



Religious tourism and life satisfaction: the role of motivation, perceived value and social cohesion

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study aimed to explore the relationships between religious tourism motivation (RTM), tourist perceived value (TPV), social cohesion (SC), life satisfaction (LS), and fear induced by COVID-19 (FC). The focus was on understanding how these factors interacted during the Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha parade, particularly in the context of the ongoing pandemic. Dongshan is a small town in Tainan, Taiwan.

Methods: Data collection with a snowball sample occurred from 23-12-2023, to 10-1-2024, yielding 304 responses. The survey assessed participant experiences and adaptations during the modified event. The relationships among RTM, TPV, SC, LS, and FC were analyzed using quantitative methods, with particular attention to the direct and indirect effects of RTM on TPV and SC, and their subsequent impact on LS.

Results: RTM significantly enhances TPV and SC directly and indirectly through TPV, positively influencing both SC and LS, with SC also positively contributing to LS. Interestingly, while fear negatively impacts LS, it does not significantly moderate the relationships between TPV and LS, nor SC and LS. This suggests that the direct and indirect effects of RTM and TPV are robust, even in the presence of pandemic-induced fear.

Implications: This study makes several theoretical and practical contributions to religious tourism. It confirms the significant role of RTM in enhancing perceived value and social cohesion, and it establishes the importance of perceived value in fostering social cohesion and life satisfaction. Moreover, it highlights the resilience of these relationships despite external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings offer valuable insights for managers and organizers of religious tourism events, emphasizing the need to enhance participant motivation and perceived value to boost social cohesion and life satisfaction, even amidst external challenges.

Keywords: religious tourism, religious tourism motivation, tourist perceived value, social cohesion, life satisfaction, fear

JEL Classification: Z12, A13, L83

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1 INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is immensely significant for individuals and communities globally (Tsai, 2021). It provides profound

spiritual and emotional experiences, enabling participants to deepen their faith, find solace, and partake in meaningful rituals and practices. Beyond the spiritual aspects, religious tourism is crucial for preserving and promoting cultural heritage. Pilgrimages and religious festivals often encompass



ancient traditions, art, music, and architecture that are vital to a community's identity. Economically, religious tourism can drive local development, generate income, create jobs, and improve infrastructure in host regions (Tkaczynski & Arli, 2018). Socially, it promotes community cohesion and intercultural dialogue by bringing together people from diverse backgrounds in shared acts of devotion and celebration (Collins-Kreiner, 2019). This convergence not only strengthens communal bonds but also fosters understanding and tolerance among different cultures and religions. Overall, religious tourism is a multifaceted phenomenon that enriches spiritual lives, sustains cultural heritage, boosts local economies, and enhances social cohesion, making it an essential area of study and practice.

Religious tourism, a branch of cultural tourism, has garnered considerable interest for its ability to provide deep spiritual and cultural experiences. Events such as "Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha" in Dongshan, Tainan, Taiwan, with their rich historical roots and cultural significance, illustrate how religious tourism can strengthen community bonds and enhance individual well-being. This annual event, featuring a five-hour, 14.6-kilometer pilgrimage, draws a diverse group of participants, underscoring its value as both a spiritual journey and a cultural tradition.

Despite the increasing interest in religious tourism, there is limited research on the factors that contribute to the perceived value and satisfaction of participants in such events. Existing studies have primarily focused on the general motivations and experiences of tourists without delving into the specific dynamics of religious events. This has left a significant gap in our understanding of how religious tourism motivation (RTM) specifically influences tourist perceived value (TPV) and social cohesion (SC), and how these factors collectively impact life satisfaction (LS).

Moreover, the impact of external disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on religious tourism experiences remains underexplored (Hsu et al., 2021). The pandemic has introduced unprecedented challenges and fears that could potentially alter the experiences and satisfaction levels of religious tourists. However, there is a paucity of research examining how these external fears and uncertainties interact with established motivational and satisfaction constructs in religious tourism.

This gap in the literature calls for a deeper understanding of how RTM, TPV, SC, and LS interact, particularly in the context of a global health crisis. Investigating these intricate relationships is crucial for enhancing the management and organization of religious tourism events. By examining how motivations drive perceived value and social cohesion, and how these, in turn, influence life satisfaction, we can develop strategies to improve participant experiences. Additionally, exploring the moderating role of fear induced by COVID-19 can provide insights into the resilience and adaptability of religious tourism in the face of external challenges. This knowledge is vital for stakeholders aiming to sustain and enrich religious tourism in turbulent times, ensuring that these events continue to provide meaningful and satisfying experiences for participants.

The study aimed to explore several key aspects of religious tourism, particularly in the context of the "Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha" event. One of the primary objectives was to investigate the role of RTM in enhancing TPV and SC.

Understanding this relationship is crucial as it sheds light on how motivational factors drive perceived value and social cohesion among tourists participating in religious events.

Additionally, the study examined the impact of TPV on SC and LS among participants. This objective is important because it highlights the downstream effects of perceived value on social cohesion and overall life satisfaction, providing a holistic view of the tourist experience in religious tourism contexts.

The contribution of SC to LS was another focus of the research. By exploring this relationship, the study aimed to demonstrate the positive impact of social cohesion on life satisfaction, emphasizing the importance of community and connectedness in enhancing the well-being of religious tourists.

Furthermore, the study assessed the moderating effect of fear induced by COVID-19 (FC) on the relationships between TPV, SC, and LS. This aspect of the research is particularly relevant given the ongoing pandemic, as it explores how external fears and uncertainties influence the established relationships between perceived value, social cohesion, and life satisfaction.

Finally, the study sought to provide theoretical and practical insights for improving the management of religious tourism events, especially in the face of external disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to fill existing research gaps and offer comprehensive insights into the dynamics of religious tourism. The findings contribute to academic knowledge by expanding current models of tourist satisfaction and motivation in the context of religious tourism. Moreover, they provide practical applications for event organizers and managers, helping them enhance participant experiences and satisfaction, even amid challenging circumstances.

This paper makes several important contributions. Firstly, it advances the theoretical understanding of how augmented reality (AR) can enhance the spiritual and cultural aspects of religious tourism. Secondly, by using a mixed methods approach, the research provides comprehensive insights into participants' experiences, combining quantitative data with qualitative narratives for a holistic view. Thirdly, the findings offer practical implications for tourism managers and policymakers, providing evidence-based recommendations for integrating AR into religious tourism events to boost participant engagement and satisfaction. Lastly, this study contributes to the broader knowledge of sustainable tourism practices, demonstrating how technological innovations can be used to preserve and promote cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Religious tourism in Taiwan

Taiwan is a polytheistic society with a wide array of religious beliefs, including Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity (Tsai, 2021), folk beliefs (Chou & Liu, 2023), Islam (Nugraha et al., 2022), and indigenous tribal beliefs (Wu, 2021). This diverse religious landscape fosters a vibrant setting for religious tourism, attracting both devout pilgrims and secular tourists to numerous sacred sites throughout the island.

Yeh et al. (2009) analyze pilgrimage sites in Taiwan as complex tourism destinations serving both religious devotees and casual vacationers. Their research on 427 pilgrims visiting the Da-Lin temple, dedicated to the goddess Mazu, uncovered diverse levels of devotion among attendees. Around 25% of participants demonstrated deep belief, while 40% reported low levels of self-assessed devotion. Factor analysis revealed that the primary motivation for visiting these sites was 'having a holiday,' suggesting that the appeal of pilgrimage sites extends beyond strictly religious purposes.

Tsai (2021) explores the pivotal role of religious tourism in Taiwan's tourism development, emphasizing the diverse motivations of visitors to religious sites. Her research on the Welcome Royal Lord Festival in Donggang, Tainan, Taiwan, identified four distinct tourist groups in a polytheistic setting: "Sacred Pilgrims," "Believers," "Experience Companions," and "Secular Polytheists." These groups varied in their satisfaction levels, participation behaviors, perceptions of cultural authenticity, and attachment to sacred sites. The study highlights potential conflicts between tourism development and religious sustainability, recommending event management strategies that balance cultural preservation with tourism attraction.

Wu (2021) examines tourism governance and its effects on indigenous communities through a case study of Nanao Township in Yilan County, Taiwan. The study underscores the significance of resource allocation, regulatory authority, and community networks in tourism development. In-depth interviews revealed that indigenous areas receive more national financial resources than nonindigenous areas. However, effective resource distribution depends on consensus reached through meeting and discussion platforms among tribes. The study highlights that sustainable tourism in indigenous communities requires respect for traditional wisdom and greater stakeholder agreement for successful participatory co-management.

These studies collectively highlight the complexity of religious tourism in Taiwan, where religious sites cater to both spiritual and recreational needs, attracting visitors with varied motivations. The findings stress the need to balance tourism development with the preservation of religious and cultural integrity, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are distributed fairly among local communities.

2.2. Religious tourism motivation

Religious tourism involves a variety of motivations, indicating that many visitors to religious sites are neither entirely secular tourists nor solely pilgrims. Instead, they fall somewhere in between, driven by a mix of motives such as worship, learning about religious rituals, and seeking cultural or adventurous experiences (Terzidou et al., 2018). Tourist motivation is complex, involving multiple needs that are addressed within a single trip (Kim et al., 2020; Yeh et al., 2009). Visitors to religious sites often have diverse reasons for their visits, ranging from religious pilgrimage to cultural or adventurous tourism (Ebadi, 2014; Kelly, 2012).

The line between pilgrims and secular tourists has become increasingly blurred. The term "pilgrim" now encompasses motivations for travel that include both religious and non-religious reasons (Lochrie et al., 2019; Rashid, 2018). This expanded definition reflects the intricate nature of

contemporary religious tourism, where motivations defy simple categorization. For example, some visitors may seek spiritual enrichment, while others are motivated by a curiosity to explore cultural heritage or enjoy distinctive experiences.

Studies by Yeh et al. (2009) and Tsai (2021) established classifications of tourists visiting pilgrimage sites. These research efforts confirmed that tourist attitudes and behaviors along the pilgrim-tourist spectrum are heavily influenced by their religious affiliations and beliefs. Yeh et al. (2009) highlighted factors such as social interaction, intellectual curiosity, and experiential learning as significant motivators for engaging in religious pilgrimages. Likewise, Tsai (2021) underscored that visitors' self-perception and motivations for travel frequently shape their overall experiences and levels of satisfaction.

Cultural factors are also influential in shaping secular-religious motivations. Tsai et al. (2002) discovered that cultural considerations strongly affect visitors' reasons for visiting religious sites such as the Vatican. For many, these visits are not solely driven by religious devotion but also by a desire to immerse themselves in the rich cultural and historical settings of these locations. This dual motivation often leads to return visits, as individuals seek both spiritual and cultural enrichment.

In summary, motivation for religious tourism involves a complex interaction of religious, cultural, and individual factors. Whether guided by faith, curiosity, or a quest for cultural enrichment, religious tourists embody a range of motivations that blur distinctions between pilgrimage and tourism. This fusion of motivations leads to a hybrid experience that enhances both the secular and spiritual dimensions of travel. Understanding this intricate motivational landscape is essential for effectively managing and promoting religious tourism destinations, ensuring they meet the diverse needs of their visitors. By recognizing the multifaceted nature of tourist motivations, destination managers can design more inclusive and compelling experiences that resonate with a wide audience.

2.3. Tourist perceived value

Perceived value, a fundamental concept in marketing, is crucial for understanding consumer behavior within relationship marketing contexts (Zietsman et al., 2020). Recently, it has garnered significant attention in tourism and hospitality research. Scholars have identified two primary approaches to conceptualize perceived value. The first approach considers perceived value as a balance between total perceived benefits and total perceived sacrifices made by customers (Lin et al., 2020). In religious tourism, perceived value is particularly influenced by religious factors, which play a pivotal role in shaping tourists' consumption experiences (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015; Prayag, 2020). Religious affiliations significantly impact tourists' perceptions of value (Jamal & Sharifuddin, 2015; Schweinsberg, 2023), which are highly subjective. As tourists visit various religious sites, they discern different types of value, thereby adding complexity to the exploration of perceived value in religious tourism.

Yu et al. (2021) explored the connection between tourist perceived value and life satisfaction in religious tourism, an area that had been less studied previously. Their research

focused on Buddhist temple tours in China and found a positive relationship between tourist perceived value and life satisfaction, with tourist satisfaction serving as a mediator in this relationship. They developed a scale to assess Buddhist tourist perceived value, encompassing seven dimensions: quality, price, emotional value, social value, educational value, physical attributes, and non-physical attributes. This comprehensive approach underscores the diverse aspects of perceived value within religious tourism.

Koburtay and Syed (2021) investigated the impact of adherence to religious guidelines and the availability of spiritual amenities on psychological well-being and guest satisfaction in 5-star hotels in Jordan. Their mixed-method study revealed that the presence of spiritual facilities contributes positively to both employee well-being and guest satisfaction, whereas non-compliance with religious regulations has a negative effect on these factors. This research expands the understanding of perceived value by incorporating the well-being of employees and guests within a Middle Eastern cultural context.

Buzinde (2020) utilized self-determination theory (SDT) to investigate the well-being effects of spiritual tourism. Through an autoethnographic examination of a yoga/meditation retreat in India, Buzinde connected experiential and self-reflective aspects of spiritual tourism to larger social outcomes such as well-being. This perspective highlights the significance of intrinsic motivations and personal development in influencing perceived value in religious tourism.

Dinh et al. (2022) examined how religiosity influences consumer behavior among Catholics in Vietnam. They discovered that life satisfaction acts as a mediator between religious commitments and customer loyalty. Moreover, ethical considerations amplify the effect of intrinsic religiosity on consumer loyalty. This study provides a sociological insight into how religious commitments shape consumer behavior and perceived value within the context of religious tourism.

To sum up, perceived value in religious tourism is intricate and multifaceted, shaped by factors such as religious commitments, personal experiences, and cultural contexts. Recognizing and comprehending these diverse dimensions is essential for successfully managing and promoting religious tourism destinations, thereby meeting the diverse needs and expectations of tourists.

2.4. Social cohesion

Social cohesion refers to the degree of connectedness and solidarity among groups within society (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020; Ramírez-Hurtado et al., 2022). It closely relates to social capital, encompassing aspects of social organization such as trust, norms, and networks that facilitate coordinated action and enhance societal effectiveness. Clarke et al. (2023) elaborate on this concept by defining social cohesion as the collective reasons why individuals choose to remain in a specific community, emphasizing its significance in urban greenspaces (Ma et al., 2023; Rasul & Hoque, 2020). Their analysis underscores that factors promoting social cohesion include crime reduction, enhanced maintenance, provision of physical spaces, and amenities for social gatherings, with considerations of safety, accessibility, and inclusivity playing pivotal roles.

The relationship between religion and social cohesion is complex. Laliotis and Minos (2022) explored this connection within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Western Germany, revealing that predominantly Catholic regions, characterized by strong family and social bonds, faced higher rates of infections and deaths during the early stages of the pandemic. This suggests that religious affiliation, influencing social interactions, can significantly impact social cohesion (Lee, 2020). Their research indicates that Catholics tend to have more frequent and close interactions with family and friends compared to non-Catholics, illustrating the role of religious communities in fostering social cohesion. This heightened social interaction partly explains the increased COVID-19 incidence in areas dominated by Catholics, highlighting the intricate interplay among religious practices, social cohesion, and public health outcomes.

Mouratidis and Poortinga (2020) investigate the relationship between urban vitality, the built environment, and social cohesion. They observe that compact urban forms characterized by higher density and mixed land use can enhance urban vitality but are negatively linked to social cohesion. In contrast, urban vitality shows a positive association with social cohesion in comparable urban settings, indicating that local efforts to encourage walking and social interaction can bolster social cohesion (Sorakunnas, 2022). This highlights that both religious practices and urban design impact social cohesion, with their effects contingent on the context and specific attributes of the environment.

Social cohesion, characterized by connectedness and solidarity within society, is shaped by both religious practices and urban design. Religion, especially in communities where social bonds are strong, can contribute positively to social cohesion but may present challenges during events like pandemics. Urban design and the vibrancy of neighborhoods also have substantial impacts, influencing how cities are structured and administered to promote social cohesion and overall well-being.

2.5. Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction within the domain of religious tourism is deeply influenced by several factors (Houge Mackenzie et al., 2023), including perceived value, spiritual enrichment, and cultural contexts. Research highlights that spiritual tourism, grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), significantly contributes to the well-being of tourists. Buzinde (2020) exemplifies this through an autoethnographic exploration of a yoga and meditation retreat in Rishikesh, India, demonstrating that such experiences promote personal development, introspection, and a sense of community. These aspects align with SDT's principles of fulfilling intrinsic psychological needs like autonomy and connection, thereby enhancing overall psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

Moreover, religiosity significantly influences life satisfaction within the realm of religious tourism. Dinh et al. (2022) examine how Catholic affiliations in Vietnam affect ethical decision-making and customer loyalty, thereby bolstering life satisfaction through a sense of purpose and moral grounding. This research underscores that religious commitments not only shape individual behaviors but also contribute positively

to overall life satisfaction by offering ethical frameworks and enhancing personal fulfillment.

In the field of Buddhist tourism, Yu et al. (2021) examine the connection between tourist perceived value, satisfaction, and life satisfaction. They identify seven dimensions of perceived value for Buddhist tourists and observe a positive relationship between perceived value and life satisfaction, mediated by tourist satisfaction. This indicates that enhancing cultural and spiritual experiences at Buddhist temples not only improves tourists' immediate satisfaction but also contributes to their overall life satisfaction by fulfilling profound spiritual and cultural desires.

Furthermore, the inclusion of spiritual amenities and adherence to religious protocols in hospitality settings, as examined by Koburtay and Syed (2021), have a substantial impact on the well-being of hotel workers and the happiness of guests. This study suggests that establishing supportive and spiritually enriching environments enhances life satisfaction among both employees and guests. These findings highlight the significance of incorporating spiritual aspects into tourism operations to promote well-being and satisfaction among participants (Mirchie & Gibson, 2020).

In summary, life satisfaction in religious tourism is closely tied to perceived value, spiritual enrichment, and cultural factors. Appreciating these dynamics can guide the formulation of tourism strategies that address tourists' immediate needs while also promoting their long-term well-being and life satisfaction. By prioritizing spiritual experiences, respecting cultural contexts, and fostering personal development, religious tourism has the potential to significantly enhance overall life satisfaction among tourists globally.

2.6. Fear induced by COVID-19

The anxiety triggered by COVID-19 has significantly disrupted religious gatherings worldwide, underscoring the need for effective crisis management strategies (Yeh, 2021). Hsu et al. (2021) emphasize the critical role of non-pharmaceutical interventions in controlling COVID-19 during large religious gatherings, recommending measures such as social distancing and hygiene protocols to reduce transmission risks.

Laliotis and Minos (2022) investigate how religious interactions in Western Germany have influenced COVID-19 incidence, highlighting elevated transmission rates linked to close and prolonged contact during religious practices. This underscores the challenge of balancing spiritual needs with public health imperatives. Yeh (2021) discusses strategies for revitalizing tourism post-COVID-19, advocating phased reopening and adaptable measures to sustain religious tourism while addressing ongoing concerns and restrictions. Managing COVID-19 fears in religious settings demands coordinated crisis management, rigorous health protocols, and flexible strategies to ensure safety, rebuild confidence, and facilitate the gradual recovery of religious tourism globally.

2.7. Hypothesis development

RTM plays a pivotal role in enhancing TPV and SC within religious tourism contexts. Studies by Eid and El-Gohary (2015) and Terzidou et al. (2018) have consistently shown that individuals driven by strong religious motives perceive

greater value in their tourism experiences. This perception stems from the fulfillment of spiritual needs, cultural enrichment, and the unique emotional and social benefits derived from participating in religious activities. Moreover, heightened RTM fosters a sense of shared purpose and community among participants, thereby strengthening social cohesion during religious events. This cohesion is evident through shared rituals, collective identities, and mutual support among participants, all of which contribute to a more fulfilling and satisfying tourism experience. Therefore, the study proposes:

H1: Attendees' religious tourism motivation (RTM) positively contributes to their tourist perceived value (TPV).

H2: Attendees' religious tourism motivation (RTM) positively contributes to social cohesion (SC).

TPV significantly influences both SC and LS among religious tourists. Research by Zietsman et al. (2020) and Mouratidis & Poortinga (2020) underscores that tourists who perceive higher value in their religious tourism experiences are more likely to engage actively with the local community, participate in communal activities, and build stronger interpersonal relationships. This sense of belonging and connectedness enhances social cohesion, as participants feel integrated into a supportive network of like-minded individuals. Moreover, TPV correlates positively with life satisfaction, as tourists derive greater joy, meaning, and fulfillment from their enriched cultural and spiritual encounters during religious journeys. Therefore, the study proposes:

H3: Tourist perceived value (TPV) positively contributes to social cohesion (SC).

H4: Tourist perceived value (TPV) positively contributes to life satisfaction (LS).

SC within religious tourism settings positively impacts LS among participants. As highlighted by Mouratidis & Poortinga (2020) and Clarke et al. (2023), cohesive social interactions foster a sense of belonging and emotional well-being among tourists. Engaging in shared rituals, mutual support, and collective celebrations strengthens interpersonal bonds and enhances the overall satisfaction derived from religious tourism experiences. Participants feel more content and fulfilled when they perceive themselves as part of a supportive community that shares similar values and beliefs, thereby reinforcing their positive perceptions of life satisfaction. Therefore, the study proposes:

H5: Social cohesion (SC) positively contributes to life satisfaction (LS).

FC serves as a significant moderator that diminishes the positive effects of TPV and SC on LS in religious tourism. Recent studies (Hsu et al., 2021; Laliotis & Minos, 2022) have documented how the fear of pandemic-related risks and uncertainties detracts from tourists' perceived value in their experiences. Concerns over health and safety measures during religious gatherings undermine the emotional and social benefits typically associated with religious tourism, thereby reducing overall life satisfaction. Similarly, heightened fear levels inhibit social cohesion by limiting physical interactions, communal activities, and the formation of close-knit relationships among participants, which are

crucial for enhancing satisfaction within religious tourism contexts. Therefore, the study proposes:

H6: Fear induced by COVID-19 (FC) negatively moderates the relationship between tourist perceived value (TPV) and life satisfaction (LS).

H7: Fear induced by COVID-19 (FC) negatively moderates the relationship between social cohesion (SC) and life satisfaction (LS).

The hypotheses are presented in Figure 1:

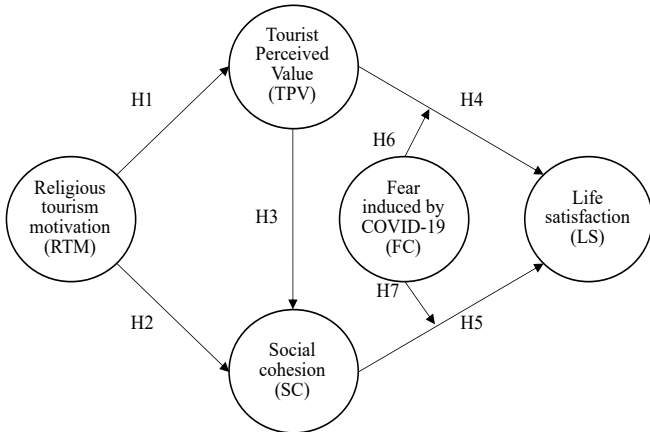


Figure 1: Research Model

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1. Dongshan welcomes the Buddha

The event "Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha," held on the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month, has a history dating back over 160 years, originating around 1844. This tradition begins with a five-hour, 14.6-kilometer pilgrimage that commences early in the morning from Dongshan Bixuan Temple (see Figure 2). The Guanyin Buddha of Bixuan Temple, also known as the Second Mother, was initially housed at Huoshan Biyun Temple. In 1832, during a rebellion led by Zhang Bing in Baihe, Huoshan Biyun Temple was destroyed. Fleeing the turmoil, the monks of the temple carried the revered Second Mother overnight. In 1844, upon invitation by Dongshan residents, the Second Mother was relocated to Dongshan, where a temporary shrine was erected. Subsequently, with contributions from local residents of Dongshan and parts of Baihe Town, Bixuan Temple was constructed. Annually on the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month, the community respectfully accompanies the Buddha back to Biyun Temple to celebrate the Lunar New Year. Late on the 9th day of the first lunar month, they return her to Dongshan Bixuan Temple in the event known as "Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha."

Following divine guidance, the people of Dongshan moved the Second Mother to Dongshan Bixuan Temple to honor the blessings of the Guanyin Buddha. In reverence, they escort her back to Biyun Temple every year to reunite with the Guanyin Buddha for the New Year, bringing her back to Dongshan on the 10th day of the first lunar month. The pilgrimage route follows ancient paths, offering views of unique agricultural produce and the tranquil atmosphere of mountain homesteads. Despite the absence of elaborate ceremonial processions, this sincere journey from the plains

to the mountains is quietly undertaken by the people of Dongshan.

Midway through the pilgrimage, meals are provided at Baoan Temple and Sheng'an Temple, with vegetarian options available upon arrival at Biyun Temple. For those unable to navigate the steep terrain, shuttle buses are provided by the temple. After dining at Biyun Temple, shuttle buses transport devotees back to Dongshan Bixuan Temple. This annual event, maintaining its original temple fair format across generations, continues to hold significant cultural and spiritual value for the community of Dongshan.

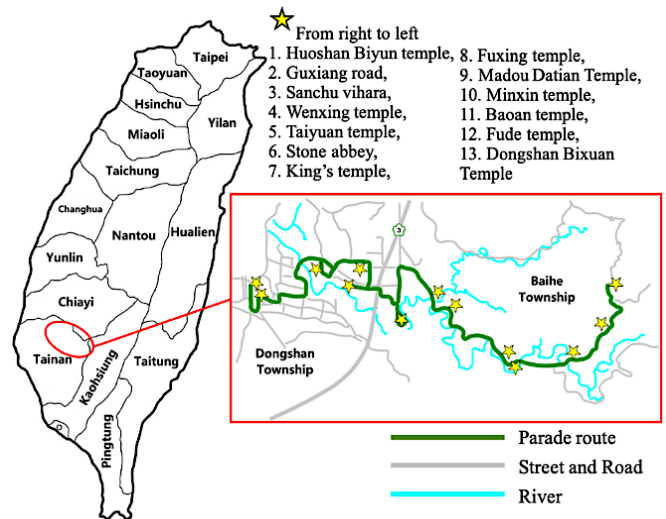


Figure 2: Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha parade route

3.2. Data collection

The research focused on the Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha procession, typically drawing thousands of participants, but limited to 200 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection took place from December 23, 2023, to January 10, 2024, immediately after restrictions were lifted. Using convenient sampling and a snowball method, 104 questionnaires were distributed onsite, supplemented by a QR code for remote participation from past attendees. This approach aimed to gather diverse perspectives and extend the survey's reach beyond immediate participants. By the study's completion, 304 responses were collected, providing insights into participant experiences and adjustments made during the adapted event.

The data was collected immediately after COVID-19 restrictions had just been lifted, which was a deliberate choice to observe post-pandemic behavior among believers. This timing was selected to capture the immediate reactions and adaptations of participants in a newly unrestricted environment. The paper acknowledges this timing as a possible limitation, as the recent lifting of restrictions may have influenced the behaviors and responses of the participants.

The data collection method successfully captured the intricacies of participant experiences amid pandemic limitations. It enabled a thorough exploration of how religious gatherings adjust in such conditions, offering valuable insights into participant interactions and the event's societal importance during the recovery period.

3.3. Measurement

In the field of tourism, religious tourism holds a prominent and profoundly meaningful position, involving journeys driven by spiritual motivations. This paper delves into key concepts such as Religious Tourism Motivation (RTM), Tourist Perceived Value (TPV), Social Cohesion (SC), Life Satisfaction (LS), and Fear induced by COVID-19 (FC), examining their measurement components and hypotheses within the framework of religious tourism.

RTM serves as a foundational concept encompassing the various motivations that drive individuals to engage in religious tourism. It is evaluated using indicators that explore spiritual exploration, pilgrimage, cultural immersion, and religious experiences, drawing from established methodologies in the field (Terzidou, Scarles, & Saunders, 2018).

TPV, another critical construct, evaluates tourists' assessments of the benefits they receive compared to the sacrifices made during their religious tourism experiences. TPV includes dimensions such as quality, emotional value, social value, and price value, which are essential for understanding tourists' levels of satisfaction (Yu et al., 2021). SC reflects the degree of unity and connectedness among participants in religious tourism events. Measured through indicators like community sense, shared experiences, and group solidarity, SC underscores the communal aspects that enhance the overall tourism experience (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020).

LS gauges participants' overall assessment of their lives, particularly in the context of their experiences with religious tourism. This construct encompasses general life satisfaction as well as satisfaction derived from participating in religious activities, illustrating the profound impact of these experiences on individuals' well-being (Yeh et al., 2021; Koburtay & Syed, 2021).

FC has emerged as a crucial moderating factor in recent times, influencing participants' perceptions and behaviors in religious tourism. FC assesses the levels of apprehension and concerns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly concerning health risks and safety during religious gatherings (Hsu et al., 2021; Laliotis & Minos, 2022).

4 DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Reliability and validity

In order to validate the measurement model used in this study, several reliability and validity assessments were performed.

4.1.1. Factor loadings and multicollinearity

Factor loadings ranged from 0.583 to 0.893. In Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), a factor loading above 0.7 is typically recommended to indicate strong item reliability (Seyfi et al., 2024). While some factor loadings in this study fell below this threshold, they are deemed acceptable in the context of exploratory research. Multicollinearity was evaluated using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values (Gopalan & Khalid, 2024). Most VIF values were below 3, which is generally acceptable, but five VIF values exceeded 3, with the highest reaching 4.698,

indicating potential multicollinearity issues among certain predictors.

4.1.2. Model fit

Model fit was evaluated using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and the Normed Fit Index (NFI). The SRMR value was 0.068, and the NFI was 0.758, indicating an adequate model fit (Hair Jr et al., 2014). These values suggest that the model adequately represents the observed data.

4.1.3. Common Method Variance

Common Method Variance (CMV) was assessed, and the CMV value was 25.149%. Since this is well below the 50% threshold, it indicates that CMV is not a significant issue in this study (Eichhorn, 2014).

4.1.4. Reliability and validity

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values. Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.869 to 0.938, and all CR values exceeded 0.9, demonstrating good internal consistency and reliability of the constructs (Nunnally, 1978).

Convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. The majority of AVE values exceeded 0.5, indicating strong convergent validity. The exception was the AVE value for Religious Tourism Motivation (RTM), which measured 0.475. While this falls slightly below the ideal threshold of 0.5, it still surpasses 0.36, which is considered acceptable in certain contexts.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), the square root of the AVE should be greater than the inter-construct correlation. This criterion was met for all constructs except for the correlation between RTM and Social Cohesion (SC), where the square root of AVE (0.689) was less than the correlation (0.738). This indicates a potential issue with discriminant validity for RTM. However, the HTMT values were all below 0.85 (Roemer et al., 2021), indicating good discriminant validity overall.

Despite encountering minor issues, such as the slightly lower AVE for RTM and potential multicollinearity among specific predictors, the overall reliability and validity of the measurement model are considered acceptable. Since most indices meet or surpass acceptable thresholds, the study proceeds with hypothesis testing.

Table 1: Reliability and validity

	α	rho_A	CR	AVE	FC	LS	RTM	SC	TPV
					HTMT				
FC	0.914	0.935	0.935	0.743	0.862	0.252	0.155	0.167	0.261
LS	0.901	0.904	0.927	0.717	-0.239	0.847	0.562	0.607	0.682
RTM	0.899	0.902	0.916	0.475	-0.134	0.521	0.689	0.796	0.757
SC	0.938	0.941	0.951	0.765	-0.158	0.569	0.738	0.874	0.844
TPV	0.869	0.881	0.900	0.565	-0.231	0.619	0.676	0.771	0.751
Fornell-Larcker criterion									

Cronbach's Alpha (α), Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Bold in diagonal cells (square root of AVE).

4.2. Sample characteristics

This section provides a succinct overview of the demographic profile of participants in the survey conducted during the

Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha event. A total of 304 responses were collected, revealing a notable gender disparity. The majority of respondents were male, comprising 194 individuals (63.8%), while females accounted for 110 respondents (36.2%). This gender distribution likely reflects specific cultural or social dynamics associated with the event. Participants' ages varied widely, representing a diverse spectrum. The largest age groups included adults aged 36-45, with significant numbers in the 21-25, 41-45, and 46-50 ranges. Smaller clusters were observed in the 26-35 and 51-55 brackets, with younger participants aged 11-20 and older participants over 50 also represented.

Occupationally, respondents represented a broad array of fields, highlighting diverse societal roles. The most common occupations included businesspersons, service industry workers, and public servants. Students, freelancers, and individuals in unspecified occupations were also part of the respondent group.

Participants assumed various roles within the event, reflecting their levels of engagement. The largest segment consisted of parade followers, followed by spectators and those involved in carrying the sedan chair. Others included residents along the route, volunteers, leaders of the parade formation, and temple officials.

In summary, the survey respondents of the Dongshan Welcomes the Buddha event exhibited diverse demographic characteristics. They predominantly consisted of males and encompassed various age groups and occupational backgrounds. Their involvement ranged from active participants to observers, providing a comprehensive snapshot of the community engaged in this significant cultural and religious event.

4.3. Hypothesis testing

The data analysis was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses and the result is presented in Table 2 and Figure 3. The analysis supports hypothesis H1 with a significant positive relationship ($\beta=0.676$, $t=9.310$, $p=0.000$), indicating that higher religious tourism motivation significantly enhances the perceived value among participants. The hypothesis H2 is also supported with a strong positive relationship ($\beta=0.738$, $t=17.064$, $p=0.000$). The effect of RTM on SC is partially direct ($\beta=0.399$, $t=2.887$, $p=0.004$) and partially mediated through TPV ($\beta=0.399$, $t=3.023$, $p=0.003$).

Table 2: Hypothesis testing results

		Total			Direct			Indirect		
		β	t	p	β	t	p	β	t	p
H1	RTM→TPV	0.676	9.310	0.000	0.676	9.310	0.000			
H2	RTM→SC	0.738	17.064	0.000	0.399	2.887	0.004	0.339	3.023	0.003
H3	TPV→SC	0.501	4.047	0.000	0.501	4.047	0.000			
H4	TPV→LS	0.484	6.542	0.000	0.362	3.481	0.001	0.121	2.151	0.032
H5	SC→LS	0.242	2.639	0.008	0.242	2.639	0.008			
	FC→LS	-0.157	2.727	0.007	-0.157	2.727	0.007			
H6	moderation	-0.003	0.029	0.977	-0.003	0.029	0.977			
H7	moderation	0.157	1.511	0.131	0.157	1.511	0.131			
	RTM→LS	0.424	9.580	0.000				0.424	9.580	0.000

This indicates that RTM enhances social cohesion directly and indirectly by increasing the perceived value. The analysis confirms hypothesis H3 proposing a significant positive effect ($\beta=0.501$, $t=4.047$, $p=0.000$), suggesting that higher perceived value fosters stronger social cohesion among

participants. The hypothesis H4 is supported ($\beta=0.484$, $t=6.542$, $p=0.000$), with both direct ($\beta=0.362$, $t=3.481$, $p=0.001$) and mediated effects through SC ($\beta=0.121$, $t=2.151$, $p=0.032$). This implies that higher perceived value enhances life satisfaction, both directly and indirectly by strengthening social cohesion. The results confirm this hypothesis H5 with a significant positive relationship ($\beta=0.242$, $t=2.639$, $p=0.008$), indicating that enhanced social cohesion leads to increased life satisfaction among participants.

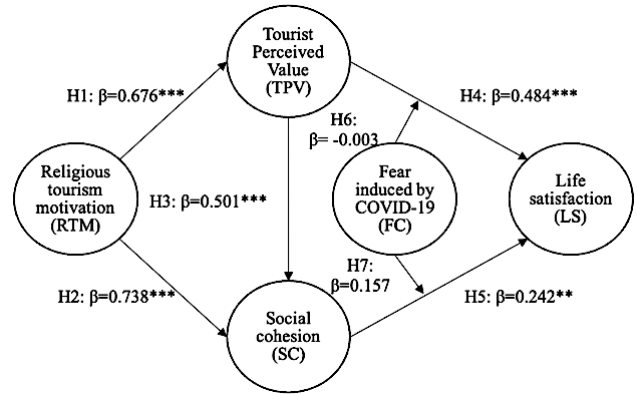


Figure 3: Hypothesis testing results

The hypothesis H6 is not supported ($\beta=-0.003$, $t=0.029$, $p=0.977$). The slope diagram shows parallel regression slopes for low, medium, and high FC, indicating that the level of fear induced by COVID-19 does not significantly affect the relationship between perceived value and life satisfaction. This may be due to the COVID-19 period having passed, reducing the fear's impact on this relationship.

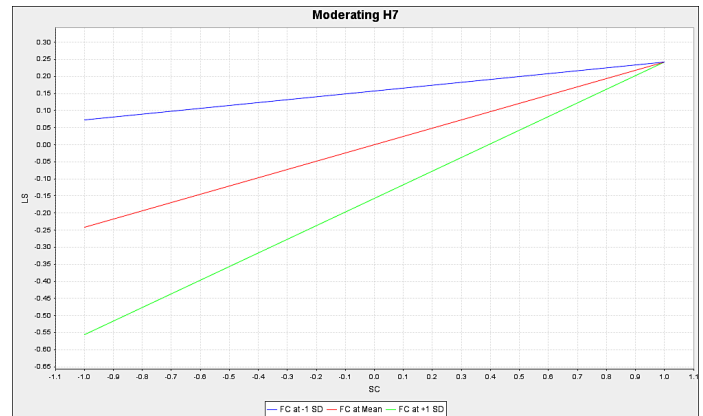


Figure 4: Slope diagram for H7

Additional findings include a significant negative effect of FC on LS ($\beta=-0.157$, $t=2.727$, $p=0.007$) and a strong positive relationship between RTM and LS ($\beta=0.424$, $t=9.580$, $p=0.000$) through sequential mediation. These results highlight that, although fear can reduce life satisfaction, strong religious tourism motivation and perceived value can enhance both social cohesion and life satisfaction.

4.4. Discussion

The findings provide comprehensive insights into the relationships among RTM, TPV, SC, LS, and FC, with both theoretical and practical implications for religious tourism

events, particularly in the context of disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic.

TPV moderately mediates the relationship between RTM and SC, with the direct impact ($\beta=0.399$, $p=0.000$) almost equal to the mediated effect ($\beta=0.339$, $p=0.003$), suggesting that perceived value plays a significant role in translating religious motivation into social cohesion. SC serves as a small mediator for the relationship between TPV and LS, with the direct impact ($\beta=0.362$, $p=0.001$) almost equal to the mediated effect ($\beta=0.121$, $p=0.032$), indicating that social cohesion slightly enhances the effect of perceived value on life satisfaction. The significant impact of FC on LS ($p=0.007$) suggests that life satisfaction is gradually improving as the pandemic recedes, although fear still negatively affects it. The moderators had no significant effects on both TPV to LS and SC to LS relationships. However, the slope analysis suggests that higher fear levels might enhance the positive impact of social cohesion on life satisfaction, implying that social cohesion becomes more important in times of increased fear.

This study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of religious tourism. It highlights the significant roles of RTM, TPV, and SC in enhancing life satisfaction among participants and underscores the importance of perceived value and social cohesion in fostering positive experiences. The findings suggest that while fear induced by COVID-19 negatively impacts life satisfaction, its moderating effect on the relationships between TPV, SC, and LS is limited. These insights are crucial for stakeholders aiming to improve the management and organization of religious tourism events, ensuring they remain meaningful and satisfying even amidst external challenges.

5 CONCLUSION

The study aimed to explore the intricate connections between Religious Tourism Motivation (RTM), Tourist Perceived Value (TPV), Social Cohesion (SC), Life Satisfaction (LS), and Fear induced by COVID-19 (FC). The findings illuminate that RTM exerts a positive influence on TPV and SC, both directly and indirectly through TPV. TPV, in turn, plays a significant role by positively impacting SC and LS, while SC further enhances LS. It is noteworthy that FC adversely affects LS, indicating a negative impact of pandemic-induced fear on overall life satisfaction within religious tourism contexts. Importantly, FC does not significantly moderate the relationships between TPV and LS, nor SC and LS, suggesting that the robust effects of RTM and TPV on life satisfaction endure despite the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic. These findings underscore the resilience of intrinsic motivations and perceived value in sustaining positive tourist experiences and satisfaction levels in religious tourism, even amidst global health concerns.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the field of religious tourism. Firstly, it confirms the significant role of RTM in enhancing perceived value and social cohesion, enriching our understanding of motivational drivers in religious tourism. By demonstrating the direct and indirect effects of RTM on TPV and SC, this research provides a

deeper insight into the mechanisms through which motivation influences participant experiences. Secondly, it establishes the importance of perceived value in fostering social cohesion and life satisfaction, thereby extending existing models of tourist satisfaction to the religious tourism context. This finding emphasizes the need to consider TPV as a critical factor in enhancing participant well-being and community feeling. Thirdly, the findings highlight the resilience of these relationships despite external disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, providing insights into the stability of motivational and satisfaction constructs in turbulent times. This underscores the robustness of the motivational drivers and perceived value in maintaining participant satisfaction and social cohesion even under significant external stress.

5.2. Managerial implications

The findings offer several practical implications for managers and organizers of religious tourism events. To enhance participant satisfaction and social cohesion, efforts should be made to boost religious tourism motivation and perceived value through enriched and meaningful experiences. For instance, incorporating culturally and spiritually significant activities that resonate with participants can elevate their perceived value and motivation. Since the study shows that perceived value significantly influences social cohesion and life satisfaction, event organizers should focus on creating high-value experiences that resonate deeply with participants. Additionally, understanding that fear from external factors like COVID-19 can diminish life satisfaction, measures to mitigate such fears and reassure participants can further enhance their overall experience and satisfaction. This could involve implementing stringent health and safety protocols, providing transparent communication about safety measures, and offering psychological support services to address participants' concerns. By addressing these aspects, managers can ensure a more fulfilling and cohesive experience for participants, ultimately leading to higher life satisfaction and a stronger sense of community.

Overall, this study not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of religious tourism motivations and their impacts but also provides actionable insights for practitioners to enhance the management and organization of religious tourism events.

5.3. Research limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of religious tourism, it is essential to recognize several limitations that may affect the interpretation and broader applicability of its findings. One notable limitation is the reliance on convenience and snowball sampling methods, which might constrain the generalizability of the results. Participants recruited through these methods may not fully represent the diverse population of religious tourism participants, potentially biasing the findings towards specific demographics or characteristics prevalent in the sampled group.

Furthermore, while the study's sample size was considered adequate, it may not capture the full spectrum of diversity within religious tourism. This limitation could impact the breadth and depth of the conclusions drawn from the study.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for response biases, where participants may answer in ways they perceive as socially desirable or aligning with perceived expectations rather than reflecting their true experiences.

To mitigate these limitations, future research efforts could employ more rigorous sampling techniques, such as stratified or random sampling, to ensure a more representative and diverse participant pool. Increasing sample diversity across various demographic, cultural, and geographical dimensions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different groups experience and perceive religious tourism.

In addition, longitudinal studies could offer valuable insights into how factors influencing life satisfaction in religious tourism evolve over time. Such an approach would enable researchers to capture changes in perceptions, behaviors, and experiences across different stages of religious tourism participation, enhancing the study's depth and longitudinal validity.

Moreover, expanding the scope of investigation to include other moderating variables beyond fear induced by COVID-19 could enrich the study's findings and applicability. Exploring factors such as socio-economic status, cultural norms, and personal motivations could offer a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics influencing life satisfaction within religious tourism contexts.

Addressing these avenues for future research could significantly contribute to advancing knowledge in this field and inform more effective strategies for enhancing the overall tourist experience in religious settings.

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