

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Design thinking for market segmentation in spiritual tourism: A path to business sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores the critical role of market segmentation as a foundation for effective positioning strategies aimed at achieving business sustainability in the niche of spiritual tourism. Recognized as a growing area of special interest tourism, spiritual tourism is attracting increasing attention from both public and private sector stakeholders. Using a qualitative approach and drawing primarily on secondary data, this study applies design thinking to structure the segmentation process in alignment with sustainability goals. The proposed conceptual model identifies three distinct behavioral factors of spiritual tourists: existential, experiential and experimental spiritual tourists. As external factors influencing the selection for spiritual tourism segmentation, the emotions of being hedonistic, serendipitous, and contemplators are recognized in the illustrated model. This model contributes to the theoretical discourse in tourism marketing and design thinking by demonstrating a structured, exploratory approach to segment identification. Practically, it offers tourism providers a framework for categorizing potential visitors and developing targeted positioning strategies that support long-term business sustainability. Future research could focus on empirically validating these segments through studies involving both tourists and industry.

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1. Introduction

Early years of the new millennium witnessed a notable rise in interest in spirituality and associated matters among the global masses. This rise in interest recreated and relaunched the industry of spiritual products and services (Balakrishnan Nair & Dileep, 2021; Kujawa, 2017; Norman, 2009). The rise of Islamic banking, Halal branding and pilgrimage to Makkah are the evident examples of the rebirth of spirituality among the Muslim global population (Halim et al., 2021; Haq, 2014). Likewise, the growth of Buddhist and Hindu retreats and visits to relative Temples, and the Christian travels to Spain to walk in the Santiago de Compostella, the Vatican, and Lourdes in France, support this notion (Kumar et al., 2022; Norman, 2009).

Journeys for spiritual development are gaining popularity among religious and secular voyagers, which motivated tourism providers to explore the potential to differentiate brands related to spiritual journeys compared to other travel offerings (Kumar et al., 2022; Haq, 2021; Raj & Morpeth, 2007). Marketing experts have been stressing that the marketing strategy does not depend merely on product differentiation activities that provide the providers with a horizontal portion of a market that is widespread (Balakrishnan Nair & Dileep, 2021; Kujawa, 2017). Meritoriously defined and pinpointed dissection of the

market is a serious requirement for a winning positioning strategy achieving business sustainability since it produces the required intensity for the competitive advantage (Vidal-Melia et al., 2025; Srivastava & Fernandes, 2021).

Since 1960, industries have appreciated that achieving and retaining a competitive advantage is the core for achieving business sustainability (Sanchez-Fernandez et al., 2019; Porter 1980). Prudence in Porter's observations and generalizations indicates that competitive advantage strategy urges strategic planning that embraces the effect of a fluctuating macro-environment on consumers and value creation for consumers (Porter 2001). Furthermore, the primary consumer segments are the final authorities to achieve business sustainability. This dimension of Porter's competitive advantage comprises of competitors and positioning. Therefore, service providing businesses, including tourism, achieve the competitive edge from a smart combination of operational effectiveness, customer identification and strategic positioning. Operational effectiveness is realized by 'doing what your competitors do, but better' (Porter 2001, p. 70). Positioning a product strategically depends on smart segmentation, which involves doing things differently from competitors, in a way that delivers a unique type of value to customers' (Porter 2001, p. 70).

Various scholars in marketing have agreed that segmenting a market is a fundamental piece of the marketing machinery that splits the market of a specialized product or service into different smaller clusters constituted upon psychography, demography, or the behavior of current and potential customers (Hassan & Craft 2005; Goller et al., 2002; Smith, 1995). Meanwhile, Yankelovich (1964) argued that demography could not be believed as the best method to split the target market. Furthermore, the psychography of customers assesses the opinions and beliefs of customers by determining the psychology (e.g. values, thinking, philosophy, etc.) rather than their demography (e.g. gender, age, race, etc.) features of customers (Jenkins & McDonald, 1997; Smith, 1995). Respected researchers have advocated that designing and offering good and services fulfilling the needs is effectively achieved and attains business sustainability after targeting is distributed into sharply specified consumer groups (Nam & Yang, 2025; Srivastava & Fernandes, 2021; Sanchez-Fernandez et al., 2019; Smith & Culkin, 2001).

Furthermore, for designing plans to achieve the business objectives of a company it is essential to construct the consumer market facilitating the crafting of the marketing strategy 'different applications of the marketing mix to service their needs' (Jenkins & McDonald 1997, p. 17). The key benefit of market segmentation is the classification of relevant features of pinpointed buyers that could and would purchase and provide feedback on crafting, packaging and distributing the item while following the requirements of that consumer group (Srivastava & Fernandes, 2021; Smith, 1956). The rationale supporting the study conducted in this paper was to fill this theoretical gap in the tourism marketing literature by finding the most appropriate means to segment the market of spiritual travelers that could augment the market positioning of the tourism providers.

The purpose of this research was to uniquely develop an effective method to segment the market of spiritual travelers, a design thinking framework was incorporated. The design thinking method has been selected in this paper, as it focuses on users, their main points and their needs. Moreover, Hartman et al. (2024) have successfully used design thinking methods (in combination with system thinking) as an instrument to segment the market to realize business sustainability. Hence it is agreed that design thinking concentrates on considering and accepting needs, attitudes and behavior of consumers. In

market segmentation, this implies the designing of segments which indicate the real consumer tastes and choices driving to craft the winning strategies (Hartman, et al., 2024).

The knowledge derived from the analysis of various published data was triangulated with material received from various sources comprising of research findings and government and non-government travel data and official tourism statistics (Alam, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). All emerging categories were further synthesized and evaluated to identify different criteria that could be used to divide the market of spiritual adventures (Daengbuppha et al., 2006; Goller et al., 2002). With the successful classification of groups of the market for spiritual adventures, a base was constructed to design and market relevant products and services. The paucity of literature on spiritual adventures highlighted the research objective being the usage of literature from similar areas to facilitate the inquiry of the research challenge (Alam, 2005). Since belonging to the similar domain of special interest tourism, the publications on cultural travels, specialized adventures and pilgrimage were analyzed to acquire necessary information applicable for the study (Daengbuppha et al., 2006; Chauvel & Despres, 2002). Hence, facilitating the research goal of segmenting a traveler who could be, would be or should be interested in spiritual tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Market segmentation in tourism*

A wide spectrum of literature has been enlightening the discussions on strategic positioning supported by market segmentation (Liu et al., 2025; Diaz Ruiz, 2024; Smith, 1956). The significance of product differentiation and segmentation for competitive positioning has been valued historically throughout the research published in marketing. As established by Smith (1956, p. 4): while product differentiation and market segmentation are closely related (perhaps even inseparable) concepts, attempts to distinguish between these approaches may be productive of clarity in theory as well as greater precision in the planning of marketing operations. Even today's modern marketers accept the application of market segmentation directly with the marketing concept paradigm as the principal marketing management philosophy (Liu et al., 2025; Haq, 2014).

The development and expansion of the literature on segmentation have attracted summaries on the studies on market segmenting and an extensive validation of segmenting as a vital and significant tool of the marketing machinery (Diaz Ruiz, 2024; Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008; Shaw et al., 2001). As is the case with all matured topics in research, whilst some marketers have declared publications on market segments as disintegrated and limited, meanwhile some have pointed out the scarcity of methodological precision in segmentation as part of the marketing system (Nam & Yang, 2025; Srivastava & Fernandes, 2021; Goller et al., 2002). Despite the fact that some criticism is acceptable, it can be concluded that the data assortment, scrutiny, dissemination and modification are essential factors for using market segmenting in marketing realization process (Smith & Culkin, 2001; Chauvel & Despres, 2002; Shaw et al., 2001).

2.2. *Spiritual tourism*

In this paper, spiritual tourism could not be apprehended without conceptualizing spirituality. An in-depth investigation of social science publications exploring spirituality in the last fifty years highlighted almost fifty descriptions of the term spirituality (Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott 1999). Spirituality is derived from the Latin 'spiritus',

meaning 'breath of life' (Principe 1983, p. 128). Spirituality can be trailed down to the Greek word 'pneuma' which was used in the New Testament to describe a person's spirit inspired by the Super Being, which is differentiated as a conclusion to impress people (Haq, 2021). The concept of spirituality could also be understood as the individualized and independent side of religious contemplating the 'holy' (Halim et al., 2021; Cohen, 1992).

Spirituality as a modern concept is free of any religious brand and many people consider themselves as spiritual without associating with any formal religions (Haq, 2021; Norman, 2009). Hence, from a non-religious perspective, spirituality is defined as a disclosing secret, melodious interrelation and an unseen personal power (Halim et al., 2021; Raj & Morpeth, 2007). Furthermore, two dimensions emerged in the literature on spirituality, firstly, it is the personal quest searching for the goal and objective of a person to complete his/her physical and emotional life, and secondly, spirituality involves the conviction that there is a Super Being that created all with His will and authority, sustains the creation, and all events and results belong to Him (Kujawa, 2017; Haq, 2014).

Furthermore, an established and standard outline of spirituality explained spirituality as a deep encounter of the person when s/he feels holiness, remarkably as verified by the impact of this involvement on his/her personal performance when s/he works on balancing his/her life with this feeling of divinity (Kumar et al., 2022). A multi-faith conceptualization ropes the impression that spirituality is an unseen and intangible truth that is the central faith element of most faith traditions (Alserhan, 2010). The multi-religious aspect of spirituality was well explained by the Muslim philosopher Ibn Al-Arabi, which has been translated as: 'my heart has become capable of every form: it is the pasture of gazelles and a covenant of Christian monks and a temple of idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba (Mecca) and the tables of the Tora and the book of Quran. I follow the religion of love: whatever way love's camel take, that is my religion and faith' (Nicholson, 1978, p.67).

2.3 Marketing spirituality

The preceding discussion in this paper indicates that marketing of spirituality related products and services is being accepted but with significant resistance. Even the identification of a pilgrim as a spiritual tourist causes debate among religious leaders and relevant researchers. For example, The Roman Rector of Santa Susanna Church argued that pilgrims should not be classified as tourists since their purpose to travel is different without any fun or leisure (Robichaud, 1999). The Rector stressed upon identifying a tourist as a traveler seeking to imitate his own land as seen in the outside world, while the pilgrim (not the spiritual tourist) visited while exploring for intangible and external for the humanly known world (Robichaud, 1999). This notion was confronted by Haq (2021) who declared pilgrims as travelers that were entertained by the tour and travel industry looking for financial profits and hence aligned with the description of the travel industry. Kumar et al. (2022) highlighted in their research findings that even many devoted pilgrims would seek some leisure and comfort, including food, transport and accommodation. Recent studies insisted that nowadays every kind of traveler is looking for some shopping time during their spiritual journeys even when Muslim pilgrims go for Hajj or Christians go to the Vatican (Kumar et al., 2022; Srivastava & Fernandes, 2021; Alserhan, 2010; Cohen, 1979).

Although, marketing of spirituality related products has been condemned as commercialization of faith and belief, yet many writers discredit earlier established notions deciding that faith and business were adversative (Halim et al., 2021; Norman, 2009; Raj & Morpeth, 2007). The connection between business and faith has been

confirmed by the significant financial influence of the yearly Hajj in Makkah, when indigenous people call the visiting pilgrims as crops (Haq, 2014). The idea of commercializing religious traveling has been called commodification (Robichaud 1999). Consideration is required for around three million devotees going for annual pilgrimage of Hajj to Makkah, they are short listed by their own governments after selecting or drawing from a much larger list of committed and hopeful Muslim travelers. This annual event of Hajj drives a multibillion-dollar machinery through the international Hajjis or spiritual tourists who spend hefty amounts on their applications, permissions, taxes, accommodation, food and transportation during the Hajj period, which cannot be labelled as a nonfinancial practice (Kujawa, 2017; Haq, 2014; Raj & Morpeth, 2007).

The above-mentioned analysis on marketing of spirituality could also be seen in a context of a marketing exchange between the faithful (devout individual) and God, the center of spirituality. The exchange could be presented as God designing His creation and marketing Himself, without being obvious, through His Blessings, His scriptures, and a universe full of His creations sustained alone by Himself. Then in the next stage, believers market themselves to God by following His rules through various religious traditions and struggle for the ultimate price of salvation after this life. This exchange process would include the spiritual quest by travelling to events and places that would enhance the performance and spiritual submission of the people. Hence, spiritual tourism marketing has become a phenomenon that has to be accepted as a product and service that needs support from effective market positioning based on specific segmentation.

2.4 Design thinking

Tim Brown (the CEO and President of IDEO, a global design and innovation firm founded in 1991 and expert in design thinking) defined design thinking as: ‘a methodology that imbues the full spectrum of innovation activities with a human-centered design ethos. By this I mean that innovation is powered by a thorough understanding, through direct observation, of what people want and need in their lives and what they like or dislike about the way particular products are made, packaged, marketed, sold, and supported’ (Brown, 2008, p. 1).

Design thinking has been applied in tourism studies across several domains. First, research demonstrates its use as a tool for conceptualizing innovative tourism projects (Sutresno & Singgalen, 2023; Haq et al., 2021; Seraphim & Haq, 2019, 2020; Stevic & Breda, 2016). Seraphim and Haq (2020) argue that design thinking can facilitate the creation of unique, engaging experiences in heritage and cultural tourism in Dubai, while their 2019 study examines the Pakistani context. Similarly, Stevic and Breda (2016) apply design thinking to enhance the sustainability of cultural tourism experiences.

Second, scholars investigate how design thinking enables the co-creation of tourism experiences with diverse stakeholders (Haq et al., 2021; Liburd et al., 2020; Matthew & McNeice, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2021). Matthew and McNeice (2022) provide a guide for co-creation using design thinking in tourism. Liburd et al. (2020) and Haq et al. (2021) show how collaboration among locals, tourism experts, and tourists can enrich the tourism experience. Ribeiro et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of cooperation between small entrepreneurs and artists in Recife, Brazil, to develop creative tourism practices.

Third, design thinking has been examined in tourism education (Doğantan, 2023; Indrianto et al., 2024). These studies consistently highlight design thinking as an approach that enhances teamwork, empathy, innovation, and problem-solving skills. Stevic and Breda (2016) illustrate its application in designing smart hotel guest experiences for

business and family travelers. Therefore, it can be summarized as design thinking in tourism studies addresses three main areas: the creation of new tourism experiences, the co-creation of experiences with stakeholders, and tourism education.

2.5 Tourism segmentation

Since knowledge management is important, this study on segmentation is constructed on the four stages of the segmentation process to facilitate the study of secondary data collection and analysis to construct the segmentation for spiritual tourism (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008; Goller, Hogg & Kalafatis, 2002). The process from Goller et al. (2002) implies that these stages contain: segmentation analysis; segmentation evaluation; implementation of segmentation; and control of segmentation. Although the process consists of four stages, due to the dearth in literature on the behavior of people engaged in spiritual tourism, this paper focuses on the first phase of segmentation analysis. This phase covers all aspects of the process engaged in dividing a diverse market into its various sections (Goller, Hogg & Kalafatis 2002).

Marketing experts have agreed that there are three major elements that build the base of the segmentation analysis: a- segmentation bases, which can be grouped according to macro variables and micro variables, and steps in the system of segmentation, b- research methodology and c- data analysis (Srivastava & Fernandes, 2021; Hassan & Craft, 2005). The market macro segmenting requires less methodological challenges since they use information from pre-published data and confirmed notions from the experts. Meanwhile, micro market segmenting centers depend on the original data from primary sources and are therefore more methodologically demanding (Smith, 1995). Micro-segmentation ensures richer data for analysis, thereby enabling the marketer to gain a sound knowledge of the composition of the customer market. Secondary data can be managed by categorizing the information strata, by scrutinizing the material and developing the associations between various related factors (Liu et al., 2025; Shaw, Subramaniam, Tan & Welge, 2001; Smith & Culkin; 2001). Sound segmentation knowledge is an essential foundation for the strategic positioning of a product (Nam & Yang, 2025; Porter, 2001; Hoek et al., 1998).

The market for cultural travelers is identified through the model from McKercher (2022) as: as per the significance of cultural purpose implying the judgement for going to a place and gravity of the traveler's involvement. Furthermore, McKercher (2002) presented five kinds of cultural travelers whose motivation stretched from a strong determined purpose to travel to those who did not have planned any predetermined intentional plans to travel (McKercher 2002). Although McKercher's model is precisely planned for adventurers seeking cultural knowledge, this study customized the model as a guideline for constructing spiritual tourism segmentation. The three kinds of roles that could be adapted from the McKercher's model to be used for spiritual travels are embedded in the traveler's inspiration and involvement to be segmented into clusters. The approach used in this paper indicates that the McKercher's model for culture seeking travelers could be adapted for spiritual adventurers' segmentation by mapping and comparing tourists' behavior and attitude. The three types of spiritual tourists acknowledged and extracted from McKercher's model are: Serendipitous, Contemplator and Hedonistic tourist.

The literature review presented in the preceding section highlights that the primary hurdle while customizing McKercher's model for culture seeking travelers for spiritual adventurers is the categorization of travelers to be devoid of realizing that their inspiration may be concentrated on varying needs at various places and in different times. Furthermore, the traveler's inspiration and preference could change during the trips that

may be related to some unknown reasons that are or are not part of the framework. Further, numerous rationales could be prompting the tourists' travel decisions. For instance, the main reason for traveling could be different but nevertheless the traveler might be decisively inspired to be seriously involved in looking for his/her spiritual development. Hence, the traveler may initiate the trip as a serendipitous visitor but could transform into a spiritual tourism contemplator.

It could also be concluded from the literature review that spiritual tourism is still accepted as an interesting subject that has not been established in tourism studies. Furthermore, the marketing of spiritual tourism has been explored by researchers but no clear path of strategizing the marketing of spiritual tourism is available. Hence, this study explores the firsts towards filling up this gap and focusing on segmentation of the spiritual tourism market identifying the travelers with various tastes and preferences that could be the primary target for tourism products and destination planning. Moreover, no research has been conducted to study the role and utilization of design thinking for spiritual tourism that highlights a significant gap attracting the initiative taken in this paper.

3. Methodology

This conceptual paper is based on the study that is exploratory in nature and adopts a literature review method to inquire into the concerns and classify the segmentation spiritual tourists for effective market positioning (Srivastava & Fernandes, 2021; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The exploratory study approach has been established as a credible method to analyze and review topics that are not supported by significant publications and struggle with the dispute of unanticipated conclusions (Daengbuppha et al., 2006; Goller et al., 2002). The theoretical underpinning of this method is that findings of such research could be groundbreaking and an opening for successive research processes; nevertheless, the researcher must confirm that outcomes of such a study are unbiased so that they could serve as the gateway for further research (Smith & Culkin, 2001; Jenkins & McDonal, 1997). That is the justification for this paper to adopt an exploratory approach which will encompass the study of all marketing publications to provide credible inputs for developing more structured tools including interviews for further research on segmenting and crafting marketing strategies for spiritual tourism (Balakrishnan Nair & Dileep, 2021; Hassan & Craft, 2005).

In order to delimitate the issues from McKercher's model, the classical and widely accepted typology from Cohen (1979) will be employed that divides tourists into five different modes. Over the years, many tourism and marketing researchers studying tourist attitudes and behavior have utilized this typology (Haq, 2014; Goller et al., 20223; McKercher, 2002). Travelers tend to search for various involvements and encounters during their travels that are based on their cultural understanding (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008). Cohen (1979) established the five tourism modes where the tourist's motivational classification ranges from searching for recreation, to seeking the experience and to the existential traveler: tourists searching for fun and leisure or some meaningful depth. The advantage of the Cohen's framework is that it emphasizes the traveler's involvement and refrains from confining the study to materialistic certainties. This study analyzed all five modes and concluded that three modes of tourism behavior are relevant for segmenting spiritual tourism, these are: existential, experimental, and experiential travelers as spiritual tourists.

In the quest to create more methodical tools for segmentation of spiritual tourists, the research used the design thinking approach crafted by the Hasso-Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford (Plattner, 2010). This approach is based on the five following steps:

- The “empathy” step, where the design thinker(s) uses different tools such as observation, interviews, secondary research to understand the users, their pain points and their needs.
- After analyzing the data collected in the former phase, the individual or team defines the problem they wish to address in the “define” step.
- Since the challenge has been established, the “ideate” step is the moment where the team employs different idea-generation techniques to produce many diverse ideas.
- Then, the team prototypes their final idea by building a visual and experiential representation of their product/service.
- The team test their prototype with their users, and they modify the prototype multiple times (or builds whole different prototypes), until the consumers are satisfied with the latest version (Plattner, 2010).

The other sources for secondary data for this research were collected and deliberated from news articles, media reports, personal travel vlogs, research papers, and the Government policy documents related to pilgrimage, sacred travels and management of holy places, people and events. The collected data was assessed by adapting the “thematic analysis” which has been successfully employed across a range of epistemological and ontological perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Chauvel & Despres, 2002). The researchers assigned various codes to the observed patterns of data, which were further categorized into sub-themes and themes, eventually leading this study to identifying segments for the spiritual tourism market.

The ethical standards adopted by the author/s in this exploratory research included: data was used only that was publicly available, the respect was maintained for the privacy of sources and the intellectual property involved, authors were watchful about responsible interpretation of the secondary data, and the transparency and accuracy of the data was assured by the team of author/s.

4. Findings and discussion

The discussion in previous sections indicate that spiritual pilgrimage tourism is based on holy and religious attitudes hence a qualitative research method is more suitable as it will facilitate this process of analyzing complex human phenomenon extracted from earlier publications rather than its quantification (Goller et al., 2002; Cohen, 1992). While going through the secondary data relevant to this exploration, three well known data evaluation criteria were observed - authenticity, credibility and meaning (Haq, 2021; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). As mentioned, the secondary data was employed in this study to facilitate the structure of a questionnaire for examining the attitudes and preferences of buyers and sellers of spiritual tourism in consequent future research. The research quality related to the validity was enriched by triangulation, otherwise, the integrity and significance of the study could be open to criticism.

Researchers have been considering four kinds of triangulations that were considered in this paper: data, method, investigator and theoretical triangulation (Haq, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The investigation in this research adopted the data triangulation approach since the findings of this paper were evidently reliant on the secondary data that was collected and assessed through various channels. The secondary data was the backbone for information collection in this study since the major source of information for this qualitative research, when the data was explored and extracted from journal articles, books, magazines, advertising material, advertising material, newspapers, vlogs, films, videos or lecture notes (Halim et al., 2021).

As mentioned above, it is difficult to segment the spiritual tourism market, as it combines spirituality and tourism in complex ways. The “empathy” step developed in this research is based on marketing researchers, marketing experts, tourism experts and tourists’ interviews, and secondary research as well. This data enables to determine the following problem for the “define” step: “How can design thinking add more rigor and facilitate the segmentation of spiritual tourists?”

During the brainstorming step, several solutions were prescribed by the authors of this paper. The following design thinking and marketing tools that can be used for segmentation of the market for spiritual tourism more accurately are:

The definition of user persona (the description of fictional users that are supposed to represent a category of a “typical” user),

- Customer journey map,
- Experience map,
- Stakeholder interviews,
- Observations,
- Secondary research,
- Qualitative Analysis.

These tools may be applied either individually or in combination. Their application will define the distinct categories of spiritual tourists. Moreover, the collected secondary data will explain the spiritual tourists’ motivation, behavior, pain points and demographics.

As part of this research, focus was mostly on secondary data, observation and published information for the “prototyping” step. The major segmentation category that emerged by the end of the coding process was an attitudinal characteristic indicating inclusive or exclusive perceptions towards spirituality as part of religion, or religion as part of spirituality. In any case, the triangulation of various data resources pinpointed that spiritual tourists were classified into three major types: existential, experiential and experimental, as illustrated and explained below. As the external factors that influence decision making for spiritual tourism segmentation, the emotions of being hedonistic, serendipitous, and contemplator are accepted and recognized in this paper.

The Venn-diagram given in Figure 1 highlights the model that could be used for spiritual tourism segmentation concluding from the triangulation of various types of cultural and religious tourists’ classifications. The spiritual tourism segmentation presented in Figure 1 is an academically structured conceptual model derived from the underpinning of existing literature on motivation and behavior of tourists. Moreover, while motivation triggers behavior, it can be considered as an exclusive connection for customer’s behavior. Hence, the spiritual tourism market is suggested to be broken into segments by using descriptive terms from concepts analyzed from current literature and reviewed in preceding sections. The examination of different models discerned a focus on the motivation of the tourist.

The illustration in Figure 1 explains the Venn-Diagram comprised of three spheres classifying the traveler's attitude and motivational behavior to categorize the traveler placed in each sphere. Therefore, a spiritual tourist is referred to as existential, experiential or experimental in behavior. The existential spiritual tourist is the most loyal and highly motivated individual aiming to enhance his/her spiritual life through traveling. This existential spiritual tourist is usually attached with a specific religious identity and is proud of it, and hence regularly travels to holy sites and events accordingly. The travel motivations for this tourist are dominated by spiritual inspiration and even visiting a new place for a different purpose, s/he will still search for some spiritual places. For example, a Muslim in visiting Italy or Greece would be searching for a Mosque or a Sufi shrine. Likewise, a Christian searching for a Church or Bible classes in the UAE.

The experimental spiritual tourist is the second strongest motivational category. This type of tourist is a regular traveler who has already tried different types of tourism, s/he has heard of spiritual tourism and knows its meanings and hence is seriously contemplating to experience it. For example, a Christian in UAE visits the Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi with the intention to have some spiritual experience. Or a Muslim in the UK visits a Church or Synagogue seeking such a spiritual presence. It can be implied that an experimental spiritual tourist has the most potential to be converted into an existential spiritual tourist. Such spiritual tourists are vulnerable to being targeted by tourism marketers in different destinations.

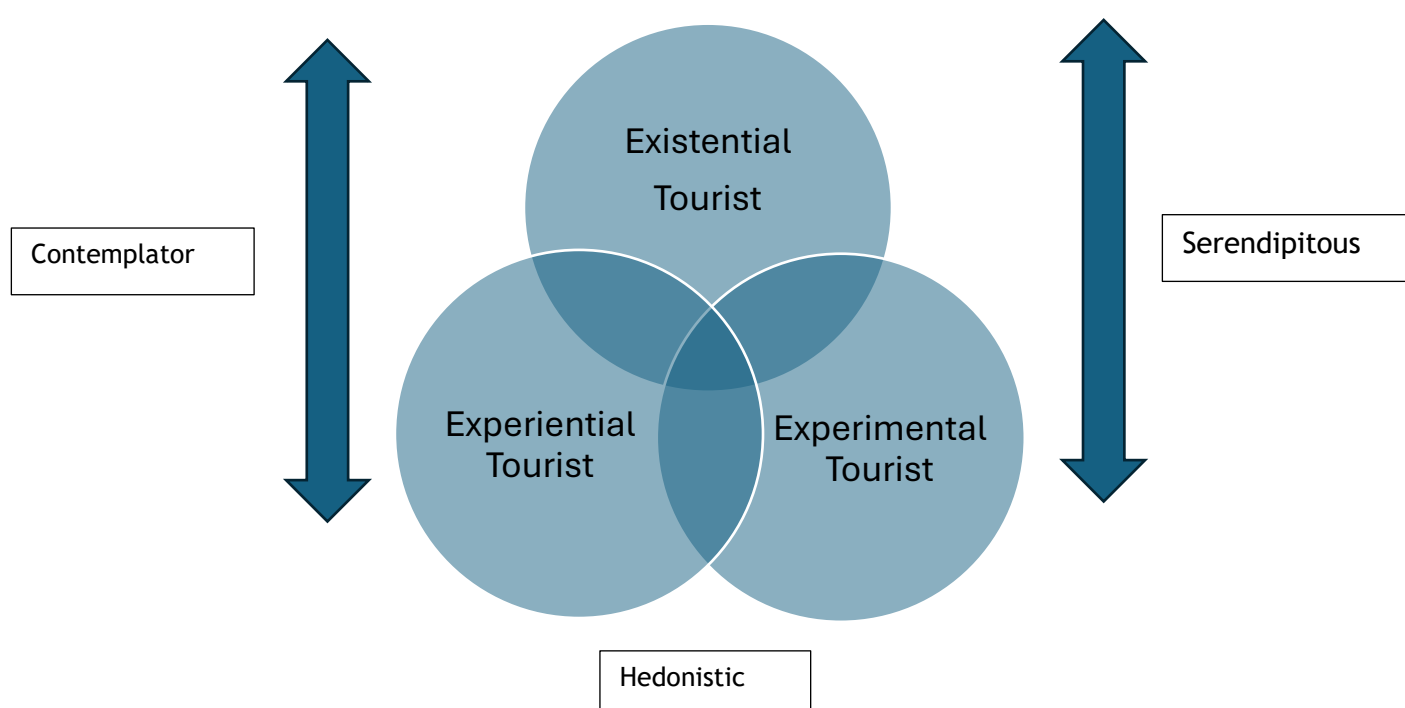
The third circle indicating the experiential spiritual tourist is the weakest motivational category. This type of tourist is a regular traveler who has already tried different types of tourism, s/he has heard of spiritual tourism, but s/he is not clear about its meanings and the expected experience. However, s/he would still consider going out of the norm and trying this type of tourism for an unexpected and unforeseen experience, depending on the convenience rather than the conviction. The holy center is the intersection of the three spheres that could be specified as the shaded section. The overlapping area portrays how the inspirations of spiritual travelers could contain many kinds of purpose and how all these could be integrated for the marketing task. The other independent sections of the spheres could represent a singular section of the market whereas the intersecting sections could signify intensity levels of spiritual travelers.

The Venn-Diagram in Figure 1 also indicates the periphery area out of the three circles. All these people have less inspiration for spiritual journeys; nevertheless, these people go for regular journeys and could be persuaded to think about trying a new kind of tourism, which is associated with personal spiritual development. The contemplators are tourists who could have been contemplating going for a spiritual engagement by traveling or who could have unexpectedly experienced such a journey, or unintentionally, while going for a fun-based entertaining vacation trip. Then there are the serendipitous travelers who could have an unplanned or serendipitous spiritual tourism experience by visiting a place close to the residence or on the way while rooming around. For example, a Christian tourist in Dubai was short of time to visit famous tourism attractions, hence walked to the Mosque in the neighborhood and enjoyed an unplanned spiritual encounter. Finally, there is the hedonistic tourist who will never think, imagine or plan to go on a spiritual journey. Even if s/he is staying next to a famous holy site and has the time and convenience to visit but s/he will still not even consider that place. Such tourists do not contemplate a spiritual tourism experience and never have an unanticipated spiritual involvement by traveling because of their environment, behavior, viewpoint, or lifestyle.

Figure 1 illustrated in the Venn-Diagram explains how the classification of the traveler's attitude and motivational behavior could be applied to position their spiritual tourism events and places for effective marketing. The marketing strategies designed in alignment with the tourist segmentation will certainly achieve the competitive advantage that has been discussed in the introduction of this paper. Therefore, tourism operators will have to design their marketing mix strategies by targeting various spiritual tourists based on their characteristics that could be categorized as being existential, experiential or experimental in behavior.

For the fifth step of Design thinking, where the team is supposed to test their ideas with their users, the authors are testing their ideas for a better segmentation of the market of traveling for spiritual reasons, in publishing the article (and in waiting for the feedback from reviewers, colleagues and professionals).

Figure 1. Spiritual Tourism Segmentation



Source: Author designed for study

5. Theoretical and practical implications

The paper contributes towards the theory of marketing and strategy that is elaborated by the explanation for recognizing the new and emerging market for travelers seeking spiritual development. This study augments the literature and theory related to spiritual and religious tourism and tourism experiences when visiting a sacred place or event. Design Thinking has not been applied in spiritual tourism and hence this paper makes a novel contribution to knowledge. This paper identifies the perception of spiritual tourism that has emerged from the combination of special purpose and cultural traveling, which further indicates the conceptual construction for segmenting spiritual tourism extracted from the literature review. Religious tourism and pilgrimage could be viewed as

subsets of spiritual tourism.

Regarding practical implications, the outcomes elaborated in the conceptual framework for spiritual tourism segmentation could be applied by tourism operators. The three internal and three external factors illustrated in Figure 1 identify attitudes and preferences of spiritual tourists visiting various sacred places or events. These behavioral factors could be utilized for more efficacious marketing through concentrated segmenting, targeting, and positioning strategies. This conceptual framework and the segmentation of religious tourists could also be applied to any country, city or town that accommodates spiritual and religious destinations and sites for competitive marketing plans and activities.

Following the illustration in Figure 1, interrelated themes could result in significant practical and policy implications giving valuable information to public and private pilgrimage and sacred tourism service providers. Tourism operators will have a clear picture about apprehensions and expectations of tourists by adapting the model highlighting six types of tourists. Finally, the conceptual framework could be used by governments in various countries to collaborate and work together to enhance their tourism policies and regulations. Strategic partnerships among various tourism stakeholders including the government, tourism companies, tourist groups and religious bodies could be facilitated to market spiritual tourism globally and accomplish four United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 1- poverty reduction, 8- economic growth, 9- infrastructure development, and 17-partnerships (UN-SDG, 2021).

6. Conclusion and future research

This conceptual paper, built on an exploratory study covers a gap in the available literature on market segmentation for spiritual tourism, which will contribute both to theory and managerial practice. The literature review reveals that many researchers have demonstrated that the designing of segments of the market for spiritual travels lacked rigor and structure (Nam & Yang, 2025; Srivastava & Fernandes, 2021; Goller et al., 2002). The Design Thinking approach was applied in this research, as a structured method to segment the spiritual tourism market.

There has been no implicit or explicit study on market strategizing for products and services related to spiritual needs that could be covered through travel and tours. As highlighted in this paper, only recently, spiritual tourism has been discussed in literature as a separate branch of traveling for specialized purposes, rather than being a part of pilgrimage, religious or sacred tourism.

Empirical research conducted with tourists and tourism operators is suggested as a potential future inquiry. A qualitative study adapting interviews and focus groups with tourism providers could be organized to explore the supply-side of spiritual tourism. Similarly, a quantitative study employing survey instruments could be managed with present and future tourists to learn about their attitudes and preferences regarding spiritual tourism segments presented in this paper.

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