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Ever since people have travelled to sacred places, religious and sacred sites have become some of the most visited destinations globally (Griffiths, 2011; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2015), providing fascinating forms of travel (Griffin & Raj, 2017). However, despite the global importance and popularity of religious tourism and sacred places, few studies measure the tourists' experiences in those destinations (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the standardisation of tourism products, including sacred ones, and the competitive market, requires that tourism destinations distinguish themselves by creating unique experiences. Currently, tourists seek appealing, unique, and memorable experiences that enhance their emotional link with tourism destinations.

Previous research studies revealed that tourism experiences and place attachment were related. However, research in this area is still scarce, especially in sacred places. Within this context and based on the tourism experience and place attachment scales, the present study explores the relationship between tourist experience and place attachment in a sacred destination. Insights of an empirical study of 329 tourists who visited the sacred Portuguese destination of the Shrine of Fatima allowed us to conclude that memorable experience have the following characteristics: 1) meaningfulness and refreshment, 2) hedonism, 3) novelty, and 4) involvement. Place attachment also exhibits four dimensions: 1) place identity, 2) place dependence, 3) place familiarity, and 4) place symbolism.

The present research contributes to the theoretical development of memorable tourism experiences and place attachment in the literature by addressing tourism experience and place attachment dimensions in relation to sacred destinations. Also, the results could have potential practical implications for religious and holy destination planning, marketing, and management, promoting the differentiating qualities that attract tourists and involving them with these settings in a unique and memorable tourism experience.

Key Words: tourism, sacred places, tourism experience, place attachment

Introduction

Religious and spiritual tourism refers to travel for religious or spiritual purposes, such as pilgrimage and visiting sacred sites. Travel to holy places is considered the oldest form of tourism and is one of the most significant tourism segments (Apollo *et al.*, 2020). UNWTO (2017)

estimates that 300-330 million international travellers visit the world's major religious sites each year, a quarter of all international tourist arrivals (Griffin & Raj, 2017).

Sacred places are powerful places with profound emotional meanings to people attracted to them (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). The significance of

holy places can be due to the qualities of the place or place-centered sacredness (Eade & Sallnow, 2000).

The search for meaningful and memorable experiences is central because it describes the primary motivation in life (Sancar & Severcan, 2010). Tourists travel away from their home environment to create a unique and personal experience (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, destinations try to provide the most pleasant and valuable experiences for tourists to remember positively (Kim, Koo & Chung, 2021). A memorable tourism experience is an experience that involves positive memories that tourists live after personally experiencing meaningful activities (Kim *et al.*, 2012). It is a significant experience that tourists remember, recall, and selectively reconstruct when describing a travel experience (Seyfi, Hall & Rasoolimanesh, 2020).

Kim (2010) developed the first studies measuring memorable tourism experiences, followed by Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012), Kim and Ritchie (2014), and later explored by Smith, Brown, and Assaker (2017). These works include a seven-dimensional scale:

- Hedonism* (living exciting experiences),
- Novelty* (once-in-lifetime experience),
- Refreshment* (escaping and feeling free),
- Meaningfulness* (learning about oneself),
- Involvement* (immersive experience),
- Knowledge* (exploring new learnings and knowledge)
- Local Culture* (experience of social interaction with the local community and local cultures).

To live a unique and memorable experience in religious and sacred destinations, people desire a sense of belonging with the place (Lucarno, 2016; Silva, Abrantes, Herstein & Reis, 2019). People prefer to create, improve and sustain strong relationships with places (i.e., Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Williams & Vaske, 2003). Social science academic interest in people-place relations has grown over the last 50 years (Di Masso *et al.*, 2019; Boley *et al.*, 2021).

Developing from people-place research, 'place attachment' is a concept which has derived from Environmental Psychology (Ariccio *et al.*, 2020) and considers the emotional connection between an individual and a place (Altman & Low, 1992; Hammitt *et al.*, 2006). The concept

was later extended mainly to the tourism domain and was widely used to measure tourist attachment (Cao, Qu & Yang, 2021). In tourism literature, there are different terms describing the emotional links that people establish with places: *a sense of place* (Farnum, Hall & Kruger, 2005; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001, 2006), *community-attachment* (Kang & Choi, 2002; Perkins & Long, 2002), *neighborhood-attachment* (Brown, Perkins & Brown, 2003; Lewicka, 2010) and *place attachment* (Altman & Low, 1992; Giuliani & Feldman, 1993; Giuliani, 2003; Williams & Vaske, 2003), which is the most commonly recognised one (Ramkissoon, Smith & Weiler, 2013).

Place attachment is a positive and affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is the tendency of the individual to maintain closeness to such place (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001: 274). The empirical measure of place attachment ranges from unidimensional measurement approaches to the consideration of four or five dimensions (Boley *et al.*, 2021). Tourism studies conceptualise place attachment as a multi-faceted concept (Ram, Bjork & Weidenfeld, 2016). However, most studies have two-dimensional scales, considering *place identity* (emotional attachment) and *place dependence* (functional attachment) as the two dimensions of place attachment. This two-dimension model is derived from the structure initially proposed by Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) and later developed by Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, and Watson (1992) and Williams and Vaske (2003). Still, several studies extend their scope and consider additional dimensions: *place affect* (Halpenny, 2010; Ramkissoon, Weiler & Smith 2012; Ramkissoon, Smith & Weiler, 2013; Tsai, 2012; Yuksel, Yuksel & Bilim, 2010), *place social bonding* (Ramkissoon *et al.*, 2012), *place memory* and *place expectations* (Chen & Dwyer, 2018), *place familiarity*, *place belongingness* and *place rootedness* (Hammitt, Backlund & Bixler, 2004, 2006; Hammitt, Kyle & Oh, 2009), and *place symbolism* (Smith, Brown & Assaker, 2017). Regardless of the dimensions considered, attachment occurs when a place becomes necessary to people (Hammitt, Backlund & Bixler, 2006; Stedman, 2003).

Place attachment plays a significant role in tourism experiences (Io & Wan, 2018) and people may feel particularly attached to a place due to solid religious

symbolism (Gieryn, 2000; Lewicka, 2011). These people aim to have memorable experiences in sacred places full of stories and symbols. Although there is a longitudinal interdependence between the tourist experience and destination attachment (Marques, 2018), attachment is a result of experience (Kastenholz, Marques & Carneiro, 2020). The memories of positive tourist experiences play a role in influencing place attachment (Vada, Prentice & Hsiao, 2019). It is meaningful experiences rather than the attributes of a setting that drive attachment to places (Sancar & Severcan, 2010). Place-attachment is thus an emotional bond to a place that may be created or enhanced by memorable experiences (Hsu & Scott, 2020).

However, few studies measure tourists' experiences in these destinations despite the global importance of sacred places and the body of research devoted to tourism experiences and place attachment (Albayrak *et al.*, 2018). It is necessary therefore, to explore the relationship between memorable tourism experiences and place attachment (Vada *et al.*, 2019), particularly in a religious experience. Thus, the present study aims to fulfil that lacuna.

Methodology

The main goal of this study is to measure the memorable tourism experience and place attachment of tourists in sacred places. The measurement instrument was developed based on scales previously established in relevant tourism literature. The scales are utilised to capture specific well-analysed concepts.

The **Memorable Tourism Experience** scale was adapted from the works of Kim and Ritchie (2014) and Smith, Brown, and Assaker (2017), integrating seven dimensions: (1) *Hedonism*, (2) *Novelty*, (3) *Refreshment*, (4) *Meaningfulness*, (5) *Involvement*, (6) *Knowledge*, and (7) *Local Culture*.

On the other hand, **Place Attachment** was measured using several scales: *Place Identity and Place Dependence* dimensions were adapted from the work of Raymond, Brown and Weber (2010); *Place Affect* was retrieved from the research of Jiang, Ramkissoon, Mavondo, and Feng (2017); the *Place Familiarity* dimension was

adapted from Cheng and Kuo (2015), and finally the *Place Symbolism* dimension came from the work of Smith, Brown and Assaker (2017).

After selecting the scales from the literature, the final instrument was discussed with experts and translated into Portuguese, Spanish, and French. After revision, a pre-test sample of 30 university students was used to test the scales' reliability (through Cronbach's Alpha). The pre-test results were used to refine the questionnaire further.

The current study uses a survey approach, with a sample of 329 tourists, and was conducted via an on-site questionnaire at Fatima in mainland Portugal. Questionnaires were administered to tourists from 30 September to 31 October of 2019. The data were collected in the prayer area of the Shrine of Fatima (Figure 1). Potential respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire after finishing their visitor experience at the Shrine, indicating their level of agreement concerning their experiences and place-attachment regarding their visit to this sacred place.

Figure 1: Basilica and Sanctuary of Fatima



Source: Kevin Griffin

Table 1: Memorable Tourism Experience in Sacred Places

Regarding the tourist experience you had in this sacred place, indicate the degree of agreement with each of the following statements: 1 = Totally Disagree / 5 = Totally Agree	1+2	3	4+5
I felt very excited about this new experience	7.9%	21.6%	70.5%
I felt very involved with the activities I had	14.3%	26.2%	59.5%
I really enjoyed this experience	5.5%	14.3%	80.1%
It was an exciting experience	13%	29.5%	57.4%
It was the experience of a lifetime	22.5%	27.1%	50.4%
It was a unique experience	19.8%	25.3%	54.9%
It was totally different from other tourist experiences	15.0%	27.2%	57.8%
I got a good impression of the local people	3.1%	20.8%	76.2%
Experienced close to the local culture	9.7%	26.6%	63.6%
It was liberating	15.0%	25.3%	59.8%
I felt revitalised	15.2%	22.5%	62.3%
I felt like I did something with meaning	10.3%	27.1%	62.5%
I felt like I did something important	13.2%	26.3%	60.5%
I learned a lot about myself	26.2%	25.0%	48.8%
I visited a place I really wanted to visit	12.2%	16.8%	71.1%
I did things I really wanted to do	13.4%	20.7%	65.8%

Source: The authors

The sample profile includes tourists mainly from Portugal (89.4%) but also from other countries, like Brazil, Spain, Colombia, Canada, and throughout Europe. They were aged between 18 and 87 years, with an average of 41 years and a standard deviation of 17 years. About 50% were aged between 25 and 53 years. Most of the participants were female (56%), and 44% were male. They are highly educated since 38.4% have university degrees and 35.1% have 12 years of school. 27.7% work in administration and commerce, 21.2% are middle and senior managers, 13.2% are freelancers/self-employed, and 7.7% are business people. The respondents' income is low for the most part: 48.9% earn less than €1000 individual net income/month, 33.7% between €1001 and €2000, only 17.4% earn more than €2001. 82% travelled with their families or companion and 12.6% with friends. Only 1.8% travel alone. Concerning the travel duration: 66.2% stayed two days, 13.7% for three days, and 20.1% spent four or more days in the area. 66% said they planned the trip themselves, and only 12.5% used a travel agency.

Data Analysis

Table 1 summarises the memorable tourism experiences while visiting sacred places. Most of the respondents pointed out that they were very excited and enjoyed the experience, got a good impression of the local people, and visited a place that they wanted to visit. Also, most

of the respondents considered that this was an experience of a lifetime, a unique event where they learned about themselves. Additionally, they referred to a very exciting and liberating experience, totally different from others. It was a revitalising experience close to the local culture. They did something meaningful, important, or even things they wanted.

Table 2 shows place-attachment regarding the visited sacred place. Most of the respondents point out that the visited sacred place has a high symbolism, with more than 60% of the sample agreeing that when they think of holy places, they always remember that place. About 50% of respondents indicate that the visited sacred place is very special, important, familiar, meaningful, and they strongly identify with it. Around 40% of the respondents feel that the place is part of them or that they've been there many times, consider it the best holy place they know, feel a real sense of belonging, and miss the sacred place after they leave. More varied answers pointed to the feeling that respondents would rather be in this sacred place than anywhere else, would not replace this for other holy places that are not comparable, and feel very connected with the site and local people. The perception that the place expresses a lot about respondents or that they know the site like the back of their hands were not as universally supported.

Table 2: Place Attachment to Sacred Places

Please indicate your degree of agreement with each of the following statements regarding the connection you feel with this sacred place 1 = Strongly disagree / 5 = Strongly agree	1+2	3	4+5
I feel this place is part of me	27.5%	29.3%	43.3%
I'd rather be in this sacred place than anywhere else	28.1%	33.8%	38.1%
This place is very special to me	24.0%	23.7%	52.3%
I would not replace this holy place with any other holy place	33.5%	30.8%	35.6%
I strongly identify myself with this place	23.8%	26.8%	49.4%
This place is the best holy place I know	25.4%	30.0%	44.6%
I feel very connected to this place and the people who are here	26.6%	34.3%	39.1%
No holy place can be compared to this	32.0%	29.9%	38.1%
This place says a lot about me	31.5%	31.2%	37.3%
Doing what I do in this place is very important to me	24.1%	23.8%	52.1%
This holy place means a lot to me	23.4%	23.2%	53.3%
When I think of holy places, I always remember this place	15.9%	22.8%	61.4%
I have a feeling I've been to this place many times	30.1%	26.1%	43.8%
This place well characterises the sacred	7.3%	20.1%	72.5%
This place is very familiar to me	20.4%	26.2%	53.4%
This place is a symbol of the sacred	6.7%	15.3%	78.0%
I know this place like the back of my hand	37.2%	29.9%	33.0%
I feel a real sense of belonging to this place	26.9%	30.2%	42.9%
I miss this place	27.8%	26.2%	46.0%

Source: The authors

Table 3: Factorial Analysis of Memorable Tourism Experiences in Sacred Places

Dimensions	Items	Communalities	Factor loadings	% of variance	Cronbach's Alpha
Hedonism	I felt very excited about this new experience.	0.772	0.744	25.0	0.916
	I felt very involved with the activities I had	0.706	0.699		
	I really enjoyed this experience	0.773	0.743		
	It was an exciting experience	0.791	0.765		
Novelty	It was the experience of a lifetime	0.741	0.587	23.6	0.888
	It was a unique experience	0.766	0.68		
	It was totally different from other tourist experiences	0.742	0.795		
Refreshment and Meaningfulness	It was liberating	0.796	0.794	15.2	0.819
	I felt revitalised	0.81	0.775		
	I felt like I did something with meaning	0.811	0.743		
	I felt like I did something important	0.783	0.709		
	I learned a lot about myself	0.702	0.645		
Involvement	I visited a place I really wanted to visit	0.869	0.815	13.9	0.834
	I did things I really wanted to do	0.818	0.733		

Source: The authors

The relations between memorable tourism experience and place attachment in a sacred place context

A factor analysis was carried out using the Varimax Rotation method, specifically for the items of ‘memorable tourism experiences in sacred places’ and ‘place attachment in sacred places.’ Tables 3 and 4 summarise the Factor Loadings, Variance Percentage, and Cronbach’s alpha of the exploratory factorial analyses.

The final model for a memorable tourism experience in sacred places (Table 3) has a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of Sampling Adequacy of 0.932, which is a good value, according to Sharma (1996). On the other hand, Bartlett’s Sphericity test showed that the variables are significantly correlated ($p=0.000$), indicating that factor analysis is adequate (Sharma, 1996). However, two variables had a factor saturation above 0.5 in more than one factor therefore they were removed from the

analysis. The final result incorporates four factors. The rotated model explained 77.7% of the total variance. The first factor was ‘*Hedonism*’ which explains 25% of the variance. The second factor, ‘*Novelty*’, explains 23.6% of the variance. The third, ‘*Refreshment and Meaningfulness*’ explains 15.2% of the variance. The last factor, ‘*Involvement*’ explains 13.9% of the variance. Also, an analysis of the internal consistency for each factor was performed. The Cronbach’s Alpha values were all greater than 0.8.

Table 4 illustrates the measurement instrument of place attachment in sacred places, incorporating 18 items, divided into four factors. The considered model showed a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy of 0.954. The results obtained from Bartlett’s Sphericity test shows that the variables are significantly correlated ($p=0.000$), indicating the use of factor analysis is appropriate (Sharma, 1996). The rotated varimax model

Table 4: Factorial Analysis of Place Attachment to Sacred Places

Dimensions	Items	Communalities	Factor Loadings	% of Variance	Cronbach's alpha
Place Identity	I feel this place is part of me	0.799	0.792	34.5	0.962
	This place is very special to me	0.802	0.722		
	I strongly identify myself with this place	0.803	0.787		
	I feel very connected to this place and the people who are here	0.755	0.785		
	This place says a lot about me	0.817	0.800		
	Doing what I do in this place is very important to me	0.790	0.759		
	This holy place means a lot to me	0.810	0.737		
	I feel a real sense of belonging to this place	0.792	0.722		
	I miss this place	0.671	0.675		
Place Dependence	I would not replace this holy place with any other holy place	0.730	0.647	17.4	0.864
	This place is the best holy place I know	0.794	0.808		
	No holy place can be compared to this	0.627	0.604		
	When I think of holy places. I always remember this place	0.744	0.703		
Place Familiarity	I have a feeling I've been to this place many times	0.811	0.768	14.5	0.856
	This place is very familiar to me	0.777	0.635		
	I know this place like the back of my hand	0.827	0.833		
Place Symbolism	This place well characterizes the sacred	0.857	0.856	11.8	0.846
	This place is a symbol of the sacred	0.861	0.883		

Source: The authors

Table 5: Correlations Between Tourism Experiences in Sacred Places and Place Attachment to Sacred Places

Tourism Experience \ Place Attachment	Place Identity	Place Dependence	Place Familiarity	Place Symbolism
Refreshment and Meaningfulness	0.504**	0.114*	0.198**	0.202**
Hedonism	0.360**	0.103*	-0.009	0.105*
Novelty	0.267**	0.277**	0.032	-0.012
Involvement	0.275**	0.105*	-0.052	0.175**

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).
 * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Source: The authors

explained 78.1% of the total variance. The factors of the model are ‘*Place Identity*’, ‘*Place Dependence*’, ‘*Place Familiarity*’, and ‘*Place Symbolism*’. All those factors have a Cronbach’s that is higher than 0.846.

A Pearson correlation analysis measured the association between the tourism experience and the place attachment to sacred places. Table 5 shows the correlation coefficient values between the four dimensions of *Tourism Experience* and the previously obtained four dimensions of *Place Attachment*.

The place attachment dimensions ‘*Identity*’ and ‘*Dependence*’ are significantly associated with all of the *Tourism Experience* dimensions. The ‘*Familiarity*’ dimension of place-attachment only shows one significant correlation with ‘*Tourism Experience*’ and that is ‘*Refreshment and Meaningfulness*’. ‘*Place Symbolism*’ is significantly related to all *Tourism Experience* dimensions except ‘*Novelty*’. The significant correlations between the dimensions are positive.

The highest correlations found are between ‘*Identity*’ and the different dimensions of tourism experience. The strongest association is between ‘*Refreshment and Meaningfulness*’ and ‘*Identity*’. Tendentially, the greater the identity to the sacred place, the greater the perception of *Refreshment and Meaningfulness*.

Conclusions

Tourism experience is a multifaceted and complex process (Singh, Singh & Singh, 2023). Understanding tourist experiences in sacred places is essential for managing these areas and attracting people. Creating

memorable experiences is a current topic in tourism and management (Wang, Liu, Wei & Zhang, 2020). Despite this, the literature suggests that it is crucial to develop new research to understand this better (Patwardhana, Ribeiro, Kyle, Payinia & Mallyaa, 2020). This study responds to this challenge, developing models that allow us to understand better what memorable tourism experiences in sacred places can be.

Theoretical Implications

This paper provides a set of theoretical contributions to the literature on tourist experiences in sacred places. Firstly, it shows that the tourist experiences lived in sacred places are different, characterised by transmitting to most tourists feelings of excitement, involvement, pleasure, a once-in-a-lifetime experience, while being liberating and revitalising. Second, tourists who visit sacred places show similarity to the residents of these places, and can develop experiences related to the local culture. Third, tourists demonstrate that visits to holy sites are important, with personal meaning. They will, for example, allow each individual to understand themselves better. Fourth, tourists experience sacred places as special, important, memorable, and symbolic.

However, grouping the different memorable experiences of sacred places identified by the literature allowed us to identify four main dimensions: *Hedonism*, *Novelty*, *Refreshment and Meaningfulness*, and *Involvement*. *Hedonism* is mainly related to the fact that tourists in sacred places obtain new experiences, get involved in the activities carried out there, enjoy the experiences carried out there, and transmit some excitement. On the other hand, *Novelty* relates to the uniqueness of the

visit experience. *Refreshment and Meaningfulness* have the meaning of liberation, revitalisation, the meaning of experience, and self-learning about oneself. *Involvement* is the performance of an activity that is personally wanted.

Finally, the analysis of Place Attachment to sacred places made it possible to identify four related dimensions: *Place Identity*, *Place Dependence*, *Place Familiarity*, and *Place Symbolism*. Visitors demonstrated that their connection with these can characterise sacred places in the first case. For example, considering sites are part of themselves, they are unique, thus, visitors develop feelings of connection and belonging to these places. On the other hand, tourists develop feelings of dependence on these places, as they are sacred and unique; others cannot replace them. Thus, holy places are familiar, and there is a desire to repeatedly visit to them and to increase knowledge about them. In short, they are symbols of the sacred.

Managerial Implications

Sacred places have unique characteristics that are capable of creating memorable tourist experiences. In this way, organisations must be able to enhance these experiences by making tourists feel that they are living a uniquely exciting experience. Another fundamental aspect is that tourists should be able to interact with residents and get to know their culture. The more this happens, the more memorable and unique the experience.

On the other hand, the experience that tourists intend to obtain is related to the sacred character of the places visited. Thus, this religious experience must be highlighted and enhanced in tourist visits. Managers of these places must enhance the hedonism, novelty, liberating, revitalising, important, and unique meaning of their visitor experience. They must also make it possible for each visitor to get to know themselves better. Finally, tourists must feel involved with the visit and be able to carry out varied activities that best suit their profile.

A sacred destination has a unique and irreplaceable identity. It creates dependency because those who visit it will want to revisit, furthermore, it is a symbol of the sacred. These are interrelated aspects.

Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some limitations, which are important to develop future research. First, the study's data collection was conducted in only one sacred destination, leading to generalisability issues for the research findings. So, further research should expand the samples and include other holy sites from other countries to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this subject. Also, tourists from different generations could have different connections and memorable experiences regarding sacred places. Therefore, a generational analysis within this context could be fascinating. Finally, and in line with most studies, this work has been conducted in the real-time tourist experience. The on-site context where tourists were either in the midst or not had completed their trip could be a limitation because it focuses on the initial encoding stage tourists' memories. It would be desirable to measure the after-lived religious experience.

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