

# THEOPLACITY AMONG TOUR PACKAGES ON ONLINE TRAVEL WEBSITES

<sup>1</sup>Daluz, Siti Hariza, <sup>2</sup>Montefalcon, Kyla Rica, <sup>3</sup>Rebulado, Angela Mycca

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**Abstract:** Pilgrimage tourism has been around and marked as the oldest form of tourism there is and has been continuously developing in relation with Modernity and demands of the audiences. On the other hand, tour package booking websites are the most modern and convenient way to book a tour with lots of tour packages you chose onto. The study's framework was grounded on Theoplacity Concept that was conceptualized by Belhassen, Caton and Stewart in 2008. Using the concept among the tour packages offered on online tour package websites to determine how pilgrimage is purchased and conducted. The study recommended a destination/booking site where pilgrimage experience authenticity was evident in the tour packages.

**Keywords:** Theoplacity, Tour Packages, Pilgrimage, Pilgrimage Tourism, Content Analysis.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage tourism is a form of tourism that belongs to the wider category of cultural tourism. It is often associated with an individual's journey towards finding inner peace and betterment, particularly the spiritual aspect, by visiting heritage sites (Hole, et al., 2019). Historically, it is the first kind of mobility tourism having started thousands of years ago. But despite of it being the foundation of all tourism mobility, the sudden increase in development of all other kinds of tourism left pilgrimage tourism behind. Thus, it does not hinder Pilgrimage Tourism to evolve on its own (Kreiner, 2019).

Pilgrimage tourism has many benefits, not only for the pilgrims, but also to the pilgrimage destination. It also contributes to peacebuilding in three dimensions (Serrallonga, 2020). The first is the inner dimension which pertains to an individual's quest for inner peace and spiritual development. It can, therefore, be considered as a form of relaxation and contributes to the spiritual development (Wang, et al., 2020). The second dimension is a social dimension where pilgrimage tourism contributes to deepen the connection between the tourist and the destination and society in general. It serves as an outlet where one's spirituality is acted out upon others, even those who do not share the same faith. The third dimension is the environmental dimension. In principle, this dimension encourages the pilgrim to live in harmony with the natural environment. This is further exemplified by (Pope Francis, 2015) in his Laudato Si where he emphasized the immediate care to everyone's common home which means the Earth.

There are many distinct Catholic pilgrimage destinations all over the world. In Europe, one of the most visited is Vatican City which features the St. Peter's Square, St. Peter's Basilica, and the Sistine Chapel, (Rogers, 2020). Spain is also among the most popular. Granada on the other hand also have a lot of pilgrimage destination it can offer namely, Royal Monastery of St. Jerome, Basilica of St. John of God, Granada Cathedral and La Iglesia De La Virgen De Las Angustias (Mulderig, 2019). The Middle East, particularly Israel, is also a renowned Catholic pilgrimage destination. Its capital, Jerusalem, has many attractions such as Haram Al-Sharid (Temple Mount), Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Armenian Quarter, Via Dolorosa (Way of Sorrow), Tower of David Museum, Christian Quarter, Mount of Olives, Mount Zion, Jerusalem old City, East of Jerusalem, Central city sites, Israel Museum, Kidron Valley, Monastery of the Cross, Yad Vashern or Hill of Rememdrance, Herzl Museum, Eid Kerem and Abu Ghosh, and Latrum to name a few (Lee, 2021). Bethlehem is another popular city with a lot of pilgrimage sites such as Church of Nativity, Christ's birthplace, Church of St. Catherine and Carmel of the Holy Child Jesus (Tripadvisor, 2021). Haifa is also a featured pilgrimage destination among the travel service provides, with sites including the Baha'i Shrine and Garden, Stella Mars Carmelite Monastery, Elihjah's Cave and Caesarea (Lee, 2021). The Middle East, particularly Israel, is also a renowned Catholic pilgrimage destination. Its capital, Jerusalem, has many attractions such as Haram Al-Sharid (Temple Mount), Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Armenian Quarter, Via Dolorosa (Way of Sorrow), Tower of David Museum, Christian Quarter, Mount of

Olives, Mount Zion, Jerusalem old City, East of Jerusalem, Central city sites, Israel Museum, Kidron Valley, Monastery of the Cross, Yad Vashern or Hill of Rememdrance, Herzl Museum, Eid Kerem and Abu Ghosh, and Latrum to name a few (Lee, 2021). Bethlehem is another popular city with a lot of pilgrimage sites such as Church of Nativity, Christ's birthplace, Church of St. Catherine and Carmel of the Holy Child Jesus (Tripadvisor, 2021). Haifa is also a featured pilgrimage destination among the travel service provides, with sites including the Baha'i Shrine and Garden, Stella Mars Carmelite Monastery, Elijah's Cave and Caesarea (Lee, 2021).

Pilgrimage tourism is featured in various media platforms. In fact, it was revealed that media platform such as novels and comic books are reliable sources of information for potential pilgrimage tourists (Lopez, 2020). Media can be an effective way to promote pilgrimage tourism. However, the poor practice of advertising pilgrimage sites contributes to the commodification and degradation of the local culture (Napitupulu, et al., 2019). Thus, there is a need to carefully examine how the media portrays pilgrimage, and religion in general.

Pilgrimage tour packages are among the most popular and regular product offerings of travel agencies (Auckland, 2018). It is commonly used by travel agencies to market to a wide range for different types of tourists (Sagun & Usha, 2017). But with the innovations in technology, online travel agencies and online bookings sites and applications are becoming more popular. Even with these innovations, pilgrimage tours remain among the consistently offered products among these online travel agencies and booking sites. Thus, this outlines the importance to examine how these online sites contribute towards pilgrimage tourism.

Booking tour packages through booking sites are the best way to see the whole city in different kinds of activities the person would want to sight. Through the increasing information and technology, booking for travel products online had a negative effect on the traditional travel agencies business models. Among all booking travel activities and sites, there are three online travel agencies the researchers have choose from tripsavvy.com that sells tour packages from different destinations around the world. Historically, the first tour package was arranged by Thomas Cook a one-day rail trip from Leicester to Loughborough back in 1841.

Drawing upon the importance of faith tourism and online booking sites, this paper analyzed how pilgrimage tourism as featured among the tour packages offered in online booking platforms. This was achieved by identifying the destinations, determining how pilgrimage was depicted based on the Theoplacity framework.

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study is grounded on the Theoplacity Conceptual Framework (Belhasen, et al., 2008). Theoplacity emphasizes the study on pilgrim experience and the underlying details that a tourist or individual's behavior in a pilgrimage site. Theoplacity is derived from the Greek word "theo" that means God and "placea" meaning place derived from Medieval Latin word. Theoplacity is depicted in a Venn diagram (Figure 1) that comprises of three interrelated components: belief, toured place, and action. Beliefs are the social discourses and emotions that they have knowledge about and shaped their understanding that influence them to encounter tourism. Toured place is the geographical location of the pilgrimage site. Meanwhile, actions are the authentic experiences that can be and that has been done on the destination.

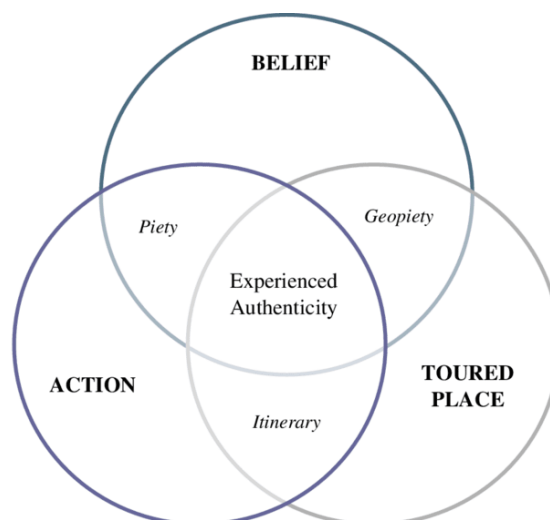


Figure 1: Theoplacity Concept

These three areas overlap with other areas, thereby creating several layers of confluence. The overlapping of belief and toured place is identified as geopiety. Geopiety refers to the emotional and intellectual attachment based on an individual's faith and values in a sacred place. The combination of belief and action is referred to as piety. Piety is an action pursued by the demand of one's religion worldview. The overlapping of toured place and action results to itinerary. Itinerary refers to the list of places that will be visited by the tourists that is being influenced by the socially constructed understanding as well as the understanding of themselves and their behavior. The confluence of the three areas is known as experienced authenticity. Experienced authenticity is an act or activities that can give different experiences from others. It is about the originality in terms of experience a pilgrim activity can offer to an individual. An experience that you can find to other activities that can be found in the same field, it is what makes a pilgrimage and the destination unique. An extra ordinary experience that you can only have in that specific pilgrimage.

The definition of Belhassen, Caton and Stewart (2008) was suited to the study, for it broadens the idea of gathered data. It also serves as a standard for the researchers to separate the nodes needed. By this, the researchers used the tour packages online travel agency website offers.

This study provides wider reference regarding the connection of the pilgrim experiences, actions and behavior that can be done on-site, said in the overview of each tour package the websites offer. Most of existing studies related to pilgrimage, only focused on one destination in line with religion of Christianity. Thus, the researchers will feature five major destinations related to Christianity itself. Furthermore, the researchers will use Theoplacity model conceptualized by Belhassen, Stewart, and Caton (2008) in the context of online tour agency websites.

This study covers the total of 862 tour packages under 5 destinations in online travel agencies. Among the destinations available in three online booking sites, only five (5) of it namely- Bethlehem, Granada, Haifa, Jerusalem, and Vatican City were mainly focused on religion of Christianity and were uploaded on February 24, 2021. The study focused at most on the actions and tour place which was included in the tour package. Thus, the researchers did not include the reviews and ratings of the travelers for it is not relevant with the needed findings. The observations that are done is guided by the Theoplacity model conceptualized by (Belhasen, et al., 2008).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The researchers used qualitative research specifically a content analysis research design. Content analysis is defined as the analytical research method that requires selecting, creating, pretesting, assessing, and coding all the data needed for the analysis. However, content analysis more than just a 'counting game', it mainly focuses on providing an understanding and describing a specific phenomenon (Zhang & Wildermuth, 2005). Content Analysis is widely used method in studies for the last recent years especially in the field of tourism (Hole, et al., 2019) it is the most effective method to analyze this study to be able to determine and analyze the contexts of the data. In fact, Camprubi & Coromina (2016) identified content analysis as the most utilized research design in qualitative tourism research.

This study examined the pilgrimage tour packages found within the following online booking sites coded only as Booking Site A, B, C. Specifically, only the Christian tour package from the most popular pilgrimage destinations are included. This yielded 862 tour packages from the three sites. The researchers used NCapture to capture each tour package containing all the details needed and saved it to their personal computers. The captured files are imported in Nvivo.

**Table 1: Total Tour Packages Per Country and Booking Site**

Destination	Booking Site A	Booking Site B	Booking Site C	Total
Bethlehem	30	1	40	71
Granada	109	7	164	280
Haifa	10	0	18	28
Jerusalem	85	3	128	216
Vatican City	171	3	93	267
Total	405	14	443	862

Afterwards, cases and nodes were created. The cases are categorized based on destinations. Nodes are created afterwards. A coding trigger parameter was established. Following the Theoplacity conceptual framework. Specifically, the following areas were coded: (1) pilgrimage actions which includes, but not limited to, praying, going to church etc; (2) toured place which include, but not limited to, churches and religious sites; and (3) tour package features. The tour package features refer to the inclusions of the tour packages such as driver, meal, tour guides, transportation, and price. Themes were

identified and combined based from the existing nodes, cases, and the intervening variable. These nodes and cases were further analyzed using matrix coding feature of Nvivo, depicted through tables and charts.

The researchers were clustered into two group which conducted an analysis independently. The coding was combined that also served as a form of triangulation. Triangulation is defined as an approach that is composed of more than one research method, a manner used to assess the data-gathering methods in terms of its reliability and validity in the social and behavioral sciences (Pelton, 2017). Moreover, triangulation is an approach to examine research problem from multiple perspective in a naturalistic inquiry – the following are “multiple observers, theories, methods and data sources.” to avoid any bias from single – observer, single – theory studies, single methods (Roulston, 2018). The results of this study was also compared to other studies and literature

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Belief, location, and opportunities for action are three key important areas that completes a complete pilgrimage experience. Examining how these three areas are presented within tour packages in online booking sites presents not only the status of pilgrimage tourism, but it gives us an idea on how pilgrimage tourism is purchased and conducted throughout the years. These changes are a crucial factor for both tourists and tourism service providers.

There are lots of reasons and ways tour package websites use in catching their prospects' attention in marketing destinations that are known for pilgrimage tourism. Travel websites provide information for the users about pilgrimage sites that help them on planning their pilgrimage tours (Khare, et al., 2020). The Theoplacity concept is present on the tour packages in which the beliefs, action, and the place itself has relationship with each other in order to obtain authentic experiences (Belhasen, et al., 2008).

##### **Pilgrimage Destinations and Types of Attractions**

The first area that will be examined are the pilgrimage destinations. This is the toured placed component of Theoplacity. Based from the coded cases, the destinations with the most offered number of tour packages are Israel, Spain, and Vatican City. The top three areas in Israel are Jerusalem, Granada, and Bethlehem, although other areas in the countries are also showcased. Meanwhile, the primary pilgrimage destinations in Spain is Granada. This result proves that the popular pilgrimage destinations have remained unchanged and may continue to be unchanged in the future. These destinations were often associated with the significance of the location to Catholicism. Basically, the pilgrims are looking for authenticity when participating in a pilgrimage.

Among the components of the Theoplacity, the most coded is toured place, where wide variety of tourists destination within the City of Jerusalem, Granada, Vatican City, Haifa, and Bethlehem has been coded. Other tourist destination sites have been included whether it is one of the main location or included only as a side trip. On the other hand, the least coded component is the action that can be related with Christianity for majority of the used overview of the tour package is mostly for leisure and relaxation purposes. According to Chhabra (2010) as the trends and demands of people differs from time to time in order to experience authenticity, tour package booking websites adjusts in order to meet the needs and wants of the tourists and market their products. This mirrors the study of Chhabra (2010), where different trends may persist across generations, but authenticity remains a crucial factor in deciding what place to visit.

The most coded religious action of this study is singing of Christmas carols. Christmas carols is traditionally sung during the Christmas season that is believed to be the day when Jesus Christ was born. According to Herring (2017) through Christian hymns, the awareness of a Christian is awakened with the of hymnic tradition. Thus, Christian worship are approached through a new perspective and demonstrated the Christ Church Unity. Hence, the least coded is joining pilgrims. Despite of pilgrimage as a way in where a person can touch a sacred. It is more than visiting a site it is stepping out of your comfort zone in order to encounter God (Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America, 2018). Website are offering more activities than the sole pilgrimage itself. It is their strategic marketing ways to gain audiences' attention to help the sales of the tour package they have served and planned. According to Kim and Kim (2019) tourists is the one who chose to do actions and behind it is the personal happiness and self-satisfaction they get. Booking site C has the most and only one that coded singing of Christmas Carols same with this, only booking site A has coded an action regarding going on pilgrims. There is no coded religious action on Booking site B. Jerusalem is the destination that has the most coded when it comes to actions that includes attending mass, baptism ceremony that is done is Jordan River, and praying as well as reflecting.

According to Auckland (2018) the concept of pilgrimage-related travel helps in understanding how the journey and destination relate to each other and not only exist as a travel phenomenon. In terms of coding Christianity, the booking website that has coded the most in regard of disclosing the religion, is Booking site C. The word 'Christianity' are said on the overview of the tour package. On the other hand, the least website that has coded the disclosure of religion is Booking site B. Although the place stated and used in this study are known for its contribution in religious aspects, majority of the tour packages are not stating the religion it revolves around with; in addition to that the study of the researchers are only focusing on one religion which is Christianity alone. Moreover, among the destinations, Jerusalem has the most coded word 'Christianity' as it is said to be the the Christian holy city and historically, the Christian church begins in the city of Jerusalem (Wilken, 2001).

Faith, Religion, and spiritual beliefs can be expressed in many forms. It happens that traveling is one of those ways. The five destinations that were chosen for this study are Bethlehem, Granada, Haifa, Jerusalem, and Vatican City. These destinations offer tour packages that mainly focuses on Christian belief. The results showed that all destinations mostly contain toured place such as churches, monuments, temples, cemetery, caves, garden, market, mountain, and museum and the highest coded toured place is the church for majority of religious actions are held in a sacred place (Pavlović, 2020). Focusing on the religious toured place, Jerusalem has the most coded church among the destinations. (Hummel, 2019) argued in his study that Jerusalem is a sacramental place for Christians because it has a potential being an instrument of God's grace.

### **Tour Package Features**

The majority tour package features were shown on Booking site C which contain a complete set of information for the travelers from Additional Information, Cancellation Policy, Frequently Asked Questions, Inclusions, Languages, Non-Religious Activities, Prices, down to the Types of tour. According to Khare, Dixit and Sarkar (2020) the interactivity of travel websites which provide information quality, destinations' description, and feedbacks would enhance the customers' trust. The components of the tours were one of the reasons tourists book a tour package, the more inclusions they have the more likely tourists are interested on the package.

Based on the findings, Booking site A and C has additional information on their tour packages. The majority of tour package was near public transportation incase tourists would go somewhere since not all includes pick up, drop off and transportation. Most of it were suitable for children and people with disabilities on a wheelchair and with service dogs included. Providing of Valid ids and information most specially on destinations with strictly securities such as in Bethlehem and Vatican City, where the leader of Catholic Church resides and houses beautiful master pieces. Other destinations require appropriate clothing to give respect while visiting Churches. Showing too much of skin is not appropriate in meeting God. Some has a policy to have a Moderate physical fitness because of the list of activities included, and in time of Pandemic, only Booking site C has posted Corona Virus protocols. Those protocols should be implemented because mass gatherings can be the cause of spreading of viruses. (Raj & Griffin, 2020). Granada has the most coded references among all destinations in terms of tour package. Tourists visits Granada first because of its location, where it is between the highest peak of Sierra Nevada and the Mediterranean shore, a perfect place whether its Summer or Winter season. Watching Flamenco show, tasting tapas, and experiencing the nightlife were one of the activities to do in Granada. Not only Christians visits Granada, it is also important to Islam most specially the World Heritage site Alhambra with beautiful architectural designs, Islamic palaces, patios and gardens. No wonder the scope of tour packages on online booking sites are big.

Based on the findings, Inclusions under the Additional Info were the most featured in all tour packages most especially in Booking site C. Inclusions are composed of all the things that were provided for the tourists such as Accommodation, Audio guide, Food and Drinks, Entrance fee, Gratuities, Hotel pick up and drop off, Insurance, Souvenirs, Tour guide and Wi-fi. There were 471 tour guides included out of 829 tour packages gathered. Tour guides are essential because they associate tourists to the destinations, provides information and assistance. (Lin, et al., 2014). Jerusalem being one of the old cities in the world, has the most inclusions compared to the other destinations. The most visited city in Israel is Jerusalem and according to Times of Israel (Anonymous, 2018), a record breaking 4 million tourists visited the country in the year 2018 and with that, the government encourage entrepreneurship to build more accommodation, and they collaborated with online travel agencies to promote their tourism where it increases job opportunities including tour guiding.

Different booking sites have different cancellation policy. Each booking site offers full refund that requires at least 24 hours in advance from the date of the booking in order to cancel. Booking site C has a different policy in terms of cancellation, there is 20 to 100% of cancellation fee depending on the days you wished to cancel the booking although the company lets the customers to have choices for much comfortable booking. In regard to prices, Booking site C has the most expensive tour packages since there were lots of inclusions included in each tour packages, and followed by Booking site A and Booking Site B which has the least priced tour package.

According to the study of Triantafillidou et al (2009), the price of tour packages gives minor importance for pilgrims because they believe that their expenses would go for good cause and their motivation is more than just a leisure. Overall, the tour packages fall under the middle price ranges. In terms of destination, Granada is the cheapest one since almost all the packages only offers walking tours, for as the beauty of the neighborhood can be easily seen while walking. On the other hand, Jerusalem is middle priced. Lastly, the expensive destination is Vatican City, the center of the Catholic church and the history of priceless arts can be seen here.

A total of 28 languages were offered by the three booking sites included in every tour package and English is the most available language among the tour packages as it is the most spoken language over the last 15 years, according to Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2021); followed by Spanish language for the reason that Granada has the most tour package among the three websites. Booking site A has the most available languages among all three websites included in their tour package for its market is wide and international based. Among the destinations, Granada has the most available languages specifically English and followed by Spanish which is the main language of Spain, then French, Italian and German which are neighboring countries of Spain.

In terms of non-religious activity, 'enjoying the view' is the most coded in all tour packages including the appreciation with the sunset and sunrise to indulge the beautiful sceneries of the place. The reason for that is tourists known to travel to rest, escape to their normal life for a while, seeks for an adventure, a prestige to some, and other external factor such as the interest on the destinations or toured place (Chavez, et al., 2020). 'Swimming in the Dead sea' is the second non-religious activity wherein tourists would go to nourish their skin with dead sea mud. Dead Sea Water is rich in minerals such as calcium, magnesium, sodium, potassium, zinc and strontium which has effects on skin diseases and therapeutic effects. Experience being a Formula One driver by testing a Ferrari vehicle on the race track, watch a flamenco show which origins in Spain, join a random party, learn in cooking class and interactive activities were also coded as the non-religious activities included in the tour packages but only one reference each as it is uncommon and just special themes of the tour packages.

Booking site C is the only site that has the category of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which provides information about the group size, safety protocols for prevention of Covid-19, pick-up location in Vatican City. Granada has the most questions with answers about the safety protocols while Jerusalem has the most coded information about the group size.

Lastly, for the types of tour the most coded among all booking sites is Sightseeing tour. Sightseeing tours is the activity of tourists to see the destination in a matter of walking on the area though it can also happen while riding on coach, bus, trams, and even trains around the area. Most of them were written on the overview part under the booking site C of the booking site and some can be found on the travel itineraries. Shore excursion takes place on the shore of Italy and Haifa. As for Other tours such as Photography tour, mostly coded in Vatican City, capturing the aesthetics of the destination, and Adventure tour on Jerusalem. Lastly, in Combining tour, the researchers gathered 15 datas with a combination of shore excursion and sightseeing tours.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

With the growing online travel booking sites, majority of them offers destinations that covers pilgrimage tourism in the most known pilgrimage toured place in the world namely Jerusalem, Granada, Haifa, Vatican City and Bethlehem. Mostly of their offered tour packages are in relations with the sacred places. However, there are lack of statements in overview regarding the religious actions that can be done in the site itself. Tour operators wrote their overviews in order for their prospect customers to know about the actions that should be done where they can be awakened in spiritual ways aside from leisure and relaxation purposes. Belief or the religion that the site have is also not stated. The assumed belief that the booking sites have focused on is Christian catholic because of the churches included toured places in destinations such as Jerusalem. Jerusalem being the holiest city is the most coded destination when it comes to pilgrimage, hence, travelers consider this because of its historic significances. Moreover, pilgrimage site itself are known for its religion aside from the geographical location and architectural designs it offers.

The findings of this study are beneficial to the online booking sites, to the tour operators, and future researchers. For the booking platforms, this study could provide insight on the faith or pilgrimage content of the tour packages where they could probably add an additional search category based on religion. For Tour Operators, the study will help them to identify the other potential pilgrimage site which can be included in another trip and also include other components of a tour package. For future researchers, the study will serve as a reference and guide on how to conduct content analysis research in online booking sites along with pilgrimage tourism as featured in tour packages.

One of the limitations of the study was it only focused on one religion, future studies can include other religions besides Christianity for a better understanding of Theoplicity Concept on tour package features and destinations. With one religion, the scope of destinations was limited to countries into top Christian destinations in the world. Future studies could also consider the reviews from each tour packages to determine the traveler's religious experiences with their pilgrimage tour and if they have achieved their objectives with their pilgrim experiences.

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