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The Role of Communication Technologies in Restructuring Pilgrimage Journeys

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Pilgrimage has evolved alongside the evolution of communication technology. Emergent communication technology is changing how people present themselves and tell others about their experiences, including within the context of pilgrimages. Building upon this recognition, this paper examines how evolving communication technologies have changed pilgrimage using Victor Turner's concepts of *rite of passage* and *communitas*. This conceptual paper recognises that technologies, such as the internet, mobile phones and social media, all influence the three stages of the pilgrimage ritual process: separation, liminality, and reintegration. This paper provides a conceptual clarification of the differences between how the medieval and the 21st Century pilgrims experience and represent rite of passage and define the spirit of community, and position themselves in relation to both. The paper shows that the power of the physical journey clearly remains the same in modern pilgrimages as it was in the medieval era, but the mental journey is meaningfully altered.

Using Goffman's theory of 'self-presentation', this paper highlights changes in how pilgrims present themselves and their pilgrimage experiences on social media. In this context, self-presentation is described as the way the pilgrim manages the impressions they make on other people, particularly at the liminal stage. While medieval pilgrims kept diaries, modern pilgrims document their pilgrimage experiences via constant status updates on social media. Social media is an important medium for modern pilgrims to present a certain version of self-identity to other users of sites. This paper emphasises the need for a deeper assessment of the conceptualisation of pilgrimage in the contemporary era as technology creates and facilitates new layers of the pilgrimage experience.

Key Words: pilgrimage, communication technology, rite of passage, *communitas*, social media, self-presentation

Introduction

It is noted that advances in communication technology have played, and continue to play a leading role in transforming all stages of the tourism experience, and how tourists' interact with and value it (White & White, 2005; Munar Ana & Gyimóthy, 2013; Aiello, 2014). In this context, mobile communication devices have been viewed as the postmodern tourists' 'travel buddy' (Aiello, 2014: 226) and theorised as producing a reduction in the liminality of the travel experience (White & White, 2005). Like tourism, pilgrimage has evolved alongside the evolution of communication technology (Amanullah, 2009; Frey, 2017; Caidi *et al.*, 2018; Jenkins & Sun, 2019; Rahimi & Amin, 2020).

The development of communication technologies such as the internet and mobile phones have revolutionised the pilgrimage experience. Features such as travel apps and instant messaging are particularly useful for pilgrims as they facilitate channels of connectivity that were unimaginable until a few years ago (Narbona & Arasa, 2016; Antunes and Amaro, 2016). Most importantly, the emergence of communication technology has changed how pilgrims present themselves and tell others about their experiences (Aiello, 2014; Ogden, 2015; Antunes and Amaro, 2016; Narbona and Arasa, 2016; Caidi *et al.*, 2018; Rahimi and Amin, 2020).

It is evident that there is an interplay between pilgrimage and communication technology. Indeed, Rahimi and Amin (2020:83) noted

‘digital technology embedded in ritual practice are acted upon to enhance pilgrimage experience, which increasingly fuses technology with ritual action’.

However, the interplay of pilgrimage and communication technology has implications that go beyond just creating and facilitating new layers of the pilgrimage experience. Instead, technology may also threaten the meaning and associated value of the pilgrimage. Responding to this challenge is the objective of this paper.

This paper draws on literature regarding how evolving communication technologies have changed pilgrimage using Victor Turner’s concepts of *rite of passage* and *communitas*. While Turner’s concepts articulate the ritual process that contributed to the personal transformation of pilgrims, the current paper builds on this concept by focusing on the transitions between important stages that occur during a pilgrimage journey. The aim is to provide a conceptual analysis of the differences between medieval pilgrimage and pilgrimage in the 21st Century in relation to communication and related technological advances. This conceptual paper recognises that technology, like the internet, mobile phones and social media, influences the three stages of the ritual process: separation, liminality, and reintegration. Additionally, using Goffman’s theory of ‘self-presentation’, this paper highlights how pilgrims present themselves and their pilgrimage experiences on social media. The purpose of this paper is to develop a solid basis for future empirical research to reflect new paradigms of pilgrimage, especially those prompted by the emergence of the internet era.

Rites of passage

The phrase ‘rite of passage’ was coined by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957). It has been used to describe rituals which mark important life transitions of individuals in a community (van Gennep, 1960). Building on the work of Arnold van Gennep, Turner and Turner (1978) continued to focus on studying the psychology of rituals as the foundational base for their theories about pilgrimage. In contrast to van Gennep’s rite of passage, which emphasised a change in a person’s social status, the Turners’ rite of passage is more about personal transformation. This concept is in line with the notion that contemporary pilgrims are in search of non-ordinary experiences, such as ‘transformation, enlightenment, and life-changing or consciousness-

changing events’ (Collins-Kreiner, 2016:328). Scholars agree that the pursuit of spiritual connection is a primary motivation for 21st Century pilgrims (Reader, 1987; Digance, 2006; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Di Giovine & Choe, 2019). As such, concepts such as ‘New Age pilgrimage’ have emerged (Digance, 2006:37) to refer to those who accentuate the experiential and embrace inner spirituality when undertaking a pilgrimage. The New Age pilgrimages emphasise the transformation of the Self, through a ‘quest of meaning’ (Digance, 2006:39).

The Turners claimed pilgrimage is a ritual process which consists of three stages. First, the stripping away of mundane structures, routines and signifiers of identity and status (the separation stage). In Turner’s (1969) rite of passage, the separation stage is where pilgrims are temporarily separated from their day-to-day world. The individuals have to detach themselves from the distractions of their normal roles and responsibilities. This allows them to become freed or distanced from the ordinary, routine and ‘profane’ (Graburn, 1989). Cousineau (2012) noted how the pilgrimage journey starts with ‘the longing’ to go; that is to move into a new way of being, in search of what the heart and soul long for. The move is often urged by ‘the call’, the opening clarion of any spiritual journey (Cousineau, 2012). As noted by Hames (2008), pilgrimage is a response to something that prods individuals into action. Thus, the primary process before the separation stage requires the pilgrim to define their needs, interests, desires and objectives (Hames, 2008). Accordingly, preparation for the journey requires careful focus, both physically and emotionally, and discernment to outfit oneself with travel necessities and discard whatever, be it physical or emotional, could impede the spiritual journey.

Second, immersion and transformation of the self (the liminal stage). For Turner, the term *liminal* applies to pilgrimage and describes the condition of ritual participants who have symbolically exited one space and entered

an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few attributes of either the former or latter profane social statuses or cultural states (1982:24).

Entering the liminal space begins as pilgrims leave the safety of the familiar and venture into the unknown world (Cousineau, 2012). Turner stresses the importance of liminality, suggesting that after being parted from society,

but before being united back into it, the pilgrim going through the rite of passage exists in a sort of 'betwixt and between' state (1995:95). In other words, liminality is a transition experience that involves the process of separating from one state of being and incorporating into another (Napier, 2014). Turner (1995) developed the notion of the *threshold* as a crucial component of his concept of liminality. Threshold literary means something that a person must cross to enter a new space (Turner, 1995; Napier, 2014). Facing the unknown in the liminal stage, pilgrims are tested through a series of trials and temptations (Cousineau, 2012). Cousineau (2012:xxvii) cited the words of a Buddhist monk to explain this: 'the point of pilgrimage is to improve yourself by enduring and overcoming difficulties'. Additionally, for Turner and Turner, a key aspect of liminality is its capacity to generate *communitas*,

a relational quality of full, unmediated communication, even communion with other individuals ... which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity and comradeship (1978:250).

Communitas is a Latin word, which means social relationship, fellowship and social bond (Gothoni, 1993). However, many researchers have challenged Turner's claim that pilgrims experience *communitas* (see Coleman & Eade, 2004; Eade & Sallnow, 2000).

Third, reintegration (the reintegration stage) of the transformed self into the mundane structures stripped away in the first phase (Turner, 1969; Turner & Turner, 1978). Having reached the destination and climax of the pilgrimage experience, pilgrims must progress through the process of reintegration as they return to the structured, everyday existence of their home society (Turner, 1969; Turner & Turner, 1978).

The separation stage

Communication technology has impacted the nature and role of pilgrims' travel planning. From once depending on reading journals and seeking guidance from the parish priest or bishop this has evolved into an abundance of information and checklists available on the internet. In medieval times, access to knowledge and information about pilgrimages and their landscapes was limited to oral culture and circulation of a limited variety of written texts produced by other pilgrims, especially ones who had visited the planned destinations, or whose

life experiences and challenges were similar to the prospective pilgrim (Lash, 1998; Campo, 2015). With the birth of the internet, communication technology has made planning a pilgrimage easier and more efficient as almost limitless information is now easily accessible online. Would-be pilgrims not only have access to written pilgrim narratives in the forms of websites, blog spots and social media pages but also visual forms such as photographs, and videos. An enormous range of pilgrimage information is available, ranging from basic information such as types of accommodation and routes, to detailed information about sites and checklists of items to take. If that is not enough, would-be pilgrims can seek instant advice from the virtual community through online platforms such as forums and Facebook groups or they can simply sign up for a virtual tour that allows them to see the pilgrimage landscape through the eyes of the pilgrims. For example, potential pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela in Spain can join the 'Live' Camino walk via the Virtual Camino to envision themselves as participants (Frey, 2017). A similar platform is available for *hajj* pilgrims (pilgrims to Mecca) to wander around and learn about the relevant holy sites. Through live *Hajj* blogging, Flickr photosets and streaming multimedia of the *Hajj* ritual, Muslims in the 21st Century can experience the *Hajj* vicariously before they start the physical journey to Mecca (Amanullah, 2009).

With the development of communication technology, the packing checklist is also evolving. Pilgrims in the medieval times chose to travel extremely light with a basic kit (e.g., simple pilgrim's leather scribe or bag, traditional russet tunic, wooden staffs) which became a pseudo-uniform with symbolic significance (Hames, 2008). Today, it is typical to see pilgrims with roomy backpacks, broad-brimmed hats, quick-drying clothing and hi-tech telescopic metal hiking poles, often making them indistinguishable from other tourists (Hames, 2008). Online checklists and depictions of other pilgrims encourage travellers to adopt such kits to conform to the contemporary uniform of the pilgrim. Most importantly, the desire to stay connected with the people back home makes mobile communication devices *must* items. Thus, a list of tech-related items such as a 4-way USB charger, mobile phone with internet connectivity, portable battery, earphones, cables and chargers are considered as the new 'essential' items for the pilgrims in the 21st Century (Frey, 1998, 2017). This indirectly adds a new layer of *needs* for pilgrims when it comes to accommodation choices. As noted by Frey (2017:16), there has been a

significant transformation of the question asked in terms of accommodation amongst Camino pilgrims, from ‘do you have hot water?’ to ‘is there WiFi?’. Like tourists, the availability of a fast and reliable internet connection has become the most-wanted accommodation amenity for pilgrims (Amanullah, 2009; Frey, 2017).

Another new facet of pilgrimage is the idea of pilgrimages being promoted and sold as package tours through online platforms. As noted by Amanullah,

what once was literally the journey of a lifetime is now planned and purchased online with the click of a mouse (2009:75).

Similar to the tourism package, the package-tour pilgrimage includes transportation, accommodation, food and guiding services (Auckland, 2017). To fully-prepare pilgrims, activities such as orientation sessions, preparation meetings, or a one-on-one review of the introductory material and information package will be conducted (Hames, 2008). Thus, with convenience in planning and preparation, most elements of the unknown traditionally associated with pilgrimages, have been eliminated. Reader noted,

the speeding up of the pilgrimage process, the increasing ease with which pilgrims can get between sites and the removal of the barriers of hardship and effort formerly necessary for performing a pilgrimage have all helped to focus the pilgrim’s energies on the sites themselves, rather than on the journey as such (1987:143).

This phenomenon indirectly alters the liminal stage as the focus now is largely falling on the ‘destination’ instead of the ‘journey’.

While medieval pilgrims often created parting messages, electronic communication now allows pilgrims to stay connected with people back home. Hurst (2000:19) suggests that in ‘the night before’ pilgrimage phase, pilgrims engaged in rituals that prepared the heart and soul for the sacred journey. For example, a special meal would be prepared before the departure, parting messages and/or a will (recognising the life-threatening dangers pilgrims faced in earlier times) would be created, and forgiveness from family and friends would be sought. Pilgrims and their kit would be blessed and, finally, pilgrims would be escorted by well-wishers to the boundaries of their home parish (Hurst, 2000; Hames, 2008). In contrast to medieval pilgrims, for 21st Century

pilgrims a complete separation from the ordinary or profane is not conceivable, or arguably desirable. Today, pilgrims can easily use their smartphone or other mobile devices to connect to their family and friends back home. Hence, the night before leaving home may be limited to arranging a special meal with close family members, calling trusted friends, and attending a service of blessing (Hames, 2008). This downgrading of the leaving experience reflects an increased expectation of connectivity during the journey and a safe return from the pilgrimage. As pilgrimage entered the internet age, it is not surprising to see departing pilgrims posting a parting message announcing they are leaving for pilgrimage and asking for forgiveness from families and friends via Facebook, Twitter, or another social media site. Social media provides unlimited access to anybody whom pilgrims are unable to meet face-to-face before their departure.

The liminal stage

Communication technology does not just play an important role as pilgrims prepare for their journey. Rather, it is an integral part of how they experience the journey. This technology has helped pilgrims to travel more easily and safely. It can also be a great help regarding religious activities (e.g., following daily readings and prayers, and reading religious documents online) (Amanullah, 2009; De Ascaniis *et al.*, 2018; Rahimi & Amin, 2020). However, communication technology poses a major challenge in the overall experience of pilgrimage. The constant connection, regarding both the virtual and physical spheres, inside and beyond the space of the pilgrimage, has dramatically transformed the pilgrimage experience. Today, there is often the expectation and temptation for pilgrims to keep in touch with those back home, thereby interrupting the sacred time and flow of the pilgrimage experience (Hames, 2008). In other words, the use of technology can actually change pilgrims’ behaviour and even their emotional state. The advancement of the smartphone and improvements in mobile bandwidth allow pilgrims to tweet, blog, and take and share photos of their pilgrimage experience as they unfold (Caidi *et al.*, 2018; Rahimi & Amin, 2020), making pilgrims today never really separate, emotionally or mentally, from home (Frey, 2017). As such, although the pilgrim experiences the physical travel environment, the desire for virtual connectedness with the home environment may prevent them from truly immersing themselves in the destination and living the *true*, or at

least traditional, pilgrim's life. As such, the presence of communication technology devices during a pilgrimage may be destroying the liminal experience of the event.

Communication technology has changed the form of hardships or challenges faced by pilgrims. It has replaced one type of hardship, such as the long, arduous journey, with another, the challenge to focus on the divine or the internal mind. The experiences of pilgrimage in medieval times were often framed within the pilgrim's relationship with the hardship of the journey. The journey, which was often undertaken on foot for hundreds to thousands of miles between starting points and the destination, could take several years (Schiller & Kenworthy, 2017). Although modern pilgrimage journeys may not be as lengthy or as arduous as the medieval ones, some religious pilgrimage routes still contain challenging physical elements because many of the religious sites that are today a focus of pilgrimage were established centuries earlier (El-Gohary *et al.*, 2017). However, due to the availability of information on the internet, pilgrims today are familiar with the landscape of the journey, thus mitigating, if not entirely negating, how arduous the journey is. Before pilgrims even set foot on the journey, communication technology has allowed them to create memories about places and form impressions of people, places, landscapes and experiences (Frey, 2017). Hence, the feeling of anxiety associated with venturing into the unknown is not as prevalent as it was for the medieval pilgrims. Simply put, the power of the physical journey clearly remains the same, but the mental journey is meaningfully altered (Reader, 1987; Frey, 2017; Amanullah, 2009).

Most importantly, pilgrims are now experiencing a new form of challenge. They are tested via the distractions offered by advances in communication technology to not be lured away by the abundance of communication tools which may hinder them accessing the so-called inner worlds (reaching the inner selves and reflecting upon who they are and what they want to be), and thus impacting opportunities for fresh spiritual connections with oneself, others, and nature (Amanullah, 2009; Frey, 2017). The continuous interaction with social networks offered by 21st Century communication technologies allows pilgrims to carry on with their routines or habits even when in the supposed liminal space of the pilgrimage (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2013; Frey, 2017). Simply put, they are continuously going in and out of the context of the pilgrimage, making it difficult to enjoy the

solitude and reflection, which are necessary for a sense of connectedness to the pilgrimage experience (Bellingham *et al.*, 1989; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002). This situation may generate a sort of 'always connected addiction', where disconnection creates powerful emotional and behavioural responses such as anxiety and tension (Paris *et al.*, 2015). Thus, technology age pilgrims are challenged with the thought of being disconnected or 'unplugged' (O'Regan, 2008; Paris *et al.*, 2015; Rahimi & Amin, 2020), which is a fear of the unknown in itself. Traveling in technology 'dead zones', a term used by Paris *et al.* (2015:805) to refer to 'service disruptions, lost smart-phones, inability to find a 'free Wi-Fi hotspot', or insufficient bandwidth' is upsetting and may create a feeling of anxiety or distress for pilgrims. In this way, dead zones and 'always connected addiction' become new hardships for pilgrims to overcome.

During the liminal stage, pilgrims will experience the concept of *communitas*, which refers to temporarily entering and becoming a member of a group through the shared experience of the pilgrimage, creating a sense of social togetherness (Turner, 1969). Concerning technology and the concept of *communitas*, close virtual proximity and constant connectivity affect the pilgrims' sense of togetherness during the journey. *Communitas* is both objective, represented by the community who experience it, and subjective, in that it represents an experience or process based on people's feelings and emotions (Napier, 2014). Although pilgrims these days appreciate the friendships formed on the journey there is a distinct difference between such friendships and the spirit of *communitas*. The former speaks of a more superficial relationship, reflecting the consumer society of the contemporary era. In contrast, *communitas* speaks of the creation of deep and meaningful connections between members of a group engaged in something, like a pilgrimage, that offers the notion of a common bond. The time which in the past was used for social bonding through shared meals, discussing faith, sharing the unpleasantness of the pilgrimage experience, or reflecting on experiences with other pilgrims, has now become a personal 'tech time' (Frey, 2017), hampering the potential for developing *communitas*. Thus, Overall (2019:72) noted: 'technology acts as an escapism from an escapism'. In other words, people who escaped the monotony of life through pilgrimage are now escaping the monotony, or perhaps the sociability of pilgrimage through technology. However, Rahimi and Amin (2020:92) noted, the use of digital technologies during

the Arba'in pilgrimage by younger pilgrims caused displeasure among older pilgrims, 'who see them as undermining the Islamic ethos of humility and self-effacing'. In this context, not all technologies are always welcomed on a pilgrimage, by pilgrims or by those controlling the journey and / or the destination.

Ironically, we are seeing social technology weaken the ability of humans to communicate with those in their physical 'here and now' at the same time it offers the ability to strengthen communications with those physically removed from us. Overall (2019) provides an example where technology helps pilgrims travelling the Camino de Santiago to compensate for, or escape the pain, suffering and unpleasantness associated with the pilgrimage by using technology to update their social media accounts, contact loved-ones, take pictures, and review photographs taken on their phones. Consequently, this phenomenon works against any potential unity within the community of pilgrims. In other words, there is a significant transformation from a sense of physical social togetherness to being 'alone together' (Frey, 2017). This reinforces the point that while medieval pilgrims stressed the importance of meeting and bonding with like-minded fellow pilgrims, contemporary pilgrims typically enjoy meeting fellow pilgrims with common purposes, but maintain virtual connections with home, thus, potentially inhibiting possible deep and profound connections with others. This suggests that the *communitas* experience of 21st Century pilgrims leans towards the objective form of *communitas* and away from the subjective form. An alternative is to view those existing in the virtual world who are not physically with the pilgrims as virtually travelling with them. In this way, an expanded *communitas*, constructed around the pilgrims and their virtual followers, may be recognised. This leads to questions about the viability of such a *communitas*, and the potential of the virtual to distract the pilgrim from the physical. It further questions whether the spiritual journey becomes one undertaken both virtually and physically, and the potential implications of this. Within this context, it is possible to ask if the virtual *follower* may actually also be a pilgrim.

The reintegration stage

At the reintegration stage, pilgrims generally come home with stories to tell. For the medieval age pilgrims, sharing experiences they encountered on the journey was one of the significant parts of returning home, due to the

preceding total disconnection with people back home. In comparison, the return of the 21st Century pilgrims is not something that family and friends at home look forward to in the same way, as they have been following the journey through the sharing of photos, comments and stories as the journey unfolded (Frey, 2017).

Technology has also affected the reconnection experience with other pilgrims. Returned pilgrims often experience a lack of comprehension as none of their family or friends really understand what the experience was. Thus, pilgrims may feel a sense of isolation and seek out ways to maintain contact with fellow pilgrims through groups or associations. For example, Santiago pilgrims is an association for Camino pilgrims who have returned home that offers them the opportunity to share their experience of the return with fellow and would-be pilgrims (Frey, 2004). Through weekend retreats, unions and gathering, returned pilgrims are able to process their experiences and incorporate the Camino into daily life. Through this, a sense of *communitas* can be continued beyond the journey of the pilgrimage. However, while the development of online platforms has increased virtual mental connection, it has decreased face-to-face connections. Mobile phone numbers or WhatsApp and social media accounts are forms of contact that are often shared amongst pilgrim today (Frey, 2017). In this sense, the interconnectedness between the pilgrims is limited by the technology that binds them together, which is mainly textual (MacWilliams, 2004). This threatens the emotional energy active in and through the physical *communitas* (Jenkins & Sun, 2019). Despite this, technology allows for relational continuity between pilgrims, enhancing collective energy by providing easier access to the sharing of information after the pilgrimage experience. Nevertheless, such engagement through technologies is more virtual as the bonding and togetherness are communicated through online platforms or other electronic communication devices, weakening the bonds of the *communitas*.

The discussion presented in this section indicates that technology has accelerated the rate of pilgrimage consumption. Communication technology has been used to connect pilgrims with people back home about matters relevant and irrelevant to the journey and has enabled pilgrims to stay up-to-date with events at home. Social media is rapidly becoming an accessible platform to most people, including pilgrims, and offers a new form of communication in the virtual world. What follows is

an account of how social media networks have become the central facilitator for pilgrims' daily communication and offer an important medium for pilgrims to present themselves and their pilgrimage experiences, potentially changing the very nature of pilgrimage as a result.

Pilgrimage and Self-representation Online

Social media has become an important forum for modern pilgrims to present a certain version of their self-identity to other users of the sites. How pilgrims attempt to present their pilgrimage experiences online in ways that create the desired impression is linked to Goffman's (1978) idea of self-presentation, called impression management. Goffman (1978) developed his dramaturgical framework in an analogy that studies social interactions as though they are stage productions. He perceived individuals and their behaviours in social situations as actors performing their roles on stage for the public to project a desirable image, using the theatre to illustrate individuals' contrasting frontstage and backstage behaviour. It is usually in an individual's best interest to present an 'idealised' version of their role that fits their understanding of the audiences' expectations rather than act as they do when not in public (Goffman, 1978:35). All the efforts a person makes, either consciously or unconsciously, to convey a coherent and meaningful image and, consequently, to influence the audience's belief in their performance (self-presentation) are defined as impression management (Goffman, 1978). When Goffman's (1978) discussion of impression management is applied to social media it creates an interesting situation regarding how contemporary pilgrims manage the impressions they make on other people, particularly at the liminal stage of their journey.

The presentation of self in the virtual world is becoming increasingly popular (Hogan, 2010; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Rettberg, 2017). When social interactions are carried out online, certain characteristics are profoundly different than in face-to-face communication. The most obvious difference is the difficulty associated with differentiating between different audiences and separating the self that is presented to each of them. Thus, instead of self-presentation, the expression of the self in social media is more of self-representation (Rettberg, 2014). In other words, social media is a form of representation of the content creator. In this sense, impression management is illustrated through content created on social media and then perceived by the audience. Importantly, social media conveniently allows

three different modes of self-representation: written (e.g., status updates on Facebook and Twitter), visual (e.g., upload images and videos on Instagram and YouTube) and quantitative (e.g., body or journey monitoring apps, number of followers and likes) (Rettberg, 2014, 2017). In pursuit of understanding how pilgrims present themselves and their pilgrimage experiences on social media, three purposes of self-representation, proposed by van Dijck (2013), are discussed: communicative, expressive and promotional.

Communicative self-representation

While medieval pilgrims kept physical, written diaries, modern pilgrims document their pilgrimage experiences via blogging and constant status updates on social media. In medieval times, pilgrims highlighted their spiritual journey by documenting everyday life events and experiences through diary writing. For example, Serfaty (2004:5) noted that the English Puritans used diaries as 'requirements of religious self-discipline', which were in turn used to recount 'a spiritual journey towards salvation'. Similarly, the pre-modern presentation of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca resulted from pilgrims' biographical narratives (Campo, 2015). Rettberg (2014) noted this form of writing allows the individuals to examine their own conscience for self-improvement and attainment of grace. Today, with the availability of technology, pilgrim diaries have been transformed into online diaries where pilgrims narrate the pilgrimage experience by updating blogs and constant posting on social media – a form of *communicative* self-representation. In this way, the traditional diary, which was, at least at the time of writing, a private space for thought and reflection, is transformed into a public spectacle where the pilgrim may reflect privately but is also consumed publicly at the same time.

The objectives of communicative self-representation are two-fold: to make a connection with friends and family back home, and to cultivate spiritual connections between those physically joined with the pilgrimage experience. Technology is seen as a means to stay connected and support pilgrim's self-reflection and experience sharing (Jenkins & Sun, 2019; Rahimi & Amin, 2020). In another point of view, narrating pilgrimage experiences in social media indirectly connects audiences to the pilgrimage site, permitting them a similar sense of emotional release as those who physically journey to pilgrimage sites. In this sense, the audiences, especially family and close friends of pilgrims, are brought into the liminal space and

validate the spiritual nature of the time together (Jenkins & Sun, 2019). Rahimi and Amin (2020:103) called this phenomenon a 'co-presence'. Examining the Arba'in pilgrimage, they noted:

Cellphone videos are used by pilgrims to record their ritual walks from Najaf to Karbala, bringing about a sense of shared media space between the ritual performers and those who witness the pilgrimage through audio and visual communication in 'real time,' in particular family and friends (Rahimi & Amin, 2020:92).

Similarly, as *hajj* pilgrims round the *Kaaba*, it is common to hear muffled conversations with loved ones back home via smartphones and witness constant photo or video taking (Amanullah, 2009). For most *hajj* pilgrims, sharing the experience with loved ones back home, especially those who are physically challenged to make the journey, can make it a more meaningful experience. Despite the potential of such acts they may be perceived by others (particularly older pilgrims) as rude and disturbing. This is a reflection on the all-encompassing nature and acceptance of social media today, something that has evolved as the ownership and use of mobile communication devices has spread throughout human society and all the spaces it inhabits.

These points may help us to understand how the pilgrimage experience remains very intimate and personal for pilgrims today, and the act of documenting and sharing the experience is a way through which some of the profound experiences of pilgrimage can be extended to those at home who are physically absent from the site. This speaks to the notion of extending the *communitas* of the pilgrimage beyond the boundaries of those pilgrims making the physical journey.

Communication technology is an integral force in the pursuit of transcendent interpersonal experiences amongst pilgrims (Jenkins & Sun, 2019). The photos and videos posted on social media act as digital memories that pilgrims use to rekindle spiritual intimacy. For example, Jenkins and Sun's study on families who walked the Camino reported that the digital diaries that were co-created by family members acted as the 'mediated spiritual intimacy' during and after the trip (2019:568). Along the Camino routes, family members took photos and videos then posted them on social media. Later the same day, the families reminisced about their encounters as an 'end-of-day' ritual practice (Jenkins &

Sun, 2019:579). Upon returning home, they revisited the digital journals together in a way that managed to revive the intimate connection to ritual moments. Through this, some pilgrims claimed to experience new understandings of shared spiritual connection and intimacy (Collins, 2014; Jenkins & Sun, 2019). As noted by Ogden (2015), the digital journal serves as a visceral reflection on the event, sometimes even after the trip. Collectively, technology is used to enhance, preserve, and crystallise memories and moments of shared spiritual practise that deepen understanding of self and significant others (Jenkins & Sun, 2019).

Expressive self-representation

Pilgrims also present themselves and their pilgrimage experiences on social media as a form of *self-expression*. Self-expression is defined as 'expressing one's thoughts and feelings, and these expressions can be accomplished through words, choices or actions' (Kim & Ko, 2007:325-326). Social media has replaced previous modes of engaging in social interaction. In addition, it has transformed the nature of how we communicate. We have witnessed the transformation of platforms of communication from text-based to image-sharing. In the process, social media platforms have become instrumental venues in helping individuals express themselves (Kim & Ko, 2007; Seidman, 2013; Shane-Simpson *et al.*, 2018; Rahimi & Amin, 2020). The *reach* of communication outlets, and hence the nature of who we are able to present our *selves* to, has also changed. While some pilgrims prefer to share their pilgrimage experiences using sites like Facebook that offer them customizable privacy settings (known contacts), others prefer to upload content using sites like Instagram and YouTube where they can broadcast images or videos of themselves to broader audiences (known and unknown contacts) (Shane-Simpson *et al.*, 2018).

Accordingly, there is a radical transformation of the visualisation of pilgrimage, evidenced by the number of 'selfies' taken by pilgrims during their pilgrimage experiences. The term 'selfie' is defined as a photograph that is taken of oneself, which is typically taken with a smartphone and then uploaded to some form of social media (Caidi *et al.*, 2018). Though selfies originally caused displeasure among older pilgrims, it is a normal practice amongst 21st Century pilgrims nowadays (Rahimi & Amin, 2020). For pilgrims, the selfie is all about experiencing and expressing the self, about

building and maintaining relationships, and a means to share impressions from the pilgrimage with the world. Using the term 'holy selfie' (a selfie taken during either the *Hajj* or the *Umrah* pilgrimages, though the term could be extended to all pilgrimages), Caidi *et al.* (2018) noted that selfies in Muslim pilgrimages contribute to reflections on the performance of pilgrimage and are used to define the diversity of Muslim experiences and practices in the 21st Century. In addition, Caidi *et al.* (2018:10) point out, that holy selfies 'serve as intimate traces left behind by Muslim people on social media platforms for multiple audiences [both Muslim and non-Muslim] to see'. The main purpose is to express what it means to be a Muslim today, with little to no interference or intermediation by an othering discourse, especially in the context of the world after the 2001 terror attacks in New York City (Schlosser, 2013; Caidi *et al.*, 2018).

Promotional self-representation

Setting aside the financial aims, social media platforms were created for people to connect more and express themselves. Yet the obsession with social media has shifted from basic functional usage to a more narcissistic engagement. In other words, there is a fine line between self-expression and narcissism. Once a mere connection platform for family and friends, social media has now become a valuable resource for *self-promotion*. In the contemporary era, individuals promote their identities through social media, a widely used means of focusing attention on oneself and defining one's identity (Hogan, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). The most obvious form of self-promotion is posting one's status or photos on social media to attract followers and likes. This form of quantitative self-representation in social media is viewed through the number of likes garnered by a comment or photo posted on Facebook or Instagram, or the number of retweets recorded on Twitter. Similarly, the 'following' option in Instagram and Facebook has created an online manifestation of individual self-branding, where the ultimate successful self-representation is to have millions of followers (van Dijck, 2013). For example, Park *et al.* (2016) in their study reported that self-promotion was the main intention of pilgrims who shared their pilgrimage experience on social media. This is related to the prestigious nature of pilgrimage travel nowadays (Blackwell, 2010; Raj *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, posting favourable images or updating the status of their pilgrimage experience is seen as a form of prestige or status, both of which are related to the concept of social

capital (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; Williams, 2006).

The current trend of people posting flattering images of themselves, especially selfies, echoes this concept of seeking social capital by manipulating a version of the content creators presented to the viewer. As Mirzoeff (2016) so eloquently put it, 'there is a new us' (p. 21) on the internet and 'each selfie is a performance of a person as they hope to be seen by others' (p. 62). Thus, scholars argue social media, such as Instagram and Snapchat, are platforms for exhibitionism and self-promotion (Hogan, 2010; Shane-Simpson *et al.*, 2018). With the high level of control over which image to upload and the possibilities of editing images (via filters and apps), people can represent themselves online in a way that they want to be *true* rather than the less interesting reality of regular, *real* life (Rettberg, 2014, 2017). Thus, there is a lot of criticism surrounding the act of selfie-taking during the pilgrimage. This suggests it as an activity that is not only disruptive of others, but also a form of narcissistic bragging (Moumtaz, 2015; Caidi *et al.*, 2018). For example, Caidi *et al.*'s (2018) study of the 'holy selfie' evidenced that other than being self-expressive, these selfies were framed and projected for public consumption in a way that enables self-promotion and attention-seeking. Yet this is arguably only reflective of the wider consumerist and narcissistic society in which we live in the 21st Century. Something that questions the ability of the pilgrimage to act as a liminal space in the face of advances in communication technology.

Taken together, the discussion in this section suggests that while social media serves as a setting that shapes pilgrimage experiences, it is a prime setting for narcissistic behaviour. As such, social media is clearly reshaping the meaning of the pilgrimage, both for participants and viewers.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a conceptual analysis of the differences between medieval pilgrimage and pilgrimage in the 21st Century in relation to communication and related technological advances. It has encompassed discussions of the experience as a rite of passage and site of *communitas*, and representations of the pilgrims themselves. Overall, the paper strengthens the idea that communication technology can enhance pilgrimage practices, not only through the seamless flow of information but also through the expansion and creation of pilgrimage communities, particularly with the emergence of social media networks. However, the use of social networks in pilgrimage not offer only positive results; rather, at times such networks can threaten the meaning and associated value of the pilgrimage, potentially changing it from the spiritual into the banal.

This article emphasises the need for a deeper assessment of the conceptualisation of pilgrimage in the contemporary era as communication technology creates and facilitates new layers of the pilgrimage experience. This is particularly true within the reality of the growing global COVID-19 pandemic where pilgrims may have to put their plans to travel on hold, and instead potentially choose to experience the sacred journey within their home through ‘virtual pilgrimage’. This links to the notion that escape from the mundane everyday in order to facilitate a search for self does not necessarily require a physical journey (Carr, 2017). Several fundamental questions emerge from this paper. In particular, does/

will digital technology threaten or liberate the pilgrimage experience? Since pilgrimage experience is thought to embody a spiritually transformative journey, how does digital technology help this to occur, or does it actually impede it? How well digital technology addresses these ideas will reveal how meaningful it will be for pilgrimage going into the future. These questions apply both to pilgrims and those responsible for the maintenance of pilgrimage routes and destinations. It is recognised that digital technology advances are not uniformly welcomed or embraced in society in general or within pilgrimages (Rahimi & Amin, 2020; Hill *et al.*, 2015; Chang & Hsu, 2020), as noted in this paper. Technology needs a setting not just in spiritual contexts, but also to be seen through an accessibility lens and a generational one. The accessibility issue speaks to the potential of digital technologies to provide access to spiritual journeys previously barred to individuals with disabilities or a lack of financial resources, for example. The generational issue recognises how the acceptance of new technologies, including digital ones, varies across generations (Hill *et al.*, 2015; Hülür & Macdonald, 2020). Research needs to be conducted to address these questions.

Overall, this paper has demonstrated that the effects of communication technology on pilgrimage are not one-dimensional, but are constantly in flux and shaped by the rapid change of the social and communication landscape. It can be tempting to assume that the 21st Century pilgrims are wired differently than the medieval pilgrims. Yet, beneath the surface differences, the need for spiritual connection is the same.

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