Managing visitor experience at religious heritage sites

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ABSTRACT

Religious tourism makes up a significant proportion of global tourism, with religious sites attracting large numbers of visitors from around the world. This study investigates visitor experience at two religious heritage sites associated with Hinduism and Buddhism and employs cross-site analysis to suggest a common management strategy. The importance-performance framework is used to assess visitors' desired and perceived experiences across five dimensions. The religious and cultural dimension is identified as the most prominent. The findings of this study provide site managers with evidence-based insights that may be usefully deployed to improve service design, boost destination marketing, and increase the effectiveness of religious sites' visitor experience management.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of people traveling long distances to visit sacred sites is one that goes back many centuries, long predating the emergence of modern tourism (Fleischer, 2000). Religious tourism can thus be seen as the oldest variety and most ancient antecedent of this sort of human behavior (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). With the development of modern tourism, the kinds of visitors attracted to religious sites have expanded to include those driven by more secular motivations, including cultural, educational, and recreational interest (Amaro, Antunes, & Henriques, 2018; Liro, 2020, Wang, Luo, Huang, & Yang, 2020; Tsai, 2021), which has meant a continuously growing number of visitors. As reported by the United Nations World Tourism Organization, the world's major holy sites attract more than three billion visitors annually (UNWTO 2018). The increasing volume of travelers is turning religious site tourism into a flourishing industry (Kasim, 2011, Amaro et al., 2018) contributing around 18 billion USD annually to the global economy (Griffin & Raj, 2018).

As one of the mainstays of the Nepalese economy, tourism makes a significant contribution to national revenue and foreign exchange earnings (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). According to the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (2018), pilgrimages and religious journeys to various sacred Hindu and Buddhist sites across the country make up the major part of its overall tourism economy. These sites also attract a large number of nonreligious visitors. Several are UNESCO World Heritages Sites (WHS). There remains, however, a lack of scientific research investigating the planning and management issues relevant to visitor experience at these sites.

While recent years have seen an increased focus by managers of religious sites on improving visitor experience, tourism management at these sites has always to some degree sat uncomfortably alongside their primarily religious function. There have been several attempts to investigate ways of balancing the apparently conflicting demands of religious sites that are also tourist destinations (Huang, Pearce, & Wen, 2017; Tsai, 2021). The findings of previous studies, while having important implications for service design and site management, are focused mainly on Christian and Muslim sites (Collins-Kreiner, 2020), limiting their applicability in non-Abrahamic contexts. The present study examines visitor experience at two sites associated with Hinduism and Buddhism and employs cross-site analysis to suggest a general strategy for managing visitor experience at religious sites. The research sites chosen were the Pashupatinath temple complex (Hindu) and Lumbini (Buddhist), both located in Nepal.

Every visitor to a religious site goes with a desired experience. This is contingent on his or her goals, which may include gaining spiritual benefits, learning something, or fulfilling a commitment (Packer, 2008, Bond, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2015; Chang, Li et al., 2020). The difference between a visitor's desired experience and their perceived experience can anticipate perceived satisfaction: the smaller the difference, the greater the satisfaction. Since higher levels of satisfaction result in a better experience, understanding desired and perceived experience is crucial for the effective management of visitor experience.

Importance-performance analysis (IPA) is a useful tool for understanding visitors' preferences and perceptions, and for identifying differences between the two (Lai & Hitchcock, 2015). The present study therefore adopted an IPA framework to investigate how visitors evaluate different dimensions of their experience, making use of field visits, interviews, and questionnaires. This study will contribute to understanding the assessment of visitor experience at religious sites and provide site managers with evidence-based insights on service design, experience management, and resource allocation. By revealing the weight of different dimensions in visitor experience, managers will be able to allocate appropriate resources to both the management and marketing of religious sites. In addition, identification of weak areas will point out directions for service improvement and help create desirable experiences for visitors.

2. Literature review

2.1. Visitor experience

Visitor experience is a personal response to any encounter during a visit, which may be influenced by both the external environment and a person's cognitive capacity (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016). Experience results from interaction with visible objects and actions as well as intangible assets and psychological reactions (Pearce, 2011). According to Walls, Okumus et al. (2011), experience occurs inside the visitor as a sum total of responses to natural as well as staged encounters; hence it encompasses different aspects and takes a complex form. Previous studies have explored various dimensions of visitor experience at tourist destinations, including aesthetic experience, social experience, cognitive experience, introspective experience, hedonic experience, spiritual experience, transformative experience, relational experience, and educational experience (Doering, 1999; Masberg & Silverman, 1996; Packer, 2008; Packer & Ballantyne, 2016; Packer & Bond, 2010).

Visitors' levels of satisfaction with all the tangible and intangible aspects of their experience, ranging from perception of service quality and price to service interactions and the attitude of the host community, are predictors of experience quality (Crompton & Love, 1995; Lounsbury & Hoopes, 1985; Qu & Li, 1997; Stevens, 1992). As explored in previous studies, the influencing factors include contextual or physical surroundings (Bitner, 1992), hygiene (Crompton, 2003), the built environment (Bitner, 1992), safety (Cavlek, 2002), and facilities such as signage, parking, catering, and toilet facilities (Pizam, Neumann, & Reichel, 1978; Ryan, 1994). Service quality and interaction with service providers are also vital to consumer satisfaction (Getz, O'Neill, & Carlsen, 2001; Oriade & Schofield, 2019). Other influencing factors are visitors' demographic and psychographic characteristics, including cultural background (Morales Espinoza, 1999), gender, age, race, religious tradition (Shackley, 2001), previous travel experience (Hudson, 2002), and state of mind (Comer, 1980). Moreover, situational factors such as use levels (Graefe & Vaske, 1987), tourism type (Nash, 1996), intimacy (Ryan, 1998; Trauer & Ryan, 2005), place attachment (Patwardhan, Ribeiro, Woosnam, Payini, & Mallya, 2020), and involvement (Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005) are also crucial in shaping visitor experience.

2.2. Religious tourism

Religious sites are the oldest visitor attractions in the world (Rinschede, 1992). They offer a wide variety of experiences, including religious services, cultural performances, educational opportunities, and religious ceremonies (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). In addition to their specifically religious offerings, these sites may also be set within beautiful landscapes, feature historic buildings, or include museums and treasuries filled with valuable cultural artifacts. These aspects of the sites can attract tourists from a variety of different sects and religions, as well as nonreligious visitors, helping to foster mutual understanding and

respect among people of different cultures and traditions (Kasim, 2011). Researchers have identified a wide range of motivations for people's visits to religious sites, including religious, cultural, educational, and recreational purposes (Hughes, Bond, & Ballantyne, 2013; Tsai, 2021). It is thus incumbent on managers of these sites to consider the correspondingly wide range of factors necessary to fulfill visitors' needs and expectations. Shi (2009) identified these factors as people, place, facilities, and critical events. Huang and Pearce (2019) categorized them as religious atmosphere, residents' attitudes, and service quality. Shi's (2009) "People" factors include visitors' interactions with service staff, religious figures, and other visitors; "Place" factors refer to a site's natural landscape, atmosphere, sense of serenity, security, accessibility, and environmental assets; "Facilities" comprise the transportation, food, accommodation, parking, and shopping that are associated with the service aspect of the visit; and "Critical events" arise from the interaction of people, place, and facilities. These factors are suggested in the context of Chinese Buddhist sites. Incorporating results from multiple religious sites will enable the design of improved guidance for religious site management that results in better visitor experience.

2.3. Religious and cultural heritage site tourism in Nepal

Tourism is a mainstay of the Nepalese economy and a major source of foreign exchange and revenue. Nepal's Hindu, Buddhist, and other cultural heritage sites are important attractions drawing many international visitors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs website lists the country's main tourist attractions as wilderness or adventure tourism, religious sites, and cultural and heritage sites.

Hinduism and Buddhism are both prominent in Nepal, and Nepalese culture and festivals are the best examples of this country's unique blending of these two major Asian religions (Amatya, 2011). Religious sites in Nepal, overflowing with art, architecture, culture, and festivals, are prime destinations for tourists (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). Among the dozens of religious sites, the Pashupatinath temple complex and Lumbini are the two main pilgrimage destinations for Hindus and Buddhists, respectively. The combination of these sites' religious significance, cultural offerings, and high visitor volumes has earned them inclusion on UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage list (Ministry of Tourism & Culture, 2018). According to a Ministry of Tourism and Culture (2018) report, pilgrimage is the third most common purpose motivating the journeys of Nepal's international visitors, and the most common of all among those visiting Lumbini.

Despite these sites making a significant contribution to tourism in Nepal, there is a lack of scientific research around issues of visitor experience management. The existing literature provides only limited insights. The present study is therefore focused on expanding the literature through an examination of visitor experience at two of Nepal's principal religious sites.

2.4. Management of religious sites

The transformation of religious sites into tourist attractions has opened up a huge market (Shackley, 2006a, Rivera, Shani et al., 2009). However, the mixed composition of visitors poses challenges to the management of these sites. The need to serve the various needs of a wide range of visitors, from devout pilgrims to nonreligious tourists, is a challenging and sensitive task. Market complexities and inadequate management structures, along with site-specific challenges, further increase the difficulty of optimizing experiences for both pilgrims and tourists.

The literature on religious tourism has identified the sustainability of sites' "spirit of place," made more difficult by the mixing of sacred with profane, as the greatest challenge to the effective management of religious sites today (Rashid, 2018). As a consequence of increasing commercialization, many churches and temples have tended to lose

their essence (Mansfield, 2008, Rishi, Singh, & Shukla, 2010). On the other hand, previous studies have shown the necessity of commercial considerations to ensure the sustainability of sacred ones (Rashid, 2018). This need to balance the maintenance of an authentic religious atmosphere with the activities of commercial tourism can present the managers of religious sites with a difficult dilemma (Shi & Pande, 2022). In addition to commercialization, other problems evident in the management of religious sites are overcrowding, inadequate services and facilities, and poor infrastructure (, Shackley, 2006b; Woodward, 2004).

The dimensions of visitor experience at religious sites have been explored in previous research in different contexts. For example, Shi (2009) found that visitor experience at Chinese Buddhist sites is affected by people, place, facilities, and critical incidents. Chang et al. (2020) identified five dimensions of Mazu pilgrimage experience: spirituality, learning, physicality, help, and unpleasantness. Bideci and Bideci's (2021) research with visitors to the House of the Virgin Mary in Turkey indicated six dimensions of experience in the sacred place: inner experience, religious experience, physical environment, history, tour organization, and service experience. While these studies provide a useful framework for understanding visitor experience at sacred sites, it remains unclear which dimensions visitors value more than others at religious sites. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating visitors' desired and perceived experiences and to reveal the weight of different dimensions of visitor experience at religious sites.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a mixed method design and used IPA framework to assess visitors' preferences and experiences in relation to site attributes. A qualitative study was conducted first to identify variables which were then subjected to quantitative analysis (Guetterman, Babchuk, Howell Smith, & Stevens, 2019). Hence, the research was conducted in two phases.

3.1.1. Phase 1

The first phase included participant observation and semi-structured interviews and was conducted in July–August of 2018. During this stage, both research sites were visited by one of the researchers, and interviews were conducted with selected visitors. Field observation focused on available facilities, events, festivals, and commercial activities. Visitors' involvement in prayer, rituals, and ceremonies was also observed. Similarly, facilities including transportation, shoe storage, and the availability of water, public toilets, and rest areas were observed, as were commercial activities such as the trade in worship-related articles and souvenirs, cafés, and restaurants. During the participant observation at both sites, the researcher interacted with various stakeholders (i.e. visitors, management, and local residents) to learn about the sites and to select suitable locations to recruit interviewees. Based on a checklist of relevant items noted during observation, an interview guide was prepared.

To ensure that a diverse range of visitors were interviewed, interviews were conducted on different days, at different times, and in different places. Only visitors who had already finished their visit to the site were chosen. At the Pashupatinath temple complex (PTC), interviewees were approached in three different locations: in front of the main temple, in the rest areas, and at the exit. The interviews were held throughout the day from morning to evening. Similarly, in Lumbini, the sacred garden (inside the fencing around the Mayadevi Temple) and the monastic zones were chosen as sites to recruit interviewees so as to ensure the involvement of both pilgrims and other types of visitor. Visitors from both Nepal and abroad were approached for recorded interview. Thirty interviews were conducted in the PTC first, and then the researcher visited Lumbini to interview visitors there. From the ninth interview at Lumbini, the interviewees' answers started to repeat

and no new information was reported. So the researcher stopped the process after conducing three more interviews to ensure that data saturation was achieved (Jennings, 2018). So, twelve interviews were recorded at Lumbini. All the interviews were conducted in Nepali, English, or Hindi, according to respondents' preference. The recordings of the interviews were then transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The procedure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. The first step was familiarization. The researchers read the interview transcripts a few times to gain a thorough overview of the data. The second step was coding. Two researchers coded three interview transcripts independently first and then exchanged ideas to agree on a common coding scheme, which was then used to complete the coding of all interview transcripts. The third step was to identify patterns among the codes and generate themes. Fourth, the main themes and subthemes were reviewed by the two researchers. After several rounds of discussion and refinement, five main themes with 30 subthemes were generated, which served as the basis for the items used to measure visitor experience in the subsequent survey. A preliminary questionnaire was then designed and improved after a pilot study. The final questionnaire was then produced and distributed as a survey from January to March of 2019.

3.1.2. Phase 2

In Phase 2, a questionnaire survey was conducted. The questionnaire began with a series of questions regarding visitors' preferences and experiences in relation to the site's tangible and intangible attributes. The questionnaire also included items concerned with the evaluation of commercial activities and heritage interpretation. These items were designed for use in a separate project and so considerations of these responses are not included in the present study. Respondents were asked to evaluate the importance they attached to and their satisfaction with each attribute using a five-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all/ completely dissatisfied; 5 = extremely important/satisfied). The final questionnaire also included demographic items and items related to visit motivations.

The questionnaire was originally prepared in English and then translated to Nepali by the researcher, following the back translation method to ascertain accuracy (Harkness, Pennell, & Schoua-Glusberg, 2004). It was then subjected to pilot testing with 48 respondents at the PTC and Lumbini to check its clarity and establish an acceptable completion time of 5–8 min. Several minor changes were made to wording to improve the readability of the questions.

During the questionnaire survey, a quota sampling strategy was employed, with respondents being assessed from three different groups: Nepali natives, Indians, and visitors from other countries. The quotas employed were based on the relative proportions of visitors to PTC and Lumbini. According to Nepal's tourism statistics ((Ministry of Tourism and Culture, 2018), the majority (over 70%) of visitors to both sites are domestic visitors, followed by Indians, accounting for about 20 percent, and finally visitors from other countries, accounting for about 10 percent. Since the exact population of each stratum is known, quota sampling can provide fair estimates (Moser & Stuart, 1953) of representative samples. The researcher also made a conscious effort to choose respondents representing different genders, age groups, and religious beliefs.

Respondents were approached personally by the researcher and invited to participate in the survey, with participants at each site being recruited on different dates, at different times, and in different locations. Thus, at the PTC, respondents were recruited in front of the main temple after morning and evening prayers, as well as in rest areas, in parks, and in cafes in the surrounding area. In Lumbini, questionnaires were handed out in the sacred garden, in the monastic zones, in souvenir shops, and in the hotels and restaurants that surround the Lumbini garden. Each questionnaire was checked upon return to ensure it had been fully completed. Those containing contradictory answers and those with the same option ticked for all Likert-scale questions were

considered invalid and discarded. In total, 650 questionnaires were handed out, of which 551 were useable for analysis, including 308 from the PTC and 243 from Lumbini. Ninety-nine questionnaires were discarded due to incompleteness or the straight lining problem in the answers for the Likert-scale questions.

3.2. Analytical framework

Importance-performance analysis, a method originally proposed by Martilla and James (1977), has grown in popularity within tourism and hospitality research (Boley, McGehee et al., 2017) in recognition of its unique capacity to derive priorities for improvement (Mikulic, Paunovic, & Prebežac, 2012) and its simplicity of interpretation (Lai & Hitchcock, 2015). It has been used in the study of tourism service quality (Go & Zhang, 1997; Hudson & Shephard, 1998), destination image (Joppe, Martin, & Waalen, 2001; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005), and tourism policies (Evans & Chon, 1989, Dwyer, Cvelbar, Edwards, & Mihalic, 2012). The framework requires respondents to evaluate attributes in terms of their importance and performance. The mean value of the importance and performance ratings for each attribute is then plotted on a grid, where the y-axis represents importance and the x-axis represents performance (see Fig. 1). Through this process, attributes are assigned to one of four quadrants: "Concentrate here," "Keep up the good work," "Low priority," and "Possible overkill" (Smith & Costello, 2009). The final grid produces the results from evaluation of existing products, and this can then be used to manage existing items and to design and plan new ones (Hughes et al., 2013).

3.3. Data analysis

The survey data were analyzed with SPSS 21. During the process, Cronbach's alpha test was employed to assess the reliability of the questionnaire data (Devon et al., 2007). Similarly, to examine underlying common dimensions of visitor experience, an exploratory factor analysis was undertaken. During the process, principle component analysis was employed using varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. This was done based on the assumption that the extracted factors might be correlated. An independent samples *t*-test was used to determine differences in the evaluation of different aspects of visitor experience at the two research sites. The mean values of each item associated with different dimensions of visitor experience were plotted on two separate IPA grids, one for each research site, and analyzed to produce a general management strategy.
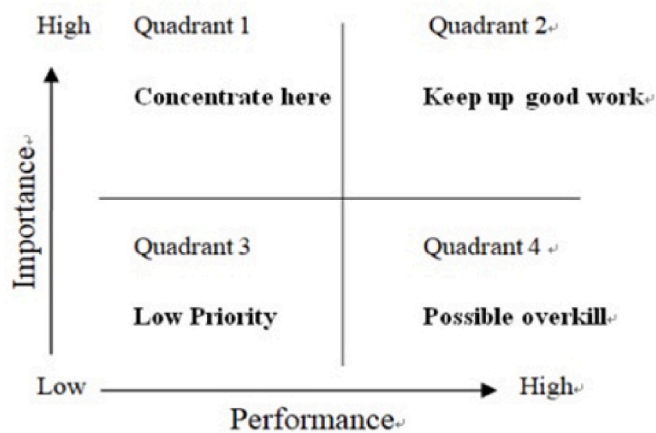

Fig. 1. I–P matrix.

4. Results

4.1. Interview results

4.1.1. Interviewees' profiles
The majorities of the 42 interviewees at the PTC and Lumbini sites were young or middle-aged males, and most were Nepalese adherents of Hinduism. Over half of the interviewees had a bachelor's degree and were employed. Detailed interviewee profiles are presented in Table 1.

4.1.2. Findings from interviews
The interview data were subjected to thematic analysis. Thirty subthemes were identified and grouped into five main themes: religious and cultural factors, environmental factors, services and facilities factors, human factors, and economic factors. The details of these themes and subthemes are presented in Fig. 2, which was used as a framework for the design of the subsequent questionnaire survey.

4.2. Survey results

4.2.1. Profile of respondents
The sample was demographically diverse, comprising 57.2 percent male and 42.8 percent female visitors. The majority of respondents were Hindus (65%), followed by Buddhists (16.3%), people of no religion (13.4%), and Christians (3.4%). The largest proportion, 74.2 percent, was Nepalese, 12.4 percent were Indian, and 13.4 percent were from other countries. The 21–30 age group was the largest (40%), while the 60+ was the smallest (2.5%); 44.6 percent had a bachelor-level degree, while 22.5 percent had a master's-level degree, or a PhD; 31.6 percent were educated to secondary or senior secondary level, while 1.3 percent were educated to primary school level. In terms of income, most respondents (43.6%) had a monthly income below Rs. 20,000 (Approximately 150 USD), while a small minority (3.6%) had a monthly income between Rs. 40,001 and Rs. 50,000 (Approximately 300 USD and 380 USD). Table 2 shows details of respondents' demographic information at

Table 1
Interviewee profiles.

|	PTC N = 30		Lumbini N = 12		Total N = 42	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
Gender						
Male	17	56.66	8	66.66	25	59.52
Female	13	43.33	4	33.33	17	40.48
Age group						
Under 20 years	3	9.37	0	0.00	3	7.14
21–40 years	14	46.67	5	41.66	19	45.23
41–60 years	9	30.00	6	50.00	15	35.71
Over 60 years	4	12.50	1	8.34	5	11.90
Nationality						
Nepalese	18	60.00	10	83.33	28	66.67
Indian	7	23.33	2	16.67	9	21.43
Other	5	16.67	0	0.00	5	11.90
Religious affiliation						
Hindu	17	56.67	7	58.33	24	57.14
Buddhist	3	10.00	4	33.34	7	16.67
Muslim	1	3.33	0	0.00	1	2.38
Christian	1	3.33	0	0.00	1	2.38
None	8	26.67	1	8.33	9	21.43
Education						
Illiterate	2	6.67	0	0.00	2	4.76
Primary level	2	6.67	1	8.33	3	7.14
Secondary level	10	33.33	3	25.00	13	30.95
Bachelor level	16	53.33	8	66.67	24	57.14
Occupation						
Student	6	20.00	2	16.67	8	19.05
Job holder	9	30.00	6	50.00	15	35.71
Self-employed	7	23.33	1	8.33	8	19.05
Other	8	26.67	3	25.00	11	26.19
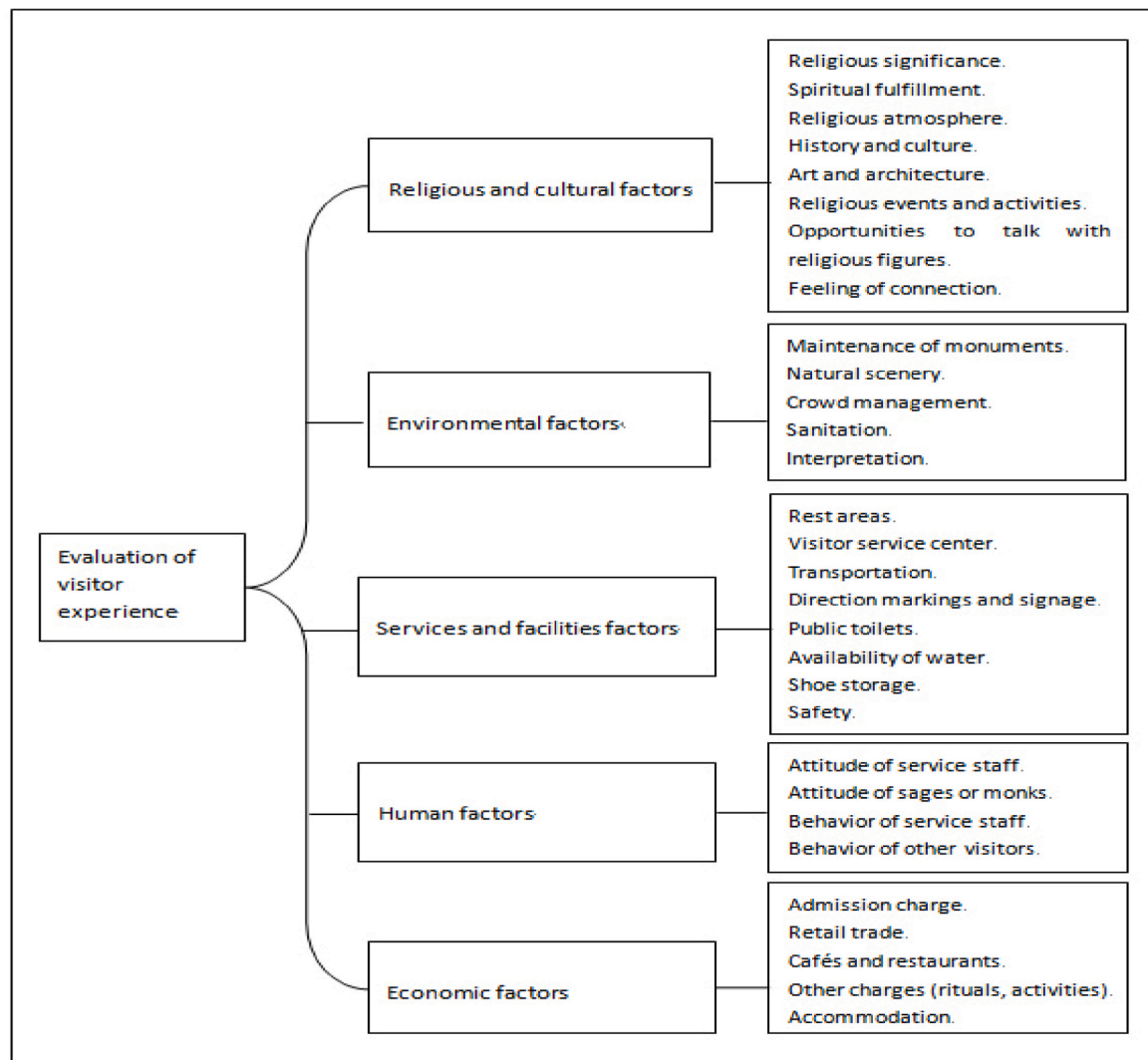
Fig. 2. Thematic analysis of study 1.

both research sites.

4.2.2. Evaluation of visitor experience

Evaluation of visitor experience was investigated using 30 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely dissatisfied; 5 = completely satisfied). The items were derived from field observation and the qualitative aspect of the present study outlined above. To examine underlying common dimensions of visitor experience, an exploratory factor analysis was undertaken. After subjecting these items to factor analysis, seven items ("Opportunity to talk with sages," "Attitude of sages," "Safety," "Visitor service center," "Natural scenery," "Shoe storage," and "Accommodation") were removed due to low inter-item correlation below 0.5 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), and one cross-loading item ("Direction and signage") was also deleted. A varimax rotation produced the final factor solution, presented in Table 3. For this solution, the KMO measure of sample adequacy was 0.732, and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < .001$).

The analysis extracted five factors or dimensions of visitor experience, labeled as "Religious and cultural factors," "Environmental factors," "Economic factors," "Services and facilities factors," and "Human factors." These five factors accounted for 62.94% of variance.

The reliability of the measurement of these dimensions was examined using Cronbach's alpha, and found to be within a normal range

(0.86, 0.81, 0.72, 0.72, and 0.80). A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using AMOS 19.0 to test the convergent validity and discriminant validity of the scales. As seen in Table 3, the composite reliability (CR) value of each dimension was above 0.7, as recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). The average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50 for each dimension: the convergent validity was adequate (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). At the same time, the square roots of AVE values were higher than the inter-construct correlations for all variables, which confirmed the discriminant validity of the dimensions (see Table 4).

4.2.3. Evaluation of visitor experience relative to research sites

The dimension with the highest mean score was religious and cultural (M = 4.30, SD = 0.51), followed by human (M = 3.61, SD = 0.57), environmental (M = 3.48, SD = 0.63), economic (M = 3.31, SD = 0.53), and services and facilities (M = 3.19, SD = 0.60). Evaluation of visitor experience across the two research sites (see Table 5) revealed that the highest-rated factor among visitors of both the PTC and Lumbini was the religious and cultural one; the economic factor was given almost equal ratings at both sites, while visitors to Lumbini rated the environmental factor higher than visitors to the PTC. Furthermore, the services and facilities factor at the PTC was perceived more positively, whereas the human factor was perceived more positively in Lumbini.

Table 2
Respondents' demographic characteristics.

	PTC N = 308		Lumbini N = 243		Total N = 551	
	n	%	*N*	%	*n*	%
Gender						
Male	178	57.8	137	56.4	315	57.2
Female	130	42.2	106	43.6	236	42.8
Religious affiliation						
Hindu	225	73.5	103	42.4	358	65.0
Buddhist	34	11.3	86	35.4	90	16.3
None	35	11.4	39	16.0	74	13.4
Christian	4	1.3	15	6.2	19	3.4
Nationality						
Nepalese	239	77.6	170	70.0	409	74.2
Indian	58	18.9	10	4.1	68	12.4
Other	11	3.5	63	25.9	74	13.4
Age group						
Under 20 years	29	9.4	8	3.3	37	6.7
21–30 years	128	41.6	109	44.9	237	43.0
31–40 years	94	30.5	51	21.0	145	26.3
41–50 years	36	11.7	27	11.1	63	11.4
51–60 years	21	6.8	34	14.0	55	10.0
Over 60 years	0	0	14	5.8	14	2.5
Education						
Primary	4	1.3	3	1.2	7	1.3
Secondary or senior secondary	87	28.2	87	35.8	174	31.6
Bachelor	127	41.2	119	49.0	246	44.6
Master or PhD	90	29.2	34	14.0	124	22.5
Monthly income						
Below Rs. 20,000	135	43.8	105	43.2	240	43.6
Rs. 20,001–30,000	59	19.2	35	14.4	94	17.1
Rs. 30,001–40,000	46	14.9	64	26.3	110	20.0
Rs. 40,001–50,000	20	6.5	0	0	20	3.6
Above Rs. 50,000	48	15.6	39	16.0	87	15.8

Fig. 3 shows the pattern of responses to different factors of visitor experience at the two research sites, illustrating that respondents rated all factors except the economic factor differently. An independent samples *t*-test was applied to check this difference, and the result showed statistically significant differences in the evaluation of religious and cultural, environmental, services and facilities, and human factors.

4.2.4. IPA relative to research sites

Table 6 presents the mean ratings and mean differences in importance and performance of site attributes associated with visitor experience at both research sites. As illustrated in the table, items related to religious and cultural aspects of visitor experience were given higher importance. For the majority of these items at Lumbini and for three items at the PTC, importance ratings were higher than their ratings of performance; however, the performance measures of these items were rated higher than the performance of items associated with other aspects. Similarly, importance ratings of all items related to environmental aspects of visitor experience were higher than their performance ratings.

Two items pertaining to economic aspects of visitor experience at the PTC, "Admission charge" and "Other charges," were noted as having higher performance measures than the importance attributed to them, possibly because this site offers free entry to domestic as well as Hindu (almost all Indian) visitors and charges minimal rates for participation in rituals and other activities. Most respondents considered it appropriate to charge foreigners and this is a common practice at other heritage sites. At Lumbini, all items related to the economic aspect of visitor experience were noted as having higher importance measures than their subsequent performance measures.

Regarding services and facilities, all items pertaining to this aspect were rated with higher importance measures. Similarly, all items at the PTC and two items at Lumbini associated with the "Human factor" were perceived to be of higher importance. At Lumbini, "Other visitors' behavior" was given a higher performance score.

To identify specific areas that require improvement, an importance-performance matrix was created separately for each research site (see Figs. 4 and 5). For this purpose, the overall mean values for importance and performance were used for placement of the axes.

The "Concentrate here" quadrant, indicating high importance but low performance, captured four items in the PTC and five items in Lumbini, among which two, "public toilets" (PT) and "sanitation" (SAN), were rated the same. In addition, two items related to the environmental aspect of visitor experience at the PTC, "maintenance of site" (MS) and "crowd management" (CM), were contained in this quadrant, while for Lumbini, three additional items identified as in need of improvement related to the human and services and facilities aspects of visitor experience, specifically "behavior of service staff" (BSS), "transportation" (T), and "availability of water" (AW). So, IPA suggests that,

Table 3
Factor analysis of visitor experience.

	Religious and cultural factors	Environmental factors	Economic factors	Services and facilities factors	Human factors
History and culture	.784				
Art and architecture	.745				
Religious atmosphere	.775				
Religious significance	.784				
Feeling of connection	.673				
Events and activities	.630				
Spiritual fulfillment	.672				
Site maintenance		.775			
Sanitation		.751			
Crowd management		.785			
Interpretation		.710			
Admission charge			.760		
Other charges			.704		
Cafés and restaurants			.695		
Retail trade			.660		
Rest areas				.756	
Availability of water				.658	
Transportation				.687	
Public toilets				.755	
Behavior of service staff					.928
Attitude of service staff					.872
Other visitors' behavior					.604
Cronbach's alpha	**.86**	**.81**	**.72**	**.72**	**.80**
CR	**.89**	**.84**	**.80**	**.81**	**.85**
AVE	**.53**	**.57**	**.50**	**.51**	**.66**

Table 4
Square roots of AVE and correlations.

Construct	Religious and cultural factors	Environmental factors	Economic factors	Services and facilities factors	Human factors
Religious and cultural factors	**0.726**				
Environmental factors	0.185**	**0.756**			
Economic factors	0.245**	0.180**	**0.706**		
Services and facilities factors	0.125**	0.146**	0.202**	**0.716**	**0.814**
Human factors	0.301**	0.264**	0.247**	0.039	

Note: The bold diagonal elements are the square roots of the average variance extracted. Below-diagonal elements are correlations between the constructs for the Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Table 5
Visitor experience relative to research sites.

	Overall (n = 551)		PTC visitors (n = 308)		Lumbini visitors (n = 243)		t-test
	M	SD	*M*	SD	M	SD	*t*
Religious and cultural factors*	4.30	.51	4.38	.55	4.20	.44	4.01
Environmental factors*	3.48	.63	3.33	.65	3.80	.44	−11.79
Human factors*	3.61	.57	3.51	.65	3.73	.43	−4.57
Economic factors	3.31	.53	3.31	.60	3.32	.44	−0.24
Services and facilities*	3.19	.60	3.36	.51	2.97	.63	7.92

*$p < .05$.

altogether, there are seven items related to three different aspects of visitor experience that require attention to improve the experience of those visiting religious heritage sites.

Religious and cultural aspects of visitor experience seemed to perform better than other aspects. The "Keep up the good work" quadrant, indicating high importance and high performance, included mainly items associated with the religious and cultural aspects of visitor experience. Both case study sites included six common items related to this aspect in this quadrant: spiritual satisfaction (SF), art and architecture (AA), religious atmosphere (RA), history and culture (HC), religious significance (RS), and feeling of connection (FC). Additionally, events and activities (EA), related to religious and cultural aspects, in the case of the PTC, and maintenance of site (MS), related to the environmental aspects in the case of Lumbini, were included in this quadrant.

Items in the "Possible overkill" quadrant represent areas where visitors think fewer financial and administrative resources should be directed. This quadrant captured three items for PTC, and two items for Lumbini, among which one, "other visitors' behavior" (OVB), was common to both sites. Other items identified were rest areas (RST) and transportation (TRP) at the PTC and crowd management (CM) at Lumbini.

The "Low priority" quadrant consisted of eight items for each site, including all four items associated with economic aspects of visitor experience, namely, Other charges (OC), admission charge (AC), retail trade (RT), and cafés and restaurants (CR). One item related to the human aspect of visitor experience, attitude of service staff (ASS), and one environment-related item, interpretation (INT), were also captured in this quadrant for both sites. The final items in this quadrant were, for Lumbini, rest area (RST) and events and activities (EA), and for the PTC, availability of water (AW) and behavior of service staff (BSS).

5. Discussion

Analysis of visitors' evaluation of their experiences resulted in the identification of five aspects of visitor experience, namely, religious and cultural factors, environmental factors, economic factors, services and facilities factors, and human factors. The items included in religious and cultural factors, such as religious significance, art and architecture, religious environment, and events, are in line with the findings of Moufakkir and Selmi (2018) and Gill, Packer et al. (2019). According to Moufakkir and Selmi (2018), religious elements are the key factors that shape the experiences of spiritual tourists. However, our study shows that visitors of all kinds, both religious and nonreligious, were looking for religious and cultural elements to have a meaningful experience in religious sites. Similarly, our study aligns with Gill, Packer et al.'s
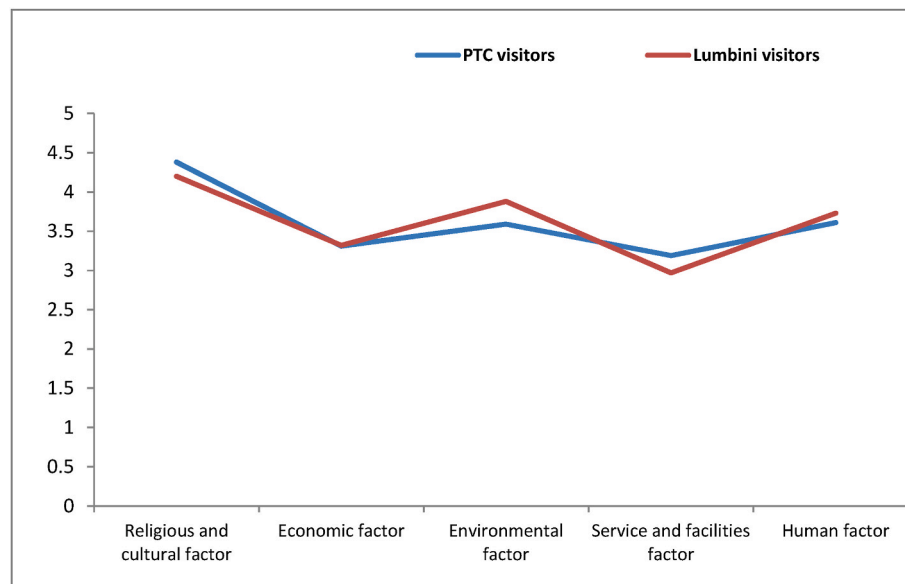

Fig. 3. Evaluation of visitor experience at both research sites.

Table 6
Mean scores for importance and performance of site attributes.

	PTC			Lumbini		
	Importance	Perfor mance	Mean Difference	Impor tance	Perfor mance	Mean Difference
History and culture	4.67	4.40	−0.27	4.56	4.24	−0.32
Art and architecture	4.43	4.49	0.06	4.20	4.30	0.10
Religious atmosphere	4.46	4.36	−0.10	4.51	4 .39	−0.12
Religious significance	4.67	4.52	−0.15	4.60	4.30	−0.30
Feeling of connection	4.23	4.24	0.01	4.49	4.21	−0.28
Events and activities	4.30	4.34	0.04	4.00	3.85	−0.15
Spiritual fulfillment	4.22	4.28	0.06	4.17	4.13	−0.04
Environmental factors						
Site maintenance	4.29	3.10	−1.19	4.41	3.90	−0.51
Sanitation	4.42	3.41	−1.01	4.51	3.86	−0.65
Crowd management	4.40	3.38	−1.02	3.95	3.88	−0.07
Interpretation	3.86	3.04	−0.82	3.89	3.57	−0.32
Economic factors						
Other charges	3.29	3.40	0.11	3.58	3.19	−0.39
Admission charge	3.31	3.44	0.13	3.93	3.58	−0.35
Cafés and restaurants	3.56	3.16	−0.4	4.00	3.26	−0.74
Retail trade	3.39	3.22	−0.17	3.60	3.24	−0.36
Services and facilities factors						
Rest areas	4.04	3.73	−0.31	4.05	3.11	−0.94
Transportation	4.01	3.73	−0.28	4.30	3.16	−1.14
Public toilets	4.30	2.68	−1.62	4.59	2.58	−2.01
Availability of water	4.09	3.30	−0.79	4.34	3.04	−1.30
Human factors						
Behavior of service staff	3.92	3.38	−0.54	4.20	3.70	−0.50
Attitude of service staff	3.74	3.42	−0.32	4.13	3.56	−0.57
Other visitors' behavior	3.86	3.74	−0.12	3.83	3.93	0.10
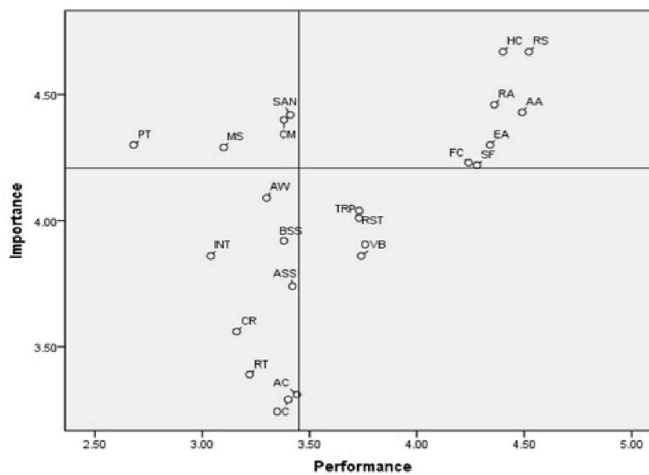
Fig. 4. IPA, PTC
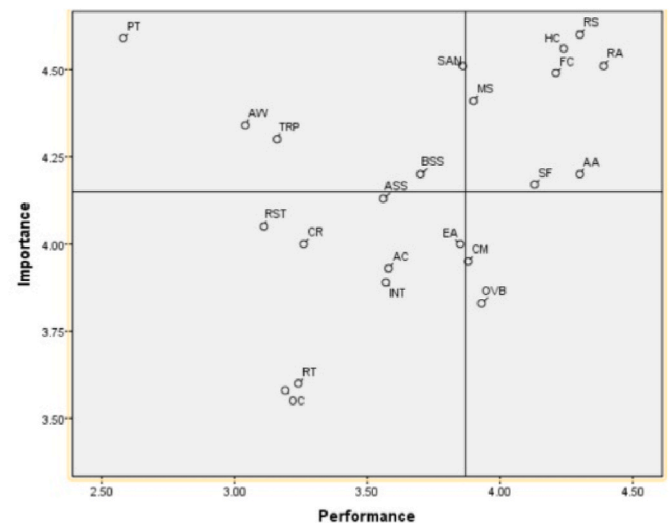
Fig. 5. IPA, Lumbini.

(2019) findings that physical environment and peacefulness were the main motivating factors to visit a destination and gain a restorative experience. In religious destinations, the art and architecture, surroundings, and peaceful religious environment are some of the factors that attract visitors.

The roles of items related to environmental and services and facilities factors in shaping visitor experience are noted in a number of previous studies, such as Gill, Packer et al. (2019), and Shi (2007). Our findings relating to these two factors largely echo the "place" and "facilities" factors identified by Shi (2009) in the context of Chinese Buddhist sites. This proves the implication of Shi's (2009) findings in diverse religious sites. Furthermore, the internal consistency of items was established by enlisting them into different factors and removing those with low inter-item correlation, to facilitate the measuring of visitor experience.

The human factors, which included service staff and other visitors, were also identified by Huang and Pearce (2019). Service staff's

performance is critical to improving service quality. According to Huang and Pearce (2019), their attitude and behavior can influence visitors' subjective experience, and thus play an important role in providing satisfying experiences to visitors. This study further identified that other visitors' behavior can also influence on-site experience.

The economic dimension of visitor experience is a unique finding in this study, which received insufficient attention in previous studies. This finding suggests that the trading of goods or services influences visitor experience, and therefore cannot be overlooked while measuring visitor experience. Commercialization at religious sites is a sensitive issue which may take the form of admission charges, fees for participation in rituals, sale of souvenirs, and cafés or restaurants. Excessive commercialization at religious sites negatively influences visitor experience (Hung et al., 2017), thus it is important to measure the economic

dimension during the study of visitor experience at religious sites.

Among the five aspects explored in this study, the religious and cultural dimension was identified as being the most important in determining overall visitor experience. However, the evaluation of individual aspects differed between the two research sites. Thus, Lumbini performed better in terms of environmental and human factors, whereas visitors to the PTC rated that site higher in terms of religious and cultural factors and services and facilities.

By using an IPA matrix, the current study was able not only to assess visitors' satisfaction with certain site attributes but also to compare visitors' perceptions of the same attributes at different religious sites. With regard to visitor satisfaction, out of the 22 items subjected to analysis in this study, six mean differences for PTC visitors were positive (see Table 6), whereas the mean differences of two items at Lumbini were positive. These mean differences reflect the fact that visitors' perceptions of site performance in relation to the majority of items failed, at both sites, to exceed these items' perceived importance. One item, "art and architecture," which did have positive mean differences, was common to both research sites. This was probably because of these sites' unique temple structures, their beautiful stone and wooden carvings, and the traditional buildings that surround their temple complexes. This is in line with Huang and Pearce (2019) finding in the context of Chinese Buddhist sites that the location, structures, and scenery are some of the primary reasons for visitor satisfaction with these sites.

Regardless of the nature of sacred sites, it is important to consider visitors' expectations and needs when designing visitor experience (Hughes et al., 2013). The IPA undertaken in this study suggests that there were a number of items that could be improved to increase visitor satisfaction. Six items related to the religious and cultural aspects of visitor experience were common to the "Keep up the good work" quadrants for both sites. Items within this quadrant are considered to be of high importance and high performance, and it is important to maintain the high performance of these items as failing to do so will likely lead to dissatisfaction (Smith & Costello, 2009). In addition, one item included in this quadrant was related to the religious and cultural dimension and another to environmental aspects. The items in this quadrant tend to be what the visitors want to experience the most. The IPA of both research sites shows that visitors, irrespective of the site they visited, were interested in religious and cultural attributes, and both research sites performed well in this area. Furthermore, physical environment is also high up on visitors' priorities, which aligns with the findings of Gill, Packer et al. (2019); physical environment is crucial in eliciting a sense of place and in shaping restorative experiences.

The "Concentrate here" quadrant indicates low performance in relation to importance and hence calls for more attention to making improvements. Altogether, seven different items for the two sites fell within this quadrant, three environmental items, three services and facilities items, and one human item. These items correlate with the categories of "place," "people," and "facilities" identified by Shi (2009). This reinforces the argument that there are various factors beyond the strictly religious or spiritual that are important in attracting people to visit religious sites (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Olsen, 2010). Environment-related site attributes such as interpretation, site maintenance, sanitation, and crowd management can assist in enhancing educational and recreational experiences, while service facilities can boost a site's convenience (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018, Gill, Packer et al., 2019). Improving the performance of these items will result in better visitor experiences. In particular, the PTC performed badly in terms of environment-related items, with three environmental attributes included in this quadrant along with one services and facilities-related attribute. In contrast, Lumbini performed poorly in the services and facilities aspect of visitor experience, as reflected in the fact that three such items (public toilets, availability of water, and transportation) fell within this quadrant.

The items in the "Possible overkill" quadrant represent areas of strong performance to which fewer financial investments and administrative efforts should be directed (Hughes et al., 2013). In the case of the PTC, this quadrant predominantly captured items associated with services and facilities (two out of the three items). The remaining item was associated with the human factor. Similarly, one each of human and environmental items fell within this quadrant for Lumbini. Visitors' preference for services and facilities-related items may illustrate their perception of the site as a place of worship and so may be seen as fulfilling primarily religious functions. Similarly, the importance attached by visitors to on-site transportation may be indicative of the importance of removing potential barriers to undisturbed spiritual experiences.

All the economic items were captured within the "Low priority" quadrant of both IPA grids. This indicates that visitors to religious sites are less interested in commercial activities. A similar result was reported in the study conducted by Rivera, Shani et al. (2009). Interviews showed that respondents at both research sites perceived admission charges as extra economic burdens and a barrier to the completion of their visit as certain areas at both research sites were only accessible to those who paid extra. Similarly, they felt that there was little need for the retail trade in religious objects, for paid accommodation, or for cafés and restaurants inside the temple complex, considering this sort of commercialization to have a negative impact on the sites' sacred sense of place. In addition, two items pertaining to the human factor of visitor experience and two to services and facilities fell within the "Low priority" quadrant for both sites. Furthermore, an additional religious and cultural-related item fell within this quadrant in the case of Lumbini. The low importance attached to these items may have resulted from a concern among visitors that these might impede the achievement of an undisturbed spiritual experience.

6. Theoritical and managerial implications

The aim of this study has been to assess visitor experience at two religious sites using importance-performance analysis and to produce a general framework for visitor experience design and management of sacred sites via cross-site analysis, as well as to locate areas for improvement at each of the sites examined. The theoretical contributions of this study are focused on two areas. Firstly, it revealed five dimensions of visitor experience at religious sites, namely, religious and cultural, environmental, economic, services and facilities, and human. This framework contributes to our understanding of the structure of experience evaluation at religious sites. While some of the dimensions are parallel with previous findings regarding the aspects of environment, facilities and people (Bideci & Bideci, 2021; Chang et al., 2020; Shi, 2009), the economic dimension is a unique contribution that was not recognized in previous frameworks. Secondly, this study further revealed the importance of these dimensions in visitors' evaluation, which has rarely been examined in existing studies. In particular, this study revealed that the religious and cultural dimension was the most prominent determinant of overall visitor experience at religious sites, while some economic and human factors were of less concern. This highlights the salience of the religious and cultural attributes of sacred sites and provides insight into visitors' tolerance of the economic elements and other people, including service staff and other visitors.

This study has several practical implications for service design, resource allocation, and site management. First, a site's religious significance and cultural riches have always been the most appealing factors for both religious and nonreligious visitors to sacred sites. Specifically in relation to the sites examined here, visitors to the PTC considered the religious atmosphere and the events and festivals associated with Hindu tradition as contributing the most to their experience, while those to Lumbini similarly considered the Buddhist traditions associated with the site as being most important. Religious and cultural items performed well at both research sites, and this performance needs to be maintained.

Second, external environment and services and facilities can also

influence perceived experience as they act to enhance visitor satisfaction by providing serenity, convenience, and learning opportunities. Since items related to these aspects of visitor experience performed less well, they must be improved. Particular attention should be paid to improving environmental items at the PTC, such as sanitation, crowd management, and site maintenance, while certain services and facilities- and human-related items at both the PTC and Lumbini require more managerial attention. For example, overcrowding can be avoided by restricting access to certain areas for tourists and leisure-oriented visitors. This can provide religious visitors an opportunity to engage in religious practices undisturbed.

Third, the benefits of commercial activities at religious sites are a matter of debate among researchers. Some appreciate commercialization for the opportunities it provides both visitors and members of the local community, whereas others criticize it for its weakening of religious authenticity. Our study shows that visitors attach less importance to commercial items than to others. However, this aspect cannot be ignored as economic experience makes an important contribution to overall experience and visitors have differing attitudes towards commercialization (Shi & Pande, 2022). Therefore, some precautions should be taken while managing commercial activities. Commercialization should be encouraged to a moderate and measured degree. Considering the need for a diversity of visitor types, commercial activities should be allowed but should be carried out at a reasonable distance from a site's core sacred area. This will allow religious visitors to have authentic religious experiences while at the same time providing opportunities for those wishing to engage in commercial activities, such as buying religious items, to do so.

7. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

Visitor experience is a complex whole that encompasses a wide variety of factors and dimensions. Because of its contextual nature, the evaluation and measurement of visitor experience has always been challenging for researchers. Understanding the underlying dimensions of experience in religious heritage settings not only facilitates assessment of visitor experience but also supports the design of better management strategies. In line with previous research, the findings of this study reveal that, while there are various influencing factors at play in shaping visitor experience at religious sites, religious significance and cultural richness remain the most important. IPA suggests that site managers should aim to maintain high levels of performance in relation to religious and cultural items. IPA also identified low visitor preference for and perception of commercial items, indicating less interest in commercialization among visitors to religious sites. Environment-, services-, and social behavior-related factors were also observed as influencing factors in shaping visitor experience. Most of the items listed under these factors failed to match the importance attached to them by visitors, as shown in the IPA grids for both sites, suggesting the importance of improving visitor experience in relation to aspects that fall outside of the strictly religious and cultural.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its application of cross-site analysis to identify common preferences among visitors to different religious sites. Though efforts were made to collect data at different locations of the two sites and at different times to interview visitors with varied motivations and characteristics, there might still be bias in the data due to the nonprobability sampling strategy. However, the research sites were selected from only two religions, and a huge majority of the visitors to these two sites were Nepalese natives who shared a common cultural background. Conducting similar research at sites that attract visitors with more diverse cultural and religious backgrounds may produce more generalizable results. The attributes subjected to IPA were based on their detection at only two sites. Including more attributes through examination of different types of religious sites will lead to richer results and provide more widely applicable insights for the design and improvement of effective management strategies.

Author statement

Kiranraj Pande: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Formal analysis; Roles/Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing. Fangfang Shi: Conceptualization; Methodology; Supervision; Project administration; Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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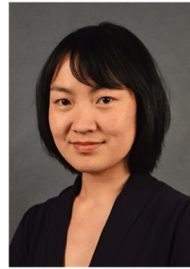
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