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## The effect of religious tourism experiences on personal values

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For humans, happiness can be a consequence of positive behaviours and regarded as their ultimate goal (Seligman, 2004). Since the late 1990s, happiness has been a prominent topic in the field of positive psychology, which seeks, from a psychological perspective, to understand how to make people happier and help them lead more satisfactory lives (Peterson *et al.*, 2005; Seligman, 2004). According to Authentic Happiness Theory (AHT), developed by positive psychologist Martin Seligman (2004), seeking life satisfaction is a long-lasting life concept.

As the understanding of tourism experience has evolved to see it as a life-changing event for profound intra-transformation of a person, religious experience during pilgrimage has been investigated to understand the holistic phenomenon of religious tourism (Andriotis, 2009; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008). The experience of oneself in a sacred place is considered the key element that religious tourists seek during their visits to religious tourism destinations. During their visits to religious sites, they have particular experiences that can be mainly provided in these places through psychological and emotional changes. Moreover, religion has a significant impact on life satisfaction and happiness (Headey *et al.*, 2010).

This study applies AHT to religious tourism experiences and extends the model to the emotional aspect. This study aims to investigate the impact of religious tourism experiences on two personal values and focuses on the mediating role of emotional connection between religious tourism experience and personal values. For this study's empirical analysis, religious tourists who answered that religion was important for their travel in Rome/Vatican City were asked to participate in a survey process. This study proves that religious tourism experiences affect happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

**Key Words:** Religious tourism experience, happiness, self-satisfaction/fulfilment, emotional connection

## Introduction

For humans, happiness can be a consequence of positive behaviours and regarded as their ultimate goal (Seligman, 2004). This has been believed since antiquity; ancient Greek philosophers – especially Epicurus – asserted that humans fundamentally possess a strong desire for happiness and attempt to pursue a happy life. Since the late 1990s, happiness has been a prominent topic in the field of positive psychology, which seeks, from a psychological perspective, to understand how to make people happier and help them lead more satisfactory lives (Peterson *et al.*, 2005; Seligman, 2004). According to Authentic Happiness Theory (AHT), developed by positive psychologist Martin Seligman (2004), seeking life satisfaction is a long-lasting life concept. An individual's happiness is

related to three main elements – positive emotions, engagement, and meaning.

In tourism studies, tourism experience has been expressively discussed as being accompanied by the attainment of personal values (Gnoth, 1997) and as an event engaged in at an emotional, physical, spiritual, or intellectual level (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Tourism experience is regarded as a complex psychological process because instances of tourism provide memories of such experiences and emotions that are related to places in an affective process (Noy, 2004). In turn, it offers individuals opportunities for self-exploration, re-examination of a deep understanding of self, self-transformation, and personal changes leading to a significant decision in someone's life (Brown, 2013).

As the understanding of tourism experience has evolved to see it as a life-changing event for profound intra-transformation of a person, religious experience during pilgrimage has been investigated to understand the holistic phenomenon of religious tourism (Andriotis, 2009; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008). The experience of oneself in a sacred place is considered the key element that religious tourists seek during their visits to religious tourism destinations.

Religious tourism has been regarded as a typology of tourism that is initiated based on individuals' religious faith (Rinschede, 1992). In religion-initiated tourism, tourists are motivated by multiple reasons, such as religious ritual, cult, worship, culture, heritage, spirituality, and knowledge (Andriotis, 2009; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008). During their visits to religious sites, they have particular experiences that can be mainly provided in these places through psychological and emotional changes. Moreover, religion has a significant impact on life satisfaction and happiness (Headey *et al.*, 2010).

However, religious experiences generated through religious tourism have been undervalued and the impact of religious tourism experience on personal values such as happiness and satisfaction or self-fulfilment are unrecognised, despite happiness having long been considered a core desire that individuals seek during a life-changing event. In addition, certain types of experience related to religion are likely to affect people's emotions and spirituality (Balswick & Balkwell, 1978), but, the emotional aspect has been overlooked in religious tourism literature when investigating religious tourism experiences and personal values.

This study applies AHT to religious tourism experiences and extends the model to the emotional aspect. This study aims to investigate the impact of religious tourism experiences on two personal values: 1) happiness and 2) self-satisfaction / fulfilment. It also aims to focus on the mediating role of emotional connection between religious tourism experience and personal values. Therefore, this study develops two models: the Happiness model and the Self-Satisfaction / Fulfilment model.

## Literature review

### *Authentic Happiness Theory*

Authentic happiness theorists specify that subjective well-being (SWB) theory is unlikely to explain a

critical focus of temporary fluctuations such as live events and can only explain stable, long-term aspects of life (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Seligman, *et al.*, 2005). A life is a combination of events that can be explained as transitory fluctuations. A key point is that life is likely to affect high levels of long-term SWB and is formed by meaning, engagement, and pleasure (Seligman *et al.*, 2005). Religious beliefs and behaviours are especially regarded as valid approaches to long term SWB (Myers, 2008).

Previous studies have examined the relationship between religious beliefs / behaviours and SWB and have found positive correlations between religious practice and life satisfaction (Clark & Leikes, 2008; Myers, 2008). The findings have also shown that religious people can cope with stress in their lives and are likely to find meaningfulness and positive lessons in life events (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002). A study by Headey *et al.* (2010) has examined the relationship between religious practice and life-satisfaction, finding that the more religious a person is, the more satisfactory his / her life becomes over time. Furthermore, people involved in religious activities are likely to gain in life satisfaction. Helliwell and Putman (2004) have argued that people who participate in religious activities are likely to equate social capital with happiness and life satisfaction.

### *Religious tourism experiences and personal values*

Religion is an element that shapes people's minds, attitudes, behaviours, cultures, and values in society (Bailey & Sood, 1993; Lupfer, Brock, & DePaola, 1992; Lupfer & Wald, 1985; McClain, 1979). Religion and experience are two important topics in tourism studies and are regarded as antecedents or consequences of tourism phenomena (Poria *et al.*, 2003). Previous psychology studies have argued that religious belief and activities are transitory fluctuations of life's events (Headey *et al.*, 2010; Myers, 2008). Tourism studies have asserted that there are five modes of tourism experience: recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental, and existential (Cohen, 1979). In addition, abundant opportunities for self-transformation that lead to life-changing events are provided by tourism experiences (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017).

Pilgrims' desire to be in a religious place is comparable to tourists' desire to visit a tourist attraction - due to the communality of their social, historical, or cultural significance (MacCannell, 1973).

However, only a few studies have investigated religious tourism experiences in tourism studies (Andriotis, 2009; Belhassen *et al.*, 2008; Kasim, 2011). Andriotis (2009) adopted a phenomenological approach to identifying sacred site visitors' experiences. He found five authentic experiences, which he identified as spiritual, cultural, environmental, secular, and educational. His study maintained that a mode of Cohen's (1979) five tourism experiences – the existential mode – is essential.

Looking specifically at the religious event of Thaipusam in Malaysia, Kasim (2011) found that religious devotees perceived feelings of togetherness with others, being closer to God, and special fulfilment regarding their religious calling. The event was perceived as not only a tourism experience but also a religious experience that provided spiritual healing and piety. Belhassen *et al.* (2008) have synthesised meanings of authenticity and highlight an intersection of three central components in a framework, namely: toured place, belief, and action. They found that people visiting sacred sites are likely to obtain personal and emotional experiences but these experiences are mediated by individuals' beliefs about the site and its meaning.

This research shows that the study of religious tourism experience at sacred sites has enriched the understanding of conventional concepts of tourism authenticity by adopting a phenomenological approach. However, its further impact on people's ultimate life values has not yet been explored, despite the fact that certain individuals' experiences affect their overall value system and an individual's religious sense of belonging can affect many aspects of their life.

#### *Mediating role of emotional connection: spirituality*

Religious experiences have been linked with the importance of emotional dimensions (Fukuyama, 1961; Glock & Stark, 1965). According to Pruyser (1968), pursuing holiness is an endeavour associated with realignment of emotions as an orchestration of feelings. Although emotionality cannot be separated from religious experience, very few studies have empirically examined the relationship between them. Balswick and Balkwell (1978) have noted that religious orthodoxy has a relationship with emotionality. They found that religious orthodoxy is positively related to individuals reporting their emotions of love and happiness. In turn, people who have high religious orthodoxy are more likely to express their love and happiness than those having low religious orthodoxy. Andriotis (2009)

claimed that an existential mode of tourism experience is pertinent because spiritual connection to a place while traveling to a sacred shrine is a quest for spirituality.

Since religious experiences that can be gained by traveling are a special type of tourism experience, religious tourists' experiences are likely to relate to their own religion and the religious experience is likely to provide advanced emotional growth in religion and spirituality. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the mediating role of emotional connection between religious tourism experiences and personal values: 1) happiness and 2) self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

By integrating AHT from positive psychology with our understanding of religious tourism experiences from tourism literature, two models focusing on happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment are developed (see Figure 1 & Figure 2) and two hypotheses are developed for each model:

#### **Model 1: Happiness Model**

*Hypothesis 1:* Religious tourism experience has a positive effect on happiness.

*Hypothesis 2:* Emotional connection mediates between religious tourism experiences and happiness.

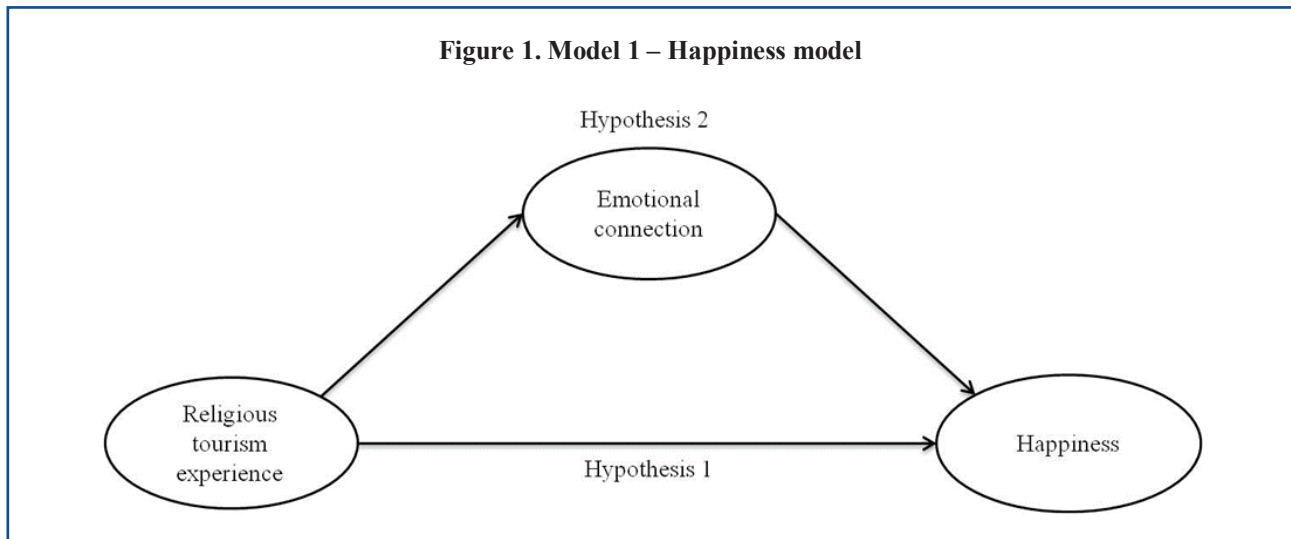
#### **Model 2 - Self-Satisfaction/Fulfillment model**

*Hypothesis 1:* Religious tourism experience has a positive effect on self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

*Hypothesis 2:* Emotional connection mediates between religious tourism experience and self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

### **Methodology**

There exist arguments that human experiences need to be explored by using qualitative methodology (Andriotis, 2009). However, the close relationship between religious experiences and personal values has been underappreciated and overlooked by a positivist methodology approach. For this study's empirical analysis, religious tourists who answered that religion was significant reason for their visit to Rome / The Vatican City were asked to participate in a survey. Data were collected in one of the representative sacred sites in Rome, the Catacombs of St. Callixtus; a religious site which is a must-see destination for any Christian religious tourists when travelling to Rome / The Vatican City. In total, 108 questionnaires were



collected, but 23 responses were ruled out since they consisted of inappropriate responses such as missing values. Thus, 85 responses were used to analyse the two models of relationship between religious tourism experience and personal values as well as the mediating role of emotional connection. Ten items about religious tourism experience (see Raj, 2012; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014), five items for emotional connection (Hughes, Bond, & Ballantyne, 2013), and two personal values (Kim *et al.*, 2016) were adopted as measurement items of this study.

## Results

In order to prove convergent validity, the Exploratory Factor Analysis results gained from using Principal Component Analysis are shown in Table 1. All the factor loadings are confirmed to exceed 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2006). Factor loadings of 10 measurement items for RTE (Religious Tourism Experience) are greater than 0.67 and the highest factor loading is 0.91. Five items for EC (Emotional Connection) are greater than 0.83 and the highest factor loading is 0.89.

Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is measured to confirm the internal reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of RTE is 0.938 and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of EC is 0.918. The results of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  scores showing greater than 0.7 indicate that 10 items of RTE and four items of EC significantly explain the constructs of RTE and EC, respectively. Each item is used to measure happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment, respectively.

In order to prove nomological validity, correlations between constructs are tested and the results for Model 1 and 2 are shown in Tables 2 and 3. Three constructs are significantly correlated at 0.01 significance level. The correlation tables support the nomological validity of the constructs of the two models (Hair *et al.*, 2006).

This study adopted simple regression analysis to investigate the relationship between religious tourism experience, emotional connection, happiness, and self-satisfaction / fulfilment. The results of the Happiness model (Figure 1) show that religious tourism experiences have a significant and positive impact on happiness ( $\beta = .401$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This means that H1 in

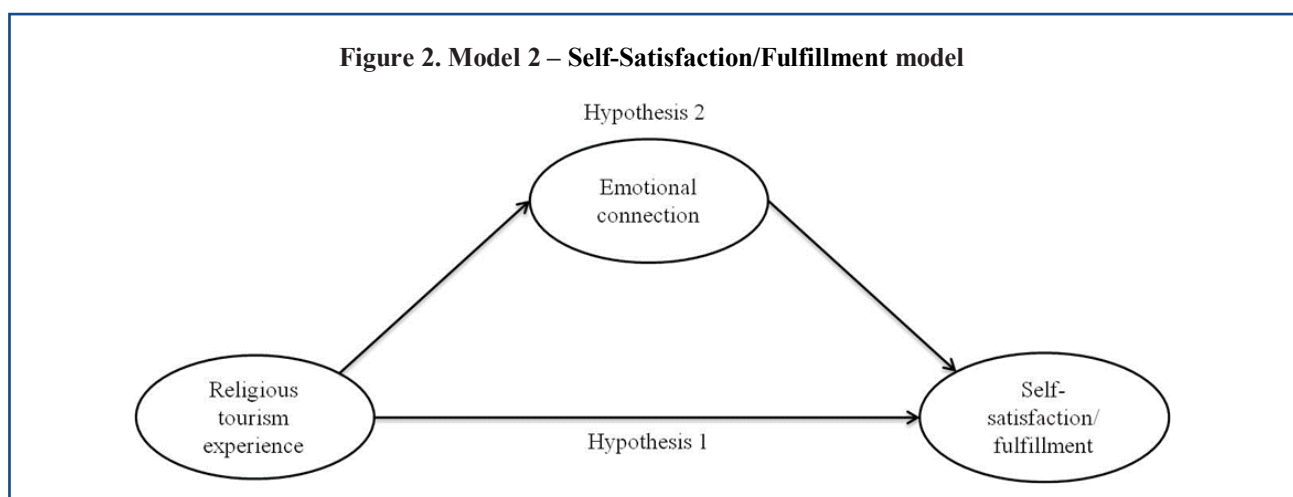


Table 1. Measurement items and results of EFA				
	Religious tourism experience	Factor loading	Variance explained	Cronbach's $\alpha$
RTE1	I reflected upon my life in a religious atmosphere.	.908	66.116	0.938
RTE2	I devoted myself to worship and prayer.	.888		
RTE3	I come closer to God.	.879		
RTE4	I had a genuinely religious experience.	.856		
RTE5	I felt emotionally involved with my religion.	.837		
RTE6	I completed acts of repentance and purification.	.807		Eigenvalues 6.612
RTE7	I fulfilled my obligation that I should make a pilgrimage to shrines.	.774		
RTE8	I rejuvenated myself spiritually and physically.	.747		
RTE9	I shared my experience with other believers.	.734		
RTE10	I searched for something previously lacking.	.669		
KMO = 0.931, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Chi-Square (df) = 660.771(45), p value = .000				
	Emotional connection	Factor loading	Variance explained	Cronbach's $\alpha$
EC1	I was able to feel the spirit of those now passed.	.890	75.645	0.918
EC2	I experienced a sense of being close to God.	.886		
EC3	This is a special place that made me reflect on religion and faith.	.880		Eigenvalues 3.782
EC4	This travel experience made me reflect on the meaning of things.	.860		
EC5	I felt a personal connection with some of the things I saw.	.832		
KMO = 0.859, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Chi-Square (df) = 299.904 (10), p value = .000				
	Personal values	Mean (SD)		
VH	Through this travel experience to Vatican City/Rome, I gained personal happiness.	4.33 (.777)		
VS	Through this travel experience to Vatican City/Rome, I gained a sense of self-satisfaction/fulfillment.	4.19 (.838)		

Table 2. Correlations between constructs in Model 1			
Model 1	Religious tourism experience	Emotional connection	Happiness
Religious tourism experience	1	.844**	.401**
Emotional connection	.844**	1	.369**
Happiness	.401**	.369**	1

Note: \*\*. Significant at the 0.01 level

Table 3. Correlations between constructs in Model 2			
Model 2	Religious tourism experience	Emotional connection	Self-satisfaction/fulfillment
Religious tourism experience	1	.844**	.423**
Emotional connection	.844**	1	.347**
Self-satisfaction/fulfillment	.423**	.347**	1

Note: \*\*. Significant at the 0.01 level

Table 4. Results of regression analyses

Independent variable(s) → Dependent variable	Model 1: Happiness		Independent variable(s) → Dependent variable	Model 2: Self-satisfaction/ fulfillment	
	Standardized Beta	t		Standardized Beta	t
RTE → HP	.401***	3.986 (.000)	RTE → SSF	.423***	4.258 .000
Multiple R	.401		Multiple R	.423	
Adjusted R2	.151		Adjusted R2	.169	
Durbin-Watson	1.741		Durbin-Watson	1.451	
F test statistic	F = 15.887, p = .000		F test statistic	18.131, p = .000	
	RTE → EC		.844***	14.350 (.000)	
	Multiple R		.844		
	Adjusted R2		.709		
	Durbin-Watson		1.901		
	F test statistic		F = 205.922, p = .000		
RTE, EC → HP	.310	1.647(.103)	RTE, EC → SSF	.455*	2.439 (.017)
	.107	.570 (.570)		-.038	-.202 (.841)
Multiple R	.405		Multiple R	.424	
Adjusted R2	.144		Adjusted R2	.160	
Durbin-Watson	1.720		Durbin-Watson	1.452	
F test statistic	F = 8.041, p = .001		F test statistic	F = 8.981, p = .000	

Note: \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001., RTE indicates religious tourism experience; EC indicates emotional connection; HP indicates happiness; and SSF indicates self-satisfaction/fulfillment.

Model 1 is supported. In addition, religious tourism experiences have a significant and positive impact on emotional connection ( $\beta = .844$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, the result of multiple regression predicting happiness from religious tourism experiences and emotional connection shows that there is no significant impact of religious tourism experiences and emotional connection on happiness ( $\beta(\text{RTE}) = .310$ ,  $t = 1.647$ ,  $p = .103$ ;  $\beta(\text{EC}) = .107$ ,  $t = .570$ ,  $p = .570$ ).

The results of the Self-Satisfaction / Fulfillment model (Figure 2) show that religious tourism experiences have a significant and positive impact on self-satisfaction / fulfillment ( $\beta = .423$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), meaning that H1 in Model 2 is supported. However, the result of multiple regression predicting self-satisfaction / fulfillment from religious tourism experiences and emotional connection shows that there is no significant

impact of religious tourism experiences and emotional connection on happiness ( $\beta(\text{RTE}) = .455^*$ ,  $t = 2.439$ ,  $p = .017$ ;  $\beta(\text{EC}) = -.038$ ,  $t = -.202$ ,  $p = .841$ ).

Software was used to test the mediating effect of emotional connection between religious tourism benefits and happiness (Model 1), and the effects of emotional connection between religious tourism benefits and self-satisfaction / fulfillment (Model 2). This software was the PROCESS macro for SPSS, developed by Andrew F. Hayes (2018) (see [www.processmacro.org](http://www.processmacro.org)). This process was used to estimate direct and indirect effects in the single mediator model by implementing bootstrapping in SPSS, which is considered a better option to prove indirect effect (Hayes, 2009). As shown in Table 5, total effect, direct effect and indirect effect of two models (Model 1: the relationship between religious

**Table 5. Result of mediating test**

<b>Model 1: Happiness</b>				
	Effect	SE	t	p
Total effect of RTE on HP	.3116	.0782	3.9859	.0001***
Direct effect of RTE on HP	.2412	.1465	1.6466	.1035
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot Lower Level CI	Boot Upper Level CI
Indirect effect of RTE on HP (Emotion)	.0705	.1158	-.1309	.3214
<b>Model 2: Self-satisfaction/fulfillment</b>				
	Effect	SE	t	p
Total effect of RTE on SSF	.3548	.0833	4.2580	.0001
Direct effect of RTE on SSF	.3815	.1564	2.4394	.0169*
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot Lower Level CI	Boot Upper Level CI
Indirect effect of RTE on SSF (Emotion)	-.0266	.1142	-.2281	.2236

Note: \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001., Percentile 95% CIs for bootstrap distributions are defined using the values that mark the upper and lower 2.5% of each distribution. CI = confidence interval.

tourism experience and happiness, and Model 2: the relationship between religious tourism experience and self- satisfaction / fulfilment) are estimated. If bootstrap confidence intervals from the bootstrap method include zero, a t-test of the sample result would be statistically insignificant (Hayes, 2018; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Table 5 shows that 95% bootstrap CI for the index of mediation including zero, indicates the evidence of mediation of the indirect effect with 95% confidence. Accordingly, the mediating effects in the two models are not supported. The results show that emotional connection does not mediate between religious tourism experiences and happiness or between religious tourism experiences and self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

### Conclusions and implications

In this paper, we developed two models associated with religious tourism experiences in order to empirically test the impact of religious tourism experiences on religious tourists' values, namely the Happiness and the Self-Satisfaction / Fulfilment models. A small number of relevant studies have identified the religious tourism experiences of people travelling to religious sites (Raj, 2012; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014) and have even investigated emotional connections linked to the level of visitor engagement at a particular site (Hughes, Bond, & Ballantyne, 2013). In addition, experiences that offer people an

opportunity to understand themselves deeply, such as the concepts of spirituality, self-fulfilment, self-satisfaction, and / or happiness, are recognised as ultimate values of individuals (Kim *et al.*, 2016).

The results of the empirical study reveal that religious experiences during religious travel directly influence personal happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment – this happens as a consequence of religious experiences during a distinct type of travel motivated by religious faith. Moreover, it can be considered as the eventual attainment of their ultimate goals through the experiential process. However, when religious tourists perceive happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment, emotional connection does not necessarily play a significant mediating role between their experiences and personal values. The study proves that certain experiences during religious tourism are significant antecedents of individuals' happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

However, emotional effect as a mediating role is not evidenced. This can be explained by the main theory of this study – Authentic Happiness Theory. The AHT is likely to explicate the emotion realised for a short-term period after an event in life, which is happiness (Seligman, *et al.*, 2005). While people perceive temporary fluctuations in their emotions after an experience, the fluctuations would not continuously



affect advanced types of individuals' emotions. Previous studies asserted that indirect experiences such as interpretation of a religious site help people to feel emotionally connected, in particular, to sites or topics (Hughes *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, people who are emotionally engaged in their experiences are likely to affect intention of support for the site and facilities in the sites (Powell & Ham, 2008), while it was revealed that deeper emotional connections such as spirituality were not the key factors affecting the personal values of happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

Most studies about this topic emphasise the identification of visitor motivations (Raj, 2012, Shuo *et al.*, 2009), the experiences that people regard as important at sacred sites using a qualitative method (Andriotis, 2009; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014), and how important visitors consider their individual experiences (Hughes, Bond, & Ballantyne, 2013). This study goes further as it explores an underappreciated aspect of religious tourism experience, adding the emotional aspect to the religious tourism setting. Secondly, it further contributes by applying an existing theory (AHT) to the religious tourism context and extending AHT with the aspect of emotionality. Thirdly, this study implies consequences of religious tourism experiences by empirically testing the significant impact of a religious tourism experience on the values which people ultimately seek. This study proves that religious tourism experiences affect happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

Most tourism studies have focused on motivation and experiences during religious tourism, and have found that tourists' religious, spiritual, and cultural experiences are the main themes of religious tourism. According to the paradigm of experience economy, emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual impressions are perceived by individuals during an event (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). During their pilgrimage or religious tourism, religious tourists' experiences are important antecedents of their happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

### Limitations and suggestion for future study

This research is a preliminary study that empirically investigates the role of religious tourism experiences in peoples' happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment.

However, it also includes a few limitations that suggest a direction for future studies in this particular area of research. Firstly, although this study focuses on religious tourists' experiences and their personal emotional engagement and values, this only investigates how consequent emotional connection affected by religious tourism experience influences personal values. To better understand the in-depth aspects of emotion of religious tourists, a future study should also investigate other roles of religious tourism experiences by expanding the models from the holistic approach of religious tourism. Secondly, this study only consists of a limited number of samples; future studies should include more detail about the in-depth role of emotion and the consequences of religious tourism experience in order to enhance the study and improve the understanding of religious tourism in the context of tourism studies. In addition to this, it is necessary to include more samples to test the happiness and self-satisfaction / fulfilment model by exploring the models using diverse analysis methods.

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