## ARTICLE HISTORY

# DIGITALISATION, TOURISM EXPERIENCE, AND PILGRIMAGE PARTICIPATION AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN CHRISTIANS

## Evidence from Online Travel Platforms, Church Mobility Networks, and Pilgrimage Service Adoption

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Digitalisation is reshaping tourism consumption by transforming how travellers search, evaluate, book, and experience destinations. For faith based travel, digital platforms now influence pilgrimage planning, spiritual community mobilisation, and the accessibility of religious tourism services. In South Africa, Christian pilgrimage and church linked tourism have expanded through regional mobility networks, yet the role of digitalisation in shaping pilgrimage participation remains under explored.

**Aim:** This study examined the effect of digitalisation on tourism experience and pilgrimage participation among South African Christians, focusing on how online travel platforms and church mobility networks influence pilgrimage service adoption.

**Methodology:** The study employed a cross sectional survey design targeting South African Christians who have participated in at least one church linked trip or pilgrimage within the last twenty four months. Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered across Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, and Western Cape provinces. A sample of 420 respondents was obtained through multistage sampling. Digitalisation was measured using perceived usefulness of online booking tools, mobile payment adoption, social media travel information reliance, and virtual faith community engagement. Tourism experience was measured through satisfaction, perceived service quality, and travel convenience, while

pilgrimage participation was measured through frequency, intention to repeat, and spiritual value perception. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and structural equation modelling.

**Findings:** Digitalisation significantly improved tourism experience by increasing information access, booking convenience, and travel coordination. Digitalisation also positively influenced pilgrimage participation, indicating that online travel platforms and church digital networks reduce planning barriers and enhance spiritual travel engagement. Tourism experience partially mediated the digitalisation and pilgrimage participation relationship, suggesting that digital tools encourage pilgrimage largely by improving convenience and satisfaction. However, digital exclusion and trust concerns remained significant barriers among older participants and low income households.

**Contributions:** This study contributes to tourism marketing and religious mobility literature by providing empirical evidence on the role of digitalisation in Christian pilgrimage behaviour in South Africa. It highlights the importance of faith community digital networks as an emerging driver of religious tourism participation.

**Recommendations**
**Tourism operators:** Improve platform usability, mobile payment flexibility, and transparent pricing for faith travel packages.
**Church organisations:** Strengthen digital communication systems for trip coordination, safety, and inclusive participation support.
**Policy makers:** Promote digital inclusion programmes and consumer protection measures to reduce trust and access barriers in digital tourism.

**Keywords:** Digitalisation, Tourism experience, Christian pilgrimage, Religious tourism, Online travel platforms, South Africa.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have restructured tourism markets by expanding access to travel information, enabling online booking, improving payment flexibility, and supporting experience sharing through user generated content. These developments have changed destination marketing dynamics and increased the power of platforms in shaping consumer choices. Within religious tourism, digitalisation introduces new opportunities for pilgrimage mobilisation, spiritual community engagement, and service integration, while also generating risks related to digital exclusion and consumer trust.

In South Africa, Christianity remains a major social institution with significant influence on mobility practices, community gatherings, and cultural tourism. Church organised trips, conferences, retreats, and pilgrimages contribute to domestic tourism flows and support local economies through accommodation, transport, food services, and event spending. As churches adopt digital communication and payment tools, pilgrimage planning has increasingly shifted toward online coordination, platform based bookings, and social media promotion.

Despite the growing relevance of faith based travel, limited evidence exists on how digitalisation shapes tourism experience and pilgrimage participation among South African Christians. This study addresses this gap by examining the direct effect of digitalisation on tourism experience and pilgrimage participation, and by testing the mediating role of tourism experience.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

**Conceptual review** Digitalisation in tourism refers to the use of online platforms, mobile applications, social media, and digital payments to support travel decision making and service delivery. Tourism experience reflects satisfaction, service quality perception, convenience, and emotional engagement during travel. Pilgrimage participation captures the frequency of pilgrimage travel, intention to repeat, willingness to recommend, and perceived spiritual value.

**Theoretical review** The technology acceptance model suggests that perceived usefulness and ease of use influence adoption of digital tourism tools. Uses and gratifications theory explains social media reliance as a means of information seeking and community belonging. Service dominant logic explains that tourism value is co created through interactive engagement among travellers, service providers, and digital platforms.

**Empirical review** Evidence indicates that digital platforms improve trip convenience and satisfaction, but digital exclusion persists among older and low income users. Religious tourism studies show that community networks and spiritual motivations drive pilgrimage behaviour, yet digital communication increasingly shapes planning efficiency and participation.

**Hypotheses** H1 Digitalisation significantly influences tourism experience among South African Christians. H2 Digitalisation significantly influences pilgrimage participation among South African Christians. H3 Tourism experience mediates the relationship between digitalisation and pilgrimage participation.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross sectional survey design. Respondents were South African Christians who participated in at least one church organised trip or pilgrimage within the last twenty four months. Data were collected across Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, and Western Cape provinces using structured questionnaires. A multistage sampling approach produced 420 valid responses.

Digitalisation was measured using online booking tool usefulness, mobile payment adoption, social media travel information reliance, and virtual faith community engagement. Tourism experience was

measured using satisfaction, service quality perception, and travel convenience. Pilgrimage participation was measured using frequency, intention to repeat, and perceived spiritual value. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and structural equation modelling.

## 4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Descriptive analysis shows that most participants rely on social media and messaging applications for pilgrimage announcements, travel updates, and community engagement. Online booking adoption was moderate, with higher usage among younger and urban respondents. Mobile payments were widely adopted due to convenience and reduced cash handling. Tourism experience scores were high among participants who used digital tools, suggesting that digitalisation improves travel convenience and service coordination.

Structural equation results indicate that digitalisation significantly improves tourism experience and increases pilgrimage participation. Tourism experience partially mediates the digitalisation and pilgrimage relationship, implying that digital platforms encourage pilgrimage by increasing satisfaction and reducing logistical barriers. However, digital trust and affordability constraints reduce adoption among older participants and low income households, highlighting the need for inclusion and transparent service communication.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that digitalisation enhances tourism experience and strengthens Christian pilgrimage participation in South Africa. Digital platforms and church mobility networks support planning efficiency, improve convenience, and increase engagement. Tourism experience acts as an important pathway through which digitalisation influences pilgrimage behaviour.

Tourism operators should improve platform usability, transparent pricing, and mobile payment options for faith based packages. Church organisations should strengthen digital trip coordination systems, safety communication, and inclusive support for digitally excluded members. Policy makers should promote digital inclusion and consumer protection initiatives that build trust in digital tourism services.

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