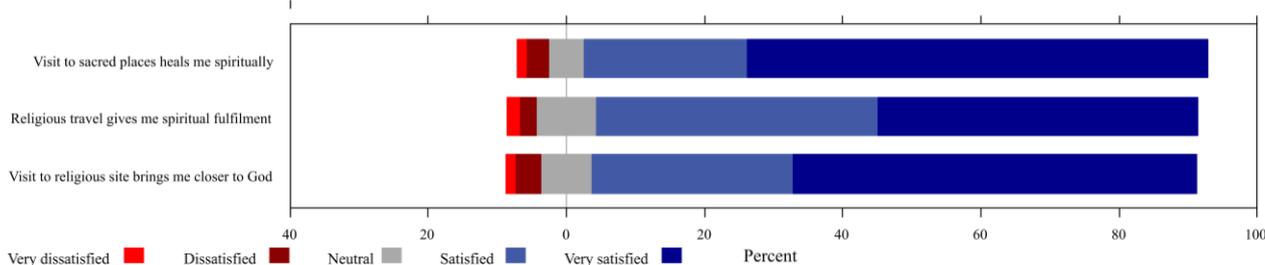


Figure 3. Participants’ responses regarding their Hajj experience

The impact of different Hajj services on pilgrims’ experience

An improved pilgrims’ experience during Hajj was independently associated with higher satisfaction with transport services ($\beta = 0.10$, 95%CI, 0.02 to 0.19, $p = 0.016$) and religious guidance ($\beta = 0.12$, 95%CI, 0.05 to 0.19, $p = 0.001$). However, other service domains did not impact pilgrims’ experience (Figure 4).

Results of the moderation analysis

The impact of medical services on pilgrims’ experience was positively moderated by age, since middle-aged participants (26-40 years) had significantly higher effects of medical services on their experiences compared to the participants aged 15-25 years ($\beta = 0.36$, SE = 0.14, $p = 0.012$, Table 4). Other demographic variables did not impact the relationship between Hajj services and pilgrims’ experience.

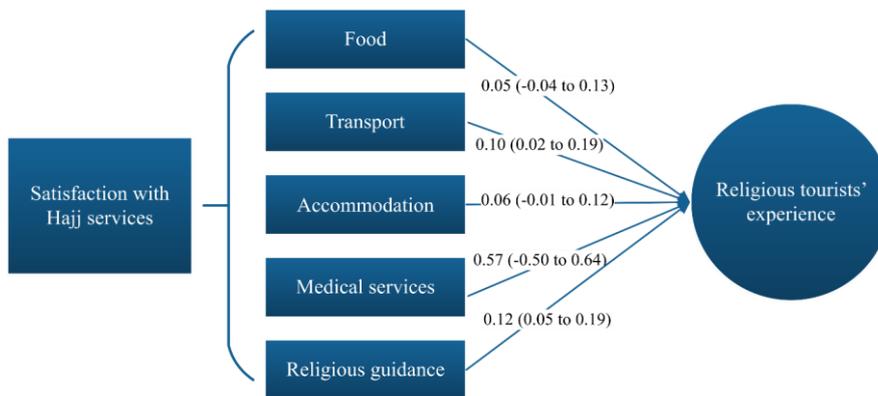


Figure 4. Results of the multivariate regression analysis to investigate the impact of Hajj services on pilgrims' experience

DISCUSSION

Spiritual tourists seek for spiritual feelings on their tour, since these feelings are not normally perceived in normal life. Their main motivation is to achieve self-actualization, which has been considered a major component of human needs and motivation (Šimková and Holzner, 2014). However, the spiritual experience may be influenced by the quality of services which are provided during Hajj. In the current study, the transportation service was a significant predictor of a favored Hajj experience.

Table 4. The analysis of demographic moderators that altered the relationship between Hajj services and pilgrims' experience (SE: standard error)

Parameter	Category	Food		Transport		Accommodation		Medical services		Religious guidance	
		β (SE)	p	β (SE)	p	β (SE)	p	β (SE)	p	β (SE)	p
Age	18-25	Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref	
	26-40	0.07 (0.12)	0.576	0.06 (0.15)	0.689	0.21 (0.14)	0.114	0.36 (0.14)	0.012	0.23 (0.13)	0.076
	41-65	0.14 (0.15)	0.357	0.09 (0.16)	0.594	0.23 (0.15)	0.132	0.06 (0.15)	0.709	-0.05 (0.14)	0.717
Gender	Female	Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref	
	Male	0.07 (0.11)	0.530	0.09 (0.12)	0.437	0.15 (0.12)	0.228	0.17 (0.12)	0.150	0.1 (0.11)	0.334
Nationality	Saudi	Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref	
	Non-Saudi	0.03 (0.13)	0.797	-0.02 (0.14)	0.904	0.23 (0.14)	0.110	-0.07 (0.16)	0.677	0.21 (0.15)	0.154
Marital status	Single	Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref	
	Married	-0.05 (0.15)	0.738	-0.19 (0.17)	0.258	0.1 (0.18)	0.603	0.09 (0.18)	0.627	0.13 (0.17)	0.449
	Other	-0.04 (0.1)	0.723	-0.06 (0.12)	0.581	0.02 (0.12)	0.861	0.02 (0.12)	0.900	-0.09 (0.11)	0.418
Educational level	No degree	Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref	
	Secondary School	0.15 (1.7)	0.930	-0.19 (1.62)	0.908	1.09 (1.65)	0.512	1.3 (3.18)	0.683	2.16 (1.5)	0.152
	Diploma	-0.31 (1.56)	0.845	0.09 (1.5)	0.954	-1.61 (1.47)	0.275	-1.36 (2.6)	0.601	-1.63 (1.35)	0.228
	Bachelor	0.07 (0.97)	0.939	0.05 (0.94)	0.956	0.86 (0.89)	0.334	1.26 (1.43)	0.381	1.54 (0.83)	0.063
	Master	-0.02 (0.45)	0.963	0.15 (0.49)	0.764	-0.36 (0.42)	0.389	-0.38 (0.53)	0.473	-0.21 (0.39)	0.585
	PhD	0.04 (2.11)	0.060	0.02 (1.72)	0.068	-0.01 (1.85)	0.214	-0.04 (3.03)	0.127	0.05 (1.67)	0.079
Hajj package	Camp Hospitality Package	Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref		Ref	
	Distinguished camp hospitality package	-0.01 (0.24)	0.971	0.06 (0.27)	0.823	0.16 (0.23)	0.471	0.15 (0.19)	0.434	0.27 (0.22)	0.221
	Towers special package	-0.2 (0.26)	0.437	-0.04 (0.29)	0.905	0.06 (0.24)	0.803	0.25 (0.22)	0.267	0.19 (0.26)	0.458

In the Hajj journey, pilgrims are assigned by the tour package operators to distinct establishments based on their zones (South Asia, Arab countries, etc.). Transportation services are provided to take pilgrims from their hotel to different sacred places at Mina, Arafah, Muzdalifa and Medina. Given the hot weather in Mecca, religious tourists (particularly the elderly) might benefit from comfortable and air-conditioned means of transportation. The tour offices are responsible for the transportation of pilgrims, which implies a real challenge in pilgrim transportation safely, comfortably and quickly between the sacred sites (Hussain et al., 2021). This is because the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have placed an additional spatial and temporal burden on performing the rituals in a timely manner. However, the low number of pilgrims who came for Hajj in the season under study might have influenced the perceptions of religious tourists. The available services for Hajj pilgrims for movement between the sacred sites include walking facilities, shuttle buses, regular buses and the Mashaer train. Service availability relies on the assigned establishments at the location of individual phases of Hajj. The greatest number of pilgrims are transported by shuttle buses, and the satisfaction with this service was investigated in the current study. Therefore, we believe that the results of our study would help enhance a significant mean of transportation for future Hajj seasons.

The present study showed also that religious guidance was an independent antecedent factor associated with favorable pilgrims' experience. Indeed, there are several stages that necessitate good knowledge about the rituals, and this could be effectively attained by the accurate guidance. For instance, after leaving Muzdalifa in the early morning of the 10th day of Dhu al-Hijjah (the Twelfth month of the Islamic calendar), pilgrims need extensive guidance on how they perform essential rituals, such as throwing stones, sacrificing the animals, and making dua at the Al-Jamarat. This knowledge-based service should be gained from certified individuals, and any limitations encountered in this service might lead to dissatisfaction. Since pilgrims' satisfaction is one of the main pillars of improving the overall experience, the Saudi Pilgrim Experience program aimed to enhancing the spiritual experience through a series of procedures that facilitate and simplify the hosting, guidance and transportation processes in a smooth way. In parallel, the national authorities aim to enrich the cultural and religious activities to make a memorable, transformative experience. Interestingly, we showed that the relationship between pilgrims' satisfaction with medical services and experience differed based on pilgrims' age. This might be explained by the necessity of medical services for religious tourists of advanced ages. In the COVID-19 era, health issues represent and

important aspect of the Hajj experience to prevent the spread of communicable diseases (Rustika et al., 2020). However, in our study, some services did not impact the overall experience of pilgrims. We hypothesized that food services would influence pilgrims' perceptions because international religious tourists come from different cultural backgrounds, and the culture and food habits of Saudi Arabia are different. Therefore, it is expected that there is a variation in the perception of food services. Nevertheless, we believe that the lack of a significant impact of food quality services might be attributed to the fact that the included sample was solely based on domestic pilgrims, which represents an exceptional condition. This limitation might be addressed in future research articles to include international pilgrims from different cultural backgrounds. In addition to such a limitation, the inherent limitations of survey-based studies remain problematic. That is, the causal relationships between different variables are limited by the cross-sectional design of the study.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The current study revealed important considerations in terms of the factors that influence the spiritual experience of Islamic Hajj pilgrims. Among the five domains of services, higher satisfaction levels with the transportation services and religious guidance were independently associated with higher levels of spiritual experience. On the other hand, the following services did not impact pilgrims' experience: food services, accommodation and medical services. Besides, the relationship between satisfaction with medical services and the spiritual experience differed significantly by pilgrims' age.

National authorities should implement adequate planning strategies to improve the local basic infrastructure, particularly the means of transportation to improve Hajj experience. Concomitantly, the authorities should resolve the potentially emerging issues that may arise during the transport, possibly by adopting relevant crowd management systems during rush times and avoiding long waiting hours. Additionally, since the Hajj journey entails multiple rituals which have to be performed based on specific rules and adequate knowledge, religious guidance should be warranted by tour operators before and during the Hajj journey. This is because many pilgrims lack proper religious wisdom and they need profound learning (Islam, 2021). This way, the hajj experience would form a positive perception via creating a good destination image for Muslim pilgrims, which would attract more pilgrims from other countries in the COVID-19 control era. Future studies should implement a survey-based design with interchangeable open-ended and closed-ended questions to get an insight into the personal perceptions and individual suggestions to improve the Hajj experience. Additionally, studies have to recruit domestic and internal pilgrims to account for the individual and cultural variation in self-perceptions of service quality measures. Eventually, academic scholars and Hajj agencies would be able to identify the gaps in the provided services and support the most significant factors that make the Hajj journey smooth, spiritually appealing and satisfactory.

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