

## Sustainable Religious Tourism: A Systematic Literature Review

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### Abstract

The study explores the dual impacts of tourism in the religious sector, highlighting both its positive contributions and environmental challenges when sustainability principles are disregarded. A literature review employing the PRISMA method examined 55 articles from SCOPUS-indexed journals published between 2014 - 2024, resulting in 27 relevant articles on the sustainable religious tourism field. Findings underscored that religious tourism generates social, economic, and environmental impacts. A comprehensive management framework is advocated for sustainable religious tourism, necessitating collaboration among stakeholders. Central to this approach is balancing the interests of all stakeholders to mitigate conflicts of interest effectively. The study recommends formulating and implementing a religious tourism sector strategy. This involves defining management concepts, executing strategies, and enforcing supervision mechanisms to foster sustainable practices.

*Keywords:* sustainable religious tourism; environmental impact; economic impact; social impact

### Introduction Section

Religious tourism is an exciting topic to discuss because it is the oldest type of tourism in the world and has the uniqueness that climate difficulties do not hinder this tourism and has a history as old as the history of religious tourism (Budovich, 2023; Jawabreh et al., 2022; Prasetio et al., 2022). Religious tourism is related to visiting a place with cultural, religious, and ritual-based values or activities related to religious beliefs (Durán-Sánchez et al., 2018). According to (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Romanelli et al., 2021), pilgrimage is a form of human mobility and circulation related to significant religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christian-Catholicism. Religious tourism tends to be carried out as group tours, not limited or ended by a specific time (Budovich, 2023; Prasetio et al., 2022). Religious tourism can be grouped into two. The first group of religious tourism is tours that aim to do religious things based on religious beliefs. The visit period depends on the era or figures associated with the tourist sites. The second group of religious tourism: tourists who come to the location not only do religious tourism but also visit other tourist facilities, making trips multipurpose in addition to religious travel (Prasetio et al., 2022). Religious tourism is unique, and this tour has the task and function: restore mental health, provide peace of mind, provide enjoyment of the spiritual atmosphere, observe activities related to religious customs and traditions, and build a spirit to deepen spiritualism in oneself (Budovich, 2023).

Tourism can provide positive added value from an economic aspect by giving employment, foreign exchange earnings, financial improvement for communities around tourist sites (craft industry, food industry, etc.), and massive infrastructure development to support tourism services. Besides the upbeat benefits, tourism also presents challenges related to environmental sustainability. Related to religious tourism, the challenges caused by the excessive development of religious sites result in high visitor traffic (over-tourism), excessive use of resources, environmental pollution (land, water, and air), low quality of services, and adequacy of foodstuffs (Huang & Pearce, 2019).

The United Nations has issued 17 concepts of sustainable development (SDGs) (Khizar et al., 2023). Tourism can encourage achieving the goals of Sustainable Development (SDGs), namely SDGs1, SDGs2, and SDGs3, promoted by the United Nations, provided that good practices in tourism management are carried out properly, namely sustainable management practices in the tourism industry. Preserving sustainable management is essential and requires proper consideration because the other side of tourism is the ability to bring adverse impacts on the environment and economy and preserve nature (Raihan, 2024).

Sustainable tourism has a management and development concept that considers the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability of the present and future and is in harmony with the needs of visitors, industry, the

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environment, and the host community. This is the definition of sustainable tourism issued by The *United National World Tourism Organization* (UNWTO) (Santos-Rojo et al., 2023). UNWTO has established 3 pillars for sustainable tourism. The first pillar is sustainable economic development based on tourism profitability at all levels (business, community, etc.). The second pillar is sustainable social development, where tourism is seen as an opportunity for promotion, safeguarding human rights, and providing equal opportunities for residents to engage and remain respectful of the culture and tourist sites. The third pillar is related to environmental sustainability. This pillar is related to the conservation and defense of natural resources, primarily associated with using non-renewable resources, air-soil-water pollution, and biodiversity in tourist sites (Santos-Rojo et al., 2023). This policy applies to all types of tourism in the world.

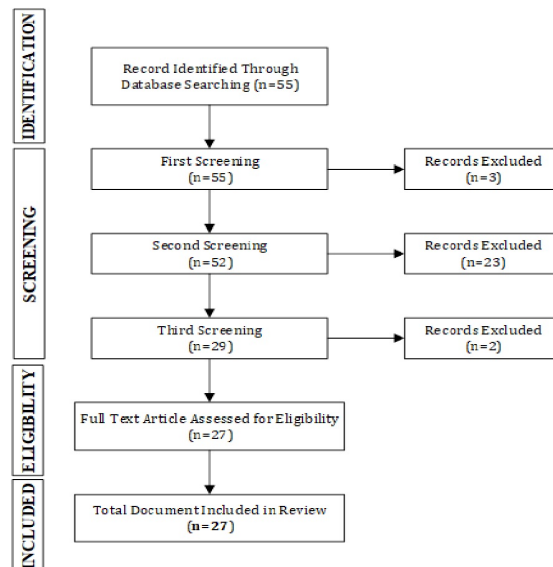
The tug-of-war between tourism's positive and negative impacts is attractive, especially related to religious tourism, which is the oldest and most unique. This article aims to review articles that discuss religious tourism in terms of sustainability to obtain information on how spiritual tourism's condition and management are currently running and how management proposals about sustainable religious tourism are implemented.

## Methodology

The methods used by researchers in making a literature review vary, some of which were *the CAD framework of Bichler and colleagues* (Schönherr, 2024), *Structural Topic Modelling* (Agarwal et al., 2024), *Systematic Literature mapping* (SLM)(Cahyo, 2021), *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA) Method (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019). In addition to these 3 methods, researchers used other methods to guide a systematic literature review (Cahyo, 2021). Preferred Reporting Items for the Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method were chosen in this literature review process. The PRISMA employed used 4 stages: *identification, screening, eligibility, and included* (Moher et al., 2009).

Articles used in the review process were Scopus-indexed articles. Search on Scopus used keywords and filter or screening stages: TITLE-ABS-KEY (“sustainable tourism” OR “eco-tourism” OR “green tourism” AND “pilgrimage tourism” OR “religious tourism” OR “spiritual tourism” OR “religion tourism”) AND PUBYEAR > 2013 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, “final”)) AND (LIMIT-TO(SRCTYPE, “j”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”)). At the initial identification stage, 55 articles were obtained and 3 stages of screening were carried out with the categories: "year," "final, journal, article" and “English”. From the “year” categories there is 3 article excluded. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Screening we use identification with “final, Journal, article” categories. From the 2<sup>nd</sup> screening, there were 24 articles excluded. Twenty-nine articles were kept for further screening. Only English-language articles will be used in the literature review. There are 2 articles excluded from 3<sup>rd</sup> screening. Furthermore, it referred to the Eligibility stage and continued the included stage. At the Eligibility and included stages, 29 articles were selected for the journal's review process. 2 articles were excluded, referring to their availability. Twenty-seven articles were downloaded for further analysis. The method of selecting articles and the number of articles included after each screening stage is illustrated in Figure 1.

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Figure 1. PRISMA Diagram for Systematic Literature Review

## Result

### Scopus Analysis

#### Number of Publications by Year

The number of publications with the keywords (“sustainable tourism”, “eco-tourism”, “green tourism”) and (“pilgrimage tourism”, “religious tourism”, “spiritual tourism”, “religion tourism”) over the past 10 years has fluctuated. Research in this field experienced a peak in 2022 but then declined in subsequent years. Notably, there were no publications in 2015 and 2017. As for 2024, the data is not fully recorded yet, as the literature review was conducted only until July 2024. There are 3 articles have been published in Scopus in 2024. There is a possibility that the number of articles related to sustainable tourism and religious tourism will increase by the end of 2024. The publication trend in the field of sustainable tourism and religious tourism can be seen in Figure 2.

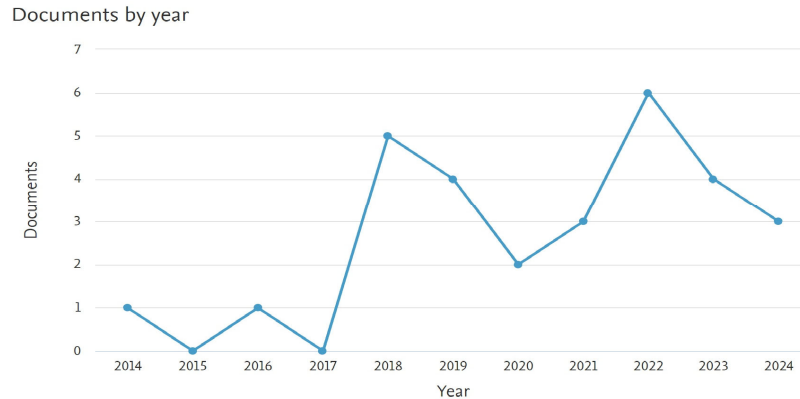


Figure 2. Graphics number of publications sustainable tourism – religious tourism (2014 – 2024)

#### Number of Publications Based on Subject Area

The classifications subject research by Scopus include Business, Management and Accounting, Social Science, Arts and Humanities, Environmental Science, Energy, Engineering, Computer Science, Economics, Earth and Planetary Sciences, Decision Sciences, and others. This indicates that the theme of sustainable religious is quite popular and can be researched from various academic perspectives. The percentage distribution of each subject area can be seen in Figure 3.

Documents by subject area

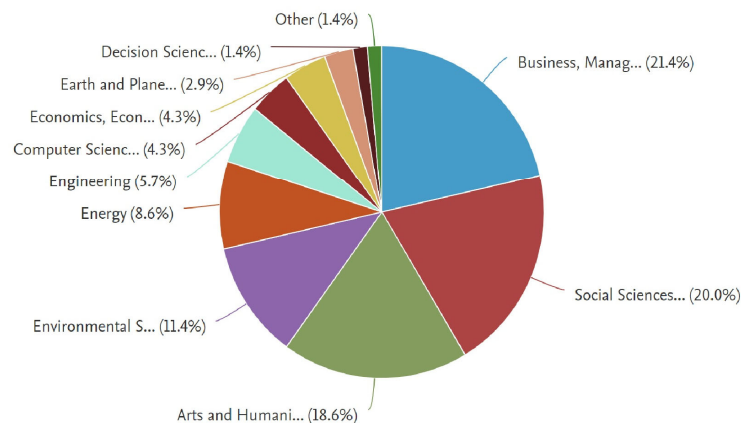


Figure 3. Graphics publication based on Subject Area

From the figure 3, can be seen that most of research area on sustainable religious tourism founded in social science. As for research involving sustainable religious tourism in other areas such as engineering, computer science, energy and the environment, it is still seen as little. Where the average percentage is below 10%. In fact, there are quite a lot of

problems in the field of sustainable religious tourism related to the fields of engineering and science, especially those related to overcoming the negative impacts that have occurred.

### **Identify the Type of Research**

From the 27 articles reviewed, author classified the article as follows : 22 categories the qualitative research , 2 into the quantitative research category, and 3 into the mixed-methods category. Three articles propose or discuss frameworks related to research in sustainable religious tourism, 2 articles propose or discuss structural models, 1 article proposes or discusses a mathematical model, and the remaining 21 provide reviews related to sustainable religious tourism.

### **Geographic distribution of sustainable religious tourism research**

The research locations for articles related to "sustainable religious tourism" that included in the literature review are spread across several continents and countries, such as Africa (Egypt, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Uganda), Asia (Indonesia, Philippines, Nepal, Taiwan, and Jordan), and Europe (Cyprus, Italy, Spain, and Turkey). This is in contrast to the research conditions in the field of sustainable religious tourism in Asia, Europe and Africa. The distribution of research related to sustainable religious tourism is still rare for in the US and Australia. This is possible because the center of the spread of religion is in Europe, Asia and Africa (Bin & Song, 2023).

Research on sustainable religious tourism is emerging not only in developed countries but also in developing countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Nepal, and Egypt. This indicates that sustainable tourism in the religious tourism field is seen as both a necessity and an awareness to maintain the continuity of that tourism in each region. Additionally, tourism is a significant contributor to national revenue(Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2015), making it imperative to ensure the sustainability of existing tourist attractions.

### **Religious Tourism Visitor Category**

Religious tourism is primarily associated with a particular religion's location or activities and involves its adherents' spiritual enthusiasm. Based on tourists' motivations, there are four categories of tourists: pleasure seekers, devout adherents, cultural enthusiasts, and pragmatic religious tourists (K. Y. Wang et al., 2020). These categories influence the locations and activities that will be visited or undertaken. Another article categorizes the motivations of religious tourism visitors into several types (Muzurura et al., 2022): spirituality and holiness, religious affiliation, cultural experiences, forgiveness of sin, adoration of the founder, seeking physical healing, seeking miraculous powers, personal discovery (life meaning), and powers to get rich quickly. The motivation of visitors also affects the behavior of tourists, such as their travel routes (Iliev, 2020), the number of destinations visited, and the duration of the trip. This, in turn, impacts the management and sustainability of religious tourism activities.

## **Discussion**

### **Impact of Religious Tourism**

Several reviewed literature discuss the impacts of religious tourism on the surrounding ecosystem, both positive and negative. The author divided the positive impact of religious tourism from various perspectives or aspects as follows:

1. Economic: places of worship serving as religious tourism sites can provide economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and spiritual benefits. From the aspect of economics, it can increase national revenue, create job opportunities, initiate infrastructure growth (Datta, 2024; Jawabreh et al., 2022; Nega, 2019, 2023), and develop local businesses (Lacey et al., 2014). Another economic benefit for the community is the opportunity for residents to offer rental accommodations to incoming tourists (Pageh et al., 2022).
2. Environment: efforts are made to cultivate flora and fauna and preserve the environment, developing hospitality infrastructure to fulfill the tourists' needs(Romanelli et al., 2021)
3. Socio-cultural perspective: religious tourism can enhance peace, social spirit, compassion, mutual assistance, and preservation. Religious tourism influences the quality of life of the local community (residents)(Datta, 2024).

Religious tourism activity also has negative impacts. Some activities within religious tourism that have negative environmental impacts are divided into several aspects, including:

1. Transportation and Accommodation: Energy and fuel consumption – energy usage (Campos et al., 2022, 2024), Water usage(Campos et al., 2024), Maintenance and cleaning of hotel interiors and exteriors (Campos et al., 2024), Provision of breakfast, office needs, and room service suppliers (Campos et al., 2024), The development of hotels and tourist attractions causes the loss of authenticity and natural beauty of tourist attractions(Sirirat, 2019a), Fuel consumption causes emissions (Campos et al., 2022).
2. Object or religious site : waste disposal, the cleanliness and holiness of places, theft of historical objects (Chuajap et al., 2023), damage to places of worship due to large numbers of visitors (Hermawan et al., 2019; Muzurura et al., 2022).

From a socio-cultural perspective, high tourism growth has benefits. But, accompanied by the unequal distribution of benefits among the government, business sectors, local communities, and religious organizations, can lead to conflicts between groups and religions (Suchkova, 2021). Another thing that can be categorized as a negative effect in the socio-cultural field: increasing social conflict and crime (Magadán-Díaz1 & Jesús Rivas-García, 2022), violating the rules for visiting religious tourist sites, such as clothing rules and behavior (Mohamed & Alseyoufi, 2018), loss of spiritual value

of places of worship/religious sites due to commercialization of tourist locations (K.-Y. Wang, 2022), sometimes there is also discomfort for religious adherents to worship when the worship schedule coincides with tourist visits in large number (Sutarya & Widana, 2024).

Based on the problems that arise in the implementation of religious tourism presented in 27 articles that have been reviewed, several authors also include a number of proposed programs that support the achievement of sustainable religious tourism, including religious tourism. The authors group these proposals into 21 programs to support the achievement of sustainable religious tourism. The programs are shown in table 1.

**Table 1.** Program for Sustainable Religious Tourism Achievement

<b>Program For Sustainable Religious Tourism</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Energy saving with local food management services	(Bellia et al., 2021; Campos et al., 2022, 2024)
Energy saving using alternative energy	(Campos et al., 2022, 2024)
LCA Analysis	(Campos et al., 2022, 2024)
Visiting time management	(Sutarya & Widana, 2024)
Empowerment of local community in religious tourism services industries to improve the economic community	(Boz, 2018; Datta, 2024; Jawabreh et al., 2022; Magadán-Díaz1 & Jesús Rivas-García, 2022; Muzurura et al., 2022; Nega, 2019, 2023; Pageh et al., 2022; Suchkova, 2021; Sutarya & Widana, 2024)
Stakeholder support to manage religious tourism destination – Infrastruktur development	(Choe & Mahyuni, 2023; Datta, 2024; Hermawan et al., 2019; Muzurura et al., 2022; Nega, 2019, 2023; Romanelli et al., 2021; Varnavas et al., 2018; K.-Y. Wang, 2022)
Sustainability research and publication on sustainable religious tourism	(Choe & Mahyuni, 2023; Datta, 2024; Kumar et al., 2020)
Comparative study of other religious tourism places	(Datta, 2024)
Collaboration with tourists for a sustainable program	(Chuajap et al., 2023)
Education sustainable tourism program for tourists and local community	(Chuajap et al., 2023; Muzurura et al., 2022; Nega, 2023)
Maintain religious places	(Chuajap et al., 2023; Cortese et al., 2019; Hermawan et al., 2019; Muzurura et al., 2022)
Government regulation support	(Datta, 2024; Nega, 2023; Sutarya & Widana, 2024)
Routing management destination, Routing evaluation	(Boz, 2018; Campos et al., 2022; Varnavas et al., 2018)
5 Dimensions of Service Quality Fulfillments	(Campos et al., 2024; Magadán-Díaz1 & Jesús Rivas-García, 2022; K.-Y. Wang, 2022)
Spiritual experiences program	(Cortese et al., 2019; Nega, 2019; K. Y. Wang et al., 2020; K.-Y. Wang, 2022)
Pollution and waste management	(Magadán-Díaz1 & Jesús Rivas-García, 2022)
Information availability	(Varnavas et al., 2018)
Increasing the role of managers of worship	(Varnavas et al., 2018)
Cinema	(Lopez et al., 2018)
Compassion program	(Weaver & Jin, 2016)

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Guarantee of Security and peace

(Chuajap et al., 2023; Mohamed & Alseyoufi, 2018)

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Determine the equilibrium point between the communities and tourists. (Sutarya & Widana, 2024)

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### **Relevant Stakeholders**

Religious tourism as a tourism industry (Guriță & Scortescu, 2023), certainly requires the involvement of many parties (stakeholders) in the management and improvement of the system to support sustainable religious tourism. Support from stakeholders can take the form of the following activities:

- Practices of maintaining sacred sites by managers and tourists towards sustainable tourism (Chuajap et al., 2023; Hermawan et al., 2019).
- Planning and management of tourism and pilgrimage sites by all stakeholders (Romanelli et al., 2021).
- Educating tourists about the destination and safety procedures by managers and tourists (Chuajap et al., 2023).
- Develop a sustainable tourism brand and information and communication from the government, tourism managers, tourists, and the media (Varnavas et al., 2018; K.-Y. Wang, 2022)
- Formation of professional tourism communities, understanding, and cooperation among all stakeholders (government, community, managers, business actors, tourists, media) for commitment and responsibility towards the implementation and development of sustainable tourism in the field of religious tourism (Suchkova, 2021; Varnavas et al., 2018), including the existence of government regulations and policies (Nega, 2023).
- Infrastructure development by the government, local communities, and site managers (Muzurura et al., 2022; Romanelli et al., 2021).

### **The Factors Inhibiting the Achievement of Sustainable Religious Tourism**

In addition to the lack of stakeholder support, other factors hindering achieving sustainable tourism in religious tourism include conflicts of interest (Sutarya & Widana, 2024) and conflicts or wars occurring in a region or country. This is evident in religious tourism in several conflict-affected countries in the Middle East. One of the factors hindering the implementation of spiritual tourism in conflict zones is Western policies that exacerbate the Middle Eastern crisis. Furthermore, religiously motivated conflicts also cause security and economic disasters at both regional and national levels, thereby affecting the organization of religious tourism (Mohamed & Alseyoufi, 2018).

### **Models and Frameworks for Achieving Sustainable Religious Tourism**

The literature review has categorized the articles based on descriptions, ideas or concepts, and stages undertaken into framework, model, and perspective. From 27 articles, there are several articles that provide output in the form of models or frameworks. Models and frameworks are described in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Model or Framework for Sustainable Religious Tourism

Reference	Method/ tools	Model /Framework	Variable dependent	Variable independent	Other Aspect /variable	Stakeholder in charge
(Datta, 2024)	Descriptive statistic	Theoretical Framework	Religious Tourism	Quality Of Life, Economic benefit, Community perception, Cultural Exchange		Government tourism management destination, resident
(Chuajap et al., 2023)	Repertory Grid,	The I.T.S.P.: Sustainable Religious Tourism Development Framework			Immersion, Stewardship, Tutelage, Proposition	Church management, Tourist
(Jawabreh et al., 2022)	CFA, multiple regression	Structural model : Relationship between sustainability issues, environmental impacts, economic	Environmental Impacts, Social impacts, Economic impact	Sustainability issues, income		Tourist

Reference	Method/ tools	Model /Framework	Variable dependent	Variable independent	Other Aspect /variable	Stakeholder in charge
						impacts, social impacts, and income
(K.-Y. Wang, 2022)	SEM	Conceptual model: Motivational and experiential differences between religious- oriented and ordinary visitors to the "100 religious attractions" and brand effect	Tourism brand trust, willingness to visit/revisit, acceptance of commercial activity, Received satisfaction, service value perception, attraction/event awareness, public sector promotion, spiritual experience	Visitor Perception, Visit Motivation, Believers/non believers		Government, Tourist
(Magadán- Díaz1 & Jesús Rivas- García, 2022)	Regression analysis	Regression model	Resident Perception	Environmental sub-indicators; Economic sub- indicator; Socio- cultural sub- indicators		Local Community/R esident, Government
(Sirirat, 2019b)	-	Model of spiritual tourism for sustainable development			Natural, historical, or cultural tourist destinations; Host community With EE Skills and Buddhist dharma understanding; Tourism Products and services with local identities; marketing by local /national tourism authority and tourist's word of mouth through social media; tourist knowledge, attitude, awareness and participation on environmental concerns	Local Community / Resident, Government, tourist
(Weaver & Jin, 2016)	Literature review	Framework: Compassion as a Motivator for Sustainable Tourism			Context: Tourist context, agen context; Encounter: relationship, encounter type, distress; Response: feeling and compassionate response, recipient, timeframe, intentions; Implication for sustainable tourism: economic, Socio- cultural, environment; intervention: strategies	Tourist Resident

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Four models emerged in the literature review, namely: a model that measures the relationship between sustainability issues, environmental impacts, economic impacts, social impacts, and income (Jawabreh et al., 2022), a model that measures the differences in motivation and experience between religiously oriented visitors and regular visitors at the "100 religious tourism objects" and the brand effect (K.-Y. Wang, 2022), a model to evaluate changes in local conditions from economic, socio-cultural, and environmental perspectives related to the development of the pilgrimage tourism sector from the perspective of mountain area residents traversed by the Primitivo St. James Way in

Asturias (Magadán-Díaz<sup>1</sup> & Jesús Rivas-García, 2022), and a model for developing practical processes for participatory education and sustainable tourism activities in the form of spiritual tourism. This involves integrating environmental education concepts, community participation, and Buddhist Dharma (Sirirat, 2019b).

The frameworks that emerged include a framework discussing Quality of Life, Economic Benefit, Community Perception, and Cultural Exchange about religious tourism (Datta, 2024), a framework related to Sustainable Religious Tourism Development in the Philippines involving elements of Immersion, Stewardship, Tutelage, and Proposition (Chujap et al., 2023), and a framework regarding Compassion as a Motivator for sustainable tourism, aiming to achieve sustainable tourism (Weaver & Jin, 2016).

## Conclusion

This systematic literature review concludes that the uniqueness of religious tourism lies in the involvement of stakeholders, from religious site managers to the characteristics of the visiting tourists. Due to the varying motivations of visitors, further research is necessary to identify the motivations behind religious tourism activities related to travel routes and duration of visits. This research is pertinent to developing educational programs for tourists on sustainable tourism, ensuring that the types of attractions or performances provided are appropriately targeted, and managing religious tourism destinations sustainably. Visitor motivation is crucial as it influences their attitudes and adherence to preserving the spiritual values at tourist sites. Therefore, the programs offered must also be capable of fulfilling the spiritual needs of the visitors.

Security stability and conflicts of interest, whether local, regional, or national, can hinder achieving sustainable religious tourism goals. Several articles emphasize the importance of sustainable tourism management involving all stakeholders in the management and development of spiritual tourism to attain sustainable tourism objectives. Balancing the interests of local communities with those of visitors regarding religious tourism is also crucial. This balance should not only pertain to the use of religious sites but must also be addressed comprehensively, considering economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability. Future research will incorporate the concept of balance (Sutarya & Widana, 2024) into Jawabreh et al.'s model (Jawabreh et al., 2022) and Datta's framework (Datta, 2024).

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