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Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, South-West Oltenia Region: Motivations, Belief and Tourists' Perceptions

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Abstract: Vâlcea County in the South-West Oltenia Region, Romania, has a great diversity of tourist destinations and boasts an impressive number of monasteries, churches and places of worship. This research aims to comprehensively investigate how tourists perceive the main reasons for visiting religious settlements and the frequency in Vâlcea County, situated in the South-West Oltenia Region, by employing a two-stage methodology to understand the interplay of demographic variables, travel behaviors and individual motivations, while utilizing GIS and SPSS for spatial and quantitative analysis. The two stages are: (1) the analysis of the specialized literature to identify the motivations, beliefs and tourists' perceptions regarding religious tourism and pilgrimage and (2) statistical analyses and interviews with internal stakeholders (residents), which present their tourist and religious perspective on Vâlcea County. The research questions aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between demographic variables, travel behaviors and individual motivations within this distinctive context. The research significantly contributes to furthering our understanding of the behavior of participants in religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, highlighting that certain variables, such as gender, education level and occupation, may or may not significantly impact their preferences and choices. Geographical Information System (GIS) software was used to map the study area and, at the same time, the main places of worship that were visited by tourists. The SPSS (version 15.0) program was used to investigate and analyze the quantitative research data. The results reveal that, in Vâlcea County's religious tourism and pilgrimage, gender, age and education level do not significantly impact travel choices or visit durations. However, occupation emerges as a crucial factor influencing transportation preferences, while respondents' place of origin shows no significant association with the presence of accompanying individuals during religious visits. The current research was limited by its focus on a single case study of Vâlcea County in the South-West Oltenia Region and the scarcity of previous studies on religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

Keywords: religious tourism; pilgrimage; religious motivations; tourist perceptions; places of worship; Vâlcea County; South-West Oltenia Region; GIS

1. Introduction

Tourists' wishes or needs become a constituent component of the tourism product (Weidenfeld 2006). Thus, the opportunity for tourists to experience spiritual values, beliefs, the assimilation of new religious knowledge and socialization determines the motivation of tourists at religious sites (Abbate and Di Nuovo 2013; Vătămănescu et al. 2018). The motivations of these tourists are based on the emergence and development of emotions and the experience of spiritual and moral values as sources of knowledge and understanding of knowledge production (Romanelli et al. 2021). Consequently, pilgrimage represents a kind

of tourism that contributes to favorable emotions and to the consolidation, processing and updating of rational, emotional and spiritual knowledge as a transformative and interactive process that helps to enrich the overall experience following the visit of monasteries and churches (Bratianu and Bejinaru 2019, 2020).

The activities, goods and services that make up a religious product are now recognized as important elements of the tangible and intangible values of cultural heritage, which must be protected and conserved (UNESCO 2003) by the local community on the one hand and by tourists on the other. The most important international organizations active in the field of the protection, promotion and survival of cultural heritage in rural or urban areas are the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Heritage Committee (WHC), International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Scientific Committee on Cultural Routes (CIIC).

In addition to the four organizations listed above, there is also the Council of Europe (CE). It is an international organization giving greater visibility to routes related to religious persons and buildings with a religious character. The CE is globally the organization that organizes the most faith-based itineraries; as per the 2023 data, 12 of their 47 cultural routes have a religious theme (COE-CR 2023). The UNESCO Cultural Heritage Committee accepted the notion of a cultural route in 1994, defining it as "the path or trail of heritage made up of concrete elements, in which the cultural importance arising from the exchange and multidimensional dialogue between countries and regions is seen temporally and spatially along the route" (UNESCO and WHC 1994). Cultural routes represent the most important places of pilgrimage. They produce a varied range of knowledge and ignorance, much of it unrelated to ritual or religion in any conventional sense (Mesaritou et al. 2020).

In the contemporary era, the aesthetic values of a location (i.e., its natural beauty and attractiveness) are joined by anthropogenic ones in shaping its touristic potential (Giușcă 2020). Tourists that like anthropic tourist landmarks (churches, monasteries, nunneries, mosques) contribute to the sustainability of tourism and to the promotion of these objectives. Primarily, supporting and maintaining the authentic pilgrim experience contributes to the development and managerial growth, fostering effective relationships and connections through the experience (Hung et al. 2020).

These qualities of the tourism supplies, spanning a variety of local and regional tourism goods and services, are also centered on highlighting and representing religious and cultural tourism, which can be broken down into four elements: (1) the originality or uniqueness of places of worship, (2) a strong local and regional identity, (3) authenticity and (4) specific history and architecture.

Travel and pilgrimage as tourist activities are two independent endeavors, but there can be a closeness between the two. Pilgrimage has its roots in religion, with such journeys undertaken by certain people of faith so that they can feel more connected to their spiritual beliefs. Tourists' perceptions of a religious destination are primarily shaped by associations drawn from their memories and, secondly, through field visits to their places of worship, as in this case of the churches and monasteries in Vâlcea County, South-West Oltenia Region.

Pilgrimages are known in the specialized literature as tourist events with religious content, which are described as "the simplest form of religious tourism" (Martínez 2010). According to Rinschede (1992), religious tourism can take various forms, including *short-term religious tourism*, characterized by trips to pilgrimage centers near or in the vicinity of a tourist destination, and *long-term religious tourism*, which involves visits to places of worship for several days or weeks. Places of pilgrimage have attracted increasing interest in recent decades, in which new pilgrimage routes and sacred places have been created or discovered. The old ones were also revived (Eade 2020).

This paper aims to assess tourists' perceptions of the main reasons for visiting within religious settlements and their frequency in Vâlcea County, South-West Oltenia Region. This county represents an urban-central pole of pilgrimage because it is located in a remarkable region from the point of view of the cultural–historical heritage it possesses. Accordingly,

there is anthropogenic tourism potential in the South-West Oltenia Region for religious tourism and pilgrimage to enhance promotion within the domestic tourism products.

The choice of the research area was not arbitrary, as Vâlcea County in the South-West Oltenia Region has a distinct tourist character, with its territory being, in itself, a solid consideration due to the countless possibilities for visiting cultural, religious and historical tourist attractions. The motivation of this research is determined by the significant impact it could have on the efficiency of economic activities, particularly in the Oltenia Region, with an emphasis on religious tourism.

In terms of the originality and complexity, the theme represented a significant challenge for the authors. Researchers debate the terms "religious tourism" and "pilgrimage", and we intend to analyze and elaborate on them in section two, the Literature Review. The specialized literature, particularly the foreign literature, explores the phenomenon of religious tourism from various angles or perspectives. Consequently, it seemed appropriate to conduct research that is tailored to the specific conditions of the South-West Oltenia region. The complexity of the research theme required that the paper be based on a diverse reference list and data from various statistical sources.

In this study, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was employed to address the significance and novelty of pilgrimage tourism. The research aims to (1) explore tourists' motivations and perceptions by discovering their reasons for visiting and examining the diverse practices they engage in at the places of worship in Vâlcea County, (2) to analyze the frequency and duration of tourists' visits for religious purposes and pilgrimage, shedding light on the temporal aspects of their experiences, and (3) to determine the specific locations of religious settlements that attract tourists within Vâlcea County, providing insights into pilgrimage destinations significant for visitors.

2. Literature Review

In Romania, similar to many other tourist destinations in the country, religious tourism is growing as a touristic segment in the Oltenia Region. The growth is evident from both from the economic activity it generates and the increasing movement of the population to places of worship in urban and rural areas. According to Giușcă et al. (2018), Romania boasts approximately 16,000 churches and 556 monasteries, as documented in previous studies. Many of these religious monuments have been well-preserved across generations, featuring unique characteristics and artistic values, along with representative traditional architecture.

Wooden churches, as places of worship, are part of the national and international cultural heritage (Caciora et al. 2021). Their construction is linked to crucial historical periods marked by events that had a profound spiritual impact on the population (Ilieș et al. 2016). For Romanians, these wooden churches hold significant relevance, being evidence of their Christian past (Baias et al. 2015; Ilieș et al. 2018).

Religious tourism plays a crucial role in establishing the local terrain framework, fostering the development of sustainable organizational hospitality models that encourage community participation (Gazzola et al. 2018, 2019; Grechi et al. 2015; Romanelli et al. 2021). Concurrently, cultural–historical management policies align with the needs, expectations and desires of visitors. Additionally, it is imperative to not overlook the impact of new technologies and social media platforms, pillars of the digital communication era. It contributes to both the consolidation and development of co-created travel experiences and the identification or rediscovery of a slow vision for sustainable development in religious tourism (Lemmi 2020; Romanelli et al. 2021).

Religion is observed as a key factor for visiting destinations and is considered the earliest form of non-economic tourism (Yan and Jia 2021; Kamath et al. 2023; Silva et al. 2023). Every year, religious sites in the Oltenia region attract tens of thousands of tourists, including pilgrims, secular tourists (Zamani-Farahani and Eid 2016) and tourists who want to visit strictly religious sites: monasteries, churches, nuns' hermitages, etc.

Likewise, modern-day religious tourism is presented in the international literature as interconnected with other types of tourism, such as cultural tourism, social tourism, group tourism, holiday tourism, historical tourism and spiritual tourism, which means it is linked to tourist seasonality (Rinschede 1992; Olsen and Timothy 2006; Timothy and Boyd 2006; Raj and Morpeth 2007; Oviedo et al. 2014; Lois-González and Santos 2015; Collins-Kreiner 2018; Sorea et al. 2023). However, in modern societies, religious motivation and perceptions appear to have less influence on overall tourism flows than in ancient societies (Rinschede 1992).

In tourism studies, there is a prevalent concept of distinguishing tourists from pilgrims, viewing them as undoubtedly dichotomous segments given their particular or varied travel motivations and choices of tourist destinations. In brief, pilgrims are guided by religious and spiritual inspiration, motivating them to visit sacred and holy places. In contrast, tourists are motivated by different concerns, such as those with secular importance—for example, hedonic pleasures (Shuo et al. 2009).

From a tourism perspective, pilgrimage is a journey undertaken both externally and internally by the pilgrim (van Iwaarden and Nawijn 2024). Originally a religious practice specific to distinct tourist segments and traditional belief systems, pilgrimage, as a classic concept, has evolved in the 21st century. It now attracts and mobilizes tens of thousands of people globally, showcasing a diverse range of attitudes toward pilgrimage (Coleman and Eade 2004; Lois González 2013). Pilgrimages involve organized or unorganized groups of visitors who, irrespective of their beliefs, political standpoints or ideological positions, choose to embark on a journey to reconnect with holy places in urban areas and the natural environment (Lois González et al. 2021; e.g., protected natural areas, landscapes and unique lookout areas). Simultaneously, they seek to partake in novel life experiences. Moreover, pilgrimages can be considered embodiments of ritual cycles linked either to the cycle of human life or to religious calendar events, such as the Birth of Jesus Christ and His Resurrection (Schmidt 2009). Traveling for religious purposes is considered the oldest form of tourism (Abad-Galzacorta et al. 2016; Bogan et al. 2017; Bogan et al. 2019). This phenomenon can be attributed to the social and cultural changes that have transpired in recent decades, including advancements in transportation and the development of globalization (Liro et al. 2018a). Religious tourism involves travel motivated by religious and spiritual growth (Liro 2021). Its evolution in recent centuries is closely tied to societal, cultural, economic, scientific and technological transformations (Liro et al. 2018b).

Guided tours encompass walks or outdoor visits to churches, monasteries, museums, shrines and mosques at the county, regional, national and global levels. These tours enable participants to engage in rituals and ceremonies and ultimately provide tourists with the opportunity to acquire religious souvenirs from these sacred places (Robina Ramírez and Pulido Fernández 2018). Souvenirs, considered a "core element of the holiday experience" (Light et al. 2024), play a significant role in enhancing the overall visitation experience. A comprehensive understanding of these aspects can contribute to the improvement of services provided to visitors by both the government and the private sector (Najib et al. 2020).

In a study by Wang et al. (2020) titled "Religious Festival Marketing: Differentiating Between Devoted Believers and Tourists", participants attending the Mazu religious festival in Taiwan were analyzed. The study classified religious festival participants into four fundamental motivational typologies ("leisure travelers, devout believers, culturally passionate believers, and religious pragmatists") based on the classification developed by Crompton and McKay (1997). Religion significantly influences the social and political opinions, travel motivations and behaviors of tourists. These behaviors encompass travel patterns, seasonal requirements and transportation options (Nyaupane et al. 2015).

Terzidou et al. (2018) define religious tourism as travel undertaken for religious purposes, involving visits to cultural, religious and historical sites within a tourist area. Several theories and viewpoints regarding the motivation for this type of religious nature tourism have been examined in the literature. Specifically, Battour et al. (2012) and Terzidou et al. (2018) discovered that tourists visit holy places for both push and pull

factors, indicating a combination of internal motivation and attraction to the visited area. Additionally, the population is influenced by internal emotional factors when visiting churches and monasteries, such as meeting with family and friends, seeking relaxation and entertainment, escaping from the daily routine, engaging in exercise (sports) and finding satisfaction in natural landscapes (Hassan et al. 2022). Attraction motivations play a crucial role in travelers' destination choices, considering factors like low travel costs or historical and cultural attractions (Hassan et al. 2022).

In an empirical study, Drule et al. (2012) analyzed non-religious intrinsic motivations for visiting Romanian monasteries, emphasizing dimensions such as the desire to become a better person during experiences in these holy places and a need related to increasing self-worth and self-realization. Motivations for different tourist segments can vary significantly based on the socio-demographic profile of the visitor, encompassing the desire to discover the cultural–intangible heritage of Vâlcea County, recreational motivation, an appreciation of architectural attractions or the wish for pilgrim–local interaction.

Studies have indicated that the most popular types of travel are associated with religious reasons, spiritual experiences, visiting objectives and, implicitly, cultural tourism (Cohen and Cohen 2015; Liro 2021). Moreover, there may be recreational motivations (walking and rest), social–familial motivations (spending time with family and friends) (Fernandes et al. 2012; Lois-González and Santos 2015; Abad-Galzacorta et al. 2016), shopping motivations (buying souvenirs and religious gifts) and, last but not least, historical tourism (practiced in correlation with religious tourism, involving visits to tourist attractions). According to the author Raj et al. (2015, p. 109), motivation represents "something that engages people in a course of action, concretely the driving force that exists in all individuals on the surface of the Globe". Silva et al. (2023) state that "religious and spiritual motivations are, most of the time, at the foundation of pilgrimages". On the other hand, basic motivation represents a form of change that includes inner values and, at the same time, questions about the meaning of life (Haab 1998). As Dyas (2020) states, "A large number of people have no form of religious belief but still find such places a useful way to explore spirituality and enrich their lives". A spiritually motivated pilgrimage is based on the appearance or thought of an unstructured, individual connection that precedes and conditions the experience (Frey 2002).

From the Middle Ages until now, the Christian faith has been a determining factor in the emergence of a motivating phenomenon, namely, following the Way of Saint James (Moscarelli et al. 2020). Religious belief is not only a part of tourists' lives but also provides spiritual support and emotional satisfaction after visiting sites (Hung and Hsu 2017; Wang et al. 2024). Currently, approximately 30% of pilgrims state that they are believers, citing religion as one of the essential reasons for visiting monasteries and churches (CETUR and SA Xacobeo 2007). Even so, in recent decades, there have been other reasons and beliefs providing a reference for certain pilgrims traveling to the sacred sites. According to Moscarelli et al. (2020), "they can incorporate spiritual reunion, a re-encounter with the inner self, and a conference with nature as they slowly progress the trail, typically on foot". Travel reasons can also include the belief in the benefits of physical exercise and the face-to-face connection with nature, including the principles of unity, solidarity, cohesion and community spirit that are part of the pilgrimage (Moscarelli et al. 2020).

Fatima et al. (2016), in their study published in the "International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage", showed that tourists' perceptions of directional signage, safety and security, exhibitions and exhibits, a sgood value for money and equal access have extremely favorable connections with religious tourism. Tourists' perception and motivations for visiting places of worship are related to the type of experience tourists are looking for, the emotional response they have and, last but not least, the satisfaction they get from visiting sacred sites (Vareiro et al. 2021; Herman et al. 2024).

Applied to tourism, the perception of tourists is the subject of numerous research that targeted the resident population (Silva and Borges 2019; Popescu et al. 2020; Cretu et al. 2021; Moreira Gregori et al. 2022; Crăciun et al. 2022; García-Buades et al. 2022; Popescu

et al. 2022; González-García et al. 2022; Telbisz et al. 2022; Crețan et al. 2023; Mazilu et al. 2023; Ilies et al. 2023; Deac et al. 2023), employees in the tourism and non-tourism sectors (Herman et al. 2020; Prima 2022; Im and Kim 2022) and the image of the tourist destination (Herman et al. 2019; Chakrabarty and Sadhukhan 2020; Niță 2021; Herman et al. 2021; Tse and Tung 2022; Zhang et al. 2022; Elhosiny et al. 2023).

3. Materials and Methodology

3.1. Study Area

Vâlcea County is located in the central–southern part of Romania (Figure 1), in the South-West Oltenia Development Region (Vlăduț et al. 2011, 2023; Dumitraşcu et al. 2017). Vâlcea County boasts all the characteristics of a diverse tourist destination, encompassing landscapes ranging from meadows to mountains. It showcases the picturesque gorge of Olt and Lotrului Valley, along with the majesty of the wild mountains and gorges of Bistrița Oltene (Neacșu et al. 2009).
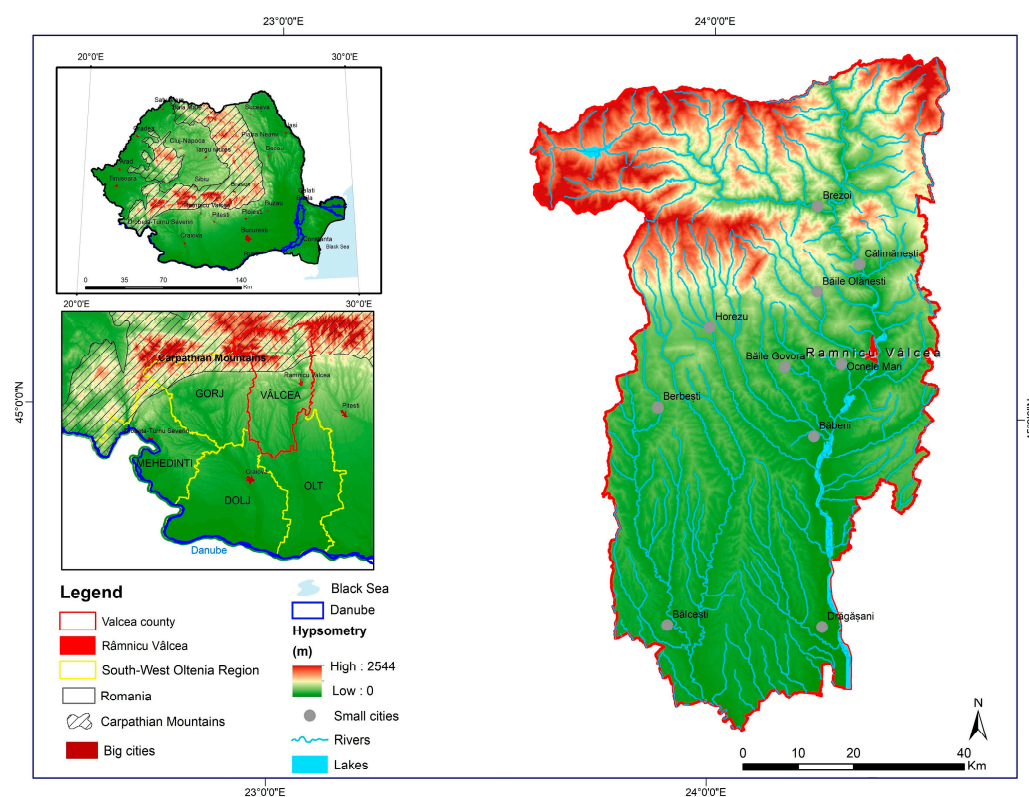

Figure 1. Vâlcea County's location at the local and regional levels. Source: Authors' data processing in ArcGIS 10.7.2.

As part of the array of tourism goods and services offered to tourists, monasteries and churches from Vâlcea County, South-West Oltenia Region function as effective means of communication. They represent key historical and cultural elements for local, regional and national identity and attractiveness. The places of worship visited by respondents in our questionnaire included Horezu Monastery (Hurezi), Cozia Monastery, Govora Monastery, Dintr-un Lemn Monastery, Bistrița Monastery, Arnota Monastery, Turnu Monastery, Surpatele Monastery, Three Saints Church, Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church, Saint John Baptist Church, Ostrov Monastery, Saint George Church, Saint Anthony Church, Pătrunsa Monastery, Frăsinei Monastery, Mălaia Monastery and Cornetu Monastery (Figure 2). It can be inferred that these places enhance the visibility and reputation of the territory, consequently contributing to the improvement and support of the local economy. Notably, Horezu (Hurezi) Monastery stood out as the most visited by tourists, earning its place on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List since 1993.
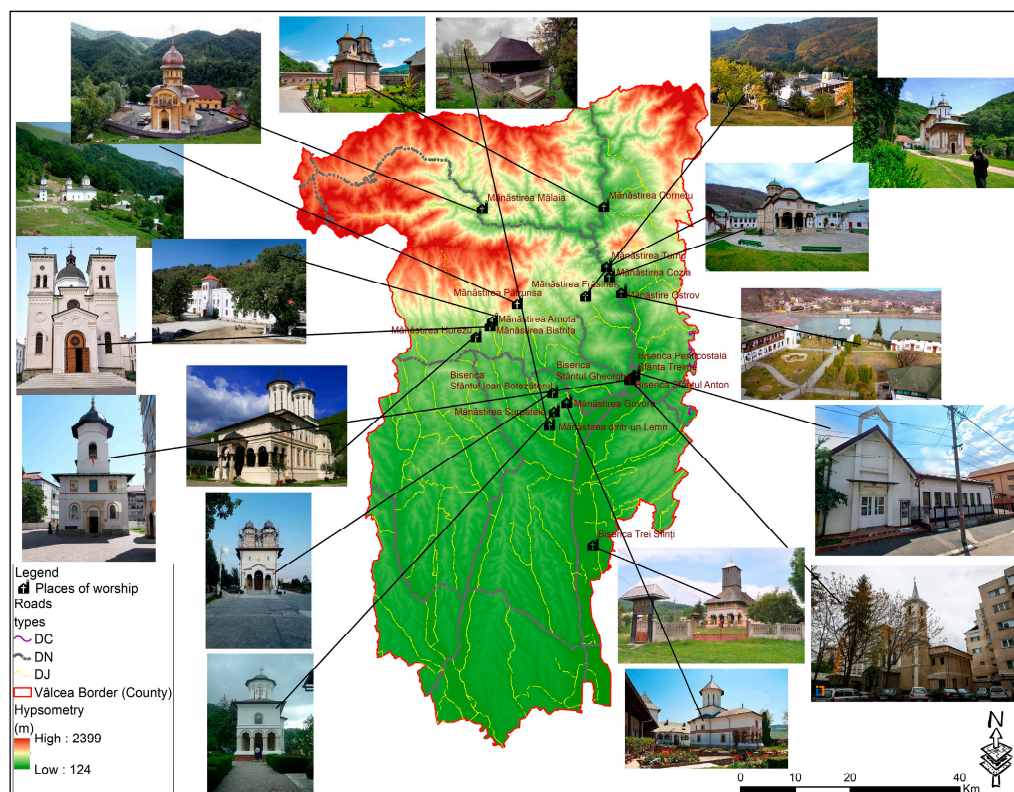
Figure 2. Places of worship visited by respondents. Source: Authors' data processing in ArcGIS 10.7.2.

To enhance visits to these cultural–historical and religious heritage sites, tourism objectives include the development, adaptation, improvement and promotion of the local and regional images. Simultaneously, the goal is to increase social cohesion and foster a sense of belonging within the local community, aligning with the needs and preferences of tourists. Lastly, but equally importantly, the objective is to preserve and promote all local and regional traditions and customs, ensuring their continued vitality and prosperity to sustain the economic and social fabric of Vâlcea County.

3.2. Data Sources

Given that the purpose of this research was to explore the motivational factors for people who practice religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, as well as to identify the main places of worship visited in the county, we collected qualitative data. These were gathered through a questionnaire containing some open-ended questions that allowed respondents to leave narrative accounts of their experiences of practicing religious tourism and pilgrimage. Research methods such as interviews and questionnaires (online or in-person) may be applied to establish the reasons why an individual goes on a pilgrimage along a specific route to visit certain monasteries and churches (Palmowski and Przybylska 2022). It is thought that there has been a long-standing motivational dualism, i.e., the combination of religious, pilgrimage motivations and touristic (cognitive) motivations, which continues to this day.

The questionnaire data collection of (Appendix A) applied for this research was conducted online in the autumn (November–December) of 2023. Participants were selected by posting the questionnaire on social media pages. The participants in the poll were randomly chosen through posts on social media networks and voluntarily responded to the questionnaire. The survey link was shared mainly through Facebook, targeting individuals interested in religious tourism. The questionnaire took approximately 7–12 min to be completed.

To assess the accessibility, readability, transparency, relevance, acceptability and average response time, the authors distributed the questionnaire. In order to minimize the potential bias introduced by personal data, participants were assured of the confidentiality of personal data through a disclaimer added at the beginning of the questionnaire: "All data collected is confidential and will be used strictly for academic purposes, and the questionnaire is addressed to tourists who visited and exclusively practiced religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County". For the research, 129 questionnaires were randomly distributed, out of which 100 questionnaires were considered for the final analysis and investigation. Out of the 129 questionnaires randomly distributed, 29 were excluded from the final analysis due to incomplete responses or inadequate data.

We required a sample of 100 respondents who were religious tourism and pilgrimage visitors to Vâlcea County, determined using the Slovin formula, which is as follows (Tejada and Joyce 2012; Ellen 2012; Sugiyono 2017; Purwoko et al. 2022)[1]:

n = size of the sample group;

N = size of the population in Vâlcea County—341,629 as of 1 January 2022, according to NIS (Institutul Național de Statistică 2023);

e = error margin—0.1%.

The calculation of the number of respondents was as follows:

$$n = \frac{341,629}{1 + 341,629 \times (0.1)^2} = 99.99$$

We conducted the study with a larger pool of respondents, and from this diverse group, we chose a sample of 100 participants. This sample encompassed individuals from diverse demographic groups, including people of different ages, genders, education levels, occupations and backgrounds. We employed a structured questionnaire to gather relevant information about their experiences and perceptions regarding religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

The questionnaire was carefully developed to cover various aspects of participants' behavior and perceptions. Each question was designed to address key variables, including gender, age, education level, occupation, place of origin and others. The instrument was pre-validated to ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data.

Participants were individually administered the questionnaires, and their responses were recorded in an electronic database. Data collection was conducted in a standardized manner to minimize potential external influences on the results.

For data analysis, we utilized the statistical software SPSS 15.0. Variables were grouped according to the research hypotheses, and various statistical methods were applied based on the nature of the data and the relationships under investigation (correlation analysis, regression analysis, ANOVA, chi-square test and *t*-test). The overall validity of the research was ensured through the careful questionnaire design, and reliability was confirmed through the internal consistency testing of responses.

The obtained results were processed and presented in tables and graphs. Interpretations were performed in the context of the initial hypotheses, highlighting correlations, causal relationships and significant variations. This methodology ensured a systematic and rigorous approach to the research, allowing for the acquisition of relevant and meaningful results in the studied field.

To perform this analysis, the following steps were taken:

Data Collection: Through our questionnaire, we gathered data on the perceptions of religious tourism and the levels of importance attributed to establishments by respondents.

Define Variables: Perceptions of religious tourism and levels of importance attributed to establishments were measured through scores for the responses to specific questions.

Build a Regression Model: We constructed a linear regression model where perceptions of religious tourism were the independent variables and the levels of importance attributed to establishments were the dependent variables.

Estimate Coefficients: We utilized regression analysis to estimate the coefficients of the model, quantifying the relationship between perceptions of religious tourism and the levels of importance attributed to establishments.

Interpret Results: We interpreted the statistical and practical significance of the coefficients. A coefficient associated with perceptions of religious tourism significantly different from zero was necessary for us to conclude that there was a significant relationship between the two variables.

Test Model Significance: We tested the overall significance of the regression model to assess whether it significantly explained the variation in the level of importance attributed to establishments.

Validate and Interpret Results: We validated the results and interpreted the findings in the context of the initial hypothesis, thereby evaluating whether perceptions of religious tourism significantly impacted the levels of importance attributed to establishments.

3.3. Research Hypotheses

The hypothesis represents a statement describing a causal relationship meant to explain a phenomenon—as in our case, religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. These hypotheses are formulated by the authors to be tested for their validity. This research aims to investigate the causal relationship between religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, South-West Oltenia Region, by applying tests to the following research hypotheses (Table 1):

Table 1. Research hypotheses.

Number	Hypotheses
H1	There is a significant correlation between the gender of respondents and the type of travel chosen for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County
H2	The age categories of participants influence the duration of their visits to religious sites in Vâlcea County
H3	The level of education completed is associated with the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County
H4	There is a positive association between the occupation of respondents and the means of transportation used
H5	There is a significant correlation between the respondents' place of origin and the presence of accompanying individuals during their visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County
H6	There is an association between the level of education of respondents and participation in guided tours within religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences in Vâlcea County
H7	There is a positive correlation between the sources of information used for religious tourism and pilgrimage and the main purpose of visits
H8	There is a relationship between an individual's perception of religious tourism and the importance attributed to religious establishments in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage

Source: processed by authors.

In order to explain the theoretical basis and the real situation offered by the research hypotheses from the study on religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, we will elaborate on how each hypothesis corresponds with the existing theory and how it reflects the concrete realities:

Theoretical Basis and Actual Situation for H1 (Correlation between Respondents' Gender and Travel Type Chosen for Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage): This hypothesis is grounded in the theory of gender differences in tourism, suggesting that men and women

may exhibit distinct preferences for travel types. In practice, this may manifest through cultural and social factors influencing the tourism choices of different genders.

Theoretical Basis and Real Situation for H2 (Impact of age categories on the duration of visits to religious sites): This hypothesis aligns with research exploring how various age groups engage in tourism. Theoretically, it suggests that tourism preferences may evolve with age. Practically, this could result in differences in the duration of visits to religious places between the young and the elderly, influenced by factors such as time availability and personal interests.

Theoretical Basis and Actual Situation for H3 (Association between the level of education and the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage): This hypothesis is rooted in the theory linking the level of education to participation in cultural activities. In practice, this may indicate that individuals with a higher level of education are more likely to engage frequently in religious tourism, possibly due to greater awareness or interest in cultural and spiritual aspects.

Theoretical Basis and Real Situation for H4 (Link between occupation and the mode of transport used): This hypothesis aligns with studies exploring how socio-economic status influences travel choices. Theoretically, occupation serves as an indicator of socio-economic status, influencing decisions related to tourism transport. In practice, this could reveal variations in the means of transport used by different professions.

Theoretical Basis and Real Situation for H5 (Correlation between the place of origin of the respondents and the presence of accompanying persons): This hypothesis reflects the theory that the cultural and geographical context influences social behavior, including tourism. In practice, this may indicate how people from different regions or cultures prefer to travel—either alone or in groups.

Theoretical Basis and Reality for H6 (Association between education level and participation in guided tours): This hypothesis aligns with theory suggesting that one's education level influences preferences for structured tourism experiences. Essentially, it may reflect a tendency for more educated individuals to prefer guided tours to deepen their knowledge.

Theoretical Basis and Real Situation for H7 (Relationship between the source of information and the main purpose of visits): This is based on theory in tourism marketing examining the influence of information sources on tourism decisions. Essentially, it illustrates how different sources of information (e.g., personal recommendations, online media) can impact the purpose of a tourist trip.

Theoretical Basis and Real Situation for H8 (The relationship between the perception of religious tourism and the level of importance attributed to religious establishments): This hypothesis fits into research in the psychology and sociology of religion, analyzing how individual beliefs and perceptions influence behavior in religious contexts. In practice, it may indicate how personal views of religious tourism affect the value people attribute to religious places in a tourism context.

Through these assumptions, the research provides a robust theoretical foundation and reflects the concrete realities of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, offering a nuanced perspective on this field of study.

By testing the hypotheses listed previously, the research aims to identify and evaluate the relationships and differences between various variables studied in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, South-West Oltenia Region (Table 2): The table provides a presentation of the variables and statistical methods used in the research, highlighting the association between the formulated hypotheses and specific aspects under investigation, such as gender, age, education level, occupation, place of origin and others.

Table 2. Strong points.

Hypotheses	Variables	The Statistical Method Used
H1.	Gender Forms of tourism	Correlation Analysis
H2.	Age category Duration of the visit	Regression Analysis
H3.	Educational level Frequency of visits	Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)
H4.	Occupation Means of transportation	Chi-square Test
H5.	Place of origin Accompanying individuals	Correlation Analysis
H6.	Education level Guided tours	*t*-Test
H7.	Information sources Main purpose of visits	Correlation Analysis
H8.	Perception of religious tourism Importance of establishments	Regression Analysis

Source: data processed by the authors in Microsoft Excel 2010 Spreadsheet Software.

Correlation Analysis: This statistical method gauges the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient, ranging from -1 to 1, is commonly used. A coefficient near 1 indicates a strong positive correlation, while -1 suggests a strong negative correlation. The aim is to assess if changes in one variable correspond to changes in the other.

Regression Analysis: This technique explores the connection between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables. It aims to model this relationship for prediction or understanding causality. In linear regression, a line is fitted through data points to minimize the sum of squared differences between observed and predicted values.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA): ANOVA is employed to compare means among three or more groups, testing the hypothesis that all groups share identical means. Significant differences in ANOVA suggest at least one group has a significantly different mean.

Chi-square Test: This test determines if there is a significant difference between observed and expected frequencies in one or more categories. Commonly used for categorical variables, it is suitable for research involving opinion polls or market studies.

t-Test: This method compares the means of two groups to ascertain if differences are statistically significant. Types include the independent *t*-test (for different groups) and the paired *t*-test (for two measurements of the same group).

Statistical analysis is integral in scientific research, offering rigorous tools for examining variable relationships and testing hypotheses. Whether revealing correlations, evaluating mean differences or testing categorical associations, each method, from Correlation Analysis to *t*-Test, contributes distinctively to comprehending the studied phenomena. Proper application ensures researchers uncover new insights and fortify existing knowledge with scientifically validated findings.

3.4. Research Questions

Examining these dynamics is crucial for the sustainable development of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, contributing to the formulation of strategies for both local authorities and businesses. Religious tourism and pilgrimage have emerged as significant facets of travel, offering unique cultural and spiritual experiences. Given its rich religious heritage, Vâlcea County serves as a compelling setting for exploring the dynamics of such travel.

This research delves into various dimensions, seeking to explore the intricate factors that shape the choices, preferences and experiences of participants engaged in religious tourism and pilgrimage within Vâlcea.

The following set of research questions aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between demographic variables, travel behaviors and individual motivations within this distinctive context.

1. How does the gender of respondents influence their choices regarding the type of travel for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea?

This research question explores how the gender of respondents may influence their choices regarding the type of travel selected for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. Essentially, the research focuses on identifying potential differences or distinct preferences between genders concerning travel choices related to religious experiences. Analyzing this relationship can provide a deeper understanding of factors influencing travel decisions in the specific context of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

2. How does the duration of visits to religious sites in Vâlcea vary based on the age categories of participants?

This research question investigates the variability in the duration of visits to religious sites in Vâlcea County based on the age categories of participants. By analyzing this relationship, researchers aim to identify possible significant differences in the time spent at religious sites among different age groups of participants. This research aims to reveal generational influences or distinct preferences regarding the duration of religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences in Vâlcea County.

3. How is the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea influenced by the educational level of participants?

This research question explores how the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County is influenced by the educational level of participants. By analyzing this relationship, researchers aim to identify possible associations between the education level of participants and how often they visit religious sites in the region. Understanding these influences can contribute to shaping the profile of participants in religious tourism and pilgrimage and highlighting potential correlations between one's education level and engagement in such activities.

4. What is the relationship between the occupation of respondents and the mode of transportation used for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County?

This research question explores the relationship between the occupation of respondents and the mode of transportation used in religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. By analyzing this relationship, researchers aim to identify possible associations or influences between the respondents' occupation type and their choice of transportation for religious and pilgrimage experiences. Understanding these relationships can shed light on preferences or constraints related to occupation and how they may influence the practical aspects of religious travel.

5. How is the presence of accompanying individuals during visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea influenced by the respondents' background?

This research question investigates how the presence of accompanying individuals during visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County is influenced by the respondents' background. By analyzing this relationship, researchers aim to identify possible connections between the social and cultural context of the respondents' backgrounds and their participation in accompanied religious travels. Understanding these influences can bring to light aspects related to traditions, interpersonal relationships and social dynamics that may affect how people experience and share their religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences.

6. How is the participation in guided tours during religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences in Vâlcea influenced by the educational level of participants?

This research question examines the influence of the educational level of participants on their participation in guided tours during religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences in Vâlcea County. By analyzing this relationship, researchers aim to identify how the education level of participants may affect their decision to engage in guided tours, providing insights into the specific preferences and needs of educational groups in the context of reli-

gious tourism and pilgrimage. Understanding these influences can contribute to tailoring guided tour offerings to better cater to the diversity of participants' education levels.

7. What are the connections between the information sources used and the main reason for visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County?

This research question explores the connections between the information sources used and the main reason for visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. By analyzing this relationship, researchers seek to identify the links between the information-gathering methods of participants and the motivations underlying their visits to religious tourism and pilgrimage. Understanding these connections can provide essential insights into the decision-making process of participants and contribute to adapting communication and promotional strategies to attract and satisfy their diverse needs.

8. Is there a positive correlation between an individual's perception of religious tourism and the importance attributed to religious establishments in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences?

This research question investigates the existence of a positive correlation between an individual's perception of religious tourism and the importance attributed to religious establishments in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences. By analyzing this relationship, researchers aim to highlight whether individuals with a positive perception of religious tourism also have a higher appreciation for the importance of religious establishments in their travels. Understanding this correlation can bring to the forefront how individual perceptions shape values and priorities in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences.

4. Results

Religious tourism and pilgrimage are socially significant phenomena, reflecting profound connections between spirituality, culture and travel. In an ever-evolving world, these forms of exploration and the pursuit of the sacred are gaining increasing relevance, attracting a significant number of participants and generating a considerable impact on local communities and regional economies.

Within that context, in this Results section, we present a detailed study of the phenomenon of religious tourism in Vâlcea County, Romania, aiming to illuminate the motives, preferences and influences that underlie spiritual travel experiences.

By applying statistical methods and rigorous analyses, we develop findings that deepen our understanding of the dynamics of religious tourism in the Vâlcea region. This not only offers a detailed insight into traveler behavior but also provides a solid foundation for decision making regarding the sustainable development of religious tourism in the future.

4.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Stakeholders (Domestic Tourists—Romanians)

To begin, we present the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents to our research questionnaire.

The sample consisted of 40 males and 60 females, providing valuable information for our demographic analyses and assisting in segmenting the data based on gender in subsequent analyses.

The distribution of respondents in terms of age was as follows: 18–25 years (12 respondents), 26–35 years (5 respondents), 36–45 years (23 respondents), 46–55 years (40 respondents) and >55 years (20 respondents). The majority of respondents fell into the 36 to 55 years age range, followed by those aged over 55 years.

According to the distribution of answers, 51 respondents were from urban areas, and 49 were from rural areas.

In terms of education, 17 respondents had completed only high school studies, while 83 respondents had completed higher education. These figures illustrate the educational composition of the studied population, with the majority (83%) having completed higher education. In further detail:

- 12% of respondents were students.
- 56% of respondents were employed.
- 31% of respondents were retirees.
- 1% of respondents were unemployed.

These data reflect the variety of occupations among the respondents and can be used to understand the composition of the workforce or the educational status of the population studied within the survey.

4.2. Questionnaire Results

Herein, the theoretical and methodological framework employed in this research will be further elucidated amid a detailed presentation and evaluation of each hypothesis, accompanied by the relevant research findings and our interpretations of those and their implications for research and practice.

H1: *There is a significant correlation between the gender of respondents and the type of travel chosen for religious tourism and pilgrimage purposes in Vâlcea County.*

In essence, this research hypothesis posits a statistical association between a person's gender and their preferences or behaviors related to travel with religious connotations, suggesting that differences in travel choices (e.g., destinations, specific activities) may be correlated with the gender of participants.

Independent variable: Gender of respondents (male or female).

Dependent variable: Type of travel chosen for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

Correlation analysis is a statistical method used to assess the relationship between two or more continuous variables. In this context, it examines the degree and direction in which variations in one variable are associated with variations in the other variable.

Pearson Correlation Coefficient: This numerical indicator gauges the linear relationship between two continuous variables, ranging from −1 to 1. A coefficient of 1 indicates a perfect positive correlation, while a coefficient of −1 indicates a perfect negative correlation. A coefficient close to 0 indicates a weak association or the absence of a significant correlation.

A positive value signifies a positive correlation between variables, suggesting that when one variable increases, the other variable tends to increase. Conversely, a negative value indicates a negative correlation, suggesting that when one variable increases, the other variable tends to decrease.

In our analysis, we found a weak and non-significant correlation between the gender of the respondents and the type of travel chosen, a finding that did not imply a causal relationship between these two variables.

The Pearson correlation coefficient for gender and type of travel was close to zero (−0.116; Table 3), indicating a negligible linear relationship. The *p*-value associated with this correlation was 0.251, which was greater than the common significance threshold of 0.05, meaning the observed correlation was not statistically significant at the conventional 0.05 level, thus suggesting that the association between gender and the type of travel was likely attributable to chance or random factors in this dataset.

H2: *The age categories of participants influence the duration of their visits to places of worship in Vâlcea County.*

The statistical method employed to investigate this second hypothesis was regression analysis, assessing the relationship between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables. In this context, they were as follows:

Dependent Variable: Total time participants spent on their visits to places of worship in Vâlcea County, assumed to be influenced by the age categories of participants.

Independent Variables: Age categories of participants.

Essentially, we sought to determine the extent to which the variability in the age category could explain the variation in the duration of visits. The results of the regression analysis provided information about the nature and strength of the relationship between these two variables, assisting us in assessing the impact that the age category had on the duration of visits in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County (Table 4).

Table 3. Correlation between gender and type of travel.

Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	−0.116
	Sig. (two-tailed)		0.251
	N	100	100
		Gender	**Type of travel**
Type of travel	Pearson Correlation	−0.116	1
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0.251	
	N	100	100

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

Table 4. Summary of the relationship between the age category and duration of visits to places of religious worship.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
	R Square Change	**F Change**	**df1**	**df2**	**R Square Change**	**F Change**	**df1**	**df2**	**Sig. F Change**
1	0.012 (a)	0.000	−0.010	0.595	0.000	0.014	1	98	0.907

a. Predictors: (Constant), Age category. Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

We found that the regression model had weak power in explaining the variation in the duration of visits based on the age category of participants. The key findings were as follows:

- R (Correlation Coefficient): It indicated a very weak correlation (0.012) between the age category and the duration of visits. The relationship between these two variables was not significant.
- R Square (Coefficient of Determination): At 0.000, it suggested that the age category did not significantly explain the variation in the duration of visits to religious sites.
- Adjusted R Square: With a value of −0.010, it indicated a poor model performance, considering the number of independent variables.
- Std. Error of the Estimate: It measured the data dispersion around the regression line—0.595, in this case.
- Change Statistics: R square change and F change did not indicate a significant improvement in the model with the introduction of the age category.
- Significance (Sig. F Change): The *p*-value associated with F change was 0.907, suggesting that adding the age category did not bring a significant improvement to the model.

The ANOVA for the regression model examining the relationship between the age category and the duration of visits to religious sites in Vâlcea County provided significant insights (Table 5).

Table 5. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the relationship between the age category and duration of visit.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	0.005	1	0.005	0.014	0.907 (a)
	Residual	34.745	98	0.355		
	Total	34.750	99			
Dependent Variable: Duration of the visit						

a. Predictors: (Constant), Age category. Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

The ANOVA did not indicate a significant relationship between the respondents' age category and the duration of visits to religious sites. The *p*-value associated with the F-statistic was high, at 0.907, surpassing the conventional significance threshold of 0.05. This suggested that the regression model that included the age category as a predictor did not bring a significant improvement in explaining the variation in the duration of visits. Therefore, we lacked sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that there was no significant difference in the duration of visits based on the age category.

The unsystematic or unexplained variation in the regression model, measured by the sum of squared residuals, was 34.745, with 98 degrees of freedom. This component represented the variability in the duration of visits that was not accounted for by the age category in the model. The total variation in the duration of visits in Vâlcea County was 34.750, with 99 degrees of freedom.

Overall, the analysis suggested that, within the studied sample, there was no significant relationship between the age category and the duration of visits to religious sites. The variability in the duration of visits appeared instead to be more influenced by other factors not accounted for in the current model.

The regression coefficients for the relationship between the age category and duration of visits were then explored (Table 6).

Table 6. Regression coefficients for the relationship between the age category and duration of visits.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error
1	(Constant)	1.370	0.182		7.514	0.000
	Age category	−0.006	0.049	−0.012	−0.118	0.907
Dependent Variable: Duration of the visit						

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

The regression coefficients can be summarized as follows:

Constant:

B (Unstandardized Coefficient): This represents the intercept of the regression line, indicating the estimated value of the dependent variable (duration of visits) when the independent variable (age category) is zero. In this case, it was 1.370.

Std. Error (Standard Error): This represents the dispersion around the estimated value of the constant. Here, it was 0.182.

t (*t*-statistic): This is a test for whether the constant is significantly different from zero. A higher *t*-value indicates greater significance. Here, it was 7.514.

Significance (Sig.): This is the *p*-value associated with the *t*-statistic. In this case, it was very small (0.000), indicating statistical significance.

Age category (Category of age):

B (Unstandardized Coefficient): This is the coefficient associated with the independent variable (age category), indicating the change in the mean of the dependent variable

for a one-unit change in the independent variable. Here, it was -0.006, indicating a negative change.

Std. Error (Standard Error): This represents the dispersion around the estimated value of the coefficient for the age category. Here, it was 0.049.

Beta (Standardized Coefficient): This indicates how many standard deviations the dependent variable is expected to change when the independent variable increases by one standard deviation. Here, it was -0.012.

t (*t*-statistic): This is a test for whether the coefficient for the age category is significantly different from zero. Here, it was -0.118.

Significance (Sig.): This is the *p*-value associated with the *t*-statistic for the coefficient of the age category. Here, it was 0.907, indicating that this coefficient was not statistically significant.

Overall, the coefficients suggested that the age category variable did not have a significant impact, and the constant was not statistically significant in the regression model.

H3: *The level of completed education is associated with the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage purposes in Vâlcea County.*

In this third hypothesis, the "level of completed education" refers to the formal education degree completed by respondents, such as primary, secondary, high school, university or postgraduate studies.

The hypothesis suggests that participants with different levels of education may exhibit distinct behaviors regarding the frequency of their visits to places with religious connotations. Thus, it can test whether there are significant differences in the frequency of visits between education categories and, implicitly, whether a person's level of education can be a significant predictor of their behavior regarding religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

We determined that the appropriate statistical method for testing this hypothesis was either analysis of variance (ANOVA) or another method of comparative group analysis based on the level of education and visit frequency, and we opted for ANOVA (Table 7).

Table 7. Analysis of variance for frequency of visits.

	Sum of Squares	**Df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Between Groups	0.125	1	0.125	0.457	0.500
Within Groups	26.865	98	0.274		
Total	26.990	99			

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

Through our ANOVA, we found that the F-statistic (0.457) was lower than the significance threshold, and the associated *p*-value (0.500) was higher than the accepted level of significance (0.05). This suggested that there were no significant differences in the frequency of visits between education level groups, meaning the results did not support an association between the level of education and the visit frequency in the context of our research. Consequently, H3 was not supported by our data and could be considered to have been refuted by our analysis.

In sum, these results indicated that the level of education did not have a significant impact on the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage purposes in Vâlcea County within the studied sample.

H4: *There is a positive association between the occupation of respondents and the mode of transportation used in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.*

To test this fourth hypothesis, we could have employed various statistical methods such as contingency analysis or chi-square tests to assess whether there was a significant association between the two variables. We began with the latter.

Chi-square analysis is a statistical method used to test associations between two categorical variables. Its results for hypothesis 4 are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Case processing summary for hypothesis 4.

| | Cases | | | | | |
| | Valid | | Missing | | Total | |
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Occupation * Means of transportation	100	100.0%	0	0.0%	100	100.0%

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0. "*" in the "Case Processing Summary for hypothesis 4" table indicates an interaction between two variables. In this case, "Occupation" and "Means of transportation" are the two interacting variables. This symbol suggests that the hypothesis and analysis focus on how the respondent's occupation may influence the method of transportation used, and vice versa. The "*" symbol is used to emphasize that the analysis and interpretation of results concentrate on the interaction between these two variables and not just on each variable individually.

The table provides information on the number of cases considered in the chi-square analysis for the association between occupation and mode of transportation. Here is how to interpret these data:

Valid cases: This indicates the total number of cases included in the analysis. In our case, there were 100 cases, representing 100% of the total.

Missing cases: This shows the number of cases that were missing or not included in the analysis. In our case, there were no missing cases, so the percentage shown is 0%.

Total cases: This represents the sum of valid and missing cases. Here, the total shown is 100, representing 100% of the total.

These data indicate that all 100 cases were included in our analysis, with no missing cases from the dataset concerning occupation and mode of transportation. This is crucial for obtaining reliable results in the chi-square analysis.

Next, Table 9 presents a contingency table (cross-tabulation) displaying the distribution of cases based on occupation and means of transportation. Each cell in this table represents the number of cases that met a specific condition.

Table 9. Cross-tabulation of occupation and means of transportation.

| | | Means of Transportation | | | | Total |
		1	2	3	4	1
Occupation 1	Count	0	0	1	0	1
	Expected Count	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.3	1.0
2	Count	3	8	0	1	12
	Expected Count	2.4	4.2	1.4	4.0	12.0
3	Count	10	25	4	17	56
	Expected Count	11.2	19.6	6.7	18.5	56.0
4	Count	7	2	7	15	31
	Expected Count	6.2	10.9	3.7	10.2	31.0
Total	Count	20	35	12	33	100
	Expected Count	20.0	35.0	12.0	33.0	100.0

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

Here is how you can interpret this table:

Occupation: This is an independent variable with four levels (1, 2, 3, 4), representing different occupation categories.

Means of transportation: This is another independent variable with four levels (1, 2, 3, 4), representing different modes of transportation.

Count: This represents the actual number of cases in each cell of the table.

Expected count: This shows the number of cases expected in each cell if there is no association between occupation and means of transportation. These values are calculated based on the marginal distribution of the data.

Key observations: In the cell corresponding to occupation 1 and means of transportation 3, there is one actual case, but the expected count is 0.1, suggesting that this combination had fewer cases than would be expected normally.

Overall, the actual and expected values were relatively close, indicating a lack of a significant association between occupation and means of transportation.

This table could be used to conduct a chi-square independence test to evaluate whether there was a significant association between the variables "occupation" and "means of transportation", and the results of that test are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Chi-square tests for the association between occupation and means of transportation.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (Two-Sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	29.848 (a)	9	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	31.316	9	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.307	1	0.012
No. of Valid Cases	100		

a. Nine cells (56.3%) have an expected count of less than five. The minimum expected count is 12. Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

Here is how you can interpret these results:

Pearson Chi-Square: The higher it is, the more likely there is to be a significant association between variables. Here, the value of this statistic was 29.848. In this case, the *p*-value (Asymp. Sig.) was 0.000, indicating a significant association at a significance level of 0.05.

Likelihood Ratio: This statistic had a value of 31.316, and the associated *p*-value was also 0.000. This confirmed that there was a significant association between variables.

Linear-by-Linear Association: This test focuses on the linear association between variables. Its value of 6.307 indicated a significant association, and the *p*-value of 0.012 confirmed this association.

Number of Valid Cases: This indicated the total number of cases included in the analysis.

Warning about Low Expected Values: Note that nine cells (56.3%) had an expected count of less than 5, and the minimum expected value was 0.12. This may have affected the validity of the results, and so interpretation should be carried out with caution.

H5: *There is a significant correlation between the respondents' place of origin and the presence of accompanying persons during their visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.*

The variables involved in hypothesis 5 were as follows:

Place of Origin (Independent Variable): This variable indicates the respondents' residential setting, either urban or rural.

Accompanying Persons (Dependent Variable): This variable refers to the presence or absence of accompanying persons during visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage.

The hypothesis here was that we would find a relationship between whether respondents came from urban or rural settings and whether they were accompanied or not during

their visits for religious purposes, and we found a significant correlation, which indicated a statistical association of these two variables.

This association could have resulted from cultural, social or economic influences that differentiate behaviors regarding participation in religious tourism and pilgrimage based on the place of origin. Seeking to further understand these influences may contribute to our understanding of how individuals' socio-cultural contexts influence how they experience and participate in religious tourism activities.

To further test our hypothesis, a correlation analysis was used to assess the nature and significance of the relationship between the place of origin and the presence of accompanying persons, to gain a clearer understanding of how the place of origin was associated with their presence.

This statistical method aims to measure and evaluate the degree of the relationship or association between two variables—in this case, between the place of origin (urban or rural) and the presence of accompanying persons during visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage. The method uses a correlation coefficient to quantify the relationship between the two variables. In our case, we used the Pearson correlation coefficient, which measures the linear relationship between two variables. The coefficient ranges from -1 to 1, where -1 indicates a perfect negative correlation, 0 indicates no correlation and 1 indicates a perfect positive correlation.

If the coefficient is positive and significant, this would suggest that, overall, respondents from a specific place of origin (urban or rural) tend to be accompanied during their visits for religious tourism more so than respondents from the other place of origin. In the case of a negative and significant coefficient, it might be observed that people from a specific place of origin are less likely to be accompanied than respondents from the other place of origin.

Testing Statistical Significance: During the analysis, it is important to test whether the observed relationship is statistically significant. This is achieved by evaluating the p-value. A low p-value (usually less than 0.05) indicates that the observed relationship is not due to chance and is statistically significant.

Additional Analysis: Depending on the results, you may conduct additional analyses to investigate the nature of the relationship further, such as grouping respondents into specific categories or comparing subgroups.

The results of our correlation analysis are presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Correlation analysis: Place of origin and accompanying persons.

		Place of Origin	Accompanying Persons
Place of origin	Pearson Correlation	1	0.063
	Sig. (two-tailed)		0.534
	N	100	100
Accompanying persons	Pearson Correlation	0.063	1
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0.534	
	N	100	100

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

Here is a detailed interpretation of the results:

The Pearson correlation coefficient between "place of origin" and "accompanying persons" was 0.063. The correlation coefficient's value close to zero (0.063) indicated that there was a very weak correlation between the two variables. The p-value (0.534) was higher than the common significance level of 0.05.

The absence of a significant correlation does not necessarily mean the absence of a relationship; it may just be undetectable in the available data. In this case, the absence of

a low *p*-value suggested that there was not enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis. In the context of this study, we could find no significant correlation between the place of origin and the presence of accompanying persons during visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

H6: *There is an association between the level of education and participation in guided tours within the experience of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.*

This hypothesis stood the chance of having practical implications for how we can understand the behavior of participants in religious tourism and pilgrimage based on their education level. If the hypothesis was validated, it would suggest that people from certain educational categories are more inclined to participate in guided tours, and this information could be used for marketing strategies and other efforts by tourist facilities in planning and promoting these activities.

To test this hypothesis, an association analysis was conducted to assess whether there was a significant link between the level of education and participation in guided tours.

Level of education: This variable indicates the educational level achieved by respondents, expressed through the following categories: primary, secondary, high school, post-secondary and university.

Guided tours: This variable indicates whether respondents do or do not participate in guided tours during their experiences of religious tourism and pilgrimage.

Statistical Method: We performed a one-sample *t*-test to assess whether there were significant differences in participation in guided tours between groups defined by education levels and, hence, differences based on the level of education. The *p*-value associated with the *t*-test was evaluated to determine whether there were significant differences or not. If the *p*-value was below the chosen significance level (0.05), it would be considered that there were significant differences. The *t*-test assumes a normal distribution of data and equal variances between groups, and its results can be influenced by the sample size. It is important to ensure that the data meet the assumptions of the *t*-test, and if not, alternative methods should be considered.

The results of our *t*-test are presented in Table 12.

Table 12. One-sample statistics: Educational level and participation in guided tours.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Educational level	100	1.83	0.378	0.038
Guided tours	100	0.54	0.501	0.050

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

The test value (48.474) with 99 degrees of freedom indicated a significant difference. The *p*-value (0.000) was extremely small, suggesting a significant difference between the observed mean and the reference value of 0. The confidence interval of the difference (95%), ranging from 1.76 to 1.90, supported the significance of this difference and excluded the value 0.

Similarly, the test value (10.780) with 99 degrees of freedom indicated a significant difference. The *p*-value (0.000) was also extremely small, indicating a significant difference between the observed mean and the reference value of 0. The confidence interval of the difference (95%), between 0.44 and 0.64, confirmed the significance of this difference and excluded the value 0.

In conclusion, for both variables, there was significant evidence that the observed mean was different from the reference value of 0. These findings suggested that the level of education and participation in guided tours had a significant relationship, thus supporting hypothesis 6.

To explore this further, we then examined the 95% confidence intervals of the differences (Table 13).

Table 13. Confidence intervals: Educational level and participation in guided tours.

					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	**df**	**Sig. (Two-Tailed)**	**Mean Difference**	**Lower**	**Upper**
				Test Value = 0		
Educational level	48.474	99	0.000	1.830	1.76	1.90
Guided tours	10.780	99	0.000	0.540	0.44	0.64

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

In this step, we sought to assess whether the observed mean for each of the two variables ("level of education" and "participation in guided tours") was significantly different from a reference value (in this case, 0).

For "level of education," the *p*-value was extremely small (0.000), indicating a significant difference between the observed mean and the reference value of 0. The confidence interval of the difference, ranging from 1.76 to 1.90, suggested that this difference was significant and did not include the value 0.

For "participation in guided tours," the *p*-value was also extremely small (0.000), indicating a significant difference between the observed mean and the reference value of 0. The confidence interval of the difference, between 0.44 and 0.64, showed that this difference was significant and did not include the value 0.

H7: *There is a positive correlation between the sources of information used for religious tourism and pilgrimage and the main purpose of visits.*

Essentially, this hypothesis assumed that the way people obtained information about religious tourism and pilgrimage would be associated or correlated with the main reason for their visits. The variables involved in this hypothesis were "sources of information" and "main purpose of visits".

Correlation analysis is a statistical method used to evaluate whether there is a statistical relationship between two or more variables. In the context of hypothesis 7, this method was applied to examine the correlations between the sources of information and the main purposes of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage.

The process involved calculating Pearson correlation coefficients between each pair of variables, which indicated the direction (positive or negative) and strength of the relationship between them. Possible values ranged from −1 to 1, where −1 indicates a perfect negative correlation, 1 indicates a perfect positive correlation and 0 indicates no correlation.

Correlation analysis provides researchers with an understanding of how variables change together and whether there is a significant association between them. It is important to note that correlation does not necessarily imply causation but rather a statistical association between variables.

The results of our correlation analysis are presented in Table 14.

The correlation between sources of information and the main purposes of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage was 0.107, and the associated *p*-value was 0.291 (at a probability of 0.291). This high *p*-value suggested that there was no significant correlation between sources of information and the main purposes of visits in this analysis.

We surmised that, for the studied sample, there was not enough statistical evidence that sources of information were significantly correlated with the main purposes of visits in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage. Therefore, in light of these results, H7 was not confirmed.

Table 14. Correlation analysis: Sources of information and main reasons for visits.

		Sources of Information	Main Reason for Visits
Sources of information	Pearson Correlation	1	0.107
	Sig. (two-tailed)		0.291
	N	100	100
Main reason for visits	Pearson Correlation	0.107	1
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0.291	
	N	100	100

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

H8: *There is a relationship between an individual's perception of religious tourism and the level of importance attributed to religious establishments in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences.*

Hypothesis 8 implied that how a person perceived religious tourism was linked to the degree of importance they gave to religious establishments.

To test this, our questionnaire data were analyzed using a regression model to identify whether there was a significant relationship between the two variables.

Regression analysis is a statistical method used to evaluate the relationship between a dependent variable (here, the level of importance attributed to establishments) and one or more independent variables (here, the perception of religious tourism)—specifically, the impact or influence of the latter on the former.

This analysis deepened our understanding of the relationship between perceptions of religious tourism and the importance attributed to establishments in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences. The results are presented in Table 15.

Table 15. Regression model summary for H8.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.130 (a)	0.017	0.007	0.612

a. Predictors: (Constant), Perception of religious tourism. Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

The findings were as follows:

R (Correlation Coefficient): The R was 0.130, indicating a very small correlation between the perceptions of religious tourism and the levels of importance attributed to religious establishments. The closer R is to 1 or −1, the stronger the correlation.

R Square (Coefficient of Determination): The R square was 0.017, meaning that approximately 1.7% of the variation in the level of importance attributed to establishments was explained by the perceptions of religious tourism. The higher the R square, the larger the proportion of variation that the model explains.

Adjusted R Square (Adjusted Coefficient of Determination): The adjusted R square (which adjusts the R Square for the number of predictors in the model) was 0.007. This low adjustment suggested that adding the perceptions of religious tourism did not significantly improve the model's performance.

Std. Error of the Estimate: This represents the dispersion of data around the regression line. The smaller this error, the better the model predicts. Here, it was 0.612.

Overall, the results indicated a very small correlation between the perceptions of religious tourism and the levels of importance attributed to establishments, and the model did not significantly explain the variation in the level of importance. Other factors may play a more significant role in influencing the level of importance attributed to establishments than the perceptions of religious tourism.

To extend these results, we then conducted an ANOVA (Table 16).

Table 16. ANOVA results for the relationship between the perception of religious tourism and the importance of religious establishments.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	0.631	1	0.631	1.686	0.197 (a)
	Residual	36.679	98	0.374		
	Total	37.310	99			

Dependent Variable: Importance of religious establishments

a. Predictors: (Constant), Perception of religious tourism. Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

Analysis of variance was used to examine the influence of the perceptions of religious tourism on the levels of importance attributed to religious establishments. Here is an elaboration of the results:

The sum of squares in the model represents the variability explained by the predictors included in the model (perception of religious tourism). Here, it was 0.631.

The degree of freedom associated with the model was one, indicating that there was one degree of freedom for the model predictors.

The sum of squares in residuals represents the variability not explained by the predictors included in the model. Here, it was 36.679.

The degrees of freedom associated with the residuals totaled 98, indicating that there were 98 degrees of freedom for the residuals.

The total sum of squares represents the total variability in the dependent variable. Here, it was 37.310.

We found 99 degrees of freedom associated with the total, indicating that there were 99 degrees of freedom for the overall dependent variable.

The F-statistic was 1.686, representing the ratio of variability explained by the model to unexplained variability. A higher value indicates a higher probability that the model is significant.

The *p*-value associated with the F-statistic was 0.197 (a), indicating the statistical significance of the model. In this case, 0.197 suggested that there was not enough statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis, meaning that we had found no significant difference between the groups.

In the next step, we explored the regression coefficients (Table 17).

Table 17. Regression coefficients for the impact of the perception of religious tourism on the importance of religious establishments.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error
1	(Constant)	4.443	0.157		28.352	0.000
	Perception of religious tourism	0.056	0.043	0.130	1.299	0.197

Dependent variable: Importance of religious establishments

Source: Data processed using the SPSS statistical software version 15.0.

The regression coefficients can be summarized as follows:

Constant:

B (coefficient): The intercept of the regression line was 4.443, i.e., the estimated value of the dependent variable (importance of religious establishments) when all predictors were zero.

Std. Error (standard error): The dispersion around the estimated value of the constant was 0.157.

t (t-statistic): The *t*-test result for the constant is used to assess whether the constant is significantly different from zero. A high *t*-test value indicates statistical significance. Here, it was 28.352.

Sig. (significance): Here, 0.000 was the *p*-value associated with the *t*-test for the constant. It was very small, indicating statistical significance.

Perceptions of religious tourism:

B (coefficient): The average change in the dependent variable for a one-unit change in the perception of religious tourism was 0.056.

Std. Error (standard error): The dispersion around the estimated coefficient value for the perception of religious tourism was 0.043.

Beta (standardized coefficient): The standardized coefficient indicates how much the dependent variable is expected to change in standard deviations when the predictor increases by one standard deviation. Here, it was 0.130.

t (t-statistic): The *t*-test result for the perception of religious tourism was 1.299. The relatively small value indicated that this coefficient was not significantly different from zero.

Sig. (significance): The *p*-value associated with the *t*-test for the perception of religious tourism was 0.197. It was higher than the common significance level of 0.05, indicating that this coefficient was not statistically significant.

Overall, these coefficients suggested that the perception of religious tourism had a relatively small and statistically insignificant influence on the level of importance attributed to religious establishments, as the *p*-value associated with this predictor was higher than the usual significance level of 0.05.

5. Discussion

As part of our research on religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, we formulated and tested a diverse set of hypotheses to comprehensively approach the studied phenomenon. The importance of these hypotheses lies in their ability to explore different dimensions and aspects of religious tourism behavior that could not have been adequately understood through a more simplistic or mono-causal approach.

Each hypothesis was designed to specifically investigate distinct influences on the religious tourism experience, such as the impact of demographic (gender, age, education level), socio-economic (occupation, means of transport) and cultural (place of origin, source of information) factors. By testing these diverse hypotheses, we were able to identify not only simple causal relationships but also more complex patterns of interaction between different factors, thus providing a deeper understanding of the interaction between different factors and a deeper and more nuanced understanding of religious tourism behavior.

By analyzing the relationship between gender and type of travel (H1) or between educational level and participation in guided tours (H6), we were able to gain clearer insight into how individual characteristics influence tourism preferences and choices. Similarly, by exploring the impact of age categories on the duration of visits (H2) or the perception of religious tourism on the importance of religious establishments (H8), we deepened our understanding of how religious tourism experiences are shaped by personal and contextual factors.

Thus, the use of a varied set of hypotheses was essential to covering the broad spectrum of factors that can influence religious tourism and pilgrimage, ensuring that our study is comprehensive and detailed, as well as sensitive to the subtleties that characterize this complex field.

H1: The correlation between the gender of the respondents and the type of travel chosen for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. This hypothesis explores gender differences in travel preferences, using The Leisure Motivation Scale (LMS) to understand the motivations behind tourism choices (Beard and Ragheb 1983). The LMS

helps us investigate how these motivations differ between men and women, providing insight into how gender may influence religious travel decisions.

H2: The age categories of the participants influence the duration of their visits to religious places in Vâlcea County. Using the Travel Career Ladder (TCL), this hypothesis focuses on how tourism motivations evolve with age, suggesting that preferences for types and durations of visits to religious sites change as individuals age. TCL allows us to examine these changes and their impact on religious tourism (Pearce 2005).

H3: The completed level of education is associated with the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea. Through The Travel Activity Preference Scale (TAPS), we investigate how the education level influences preferences for tourism activities, including religious ones. The TAPS helps identify the link between education and interest in educational or cultural tours, suggesting that a higher level of education may motivate more frequent participation in such activities (Perdue 1985).

H4: There is a positive association between respondents' occupation and the mode of transport used. Even if there is no specific scale that directly links occupation to the choice of transport mode in tourism, research on socio-economic status can provide relevant clues. These studies suggest that different occupational groups may have different access to resources, thereby influencing transport preferences for pilgrimage or religious tourism.

H5: The correlation between the respondents' place of origin and the presence of accompanying persons during their visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea county. The Social Support and Leisure Scale (SSLS) measures the perception of social support in the context of leisure activities, including religious tourism (Lindsay Smith et al. 2017). This scale helps us understand how social context and place of origin influence the decision to participate in group or individual religious travel.

H6: The association between the level of education of the respondents and participation in guided tours within religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences in Vâlcea county. Using the Cultural Tourist's Service Quality Expectations (CTSQUE), this hypothesis aims to explore how service quality expectations in cultural tourism, including guided tours, vary according to the tourist's level of education (Aksöz and Çay 2022). CTSQUE allows us to identify whether people with a higher level of education are more likely to participate in guided tours, having different expectations of their quality and informational content.

H7: Correlation between sources of information used for religious tourism and pilgrimage and the main purpose of visits. The Information Search Behavior Scale (ISBS) is applied to examine how information search behavior affects travel planning and destination choice in religious tourism (Ramkissoon and Uysal 2011). ISBS helps us to understand whether specific information sources, such as online recommendations, tourist brochures or social media, influence the main objectives of visits, directing the tourist towards certain religious experiences or pilgrimage locations.

H8: There is a relationship between the individual perception of religious tourism and the level of importance attributed to religious institutions in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage. Using the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10) allows us to address how an individual's religious commitment influences the perception and valuing of religious institutions in the tourism context (Worthington et al. 2003). The RCI-10 provides a validated method for measuring the depth of religious commitment, which can be correlated with the degree of appreciation and the frequency of visits to places of religious significance, suggesting that a deeply religious perception may intensify the importance attributed to pilgrimages and visits to religious institutions.

This methodical and well-grounded approach enhances the validity and relevance of religious tourism research by ensuring that hypotheses are supported by recognized and validated measurement tools. The use of these scales in research specific to Vâlcea County allows for a detailed and nuanced analysis of religious tourist behavior, providing valuable insights for the development of religious tourism and pilgrimage strategies adapted to the diverse needs and expectations of tourists.

The chart provides a breakdown of the sources of information or documentation used by respondents regarding religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. The numbers associated with each source indicate the number of respondents who mentioned using that particular source. Here is the interpretation for each category (Figure 3):
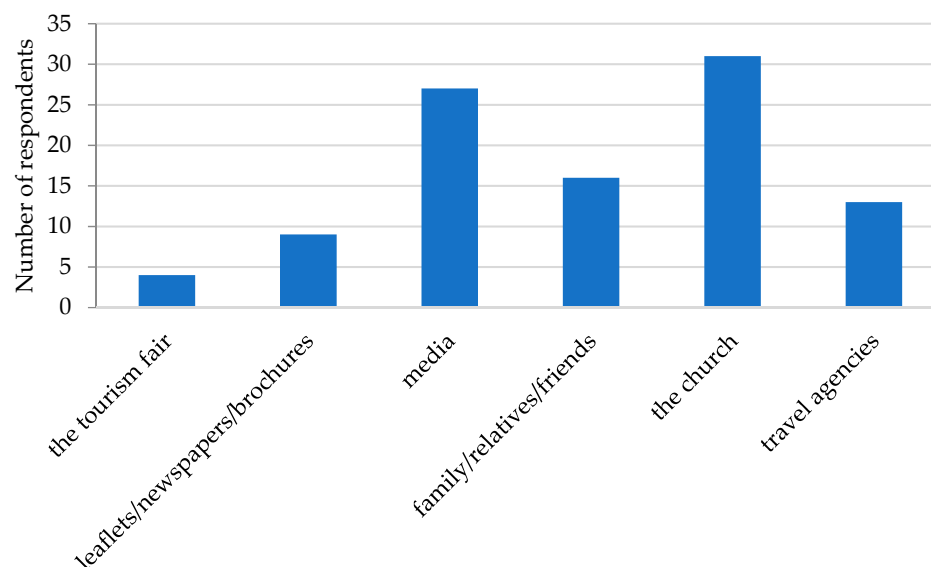

Figure 3. Sources of information for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea county. Source: data processed by the authors in Microsoft Excel 2010 Spreadsheet software.

The tourism fair—four respondents: four individuals stated that they obtained information about religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County by participating in tourism fairs.

Leaflets/newspapers/brochures—nine respondents: nine persons used materials such as informative leaflets, newspapers or brochures to gather information about religious tourism and pilgrimages in the area.

Media—27 respondents: twenty-seven respondents mentioned obtaining information through mass media, which may include television, radio or other media channels.

Family/relatives/friends—16 respondents: sixteen individuals indicated that they relied on family, relatives or friends' recommendations or experiences regarding religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

The church—31 respondents: thirty-one respondents mentioned seeking information or being guided in religious tourism and pilgrimages through the church.

Travel agencies—13 respondents: thirteen individuals used the services of travel agencies to gather information or organize trips related to religious tourism and pilgrimages in the area.

This chart highlights the main reasons for respondents' visits to places of religious worship in Vâlcea County, along with the corresponding number of respondents for each category. Here is the interpretation for each category (Figure 4):

Out of curiosity and a desire to explore—15 respondents: fifteen people visited religious places in Vâlcea County out of curiosity and a desire to explore, without a specific religious motive.

The desire to be close to faith—13 respondents: thirteen respondents mentioned that the main reason for their visits to places of worship is the desire to be closer to their faith.

For the sacred atmosphere—four respondents: four individuals visited religious sites in Vâlcea County for the sacred and spiritual atmosphere these places offer.

For the history of church art—eight respondents: eight respondents visited places of worship with an interest in the history of church art.

For prayers—25 respondents: twenty-five people went to places of worship to participate in prayers or for moments of personal worship.

Visiting places of worship—35 respondents: 35 respondents mentioned that they visit places of worship for various reasons, possibly including the multiple motives mentioned above.
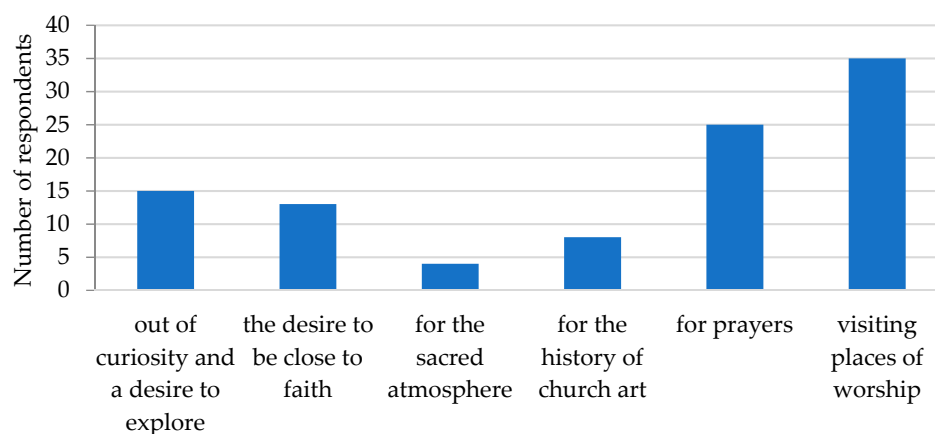

Figure 4. Primary motivations for visits to religious establishments in Vâlcea county. Source: data processed by the authors in Microsoft Excel 2010 Spreadsheet software.

This information suggests a variety of motives for visits to religious places in Vâlcea County, reflecting a combination of spiritual, cultural and personal interests among respondents. These include curiosity, a desire for spiritual connection, an appreciation for the sacred atmosphere, an interest in church art history and participation in specific religious activities such as prayers. This indicates that religious tourism in the region encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences and reasons for engagement.

This question is crafted to elicit the respondent's subjective interpretation of the terms "religious tourism and pilgrimage". The primary goal is to capture a personalized understanding of these terms based on each respondent's experiences and beliefs.

By prompting responses to this question, the intention is to gather diverse, individual perspectives on the meaning of these concepts. Interpretations may differ based on personal experiences, cultural values or the individual beliefs of the respondent.

This chart presents the opinions expressed by respondents regarding the concept of "religious tourism and pilgrimage". Each figure associated with a statement represents the number of respondents who chose that option. Here is an interpretation for each statement (Figure 5):

"An economic activity with positive benefits for the local community" (16): 16 respondents believe that religious tourism and pilgrimage represent an economic activity with positive benefits for the local community. This suggests that they view this form of tourism as something that can stimulate the local economy and bring material benefits to the community.

"A way to capitalize on human tourism resources" (eight): Eight respondents believe it is a way to capitalize on human tourism resources. This viewpoint may indicate that they see pilgrimage and religious tourism as something that can leverage people's interest and involvement for tourism purposes.

"Rediscovering holy places and religious routes" (34): 34 respondents believe that religious tourism and pilgrimage involve rediscovering holy places and religious routes. This aspect suggests that many see religious travel as a way to explore and rediscover places considered sacred in various religious traditions.

"A way to enrich knowledge about religion and pilgrimage" (eight): Eight respondents view religious tourism and pilgrimage as an opportunity to enrich knowledge about religion

and pilgrimage. This viewpoint may indicate that they see religious travel as an opportunity for learning and spiritual development.

"A way of showing faith for the holy things" (34): 34 respondents believe that religious tourism and pilgrimage are a way of showing faith for holy things. This aspect suggests that, for them, religious travel is an expression of faith and devotion to elements considered sacred in their faith.

Therefore, based on this chart, it appears that many respondents see religious tourism and pilgrimage as an experience that can bring economic benefits and as a way to rediscover and express faith in sacred places.
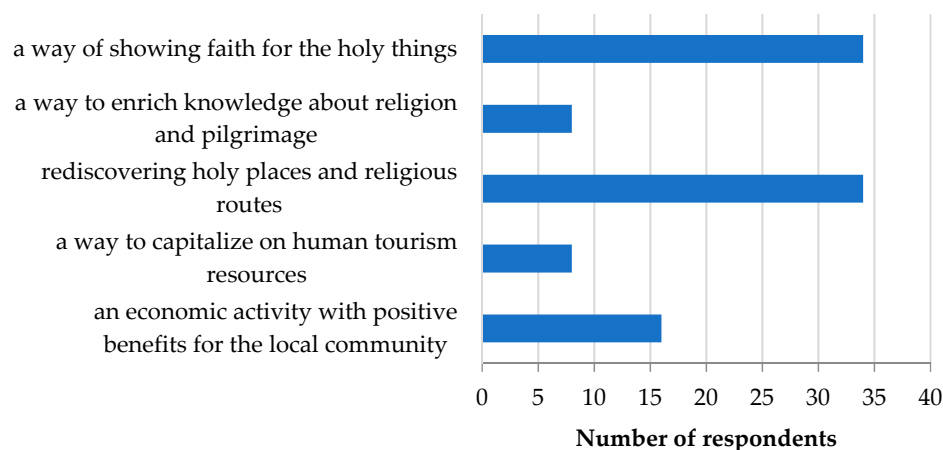
Figure 5. Perceptions of 'religious tourism and pilgrimage' concept distribution. Source: data processed by the authors in Microsoft Excel 2010 Spreadsheet software.

6. Conclusions

This research article has explored various hypotheses concerning the behavior and preferences of participants in religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

Hypothesis 1 posited a significant correlation between the gender of respondents and the type of travel chosen for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. However, the results from our correlation analysis did not support this hypothesis. The observed correlation was not statistically significant at the conventional 0.05 level, indicating that any association between gender and the type of travel could be attributed to chance or random factors in this dataset. Therefore, based on the statistical analysis, there is insufficient evidence to support Hypothesis 1, suggesting that the gender of tourists does not significantly influence their choice of travel for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. Hypothesis 2 suggested that the age categories of participants would influence the duration of their visits to religious sites in Vâlcea County. However, the results of the regression analysis did not support this hypothesis. The model did not significantly explain the variability in the duration of visits to religious sites based on the age category of participants. The age category did not have a significant impact on the duration of visits, and the constant was not statistically significant in the model. Therefore, based on the results of the regression analysis and ANOVA, there is insufficient evidence to support Hypothesis 2, suggesting that the age category of tourists does not significantly influence the duration of their visits to religious sites in Vâlcea County. Hypothesis 3 suggested an association between the level of education completed and the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. The hypothesis posited that participants with different levels of education would exhibit distinct behaviors regarding the frequency of their visits to such places. However, the results indicated that the level of education did not have a significant impact on the frequency of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County within the studied sample. The ANOVA results showed no significant differences in the frequencies of visits between education-level groups. Therefore, the results did not support an association between the level of education and the frequency of

visits in the context of our research, and Hypothesis 3 was not supported by our data and could be considered refuted by this analysis. Hypothesis 4 proposed a positive association between respondents' occupations and their modes of transportation used in the context of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. The results strongly supported this hypothesis, revealing a significant relationship between the two variables. While some low expected values call for cautious interpretation in specific situations, overall, the findings indicated that occupation is a significant factor influencing the choice of transportation mode in the studied context. This insight contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

Hypothesis 5 suggested a significant correlation between respondents' place of origin and the presence of accompanying individuals during their visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. However, the results of the statistical analysis did not provide sufficient evidence to support a significant correlation between these two variables. Hypothesis 5 was not confirmed in this study, suggesting that the respondents' place of origin is not significantly associated with the presence or absence of accompanying individuals in the context of visits for religious tourism and pilgrimage. Hypothesis 6 predicted an association between the respondents' level of education and participation in guided tours within religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences in Vâlcea County. The results of the statistical analysis supported this hypothesis, providing significant evidence that the observed mean differed from the reference value (0). This finding suggests a significant association between the level of education and participation in guided tours. The practical implications of these results lie in understanding how participants' education level influences their behavior in religious tourism and pilgrimage, offering valuable insights for planning and promoting religious touristic activities.

Hypothesis 7 suggested a positive correlation between the sources of information used for religious tourism and pilgrimage and the main purposes of visits. However, the results of the correlation analysis did not provide sufficient statistical evidence to support this idea. Therefore, hypothesis 7 was not confirmed based on the results of the correlation analysis. Hypothesis H8 proposed a relationship between a person's perception of religious tourism and the level of importance they attributed to religious sites within religious tourism and pilgrimage experiences. However, the results of the regression analysis did not support this hypothesis. The analysis indicated only a very small correlation between the perception of religious tourism and the level of importance attributed to religious sites. The model did not significantly explain the variability in the level of importance attributed, and the perception of religious tourism did not have a statistically significant impact on this variable. Other factors may play a more significant role in influencing the level of importance attributed to religious sites than the perception of religious tourism. Therefore, hypothesis H8 was not supported based on the results of the regression analysis.

In conclusion, this research significantly contributes to advancing our understanding of the behavior of participants in religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. It highlights that certain variables, such as gender, education level and occupation, may or may not significantly impact their preferences and choices. While the study provides valuable insights into religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County, South-West Oltenia Region, it acknowledges certain limitations, including the confined sample group and the focus on a single county in Romania. A comparative analysis with other regions could enhance the broader applicability of the findings in the international specialized literature.

Indeed, future studies could enhance the robustness of findings by increasing the sample size and diversifying participant groups. Including perspectives from travelers and hospitality industry managers could provide a more comprehensive understanding of religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County. This approach could offer deeper insights into the multifaceted aspects of the phenomenon, including the meaning, identity and impact on the local community.

Exploring various hypotheses in this study contributes to the existing literature on religious tourism and pilgrimage. By challenging or confirming existing knowledge, the

research expands our understanding of participant behavior in this specific tourism niche. The study's comprehensive examination of gender, age, education, occupation, place of origin, guided tours, information sources and the perception of religious tourism in Vâlcea County provides valuable insights. These insights not only contribute to academic knowledge but also have practical implications for tourism planning and promotion in the religious tourism and pilgrimage sector, with potential applicability at the national level.

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Appendix A

Structure of the questionnaire:

I.   Sample group data.

1.   Your gender?
     Male
     Female
2.   Which age category do you fit into?
     18–25 years
     26–35 years
     36–45 years
     46–55 years
     Over 55 years
3.   Your residence?
     Rural
     Urban
4.   Level of education?
     High school
     University
5.   Your occupation?
     Student
     Employee
     Unemployed
     Retiree
     Others (please specify) . . .

II. Evaluation of the aspects related in religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County.

6. What type of trip did you choose?
   Individually
   In an organized group
7. What means of transport did you use?
   Own car
   Bus
   Train
   Other (please specify) . . .
8. What is the frequency of your visits for purposes of religious tourism and pilgrimage to Vâlcea?
   Once a year
   Two or more times
   Never
9. How long was the visit?
   One day
   A weekend
   More than two days
10. Who accompanied you in visiting places of worship?
    Family members
    Friendship
    Other (please specify) . . .
11. Which places of worship (churches and monasteries) have you visited in Vâlcea County?
    . . . .
12. Have you used guided tours for visiting places of worship?
    Yes
    No
13. What sources of information/documentation did you used for religious tourism and pilgrimage in Vâlcea County?
    Media
    Travel agencies
    The tourism fair
    Family/relatives/friends
    The church
    Leaflets/newspapers/brochures
14. What is the main reason behind your visits to religious settlements in Vâlcea County?
    For prayer
    For the history of church art
    Out of curiosity and a desire to explore
    Visiting places of worship
    For the sacred atmosphere
    The desire to be close to faith
15. The notion of "religious tourism and pilgrimage" in your view represents?
    A way to capitalize on human tourism resources
    Rediscovering holy places and religious routes
    An economic activity with positive benefits on the local community
    A way of manifesting faith for holy things
    A way to enrich knowledge about religion and pilgrimage
16. On a scale from 1 to 5, how important are the religious settlements in Vâlcea for visitors?

Notes

[1] $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$.

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