Recovery Strategies to Sustain Religious Tourism Post-COVID-19: Evidence from Iran

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Religious tourism, as one of the most significant types of tourism, is among the most seriously affected economic sectors worldwide as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This study sought to identify and prioritise the strategies for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious tourism. The study was an applied survey that drew on a mixed research design. The results of the qualitative data analysis obtained through a systematic literature review revealed that the recovery strategies to boost businesses in the field of religious tourism in the post-COVID-19 future could be divided into four main strategies (dimensions) and 24 sub-strategies (criteria). Furthermore, the quantitative analysis, conducted through the R-SWARA technique, showed that 'making it mandatory to maintain a distance from sacred monuments (e.g., tombs) and prohibiting touching or having any physical contact with such monuments', 'Understanding religious tourists' health-related expectations', 'making it mandatory to use masks and other health-related equipment in sacred/ religious locations', and 'reducing the capacity for welcoming tourists in sacred and tourism sites while holding religious ceremonies with a small number of attendants' were the most significant strategies that could boost religious tourism post-COVID-19. These factors were prioritised by experts and activists in the industry who shared their opinions in this study.

Key Words: religious tourism, coronavirus pandemic, post-COVID-19 future, systematic literature review, R-SWARA technique

Introduction

The global outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) as a pandemic (Rowan & Laffey, 2020) has led to numerous problems in economic, political, social and cultural systems worldwide (Sigala, 2020). The crisis has seriously affected the functioning of tourism in terms of economic, social, and political conditions (both domestically and internationally) (Gan, Lim & Koh, 2020; Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Following the closure of tourism activities, as a protective health strategy that governments adopted (Sigala, 2020), over 50 million jobs were at risk in the tourism industry which had to temporarily close down (Nicola *et al*., 2020).

The crisis is the most serious problem threatening religious tourism in many decades, as it has also led to numerous challenges in religious tourism worldwide. Religious tourism had constantly been showing a growing trend worldwide (Chantziantoniou & Dionysopoulou, 2017), but, it has been experiencing a different trend since the pandemic began. Many activities in the field were suspended as a response to governmental regulations (Furtado *et al*., 2020), and the most remarkable religious events have either been cancelled or postponed (Nhamo, Dube & Chikodzi, 2020). Meanwhile, many sacred places closed their doors to pilgrims and tourists, and many faith-based travels were postponed upon the request of religious leaders (Faris & Griffin, 2020). Every country banned pilgrims from entering enclosed religious places, while halting visa applications for pilgrimage purposes. Many countries annulled issued visas as a way to contain the COVID-19 virus. These measures then lead to a decline in religious tourism (Yasin *et al*., 2020).

In the short term, this situation has unprecedentedly cut down the number of religious tourists in different destinations. However, it is predicted that the crisis may

leave long-term impacts on the industry (Rutynskyi & Kushniruk, 2020). In fact, the spread of the coronavirus has been a 'landscape scale crisis', which has engendered massive side-effects for businesses (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020), while making the future outlook very uncertain (Mendy, Stewart & VanAkin, 2020).

Iran is a country strongly hit by COVID-19, while the country's religious tourism has been negatively affected by the virus outbreak. The country hosts religious shrines in Qom and Mashhad and is considered to be one of the most important destinations for followers of Shia Islam. The COVID-19 outbreak, however, forced religious tourism activities to close down entirely (Yasin *et al.*, 2020)

Despite the gravity of the COVID-19 crisis, it is not the end of human social activities and interactions, but, instead, it seems to be the beginning of a new era (Cadena *et al.*, 2020). Today, business managers / leaders, as well as organisations and firms engaged in the tourism and hospitality industry, have realised how to rebuild and reorganise their operations (Mendy, Stewart & VanAkin, 2020), while trying to reconstruct the economic system (Cadena *et al.*, 2020). Meanwhile, investigations into markets and customer behaviour have revealed that people's plans for traveling and their demand for using tourism and hospitality products / services are returning to a normal status.

However, post-COVID-19 tourism is an issue that must be profoundly explored, by taking into account various dimensions related to the sub-sectors in the tourism industry (Dalrymple *et al.*, 2020). In this recovery process, religious tourism is one of the considerable sectors to be reconstructed after the re-opening of religious sites (WHO, 2020). Before the outbreak, religious tourism was one of the most developing types of international tourism worldwide (Chantziantoniou & Dionysopoulou, 2017), as it channelled over 300 million tourists annually (Durán-Sánchez *et al.*, 2018). It also created an 18-billion-dollar industry and market, which brought about abundant opportunities to expand destinations and develop regions (Kartal, Tepeci & Atlı, 2015). Tourism, more specifically, has a served as a major tool for economic development in communities hosting religious places (Muriuki, Bururia & Mutegi, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to identify and prioritise the strategies that could help to sustain tourism and hospitality businesses in the post-COVID-19 future. How post-COVID-19 tourism should remain a burgeoning field is a critical concern, and how to secure tourists' safety and health as a top priority is a question that demands an appropriate answer (Dalrymple *et al.*, 2020). How to re-open and re-start activities effectively and safely is a principal question that business owners, managers, and leaders are currently dealing with (Mendy, Stewart & VanAkin, 2020). Many attempts have been made to provide suitable strategies to respond to the question (see Sneader & Sternfels, 2020; Baig *et al.*, 2020; Sneader & Singhal, 2020a). Yet, despite the importance of addressing religious tourism, as the literature reviewed below clarifies, there is no specific and effective solution proposed, and few studies have explored the recovery of post-COVID-19 religious tourism, despite managers' and policy-makers' urgent need for well-defined and scientific strategies (Mendy, Stewart & VanAkin, 2020). A review of the theoretical literature on the topic in Iran shows that, despite the massive negative impacts of COVID-19 on Iranian religious tourism (Iranian Hotels Association, 2020), no study has been conducted to identify recovery strategies for tourism businesses in Iran.

Literature Review

Religious tourism

Traditionally speaking, religion is closely tied with tourism and serves as one of the oldest factors contributing to the development of travel (Heydari Chianeh, Chiappa & Ghasemi, 2018). Although systematic studies investigating religious tourism began to take shape back in the 1950s (Alvarado-Sizzo, Frejomil & Crispin, 2017), and although the first papers concerned with this topic were published in the 1980s (Kim *et al.*, 2019), religious tourism represents one of the oldest types of tourism that incorporates religion and traveling (Heydari Chianeh, Chiappa & Ghasemi, 2018). In fact, among travel motives, religion has been a historically significant motive. The integration of travel and religion has led to the formation of a highly important tourism practice called 'religious tourism', which refers to travels to sacred places for spiritual / religious purposes (Rot *et al.*, 2014). Religious tourism has been on the rise worldwide (Maneenetr & Tran, 2014).

In religiously inspired travel, religion is the basic drive that motivates people to visit sacred places and gain spiritual experiences (Shinde, 2018). Religious tourism, as a general term, describes travel patterns that people

practice to satisfy their religious, leisure, and recreational needs, by visiting sacred places (e.g., temples, harams, shrines) or religious events (e.g., festivals, dramatic performances) (Shinde, 2018). Religious tourism has also been defined as way of gaining faith-related experience, learning, and increasing one's spiritual awareness (Indrawati *et al.*, 2016). This type of tourism can serve as a channel for meeting modern social needs, through which people can strike a balance between their physical health and mental/spiritual wellbeing, enjoy an opportunity to have cross-cultural empathy / sympathy, and sustain reliable relationships between communities (Fabio, Gian & Anahita, 2016).

Religious tourism has proven to be a constantly developing mode of tourism (Irimias, Mitev & Michalko, 2016), while providing many opportunities to develop tourism destinations / regions on a national, regional, or transnational scale (Fabio, Gian & Anahita, 2016). Meanwhile, this mode of tourism has attracted the attention of academics who have tried to explore and conceptualise the phenomenon through various approaches. Such academics include anthropologists, sociologists, economists, geographers, ecologists, and physicians (Al-Harthi *et al.*, 1990; Timothy & Olsen, 2006 Alvarado-Sizzo, Frejomil & Crispin, 2017). Tracing the evolution of religious tourism suggests that 'understandings of religious tourism have evolved beyond pilgrimage and now encompass the meaningfulness of a destination' (Kim, Kim & King, 2019:185).

Meanwhile, a review of the existing theoretical literature on religious tourism also indicates that some scholars view religious tourism as a general concept that refers to a specific pattern of travel that people practice for spiritual, leisure, recreational, and psychological purposes, visiting scared places and participating in faith-based festivals, performances, and events in contemporary societies (Shinde, 2018). Another group regards religious tourism as an independent type of tourism, and defines it as a journey that a believer (called a *pilgrim*) makes for religious or spiritual purposes. This approach sees the tourist as an individual who visits places only for religious inspiration, regardless of historical and cultural aspects (Indrawati *et al.*, 2016).

Others suggest that religious tourism is a sub-set of cultural tourism, believing that tourists practice religious tourism as a way of gaining familiarity and experiencing foreign cultures, and can do so without religious motives

(Chadha & Onkar, 2016). This approach recognises religious tourism as a new mode of cultural tourism, which meets new and emerging needs of tourists in terms of religion (Fabio, Gian & Anahita, 2016). Other thinkers view religious tourism as a combination of religious tourism and cultural tourism. They suggest that this mode of tourism, besides religious motives, encompasses cultural motives (Chadha & Onkar, 2016). In this approach, religious places are seen as tourism destinations with a multidimensional quality that attracts tourists interested in history, culture, art, architecture, and/or religion (Durán-Sánchez *et al.*, 2018).

Investigations concerned with tourism show that empirical studies concerned with tourism could be divided into three groups. First, some studies have focused on religious tourists (their behaviours, perceptions, motives, and experiences). The second group of empirical surveys has addressed religious tourism in diverse destinations, concentrating on such topics as the impacts of religious tourism, religious tourism development, and political considerations. The third groups of studies probe into infrastructures (accommodation and package tours) and their role in religious tourism (Kim, Kim & King, 2019).

Broadly speaking, therefore, religious tourism may refer to various types of journeys made within a short period of time for: (a) religious motives such as visiting sacred places, participating in religious ceremonies, performing pilgrimage rituals, and undertaking faith-based duties (Tkaczynski & Arli, 2018); and (b) non-religious motives, such as visiting and learning about attractive religious places and monuments (Kartal, Tepeci & Atlı, 2015).

Definition of crisis

A crisis may refer to any destructive incident that is either unpredictable or hardly predictable and could lead to detrimental outcomes (e.g., resource losses) if it is not handled properly (Hetu *et al.*, 2018). A crisis has been also defined as any disruption that physically or non-physically affects a system and its sub-components and threatens its existence (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). From the perspective of businesses and organisations, a crisis describes an unstable period of time that increases the chances of unwanted or undesirable consequences. Such consequences could disrupt current performances and procedures in an organisation, engender problems in production lines, damage the organisation's public

image, and make media and the government sensitive to the organisation (Devlin, 2007). Furthermore, given its nature or causes, a crisis could be categorised into internal or external types. An internal crisis involves disruptions or problems that stem from controllable organisational occurrences that an organisation can prevent. In contrast, an external crisis refers to any disruption or threat that arises from external factors (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019).

From the perspective of tourism, a crisis may refer to any event that threatens common tourism operations and activities, damages tourism destinations in (in)tangible ways (e.g., creating a negative image, reducing tourists' sense of safety, and shaping negative perceptions among tourists), and leads to a reduction in revenue and temporary / permanent closure of tourism businesses (Sönmez *et al.*, 1994). The tourism and hospitality industry, despite its diversity and dynamicity (Petrevska, 2012), is recognised as an economic sector notoriously vulnerable to crises (Burton & Crotts, 2015). This problem arises from the influences that the industry receives from external factors (e.g., political, economic, environmental, and climatic) (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019).

A business active in tourism may encounter various crises over its lifespan. Crises may be associated with products / services (for instance when a product / service lacks the promised quality), negative social perception of the industry or of its performance, financial deficits, international disorders (e.g., a loss of international supply chains), workplace dysfunctions (e.g., violence and labour strikes), senior / key managers' deaths, natural catastrophes (e.g., flood, earthquake), and terrorist attacks or operations (Devlin, 2007).

Religious tourism and the COVID-19 pandemic

The gravest and most dangerous crisis facing global religious tourism in recent decades is the outbreak of COVID-19, which emerged from Wuhan, China (Gan, Lim & Koh, 2020) and was declared by the World Health Organization, as a *pandemic* and a crisis on a global scale (Rowan & Laffey, 2020). The outbreak has led to serious challenges in religious tourism worldwide and many activities have been suspended (Furtado *et al.*, 2020). For example, the crisis temporarily stopped the arrangements of the Umrah and Hajj, which represent the most significant religious events in the Muslim world (Mosier *et al.*, 2020). As a response, the Saudi government allowed only 1,000 pilgrims, instead of two

million, to perform the Hajj rituals in 2020 (Yasin *et al.*, 2020). The crisis halted religious tourism worldwide, including destinations in Iraq and Iran (Mosier *et al.*, 2020), throughout the Christian world (Mróz, 2021), and in India (Yasin *et al.*, 2020), causing serious problems for many religious destinations (Mróz, 2021; Faris & Griffin, 2020).

Research Methods

This study has undertaken an applied research which consisted of qualitative and quantitative steps. In its qualitative step, the study drew on the systematic review method to identify strategies for sustaining post-COVID-19 tourism and hospitality businesses, and to construct a valid model. The quantitative part was undertaken to weight and rank the strategies, and in doing this, the R-SWARA method was used. Given the research topic, through purposive sampling, 15 individuals were selected who had at least five years of work experience in the field of inbound religious tourism or managing domestic religious tours. The data needed for the quantitative part were collected through questionnaires.

Systematic literature review

A systematic literature review is a comprehensive and organised process that seeks to collect, evaluate, and condense all pieces of evidence and to evaluate scientific contributions in response to a research question (Yannascoli *et al.*, 2013). Systematic literature review involves a precise extraction of data from scientific publications in order to reach an appropriate answer to a research question. It should reduce bias in research (Gupta *et al.*, 2018) by collecting, evaluating and extracting representative data and scientific evidence to detect gaps and suggest a guideline for future investigations (Knoll *et al.*, 2018).

This study drew on an eight-stage systematic review framework as suggested by Okoli and Schabram (2015). This framework was applied because it is more recent than other models (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015). The framework has been utilised and confirmed by many researchers, such as Albliwi *et al.* (2014) and Papamitsiou and Economides (2014). Following the guidelines for systematic literature review, publications addressing the recovery and reopening of businesses in the post-COVID-19 tourism and hospitality industry were reviewed and their significance was assessed.

Next, a mixed research design was selected as the research framework for selecting recovery strategies. Following that, the research question was formulated and literature on the topic was explored on the databases of Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SCOPUS, and Web of Science, by searching for certain phrases and keywords such as: 'post-COVID-19 tourism', 'post-COVID-19 religious tourism', 'post-COVID-19 tourism recovery', 'how to boost post-COVID-19 tourism', 'how to sustain post-COVID-19 religious tourism', 'post-crisis tourism.' In this step, 239 publications were found (Figure 1).

In the next step, the identified publications were inspected by considering their titles, abstracts, and content. The resources compatible with the aims of this study were selected in the light of the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ, a 32-item checklist) for qualitative resources. The whole procedure helped to better understand and analyse the content, quality, structure and type of resources required, while revealing the most relevant resources (Tong, Sainsbury & Craig, 2007). Ultimately, 52 publications were selected. Figure 1 illustrates the process of searching, evaluating and selecting the publications needed.

R-SWARA technique

To weight the strategies in this study, the R-SWARA method was used. In most multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) problems, weighting represents an important stage in the process (Zolfani et al., 2013). R-SWARA is a recent technique proposed by Kersuliene and colleagues in 2010 (Kersuliene, Zavadskas & Turskis, 2010). The most important advantage of this method compared to others lies in its capability of evaluating experts' opinions about the weighted criteria, its operational convenience, and its computation without requiring a large volume of comparisons (Kersuliene, Zavadskas & Turskis, 2010). R-SWARA is an extended version of SWARA, which incorporates rough theory and involves the following stages (Zavadskas et al., 2018).

Step 1. Define a set of criteria in the decision-making process.

Step 2. Establish a team of specialists including *k* experts to evaluate the importance of the criteria. Primarily, the criteria should be ranked in descending order depending

Figure 1: Stages of Identifying, Searching, Evaluating, and Selecting Publications
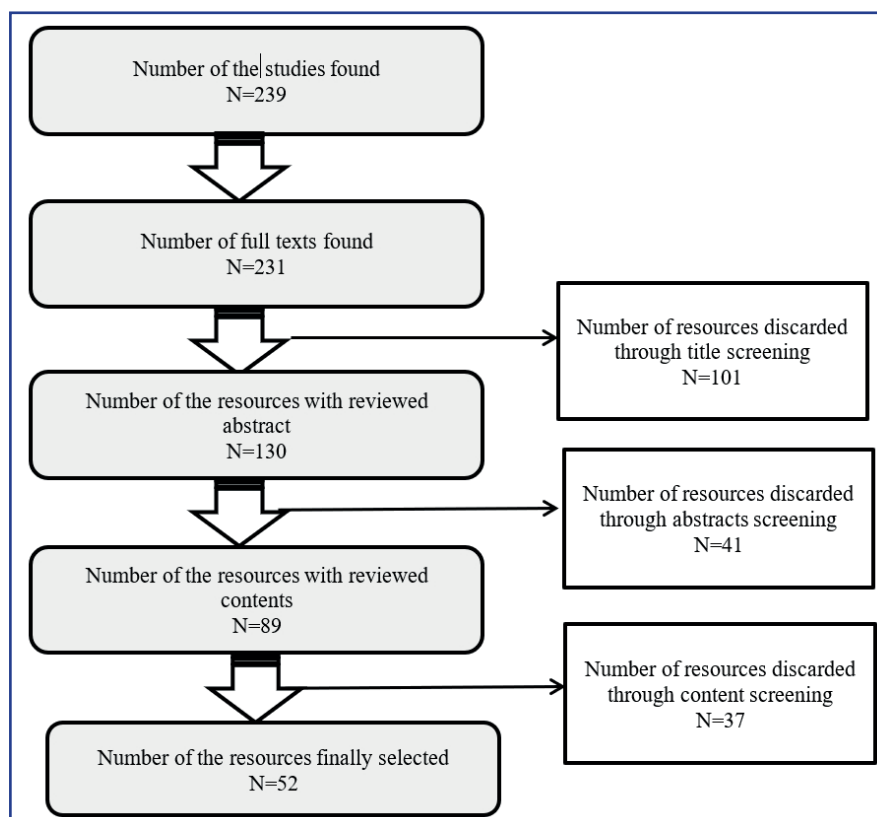
on their importance rates. Next, S_j is analysed as the second criterion and shows the degree of importance of the criterion C_1 with respect to other criteria C_{1-n}.

Step 3. Convert each expert's responses into a rough matrix (C_j). Each expert's response $K_1, K_2, ..., K_n$ should be converted into a rough matrix via the following equation:

$$RN(G_q) = \left[\underline{Lim}(G_q), \overline{Lim}(G_q)\right], \tag{1}$$

$$RN(C_j) = \left[C_j^L, C_j^U\right]_{1 \times m} \tag{2}$$

Step 4: Normalise the matrix $RN(C_j)$ to reach the matrix $RN(S_j)$ through the following equation:

$$RN(S_j) = \left[S_j^L, S_j^U\right]_{1 \times m} \tag{3}$$

Step 5: Calculate the matrix $RN(K_j)$ using the equations below:

$$RN(K_j) = \left[K_j^L, K_j^U\right]_{1 \times m} \tag{4}$$

Step 6: Create the matrix of the calculated weights through the $RN(Q_j)$ equation:

$$RN(Q_j) = \left[q_j^L, q_j^U\right]_{1 \times m} \tag{5}$$

Step 7: Compute the matrix of relative values $RN(W_j)$ via:

$$RN(W_j) = \left[w_j^L, w_j^U\right]_{1 \times m} \tag{6}$$

Research Findings

Qualitative findings

After the relevant publications were selected, the data were extracted, condensed and analysed, and were then categorised and integrated in line with the research purposes. The categorisation, which included 37 strategies for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious tourism, is presented in Table 1.

In the next step, the strategies identified and extracted were integrated and categorised. As Table 2 shows, the strategies identified at this stage fell into four major categories. Finally, the results obtained from the research were evaluated and examined and were reported as a complete investigation (the present research paper).

Quantitative findings - Weighting the strategies for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious through R-SWARA

In this section, a questionnaire was created, in which the experts (15 experts) ranked the main strategies (dimensions) and sub-strategies. Table 3 shows the ranks of 'marketing strategies' as shared by the experts. In Table 3:

C_1 represents 'understanding religious tourists' health-related expectations';

C_2 represents 'adopting the purpose-driven marketing approach';

C_3 represents 'paying attention to retail opportunities',

C_4 represents 'considering domestic tourism' and

C_5 represents 'using the situation to promote a distinctive brand in religious tourism.'

Through equations (1)-(2), the group rough matrix C_j was calculated as specified in Figure 2:

The complete matrix C_j was computed in accordance with the previous calculations:

$$RN(C_1) = [1.00, 1.00]$$

$$RN(C_3) = [1.855, 3.80]$$

$$RN(C_2) = [2.43, 3.34]$$

$$RN(C_5) = [2.12, 4.16]$$

$$RN(C_4) = [3.43, 4.71]$$

In **Step 4**, the previous matrix was normalised through the following equations. The worst criteria would display the greatest value - these included 'paying attention to retail opportunities' and 'paying attention to family-

Row	Strategies for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious tourism	Reference
	Table 1: Strategies for Sustaining Religious Tourism post-COVID-19	
1	Holding faith-related events and gatherings in open spaces while maintaining social distancing	WHO, 2020
2	Reducing travel restrictions	OECD, 2020; Ryland, 2020; Ondicho, 2021
3	Reducing the capacity for welcoming tourists in sacred and tourism sites while holding religious ceremonies with a small number of attendants	WHO, 2020;
4	Supporting innovation in religious tourism	OECD, 2020; Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020;
5	Offering (non)financial support for businesses and firms	OECD, 2020; Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020; OECD, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Ondicho, 2021
6	Considering local and regional tourism	Leask, 2020; Chen, *et al.*, 2020; McMillan, 2020; Sharma, 2020
7	Adopting a purpose-driven marketing approach	Chen, *et al*, 2020; Avraham, 2020
8	Paying attention to retail opportunities	Chen. *et al.*, 2020; Avraham, 2020
9	Targeting younger tourists	Enger *et al*., 2020a; McMillan, 2020; Avraham, 2020
10	Making it mandatory to use masks and other health-related equipment in sacred / religious locations	WHO, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020
11	Breaking the number of tourists into smaller groups	Enger *et al*., 2020a; Trampert, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020
12	Paying attention to family-related issues	Enger *et al*., 2020b; CBI, 2020;
13	Formulating and implementing health protocols in business operations	Krishnan *et al*., 2020; Dalrymple *et al*., 2020; Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020; Enger *et al*., 2020a; Enger *et al*., 2020b; Leask, 2020; Klasko *et al*., 2020; Zukhri & Rosalina, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020
14	Having close relationships and cooperation with healthcare organisations	UNWTO, 2020b; Krishnan *et al*., 2020; Wen *et al*., 2020
15	Understanding religious tourists' health-related expectations	Krishnan *et al*., 2020; Bhattacharya, 2020; Wen *et al*., 2020; Haque, 2020;
16	Making it mandatory to maintain a distance from sacred monuments (e.g., tombs) and prohibiting touching or having any physical contact with such monuments	WHO, 2020
17	Investing in advanced technology	Klasko *et al*., 2020; Hollander, 2020; CBI, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Haque, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020
18	Formulating, implementing and supervising cleaning instructions and disinfection procedures in sacred sites or tourism places	WHO, 2020; Ondicho, 2021
19	Diversifying service packages	Dalrymple *et al*., 2020; Chen, *et al*., 2020; Avraham, 2020
20	Using the situation to promote a district brand	Dalrymple *et al*., 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Avraham, 2020; de Andreis, 2020
21	Providing necessary training to staff	Dalrymple *et al*., 2020; OECD, 2020; Klasko *et al*., 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020
22	Considering employees' health and safety	Dalrymple *et al*., 2020; OECD, 2020; Klasko *et al*., 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020
23	Considering domestic tourism	Chen *et al.*, 2020; Enger *et al*., 2020a; CBI, 2020; Trampert, 2020; Wen *et al*., 2020; Haque, 2020; Hussain & Fusté-Forné, 2021
24	Giving more consideration to employees harmed during the crisis	Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020
25	The government prioritising small and medium-sized businesses	Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020;
26	Stimulating demand for religious tourism	Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020; OECD, 2020; Ondicho, 2021; Haque, 2020;

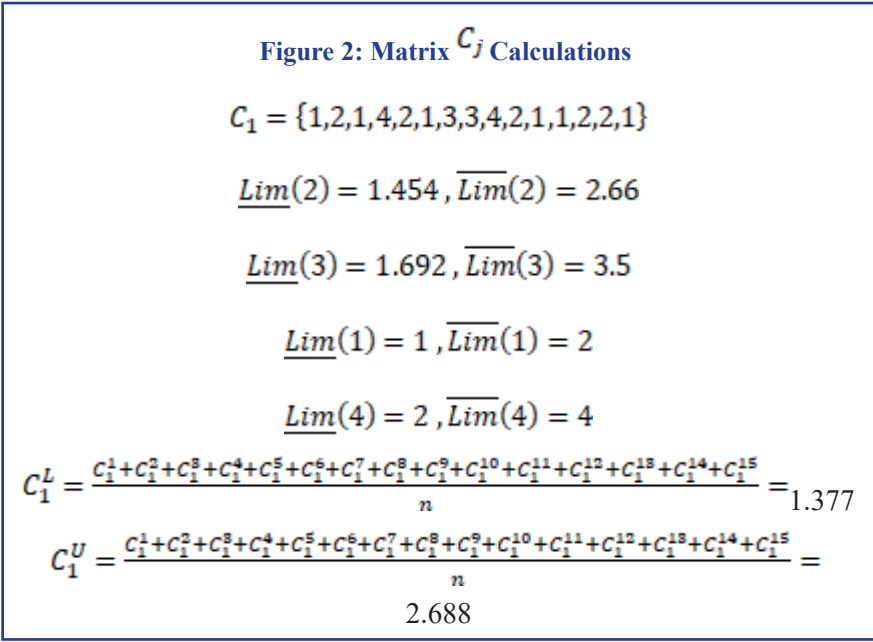|		
Table 1 (cont.): Strategies for Sustaining Religious Tourism post-COVID-19		
Row	**Strategies for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious tourism**	**Reference**
27	Increasing social media use and online channels for advertising	Enger *et al*., 2020a; Leask, 2020; Zukhri & Rosalina, 2020; Avraham, 2020; Ondicho, 2021
28	Formulating and supervising the implantation of healthcare protocols in tourism places and businesses	OECD, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Haque, 2020; Ondicho, 2021; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020
29	Considering employees' new and changing needs	Nilakant, Walker & Rochford, 2013; Sneader & Singhal, 2020a
30	Prioritising cleanliness and sanitation	Zukhri & Rosalina, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020
31	Reducing hotel and restaurant occupancy rates	Zukhri & Rosalina, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020
32	Holding virtual tours	El-Said & Aziz, 2021
33	Offering financial support for businesses and firms	Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Ondicho, 2021; Haque, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Yeh, 2020
34	Reducing customer–employee contact	Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020
35	Waiting for the government to provide guidelines for re-opening, adapting, and accessing tourist markets	Ondicho, 2021
36	Reducing the capacity for welcoming tourists in tourism sites	de Andreis, 2020
37	Boosting international tourism flow by lifting/easing visa regulations as countries recover from the pandemic	Assaf & Scuderi, 2020

Table 2: Results of Qualitative Research		
Strategies for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious tourism	**Supporting strategies**	Reducing domestic travel restrictions
		Boosting international tourism flow by lifting / easing visa regulations as countries recover from the pandemic
		Stimulating religious tourism demand
		Offering (non)financial support for businesses and firms
		Supporting innovation in the religious tourism sector
		Investing in advanced technologies
	Executive strategies	Holding faith-related events and gatherings in open spaces while maintaining social distancing
		Reducing the capacity for welcoming tourists in sacred and tourism sites while holding religious ceremonies with a small number of attendants
		Making it mandatory to use masks and other health-related equipment in sacred / religious locations
		Making it mandatory to maintain a distance from sacred monuments (e.g., tombs) and prohibiting touching or having any physical contact with such monuments
		Formulating, implementing and supervising cleaning instructions and disinfection procedures in sacred sites or tourism places
		Reducing hotel and restaurant occupancy rates
		Holding virtual religious tours
		Having close relationships and cooperating with healthcare organisations
	Marketing strategies	Understanding religious tourists' health-related expectations
		Adopting the purpose-driven marketing approach
		Paying attention to retail opportunities and family-related issues
		Considering domestic tourism
		Using the situation to promote a distinctive brand in religious tourism
	Human resources management strategies	Giving more consideration to employees harmed during the crisis
		Providing necessary training to staff
		Considering employees' new and changing needs
		Considering employees' health and safety
		Reducing customer–employee contact

Crit./ Ex.	E₁	E₂	E₃	E₄	E₅	E₆	E₇	E₈	E₉	E₁₀	E₁₁	E₁₂	E₁₃	E₁₄	E₁₅
C_1	1	2	1	4	2	1	3	3	4	2	1	1	2	2	1
C_2	2	3	3	2	3	2	5	4	2	3	3	2	3	3	3
C_3	3	1	2	5	4	4	2	2	5	1	2	3	5	1	2
C4	5	4	5	3	1	5	4	5	3	4	5	5	4	4	5
C5	4	5	4	1	5	3	1	1	1	5	4	4	1	5	4

Table 3: The experts' ranks assigned to "marketing strategies"

Figure 2: Matrix C_j Calculations

$$C_1 = \{1,2,1,4,2,1,3,3,4,2,1,1,2,2,1\}$$

$$\underline{Lim}(2) = 1.454 , \overline{Lim}(2) = 2.66$$

$$\underline{Lim}(3) = 1.692 , \overline{Lim}(3) = 3.5$$

$$\underline{Lim}(1) = 1 , \overline{Lim}(1) = 2$$

$$\underline{Lim}(4) = 2 , \overline{Lim}(4) = 4$$

$$C_1^L = \frac{c_1^1+c_1^2+c_1^3+c_1^4+c_1^5+c_1^6+c_1^7+c_1^8+c_1^9+c_1^{10}+c_1^{11}+c_1^{12}+c_1^{13}+c_1^{14}+c_1^{15}}{n} = 1.377$$

$$C_1^U = \frac{c_1^1+c_1^2+c_1^3+c_1^4+c_1^5+c_1^6+c_1^7+c_1^8+c_1^9+c_1^{10}+c_1^{11}+c_1^{12}+c_1^{13}+c_1^{14}+c_1^{15}}{n} =$$

2.688

related issues' (C_4). The first element of the $RN(S_j)$ was 1, while the other elements of the matrix were divided by the greatest value (c_4) to be computed. Finally, the following results were observed:

$$RN(S_1) = [1.00,1.00]$$

$$RN(S_3) = [0.39,1.10]$$

$$RN(S_2) = [0.51,0.97]$$

$$RN(S_5) = [0.45,1.21]$$

$$RN(S_4) = [0.72,1.37]$$

In **Step 5**, all of the entries of the previous matrix, except the first one which remained unchanged, were added to 1 and the following matrix was resulted:

$$RN(S_1) = [1.00,1.00]$$

$$RN(S_3) = [1.39,2.10]$$

$$RN(S_2) = [1.51,1.97]$$

$$RN(S_5) = [1.45,2.21]$$

$$RN(S_4) = [1.72,2.37]$$

In **Step 6**, the entries of the matrix were calculated via equation 5 as follows:

$$q_n^L = \frac{q_{j-1}^L}{k_j^U} = \frac{q_n^L}{k_1^U}$$

Based on the stages mentioned in **Step 6**, the complete matrix $RN(Q_j)$ was created through:

$$RN(q_1) = [1.00, 1.00]$$

$$RN(q_3) = [0.47,0.71]$$

Figure 3: Sample of Analysis

$$RN_1 \times RN_2 = \Big[\min(\underline{R_1} \times \underline{R_2}, \underline{R_1} \times \overline{R_2}, \overline{R_1} \times \underline{R_2}, \overline{R_1} \times \overline{R_2}), \; , \max(\underline{R_1} \times \underline{R_2}, \underline{R_1} \times \overline{R_2}, \overline{R_1} \times \underline{R_2}, \overline{R_1} \times \overline{R_2})\Big]$$

$$= [0.005, 0.074]$$

$$RN(q_2) = [0.23, 0.47]$$

$$RN(q_5) = [0.10, 0.32]$$

$$RN(q_4) = [0.04, 0.18]$$

Equation 6 from **Step 7** was used to compute the relative weights of the strategies, in which every number in the matrix $RN(Q_j)$ was divided by the sum of the numbers in the corresponding matrix (every number in the upper limit of the matrix was divided by the sum of the numbers in the lower limit and vice versa)

$$[w_j^L, w_j^U] = \left[\frac{[q_j^L, q_j^U]}{\sum_{j-1}^{m}[q_j^L, q_j^U]}\right]$$

Finally, the weight of each strategy was found in accordance with the following matrix:

$$RN(w_1) = [0.369, 0.535]$$

$$RN(w_3) = [0.175, 0.384]$$

$$RN(w_2) = [0.088, 0.253]$$

$$RN(w_5) = [0.040, 0.174]$$

$$RN(w_4) = [0.016, 0.101]$$

To calculate the final weights, the multiplication of rough numbers was used, in line with Zhu and colleagues' (2015) research; the sample of this analysis for the first strategy ('reducing travel restrictions') is as illustrated in Figure 3

Next, to rank the strategies, first the mean of the upper and lower limits of the final rough weight for each strategy was computed, and after that the strategies were ranked in light of the calculated weights. Finally, the steps in the R-SWARA technique were applied to each strategy (see Table 4).

Discussion

This study sought to identify and prioritise strategies that could help to sustain post-COVID-19 religious tourism. The study focused on the importance of improving post-COVID-19 businesses in the tourism industry (Nicola *et al.*, 2020; Mendy, Stewart & VanAkin, 2020; Cadena *et al.*, 2020), particularly in the case of religious tourism as one of the most significant types of tourism (Chantziantoniou & Dionysopoulou, 2017; Durán-Sánchez *et al.*, 2018), which has incurred heavy losses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Nhamo, Dube & Chikodzi, 2020). As such, the study tried to underscore the importance of formulating effective strategies that could help religious tourism rebound (Sneader & Sternfels, 2020; Baig *et al.*, 2020; Sneader & Singhal, 2020a).

The findings reveal that the strategies to rebuild post-COVID-19 religious tourism could be divided into four main groups (dimensions) and 24 sub-strategies. The findings also demonstrate that, from the perspective of the participants, 'making it mandatory to maintain a distance from sacred monuments (e.g., tombs) and prohibiting touching or having any physical contact with such monuments' are the most effective strategies. Given the fact that tourists' or pilgrims' physical contact with sacred monuments could increase the chances of virus transmission, tourists should be banned from touching such constructions (WHO, 2020). 'understanding religious tourists' health-related expectations', represented another strategy for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious tourism. This factor was the second most important criterion in this study. This strategy was also stressed in other investigations conducted by Krishnan *et al.* (2020), Bhattacharya (2020), Wen *et al.* (2020) and Haque (2020).

The findings also reveal that the third most important factor is 'making it mandatory to use masks and other health-related equipment in sacred / religious locations.' To contain virus transmission, governments have made it mandatory for people to wear masks in public places, especially in indoor places. This measure is important in

Dimension	Dimension Weight		Number	Strategy	Criterion weight		Final weight		Average	Rank
	L	U			L	U	L	U		
Supporting strategies	0.075	0.267	1	Reducing domestic travel restrictions	0.072	0.276	0.005	0.074	0.040	12
			2	Boosting international tourism flow by lifting/ easing visa regulations as countries recover from the pandemic	0.013	0.111	0.001	0.030	0.015	20
			3	Stimulating religious tourism demand sector	0.005	0.066	0.000	0.018	0.009	22
			4	Offering (non)financial support for businesses and firms	0.164	0.403	0.012	0.107	0.060	8
			5	Supporting innovation in religious tourism	0.346	0.549	0.026	0.146	0.086	6
			6	Investing in advanced technology	0.030	0.180	0.002	0.048	0.025	16
Executive strategies	0.418	0.594	7	Holding faith-related events and gatherings in open spaces while maintaining social distancing	0.057	0.180	0.024	0.107	0.065	7
			8	Reducing the capacity for welcoming tourists in sacred and tourism sites while holding religious ceremonies with a small number of attendants	0.103	0.246	0.043	0.146	0.095	4
			9	Making it mandatory to use masks and other health-related equipment in sacred/ religious locations	0.182	0.340	0.076	0.202	0.139	3
			10	Making it mandatory to maintain a distance from sacred monuments (e.g., tombs) and prohibiting touching or having any physical contact with such monuments	0.282	0.416	0.118	0.247	0.183	1
			11	Formulating, implementing and supervising cleaning instructions and disinfection procedures in sacred sites or tourism places	0.015	0.087	0.006	0.052	0.029	15
			12	Reducing hotel and restaurant occupancy rates	0.029	0.130	0.012	0.077	0.045	11
			13	Holding virtual religious tours	0.007	0.048	0.003	0.029	0.016	19
			14	Having close relationships and cooperating with healthcare organizations	0.003	0.026	0.001	0.016	0.008	23

Table 4: Final Results of Quantitative Research (final weight of each strategy)

Dimension	Dimension Weight		Number	Strategy	Criterion weight		Final weight		Average	Rank
	L	U			L	U	L	U		
Marketing strategies	0.183	0.395	15	Understanding religious tourists' health-related expectations	0.3694	0.54	0.067	0.212	0.140	2
			16	Adopting the purpose-driven marketing approach	0.0886	0.25	0.016	0.100	0.058	9
			17	Paying attention to retail opportunities and family-related issues	0.175	0.384	0.032	0.152	0.092	5
			18	Considering domestic tourism	0.017	0.101	0.003	0.040	0.022	17
			19	Using the situation to promote a distinctive brand in religious tourism	0.040	0.175	0.007	0.069	0.038	13
Human resources management strategies	0.029	0.165	20	Giving more consideration to employees harmed during the crisis	0.362	0.486	0.010	0.080	0.045	10
			21	Providing necessary training to staff	0.103	0.241	0.003	0.040	0.021	18
			22	Considering employees' new and changing needs	0.214	0.381	0.006	0.063	0.034	14
			23	Considering employees' health and safety	0.0205	0.08	0.001	0.014	0.007	24
			24	Reducing customer–employee contact	0.0464	0.15	0.001	0.025	0.013	21

Table 4 (cont.): Final Results of Quantitative Research (final weight of each strategy)

tourism, particularly in religious tourism (WHO, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020). Using masks could also be a necessity for employees and service providers (Hatami, Lacroix, & Mieszala, 2020). 'Reducing the capacity for welcoming tourists in sacred and tourism sites while holding religious ceremonies with a small number of attendants' was the fourth factor as revealed in this investigation. To further strengthen social distancing and prevent the spread of COVID-19, governments have decided to reduce the number of people allowed to visit tourism sites / places. This measure must also be taken seriously in religious tourism (WHO, 2020).

The investigation also revealed that 'paying attention to retail opportunities and family-related issues' was the fifth strategy that could improve post-COVID-19 religious tourism. Fear of COVID-19 infection has increased the tendency to travel alone and far from large crowds, while this change of behaviour could provide many opportunities for retail in the industry (Enger et

al., 2020a). Studies in the literature also explained that family trips would account for a considerable proportion of travel over the first months of the post-COVID-19 future. Therefore, family-oriented tourism activities must be planned in advance (Enger et al., 2020b). This strategy has been highlighted in other investigations (Chen. et al., 2020; Avraham, 2020).

The analysis of the findings also clarified that 'supporting innovation in religious tourism' was the sixth post-COVID-19 recovery strategy, which was also emphasised in other studies (OECD, 2020; Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020). 'Holding faith-related events and gatherings in open spaces while maintaining social distancing' was the seventh factor in improving post-COVID-19 religious tourism, according to the opinions of the participants. Given the possibility that staying in an open space could reduce virus transmission, it would be an effective strategy to hold religious events in open spaces in which attendants maintain social distancing (WHO, 2020).

The investigation also revealed that 'offering (non) financial support for businesses and firms' was the eighth most important strategy for rebuilding post-COVID-19 religious tourism. Such supports could appear in the form of *ex gratia* financial assistance, cheap loans offered to businesses, tax exemption / reduction, paying costs for training and human resource development, and other similar cases (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Ondicho, 2021). Governments could also stimulate demand for travel and tourism by offering related facilities, while contributing to the development of post-COVID-19 religious tourism activities. Financing innovation could also serve as part of supporting measures that governments could implement (OECD, 2020; Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020).

'Adopting a purpose-driven marketing approach', as the ninth factor in the ranking, was another strategy for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious tourism. Post-pandemic businesses must clearly delineate their target markets, trying to meet each market's needs (Avraham, 2020). The experts believed that the best market delineation method during the first post-COVID-19 months is to categorise tourists based on their travel dates. Given this categorisation, marketing managers could divide tourists into those who intend to take a trip within the next three months, within the next three-six months, or the next six-twelve months. Each type of tourists may impose certain limitations and obligations on tourism businesses (Chen, *et al*., 2020). Research also suggests that young and single people will account for the first wave of demand in post-COVID-19 tourism. As a result, tourism and hospitality businesses must have plans for welcoming younger tourists over their first post-COVID-19 days (Enger *et al*., 2020a).

'Giving more consideration to employees harmed during the crisis' was prioritised as the tenth strategy to rebuild post-COVID-19 religious tourism. This fact was also emphasised in previous research (Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020). Another strategy identified by the participants was 'reducing hotel and restaurant occupancy rates', which was the eleventh factor in the study. This strategy was also found important in other investigations (Zukhri & Rosalina, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020).

The findings also demonstrated that, from the perspective of the participants, 'reducing domestic travel restrictions' was the twelfth strategy. One of the measures adopted

by governments in their attempt to contain COVID-19 was to set travel and tourism restrictions worldwide. However, for post-COVID-19 tourism to thrive, it would be necessary to lift part of the restrictions (however, health protocols must be maintained and tourism places must be supervised and controlled). As such, governments can delineate regions depending on their virus spread rate, while reducing restrictions in corridors, pathways and areas designated as 'safe zones.' This strategy os stressed in other studies (OECD, 2020; Ryland, 2020; Ondicho, 2021).

'Using the situation to promote a district brand' was the Thirteenth strategy as evaluated by the participants. Developing personal, unique, and memorable experiences is an effective factor in winning customers' loyalty in tourism and hospitality, while the post-COVID-19 future may offer opportunities in this regard even more than before (Dalrymple *et al*., 2020). This strategy was also emphasised in other investigations (Dalrymple *et al*., 2020; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Avraham, 2020; de Andreis, 2020).

'Considering employees' new and changing needs' was the fourteenth strategy that could be used to sustain post-COVID-19 religious tourism. Researchers believe that human resources constitute the main element in developing the tourism industry (Baum & Kokkranikal, 2003; Gruescu, Nanu & Pirvu, 2008). Therefore, considering human resource post-pandemic needs represents a significant issue to be prioritised by religious tourism managers and policy-makers. The crisis may lead to the formation of a wide range of needs depending on people's individual and familial conditions. This issue highlights the importance of identifying and addressing employees' new and changing needs (Nilakant, Walker & Rochford, 2013; Sneader & Singhal, 2020a).

The findings of this study also revealed that the participants prioritised 'formulating, implementing and supervising cleaning instructions and disinfection procedures in sacred sites or tourism places' as the fifteenth factor in sustaining post-COVID-19 religious tourism. To prevent virus transmission due to exposure to surfaces and further assure tourists and visitors of their safety, all sacred places / sited should be disinfected before and after tourists visit them (WHO, 2020). This strategy was also stressed in the study conducted by Ondicho (2021). 'Investing in advanced technology', too, represented another strategy for sustaining post-COVID-19 religious

tourism; this factor was the sixteenth most important criterion in this study. Many experts contend that re-opening post-COVID-19 tourism activities requires investment in supplying and employing technologies that could provide services to tourists (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Haque, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020). Such technologies could minimise physical contact and could bring about new experiences for tourists. For instance, digital technologies can be used to develop e-tourism or to register guests' hotel orders via cellphones (Klasko *et al*., 2020; Hollander, 2020). Advanced technologies could also be used in such cases as online advertising, virtual networks and applications, and provision of electronic and online tourism services (Enger *et al*., 2020a; Leask, 2020).

The seventeenth strategy as observed in this study was 'considering domestic tourism'; other investigations, too, have emphasised domestic tourism as a way of sustaining post-COVID-19 tourism and hospitality businesses (Leask, 2020; Wen *et al*., 2020; Haque, 2020; Hussain & Fusté-Forné, 2021). To accomplish this, tourism businesses must target domestic and local markets, while promoting short trips. Local residents, too, can encourage tourists by using local tourism services (e.g., having food in local restaurants) (Chen, *et al*., 2020).

The participants in this study selected 'providing necessary training to staff' as the eighteenth most important factor in rebuilding post-COVID-19 religious tourism. Training staff is a major success factor in the tourism industry (Baum, 2007), as it can be especially significant during a crisis. More specifically, as a crisis breaks out, the behaviour of employees could bring about many opportunities to develop a firm's brand in tourism. Employees, then, must learn how to interact with and provide services to customers / guests through effective training, while observing all health and safety protocols (Dalrymple *et al*., 2020).

Selected as the nineteenth post-COVID-19 religious tourism recovery strategy, 'holding virtual religious tours' was a factor highlighted in El-Said & Aziz's (2021) study. 'Boosting international tourism flow by lifting / easing visa regulations as countries recover from the pandemic' was the twentieth strategy, as also emphasised by Assaf and Scuderi (2020). The twenty-first strategy identified in this study was 'reducing customer–employee contact', which was a factor mentioned in a number of other observations (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020).

Another strategy identified in relation to post-COVID-19 religious tourism recovery was 'stimulating religious tourism demand', which was prioritised by the participants as the twenty-second strategy. By offering facilities to religious tourists (e.g., travel credit cards), governments can stimulate demand in this sector and support businesses active in religious tourism. The importance of this strategy was also highlight in previous research (Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020; OECD, 2020; Ondicho, 2021; Haque, 2020). 'Having close relationships and cooperating with healthcare organisations' was the twenty-third strategy found in this study, as emphasised by other researchers (UNWTO, 2020b; Krishnan *et al*., 2020; Wen *et al*., 2020).

Finally, 'considering employees' health and safety' was the twenty-fourth and last strategy observed; human resources represent one of the most valuable assets of tourism businesses and have vital functions in meeting tourists' needs (Nzonzo & Chipfuva, 2013). As such, employees' safety and health over the post-pandemic era would be a serious topic to be reflected on by businesses. For instance, some of the measures that businesses can take are asking employees about their health status, diagnosing and separating infected employees, providing personal protection equipment to staff including masks and other health-related tools (Dalrymple *et al*., 2020; OECD, 2020; Klasko *et al*., 2020).

Conclusion and Suggestions

Focusing on the losses that religious tourism as an important type of tourism has incurred since the COVID-19 outbreak, this study has identified and prioritised practical strategies to sustain post-COVID-19 religious tourism. The results of data analysis reveal that the strategies to sustain post-COVID-19 religious tourism could be divided into four main strategies (dimensions) and 24 sub-strategies. The findings further clarify that the five most significant strategies that could help post-COVID-19 tourism rebound are as follows in order of importance:

'making it mandatory to maintain a distance from sacred monuments (e.g., tombs) and prohibiting touching or having any physical contact with such monuments',

'understanding religious tourists' health-related expectations'

'making it mandatory to use masks and other health-related equipment in sacred/religious locations',

'reducing the capacity for welcoming tourists in sacred and tourism sites while holding religious ceremonies with a small number of attendants', and '

Paying attention to retail opportunities and family-related issues.'

The results offer practical guidelines to managers, activists and religious tourism planners in the public and private sectors. In this regard, religious tourism managers and policy-makers are advised to take into account the strategies to help religious tourism bounce back in the post-COVID-19 future. Furthermore, managers and policy-makers in the tourism industry can use the prioritisation suggested in this study, while formulating their plans for reinforcing and rescheduling their activities and operational processes. The findings could also provide some insight into future investigations; for instance, although this study relies on a systematic literature review to identify the strategies, future surveys could draw on the opinions of managers and activists in the tourism industry. Given the model proposed in this study, researchers could also evaluate the measures adopted by governments or management systems (in relation to private businesses) in their efforts to strengthen and reconstruct religious tourism in the post-COVID-19 future.

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