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Systematic Review

Religious Festivals in Tourism Research: A Systematic Review of Stakeholders, Themes, Theories, and Methodologies

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Abstract

Religious festivals are increasingly recognized as significant cultural and tourism phenomena, yet their study from a tourism perspective remains underexplored. This systematic literature review examines the thematic focus, stakeholder involvement, research methods, and theoretical frameworks employed in the study of religious festivals. Using the PRISMA framework and the Covidence data management tool, 24 studies were selected from an initial pool of 493. The findings reveal that research on religious festivals has primarily focused on visitor experiences, motivations, perceptions, and impacts, with limited attention to stakeholder integration and theoretical diversity. Notably, religious leaders and ministers, key actors in festival organization, are underrepresented in the literature. This review identifies critical gaps, including the need for sustainability-focused research, broader stakeholder engagement, and the application of diverse theoretical frameworks. By synthesizing existing knowledge, this study provides a roadmap for advancing research on religious festivals and their intersections with tourism.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage; PRISMA; faith-based events; event studies

1. Introduction

A festival refers to a socially and culturally meaningful event in which people gather to celebrate or commemorate shared traditions and practices, often rooted in symbolic, religious, or heritage values [1]. Festivals have the characteristics of being transformational, a two-way process, interactive, and focused on a particular community [2].

Religious festivals are celebrated worldwide as profound expressions of faith, culture, and community [3]. These events, often rooted in centuries-old traditions, serve as mechanisms for spiritual connection, cultural preservation, and social cohesion [4,5]. They also have significant economic impacts on tourism [6–8]. Examples such as Christmas, Ramadan, and the Kumbh Mela attract not only devout participants but also domestic and international tourists seeking spiritual enrichment, cultural immersion, and unique experiences [9,10]. With the majority of the global population practicing some form of religion, religious festivals hold immense potential to drive religious tourism, fostering economic, social, and cultural benefits for host communities [11].

Religious festivals are not only tourism attractions [12] but also core expressions of intangible cultural heritage [13]. They encompass ritual practices, performative traditions, embodied forms of worship, and community-based knowledge that are transmitted across generations and continuously recreated in response to social, political, and economic

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change. Framing religious festivals as heritage practices also draws attention to heritage governance, community rights, authenticity, and power. Decisions about how festivals are staged, promoted, regulated, and commodified are rarely neutral; they reflect negotiations among religious authorities, state agencies, tourism organizations, private businesses, and local communities.

Religious festivals play a multifaceted role in tourism development. They serve as cultural identifiers, strengthen community values, and are symbolic representations of destinations [14,15]. Beyond their spiritual significance, these festivals generate economic opportunities, create employment, and enhance destination branding [16,17]. However, the intersection of religious festivals and tourism also presents challenges, including the commodification of sacred traditions and the need to balance visitor experiences with the preservation of cultural authenticity [9]. Religious tourism refers to travel driven mainly by spiritual or devotional goals, including activities such as pilgrimages or attendance at sacred rituals [18]. Event and festival tourism encompass travel to organized cultural, social, or religious events that provide opportunities for shared experiences and learning [19]. Religious festivals, therefore, represent a convergence of religious events and heritage tourism, motivated by the pursuit of spiritual satisfaction, cultural involvement, and participation in collective celebrations.

Despite the growing recognition of religious festivals as key drivers of tourism, academic research in this area remains limited. While studies on pilgrimage, holy sites, and religious routes are well-established [20,21], research specifically focused on religious festivals is comparatively sparse [22]. Existing studies often emphasize visitor motivations, perceptions, and experiences, while paying less attention to the roles of stakeholders such as local communities, religious leaders, and festival organizers [23,24]. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks employed in these studies are often narrow, limiting the scope of analysis and understanding.

To address these gaps, this study conducts a systematic literature review of research on religious festivals from a tourism perspective. By synthesizing existing scholarship, this review aims to (1) identify dominant thematic areas, (2) evaluate the research methods and theoretical frameworks employed, (3) assess stakeholder involvement, and (4) highlight gaps and propose future research directions. Using the PRISMA framework and the Covidence tool, this review provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge, offering valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in the intersection of religious festivals and tourism.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This study employed a systematic literature review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. Although PRISMA originated in health sciences [25], it is now widely adopted in social sciences and tourism research for its emphasis on transparency, replicability, and structured reporting. While the PRISMA framework ensures transparency in study selection and reporting, it does not function as a methodological quality assessment tool. Consequently, studies of varying methodological rigor are weighted equally, which may limit the strength of our conclusions. A systematic review, rather than a scoping review, was selected because the aim was not only to map existing scholarship but also to synthesize, categorize, and critically evaluate methodological, theoretical, and thematic patterns within religious festival tourism research. Given the relatively focused nature of this field and the need to identify dominant approaches and conceptual gaps, a systematic review offered the appropriate depth and analytical rigor. While the literature review identifies apparent theoretical imbalances in

studies of religious festivals/events, the PRISMA framework does not permit determination of whether these imbalances originate from empirical, methodological, or other factors. PRISMA is highly effective for transparent narrative synthesis but is not suitable for meta-analysis or empirical testing. Therefore, the conclusions of this review should be interpreted as indicative rather than exhaustive, reflecting observed patterns in the literature without asserting definitive causality.

This review followed the four phases of the PRISMA process—identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion—to ensure transparency in documenting how studies were sourced, filtered, and selected, as shown in Figure 1. The PRISMA checklist (also see Supplementary Table S1. Reporting checklist for systematic review) was consulted throughout the process to maintain clear and comprehensive reporting [26].

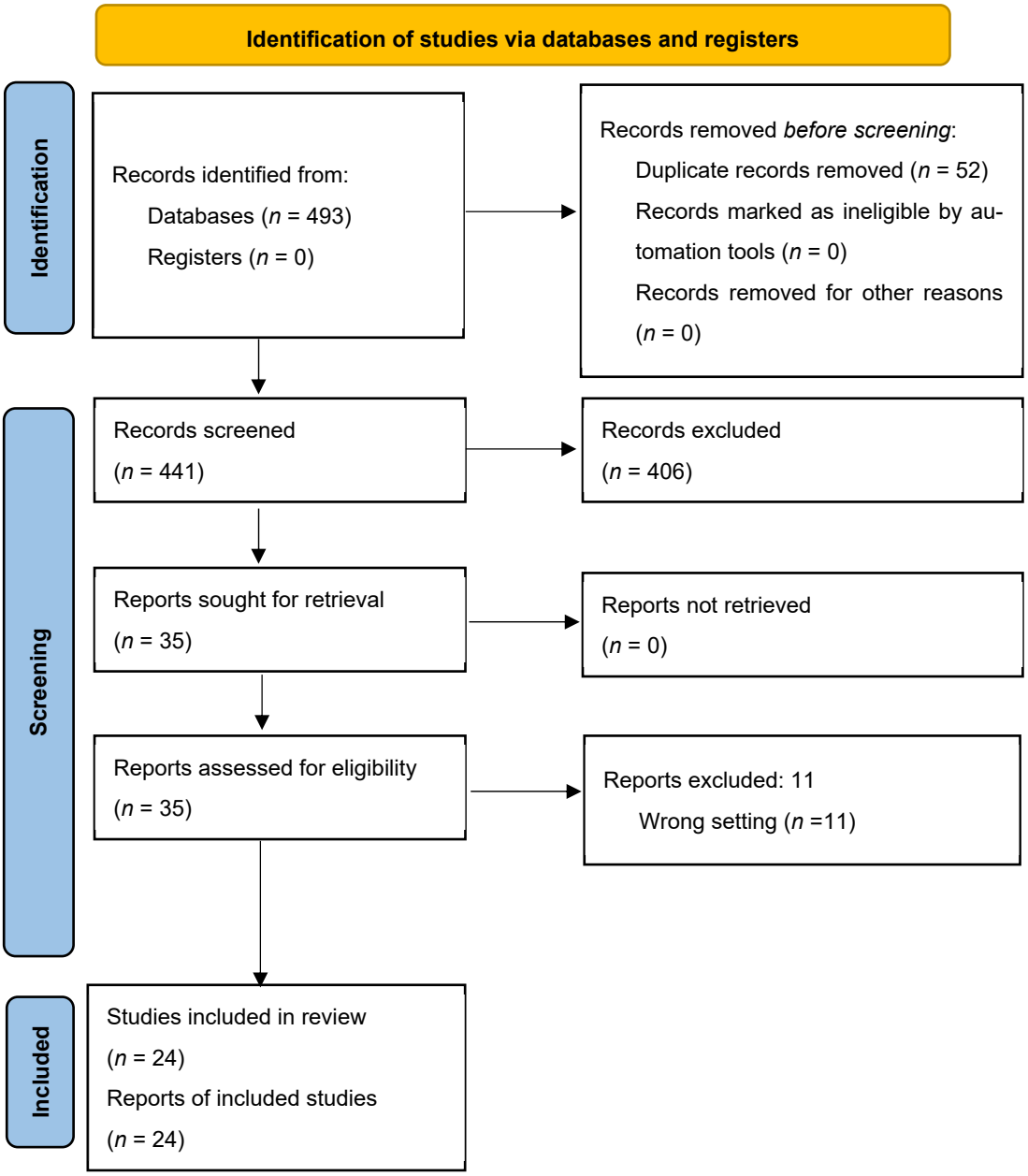


Figure 1. PRISMA framework.

2.2. Sources and Search Strategy

During Phase One (identification), the researchers developed the appropriate search strategies. Scopus and ProQuest, which are recognized for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed academic publications [27,28], have been selected as the databases. Scopus was used as the primary bibliographic database, while ProQuest was employed as a complementary platform to ensure broader disciplinary coverage. The search period spanned from November 2023 to January 2024. Keywords were carefully selected and refined using Boolean operators ("AND" and "OR") to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic. Employing the Boolean operator "AND" to connect two keywords enhances the identification of significant publications within the specified area. The search strategy applied the selected keywords across the titles, author-specified keywords, and abstracts of all articles in the identified databases to ensure comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies. Conversely, utilizing alternative keywords linked by the Boolean operator "OR" broadens the database search, minimizing the risk of overlooking pertinent works. Hence, the final search string was:

("Religious festival*" OR "Religious event*" OR "religious festival* tourism" OR "religious event* tourism") AND ("Local community" OR "Local communities" OR communities OR community OR "religious leader*" OR "religious practitioner*" OR "religious minister*" OR visitors OR tourists).

The strategy was designed to target studies that explicitly examine religious festivals in a tourism context. Including terms like 'local community,' 'religious leader,' and 'religious practitioner' ensures the review addresses key stakeholders involved in organizing and participating in these festivals. However, this precision may have excluded studies referring to religious events under alternative terminology (e.g., "ritual celebrations," "holy days," "pilgrimage ceremonies"), a trade-off acknowledged as a search limitation. Moreover, although PRISMA enhances transparency about inclusion, it does not ensure topical completeness. The reliance on "religious festival" and "religious event" as core search terms may have led to the systematic exclusion of relevant studies focused on rituals, ceremonial practices, heritage governance, or broader anthropological perspectives that are not explicitly positioned within tourism or festival-oriented scholarship. As a result, the identified research gaps, particularly regarding stakeholder representation and governance, should be interpreted as reflecting patterns within tourism-focused academic framings rather than the full breadth of scholarship on religious rituals and heritage practices.

All references were exported to the Covidence management platform. A total of 493 records were imported, and 52 duplicates were removed. In addition, this review was not guided by a pre-registered analytical protocol. While protocol registration is not common practice in qualitative and interpretive social science reviews, its absence means that the synthesis reflects an emergent, inductive interpretation of the included literature rather than a hypothesis-driven or pre-specified analytical framework. Consequently, patterns identified in this review—such as stakeholder imbalances or theoretical dominance—should be interpreted as indicative tendencies within the reviewed corpus, rather than as definitive or causal explanations of the state of the field.

2.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established (Table 1) [29]. Only peer-reviewed journal articles written in English and explicitly examining religious festivals from a tourism, visitor, or destination perspective were included. No restrictions were placed on publication year or study location due to the limited development of the field.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	No English
Databases	Scopus, ProQuest, and Citation databases	Out of these databases
Types of literature	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference proceedings, books, book series, articles in press, editorial materials, book chapters, symposium reports, thesis/dissertation
Titles and abstract	Religious festival studies related	Religious festivals studies which are not related with tourism, cultural related festivals
Others	Clear objectives and research questions related with religious festivals	Unclear issues of the festival, duplicated peer-reviewed articles.

Excluded materials included theses, dissertations, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, editorials, and articles in press. Studies focusing on religious festivals without any explicit tourism, visitor, or destination dimension were excluded, as were studies on secular or cultural festivals without religious components.

2.4. Screening and Selection Process

Following the PRISMA framework, the screening and selection process proceeded through four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. A total of 493 studies were identified from the database and citation searching, comprising Scopus (n = 131), ProQuest (n = 203), and citation searching (n = 159). No gray literature was included. After importing all records into the Covidence platform, 52 duplicates were detected and removed. In the screening phase, 441 studies remained for title and abstract review. Two reviewers independently screened each record, and disagreements were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer. Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 406 studies were excluded at this stage.

A total of 35 full-text articles were included in the eligibility assessment. Two reviewers examined full texts to determine their relevance to religious festival tourism. Eleven studies were excluded because they were conducted in the wrong setting (e.g., not focused on religious festivals, lacked a tourism component, or addressed unrelated cultural events). Ultimately, 24 studies met all inclusion criteria (phase 4) and were incorporated into the final synthesis.

2.5. Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction was completed using an Excel sheet, and all relevant studies included titles, authors, abstracts, authors' addresses, journal names, thematic areas, theories used, research methods and approaches, and key findings. The research team reviewed all extracted data to ensure accuracy and consistency before proceeding to analysis.

A qualitative content analysis was carried out to identify recurring themes, theoretical approaches, and methodological patterns across the studies. Descriptive summaries were produced to categorize stakeholder involvement, dominant themes, and methodological trends. These findings form the basis of the synthesis presented in the Results and Discussion section. No risk-of-bias assessment was applied to the included studies, which may contribute to the observed dominance of visitor-centered and quantitative approaches in the literature. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the results, and conclusions are indicative rather than empirically definitive.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section synthesizes the findings of the systematic review, focusing on stakeholder involvement, thematic trends, theoretical frameworks, and research methods (Table 2). The discussion critically evaluates the current state of research on religious festivals from a tourism perspective. While this review provides a structured and transparent synthesis of existing research, its findings are intended to highlight indicative trends and gaps within tourism-focused scholarship rather than to offer empirically testable or exhaustive explanations.

Table 2. Characteristics of included studies, $n = 24$.

ID	Citation	Journal	Participants/Stakeholders Studied	Dominant Stakeholder Focus	Theoretical Framework/Key Concepts	Research Design	Main Focus/Theme
1	[30]	Tourism Geographies	Attendees/Visitors	Visitor/Pilgrim	Experience (emotional, authenticity) and identity theories	QN	Experience, identity, and support for tourism development
2	[9]	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	Monks and lay people	Religious leaders/Ritual specialists	Social Exchange Theory (SET); local perceptions	QN	Tourism impacts (local perspectives)
3	[31]	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	Visitors	Visitor/Pilgrim	Tourist motivation (push–pull framework)	QN	Motivation
4	[32]	International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research	Volunteers	Visitor/Pilgrim	Value theory (Holbrook); consumer behavior	QN	Experience value, satisfaction, and loyalty
5	[33]	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	Visitors	Visitor/Pilgrim	Experience Economy (extended 4Es incl. spirituality, communitas, authenticity)	QN	Experience dimensions and behavioral intention
6	[34]	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	Church leaders, staff, congregation	Religious leaders/Ritual specialists	Event tourism theory; cultural heritage management	QL	Eventization, venuefication, ethical considerations
7	[35]	Enlightening Tourism	Residents	Local community/Faithful	Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA); Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)	QN	Attitudes and intention
8	[36]	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	Local community	Local community/Faithful	Impact assessment; community livelihoods	QN	Socio-cultural and economic impacts
9	[37]	Church, Communication and Culture	Users/Pilgrims	Visitor/Pilgrim	Marketing communication; mass religious events	QN	Tourism promotion via digital channels
10	[38]	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	Visitors/Attendees	Visitor/Pilgrim	Experience Economy (4Es); behavioral intention	QN	Festival experience and revisit intention
11	[34]	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	Residents, devotees, priests, retailers, staff	Multi-stakeholder/Governance network	Faith-based activities; tourism development impacts	QL	Contribution to tourism development
12	[39]	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	Community, religious leaders, tourism experts, visitors	Religious leaders/Ritual specialists	Event tourism development; intangible cultural heritage (ICH)	QL	Festival potential and value
13	[40]	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	Visitors/Pilgrims	Visitor/Pilgrim	Memorable experience; subjective well-being; satisfaction	QN	Experience, satisfaction, and well-being

Table 2. *Cont.*

ID	Citation	Journal	Participants/Stakeholders Studied	Dominant Stakeholder Focus	Theoretical Framework/Key Concepts	Research Design	Main Focus/Theme
14	[41]	Journal of Islamic Marketing	Consumers/Household Muslims	Visitor/Pilgrim	Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA); religio-spiritual insights (RSI)	MM	Religio-spiritual insights and advertising attitudes
15	[42]	Revista de Administração Mackenzie	Consumers/Household Muslims	Visitor/Pilgrim	Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA); religio-spiritual insights (RSI)	QN	Advertising attitude comparison
16	[38]	African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure	Visitors	Visitor/Pilgrim	Tourism development and perception frameworks	QN	Perception of impacts and facilities
17	[43]	International Journal of Latin American Religions	Indigenous communities; human & non-human actors	Local community/Faithful	Actor–Network Theory (ANT); lived religion	QL	Lived religious practice and identity
18	[24]	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	Monks, abbots, youth, tourists	Religious leaders/Ritual specialists	Cultural sustainability; liquid modernity	QL	Cultural sustainability and modernization
19	[44]	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage	Tourists/Visitors	Visitor/Pilgrim	Strategic tourism planning (applied framework)	MM	Strategic planning for tourism attraction
20	[45]	Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research	Pilgrims/Visitors	Visitor/Pilgrim	Facility satisfaction framework	MM	Pilgrim satisfaction and facilities
21	[46]	Anthropological Notebooks	Faithful/local audience	Local community/Faithful	Crowd theory (Durkheim); communitas; liminality	QL	Religious crowd and identity
22	[47]	Journal of Travel Research	First-time and repeat visitors	Visitor/Pilgrim	Authentic experience; SET; S–O–R	MM	Authentic experience and support for tourism
23	[48]	International Journal of Latin American Religions	Religious families/local community	Local community/Faithful	Cultural continuity and change	QL	Festival transformation
24	[23]	Almatourism	Civil & religious institutions, NGOs, businesses, tourists	Multi-stakeholder/Governance network	Actor–Network Theory; social cohesion	QL	Stakeholder functions and relations

Notes: MM = Mixed approach QN = Quantitative QL = Qualitative; Dominant stakeholder focus refers to the primary empirical and analytical emphasis of each study.

3.1. Stakeholder Involvement and Research Approaches

3.1.1. Stakeholders

Across the 24 included studies, stakeholder representation is uneven and reveals a clear conceptual bias in how religious festivals are examined in tourism research. A substantial proportion of the literature—13 studies, including [30,31,33,38,40,49]—centers on visitors or pilgrims. These works typically investigate motivations, experiential dimensions, satisfaction, perceived value, and behavioral intentions. As a result, religious festivals are frequently framed as sites of visitor consumption rather than as community-driven cultural or spiritual practices. The dominance of visitor-oriented perspectives continues a longstanding pattern in tourism scholarship in which demand-side dynamics are foregrounded at the expense of cultural context and heritage governance. Hence, this apparent dominance of visitor-focused perspectives may partly reflect the prevalence of survey-based, quantitative research designs in tourism scholarship.

A smaller portion of studies—five in total—focus on local communities or the faithful as primary participants [35,36,46,48,50]. These works offer insights into socio-cultural and economic impacts, community well-being, and the endurance of ritual traditions. However,

communities are often treated as internally homogeneous, and few studies examine how gender, class, age, religious commitment, and other social markers shape communities' roles, benefits, and vulnerabilities within festival contexts. As a result, tensions and inequalities within host communities remain largely unexamined.

Religious leaders, monks, priests, and abbots who shape ritual meaning, authorize festival practices, and negotiate the boundaries between sacred tradition and tourism adaptation are underrepresented, appearing centrally in only four studies [9,34,39,50]. Their limited presence is especially notable given their central role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, setting the conditions for authenticity, and mediating community–tourism interactions. The near absence of their voices constrains the field's ability to assess how tourism pressures interact with ritual authority, religious interpretation, or heritage transmission.

Multi-stakeholder perspectives remain rare; Cannizzaro et al. [23] is the most explicit relational governance analysis, with only a small number of additional studies incorporating multiple-stakeholder perspectives. Such approaches demonstrate that festival governance is not merely a matter of visitor experience or community impact but involves negotiation across multiple institutional and cultural domains. Yet this relational perspective remains marginal within the broader literature. Taken together, the distribution of stakeholders suggests that research on religious festivals in tourism continues to privilege the experiential and behavioral perspectives of visitors, while giving limited attention to the diverse actors responsible for creating, sustaining, and shaping festivals as intangible cultural heritage.

3.1.2. Research Approaches

The methodological profile of the 24 studies further reinforces this emphasis on visitor perspectives. Quantitative research dominates, with 12 studies relying primarily on structured questionnaires, statistical modeling, and behavioral frameworks [30–32,35,42,49]. These studies offer explanatory models of motivation, experience, satisfaction, and intention. However, they also tend to conceptualize religious festivals through consumer-oriented constructs such as experience value, perceived authenticity, or behavioral intention. In doing so, they often reduce complex ritual and cultural phenomena to variables measurable at the individual level. While such approaches generate generalizable findings, they risk overlooking how religious festivals function as social, symbolic, or spiritual institutions.

Qualitative research, employed in eight studies [24,25,34,43,50], provides counterbalancing perspectives by foregrounding lived religious practices, embodied ritual performance, cultural sustainability, and community interpretations of change. These studies reveal dynamics that cannot be captured through survey instruments, such as the negotiation of cultural continuity [48], the articulation of indigenous identity through ritual networks [43], or the tensions arising from modernization and "liquid" cultural transformation [24]. Qualitative approaches therefore offer essential insights into how festivals operate as heritage practices rather than merely as tourism experiences. However, their minority status in the literature limits the visibility of these culturally grounded perspectives.

Mixed-methods designs remain rare, appearing clearly in only four studies [41,44,45,47]. The limited uptake of mixed methods suggests that opportunities to bridge behavioral and cultural analysis remain underutilized. Given the multi-layered nature of religious festivals—simultaneously experiential, ritual, institutional, and symbolic—more explicit integration of methods would allow researchers to connect individual-level patterns with broader cultural processes.

The methodological landscape demonstrates an imbalance that parallels the stakeholder distribution. The predominance of quantitative, visitor-focused approaches has led to the conceptualization of religious festivals in behavioral and experiential terms.

Meanwhile, the cultural, ritual, historical, and political dimensions that shape festivals as intangible heritage remain comparatively undertheorized. Broadening methodological strategies—through rigorous ethnography, participatory visual methods, community-based approaches, or mixed-method triangulation—would significantly enhance the field's capacity to analyze religious festivals as complex socio-cultural systems embedded in broader heritage and governance structures.

3.2. Thematic Areas

Thematic analysis of the selected studies reveals that research on religious festivals has predominantly focused on four key areas: visitor experiences and practices, perceptions, motivations and intentions, and impacts. These themes reflect the multifaceted nature of religious festivals as both cultural and tourism phenomena. Nevertheless, these themes are approached in ways that privilege behavioral and experiential interpretations over cultural, ritual, and heritage-centered understandings of religious festivals. While the thematic diversity suggests broad scholarly interest, the underlying conceptual orientations converge around a relatively narrow set of concerns.

3.2.1. Experience and Practices

Research on visitor experiences constitutes one of the most prominent themes in the reviewed literature. Studies such as [30,33,40,41] typically frame religious festivals as experiential environments structured around emotional engagement, authenticity, communitas, or memorable experiences. These works draw heavily on frameworks such as the Experience Economy [51], authenticity theory, and concepts of spiritual or emotional immersion. The emphasis on capturing experiential dimensions—often through survey-based measurements—positions the festival primarily as a setting for individualized consumption rather than as a collective ritual practice embedded in cultural systems.

Only a small number of studies approach festival practices in tourism contexts from a heritage or cultural sustainability perspective. Ref. [24], for example, highlights how modernization, tourism, and "liquid modernity" reshape ritual performances and challenge notions of tradition within Bhutanese festivals. Reference [43] further demonstrates how ritual materiality, embodied practices, and human–non-human relations shape indigenous religious identities through lived religion. These studies illustrate the analytical potential of examining religious festivals as dynamic cultural practices rather than as mere experiential products. However, their minority status means that broader discussions of ritual logic, cultural transmission, and symbolic meaning remain peripheral to the dominant experiential framing. Overall, the literature tends to reduce complex ritual processes to affective states and visitor-focused outcomes, limiting deeper engagement with festivals as intangible cultural heritage.

3.2.2. Perceptions

Perceptions of religious festivals are shaped by socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors. Studies indicate that visitors often have positive perceptions when festivals enhance local infrastructure, safety, and hospitality [38,45]. Host communities, on the other hand, view festivals as opportunities for cultural expression, identity reinforcement, and economic development [9,36]. These studies often highlight positive attitudes toward festival development and perceived socio-economic benefits, while also revealing concerns about inadequate facilities, crowding, or commercialization.

Although perceptions offer insight into stakeholder satisfaction and acceptance, the literature frequently treats them as static indicators rather than as expressions of underlying power relations, cultural expectations, or contested values. For instance, while monks and laypeople in Bhutan express divergent concerns regarding tourism impacts [9], such

analysis could further explore how these perceptions relate to authority structures, religious hierarchies, or cultural stewardship responsibilities. Similarly, community perceptions of socio-cultural impacts [36] are seldom situated within broader discussions of heritage governance or local control over festival narratives. As a result, perceptions are treated mainly as attitudinal data rather than as windows into deeper cultural or political dynamics.

3.2.3. Motivation and Intention

Motivational studies, including [10,35,49], typically focus on identifying psychological drivers for festival attendance, often applying push-pull frameworks, the Theory of Reasoned Action, or related behavioral models. These studies reveal a spectrum of motivations, ranging from spiritual devotion and cultural curiosity to entertainment, relaxation, and social participation. They provide useful typologies, such as distinctions between devout believers, cultural enthusiasts, and leisure-oriented attendees.

However, these motivational frameworks seldom consider how social structures, cultural expectations, or religious norms shape motivations. They also rarely engage with questions of authenticity, heritage transmission, or ritual authority. Instead, motivations tend to be conceptualized as individual psychological variables. This approach aligns with broader behavioral traditions in tourism research. However, it offers limited insight into how religious festivals operate as collective cultural practices, how intergenerational shifts in religiosity shape attendance, or how tourism marketing discursively redefines motivations. Moreover, studies such as [41,42] broaden the concept of motivation by examining advertising stimuli. Yet, even these remain situated within consumer behavior paradigms rather than heritage or sociocultural contexts.

3.2.4. Impacts of Religious Festivals

Impact studies, such as those by [36,39,44,50], address economic, socio-cultural, and spiritual dimensions of festival development. These studies frequently report positive economic and cultural outcomes, such as enhanced livelihoods, community cohesion, and spiritual enrichment, alongside challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate facilities, or concerns over cultural erosion.

Yet, despite recognizing these tensions, impact assessments rarely move into critical analysis of how tourism pressures reshape ritual authenticity, how power is distributed among stakeholders, or how commodification influences cultural meaning-making. Sustainability discourses, with a few exceptions, often remain descriptive rather than interrogate the deeper structural forces driving cultural change, as in works such as [24,39]. Environmental impacts, despite their growing significance, receive minimal direct attention. Overall, the focus on measurable impacts tends to frame religious festivals as economic and tourism resources, while downplaying their role as heritage practices linked to identity, belief systems, and social continuity.

3.3. Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical landscape of research on religious festivals in tourism is diverse yet uneven, demonstrating both conceptual strengths and some blind spots. Several established frameworks, particularly those derived from consumer behavior, experiential value, and behavioral intention, dominate the field. At the same time, theories that would illuminate cultural processes, heritage governance, or power relations remain comparatively underutilized. The result is a body of literature that often conceptualizes religious festivals as experiential tourism products rather than as complex heritage practices embedded in ritual, community identity, and socio-political dynamics.

A substantial cluster of studies applies experience-based and consumer behavior frameworks, such as the Experience Economy [33,49], authentic and emotional experience

theories [30,47], value theory [32], and memorable experience and well-being models [40]. These works view festivals through a lens of experiential value creation, positioning authenticity, spirituality, communitas, entertainment, and emotional resonance as drivers of satisfaction and behavioral intention. While these theories yield insights into visitor responses, they tend to treat festivals as staged or co-created experiences, abstracted from the cultural, religious, and historical contexts that shape ritual meaning.

Moreover, behavioral intention and attitudinal models, such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and related frameworks, appear prominently in studies such as [35,41,42]. These theories offer predictive insights into intentions to participate in religious festivals and attitudes toward religious advertising. However, these models are rooted in cognitive-behavioral paradigms that conceptualize individuals as rational evaluators of stimuli, thereby overlooking the embodied, affective, and ritualized nature of religious participation. A smaller subset of studies adopts frameworks that focus on cultural, ritual, and heritage dynamics. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) appears in [23,43], where it is used to examine how human and non-human actors, ritual objects, infrastructures, and institutional forces co-produce festival meaning and social cohesion. ANT's relational ontology expands analytical attention beyond individual visitors, offering a promising means to conceptualize festivals as socio-material assemblages. Likewise, the application of cultural sustainability and liquid modernity [24] highlights how modernization and global flows destabilize traditional ritual forms, demonstrating the potential of sociological theory to interrogate the tensions between heritage preservation and tourism-driven change.

Theories centered on community development, socio-cultural impacts, and spiritual benefits appear in studies such as [36,39,50]. These frameworks implicitly recognize festivals as sites of cultural capital, social reproduction, and community identity. However, they often remain descriptive, lacking a robust engagement with how power, governance, or external pressures shape these outcomes. Strategic planning tools like SWOT analysis [44], while useful for tourism development, similarly foreground managerial concerns over cultural or religious significance.

Accordingly, the theoretical foundations of the field reveal a consistent pattern: most studies adopt frameworks that privilege measurable experiences, attitudes, or impacts, while only a minority engage with theories that interpret festivals as dynamic cultural systems, contested heritage resources, or ritual practices shaped by power relations. The dominance of Western behavioral and experiential frameworks further limits analytical scope, leaving questions of postcolonial negotiation, religious authority, gendered participation, intergenerational transmission, and conflict over meaning-making largely unexplored. The theoretical landscape remains fragmented, with considerable potential for deeper conceptual development.

4. Research Gaps and Future Directions

This systematic review has revealed several critical gaps in the study of religious festivals and tourism, offering opportunities for future research to address these limitations and advance the field (Table 3). Although the field has expanded in scope, it remains conceptually and methodologically uneven. Much of the existing work approaches festivals from a visitor-centric and behavioral perspective, leaving critical dimensions related to heritage, community agency, ritual authority, and cultural politics insufficiently explored. Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing a more comprehensive and culturally grounded scholarship on religious festival tourism.

Table 3. Research Gaps and Future Research Directions in Religious Festival Tourism Studies.

Gaps and Issues	Future Research Directions
1. Limited focus on underrepresented stakeholders	• Investigate the roles and perspectives of religious leaders, festival organizers, and marginalized groups (e.g., women, indigenous communities). • Explore how religious leaders mediate between spiritual practices and tourism demands. • Examine the contributions of women and indigenous groups to festival organization and cultural preservation.
2. The generational shift in attending religious festivals	• Understand the needs and demands of younger generations' behaviors (e.g., Gen Z and Gen Alpha). • Explore their perception of religious festivals and their intention to visit religious festivals. • Identify different segmentations among these generations for the advantages of event marketing and branding strategies.
3. Overreliance on qualitative or quantitative methods	• Adopt mixed-methods approaches to combine the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research. • Use creative and participatory methods to explore subjective experiences, senses, and emotions of different stakeholders. • Triangulate findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of festival dynamics.
4. Insufficient exploration of globalization and modernization	• Analyze how globalization and modernization influence the authenticity and evolution of religious festivals. • Use alternative frameworks to study global flows of people and cultural practices in religious festival tourism. • Examine the role of digital media and transnational networks in shaping festival promotion and perception.
5. Sustainability	• Investigate the environmental challenges associated with large-scale religious festivals (e.g., waste generation, resource strain). • Adopt integrated sustainability frameworks that simultaneously address environmental, social (e.g., community well-being, cultural continuity), and economic (e.g., local livelihoods, long-term resilience) dimensions of religious festivals as living heritage practices. • Explore how sustainability can be integrated into festival planning without compromising cultural authenticity.
6. Safety and security	• Analyze the current festival framework in implementing the safety and security aspects, especially crowd-related incidents. • Propose precaution and prevention strategies in crowd management • Explore attendees' behavior and awareness.
7. Narrow theoretical foundations	• Expand the use of alternative and non-Western theoretical frameworks. • Apply postcolonial theory to examine how colonial legacies, including the negotiation of cultural identity, authenticity, and power relations, shape religious festivals. • Incorporate postmodern and critical theories to examine globalization, commodification, and power dynamics in religious festivals.

A first major gap concerns the limited representation of key stakeholders. Although some studies highlight the perspectives of monks, priests, and community leaders [9,39], these actors remain considerably underrepresented relative to visitors and pilgrims. Their absence restricts the field's ability to understand how ritual authority, cultural stewardship,

and heritage transmission are negotiated amidst tourism growth. More research is needed to incorporate the perspectives of ritual specialists, festival organizers, women, youth, and Indigenous groups—stakeholders who contribute actively to sustaining festivals but remain analytically marginal in tourism scholarship.

A second emerging gap relates to generational change in religious beliefs, value orientations, and participation patterns. Early evidence suggests that younger cohorts, particularly Generation Z and Generation Alpha, exhibit distinct orientations toward spirituality, digital engagement, and cultural consumption [52]. Understanding how these generations perceive religious festivals, what motivates or discourages their participation, and how they negotiate tradition and modernity is essential for assessing the long-term sustainability of festival practices and their cultural continuity as intangible heritage.

Methodological imbalance constitutes a third gap. Despite the cultural complexity of religious festivals, research continues to rely predominantly on quantitative surveys, with qualitative and ethnographic work remaining in the minority. This pattern mirrors broader concerns in tourism and heritage research, calling for deeper interpretive inquiry [53] and methodological innovation in festival studies [54]. Greater use of ethnography, participatory and visual methods, and systematically integrated mixed-methods designs would allow future scholarship to capture affective, embodied, material, and relational dimensions that are largely invisible within current approaches.

Another key gap concerns the limited examination of globalization, modernization, and digital mediation. While some studies indicate that modernity and media reshape ritual practices and meanings [24] or influence festival promotion and audience reach [37], much remains unknown about how transnational networks, diasporic publics, and algorithmic visibility interact with religious festivals. Research on how global cultural flows transform ritual authority, festival identity, and sacred-profane boundaries could significantly advance the field and align it more closely with contemporary theoretical debates.

While environmental sustainability has received limited explicit attention, social and economic dimensions, such as community well-being, cultural continuity, and local livelihoods, are only partially and unevenly addressed, often without being framed within explicit sustainability frameworks. Future research would benefit from adopting integrated sustainability perspectives that explicitly incorporate environmental, social, and economic pillars to better understand how religious festivals can be sustained as living heritage practices [55]. Environmental sustainability also remains insufficiently addressed. Festivals, especially large-scale religious gatherings, generate significant ecological pressures, yet sustainability concerns receive minimal scholarly attention. Existing works that address planning issues [44] tend to foreground management rather than ecological impact. Future research should examine waste management, resource strain, environmental degradation, and the possibilities for integrating sustainability principles into festival planning without undermining ritual authenticity.

Safety and security constitute a further emerging area requiring urgent attention. Crowd-related incidents and infrastructural challenges have drawn increasing public scrutiny, and recent scholarship [56] demonstrates the importance of examining governance, crowd dynamics, and risk perception in festival environments. Research that investigates regulatory frameworks, culturally informed safety strategies, and the behavioral dynamics of attendees would provide critical insights into festival resilience and visitor well-being.

Finally, the theoretical foundations of the field require broader diversification. Behavioral and experiential frameworks dominate current research, shaping understandings of religious festivals largely in terms of individual attitudes and experiences. Greater engagement with alternative and non-Western conceptual approaches, such as theory of practice [57], global cultural flow concepts [58], ritual theory, postcolonial theory, and

critical heritage studies, would expand the analytic scope of the field. These frameworks provide tools to interrogate power relations, cultural politics, identity negotiation, and heritage governance, offering a more holistic perspective on how festivals function within contemporary social and cultural landscapes. Integrating such theories would reposition religious festivals not simply as tourism attractions but as living heritage practices through which communities articulate belief, identity, agency, and continuity amid changing global conditions.

5. Conclusions

This systematic review examined 24 peer-reviewed studies on religious festivals within tourism research, offering a synthesized account of stakeholders, thematic emphases, methodological tendencies, and theoretical orientations. The findings demonstrate that existing scholarship remains heavily shaped by visitor-centered and behavioral approaches that conceptualize religious festivals primarily as experiential tourism settings. While such perspectives provide useful insights into motivations, satisfaction, and intention, they offer only a partial view of festivals as complex cultural and religious institutions. Perspectives from community members, ritual specialists, and religious leaders—those most responsible for sustaining intangible cultural heritage—are notably underrepresented, limiting the field's capacity to address questions of ritual meaning, cultural continuity, heritage governance, and power relations.

The thematic analysis further shows that research has largely focused on visitor experience, perception, motivation, and socio-economic impacts, with far less attention paid to ritual practices, cultural transmission, or the broader socio-political contexts in which festivals are embedded. Methodologically, quantitative studies dominate, while qualitative, ethnographic, and mixed-methods approaches remain comparatively scarce, resulting in an analytical imbalance that privileges measurable behavioral constructs over embodied, relational, or symbolic dimensions of festival participation. Theoretical engagement is similarly uneven, with a predominance of experiential and behavioral models and limited integration of heritage-oriented, sociological, postcolonial, or non-Western frameworks.

These patterns indicate that research on religious festivals in tourism has yet to fully engage with the cultural, ritual, and heritage foundations that give these events their enduring significance. To develop a more comprehensive and culturally grounded understanding, future scholarship should broaden stakeholder inclusion, diversify methodological approaches, and engage more deeply with theoretical perspectives capable of capturing the interplay between ritual practice, community agency, cultural politics, and tourism dynamics. Such an agenda would reposition religious festivals not simply as sites of visitor consumption but as living heritage practices in which identity, belief, cultural reproduction, and socio-political negotiation intersect.

By articulating these gaps and proposing research directions, this review contributes a framework for advancing the study of religious festivals within tourism and heritage scholarship. Recognizing religious festivals as multifaceted cultural systems rather than solely as experiential tourism products provides a more robust basis for interpreting their contemporary transformations and for supporting their sustainable development in ways that respect both cultural integrity and community agency.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/heritage9020058/s1, Table S1. Reporting checklist for systematic review.

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