*Article*

# Traveler Motivation and Destination Loyalty: Visiting Sacred Places in Central Asia

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**Abstract:** Visiting sacred spaces is becoming a growing trend in tourism in the Central Asian region. Sacred sites are said to have the power to heal the body, enlighten the mind, and inspire the heart. This study explored the motivations for visiting sacred spaces among tourists from three Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The study used a sequential mixed methods research design. In the first stage, a general list of motivations was produced, based on the analysis of 14 semi-structured interviews. The second stage quantitative survey was conducted with a sample of 211 tourists from Central Asia. Data collection took place during tours to sacred sites in the city of Turkestan in South Kazakhstan. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and regression analysis. The relationships between motivation factors and destination loyalty were tested. The results show that among the five motivational factors identified in this study, only three (Spiritual and Religious Motives, Cultural and Historical Motives, and Wellness and Healing) have a significant relationship with sacred site destination loyalty. The remaining two factors (Nature, Fun, and Social Contact) have not been proven to have a significant relationship with destination loyalty. The study adds value to the literature on traveling to religious sites, especially those in formerly atheist countries, and provides recommendations to practitioners and policymakers to enable them to develop a niche tourism area by segmenting tourists' motivations and destination loyalty in their sacred places. It also contributes to the diversification of tourism products in those destinations that have historical religious heritage resources.

**Keywords:** traveler wellness motivation; destination loyalty; sacred places; spiritual tourism

## 1. Introduction

Academic studies on religious tourism are growing exponentially [1]; however, there is limited literature on traveling to religious sites in formerly atheist countries. Since ancient times, sacred places have been attracting travelers around the world based on the mysterious and extraordinary experiences people have had while visiting these sites [2,3]. Traveling to sacred sites is one of the oldest forms of tourism, with journeys undertaken for religious motives as the oldest form of non-economic travel [4,5]. People are drawn to sacred places "where divine power has suddenly burst forth" [6] (p. 3). Traditionally and historically, traveling to sacred places was viewed as pilgrimage [7]. Different concepts, such as pilgrimage, spiritual tourism, personal heritage tourism, holistic tourism, and value-added journeys, can be applied to travel to sacred places [8,9]. A substantial body of research describes the relationship between religion and tourism [2,10–19]. Spiritually and religiously motivated travel has become popularized and widespread in recent decades [2,12,20]. Faith-based travel is one of the top critical issues and trends in travel and tourism in the 21st century [21]. Recently, the Adventure Travel Trade Association, in the overview of global trends and disruptions in the travel industry, listed an "increased

interest in wellness, mindfulness, and transformation as travelers seek opportunities to get back to nature, exert independence, and seek silence" as one of the key drivers expected to impact global travel over the next decade [22–24]. However, the popularity of religious travel to sacred places occurs not only because of religious motives but also because of modern secularizing trends, such as cultural pluralism, post-industrialism, and scientific rationality [25]. These trends have led to the decreased significance of religion and have even changed the use of the word "religion" to mean a more privatized and pluralized experience, where "spiritual" and "religious" are separate [19,26]. Nowadays, people who consider themselves spiritual would not necessarily see themselves as religious [27]. Experimenting with mixing various religious traditions, conventional as well as alternative, is well accepted and even encouraged now, forcing "real" religion outside of religious institutions [28]. The separation of the spiritual and the religious has resulted in a different interpretation of what is called "sacred"; from holy and supernatural to cultural-exotic and valued ideal [27,29,30]. Thus, many people today travel to sacred places not only for traditional religious reasons but also for a variety of other motives, such as other cultural and heritage attractions, wellness and healing, pleasure-seeking, novelty, social contacts, and so on [8,27,31].

Visiting sacred sites for healing and wellness reasons is becoming a growing trend in tourism [32,33]. The wellness economy grew by 10.6%, while the global economy shrank by 3.6% from 2013 to 2015. The wellness economy counts for more than 5% of global economic output (US$3.7 trillion in 2015) and is about half of all global health expenditures ($7.6 trillion), whereas the wellness tourism segment of the global wellness industry represents a $563 billion global sector [34]. The demand for destinations that are perceived as less healthy or sun-holiday-only destinations continues to decrease, while the demand for "wellness" products and active holidays has increased [35,36]. This shift to wellness in health-oriented tourism occurred due to consumer trends favoring increased health awareness, and the World Health Organization pushing an integrated concept of "wellbeing" and "fitness" into its global health policy [37]. Famous sacred places are said to have the power to heal the body, enlighten the mind, and inspire the heart. Following the concept of wellness being defined as "a special state of health comprising an overall sense of wellbeing, which sees human beings as consisting of body, spirit, and mind, and being dependent on their environment" [37] (p. 530), the main purpose of the present study was to explore overall motivations for visiting sacred spaces among tourists from Central Asia. In addition, as repeat purchases and recommendations to others are essential for the success of a destination, the relationship between motivation factors and destination loyally is examined [3].

The main research questions (RQ) for this study were the following:

RQ 1: What are the motivations for visiting sacred spaces among tourists from Central Asia?

RQ 2: What is the relationship between motivation factors and destination loyalty?

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Religion and Tourism

Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism and also one of the highly opportunistic forms of alternative or special interest tourism, as it has been associated with pilgrimage tourism. The intersections between tourism and religion have become of great interest to tourism researchers, practitioners, and the media in recent years, due to the economic impact of the religious tourism sector [13]. Up to 600 million people visit religious sites in a year and the realization that religious tourism is no longer a niche market for low-budget travelers [14] has been important here. From an industry perspective, tourism types are usually defined based on the activities in which people engage while traveling, rather than on their motives for travel [19,38]. This supply-side approach suggests that religious tourism should include anyone who visits a religious site [11]. However, as religious tourism is changing and becoming more complex, researchers have begun to define the

concept of religious tourism from the point of view of motivation(s) for travel rather than on the activities in which people engage or the places they visit while traveling [14]. The literature on religious motives was first initiated by Eliade [39], who indicated that religions have sacred centers that people desire to visit. The early research was done from a general perspective, though it often distinguished between pilgrims and tourists [40–43].

Earlier studies have suggested that pilgrims visit sacred spaces to gain emotional release from the world of everyday life [40], to temporary release from social ties [43], and may "expect things of themselves and others which they may not expect while they are at home" [42] (p. 23). Timothy and Olsen [19] indicate that people are motivated to travel to sacred sites searching for truth, enlightenment, or an authentic experience with the divine or holy. However, modern religious tourists do not only hold the single-minded religious motives of pilgrimage but also non-pilgrimage motives, such as sightseeing, cultivation, and recreation. Nowadays, it is difficult to distinguish a pilgrim from a tourist. There are, in fact, infinite possibilities of sacred-secular combinations between the two extremes of the continuum, proposed by Smith [44], with pilgrims at one end and tourists at the other. Similarly, the typology developed by Santos [16] places tourism and religion at opposite ends of a continuum, with the combinations between the two based on religious backgrounds, the values travelers place on various religious spaces, and the experiences they expect to have in those spaces. People can switch from being a tourist to a pilgrim and vice versa without being aware of the change from one to the other [45]. Therefore, motivations to visits sacred spaces can include a mixed range of both pilgrimage and secular motives. Some people travel to sacred sites to pay respect to God, or with a hope to be cured, while others go just for the curiosity of seeing those sacred places [46,47].

### 2.2. Sacred Spaces in the City of Turkestan

The blurring of the lines between pilgrimage and other forms of tourism (e.g., wellness, festival, ethnic, educational, cultural, and heritage tourism) has led to an increase in religiously and spiritually motivated travel to a wide range of sacred sites around the world [14,48,49]. People travel to sacred spaces searching for "a mystical or magico-religious experience—a moment when they experience something out of the ordinary that marks a transition from the mundane secular humdrum world of our everyday existence to a special and sacred state" [50] (p. 38), here the profane becomes a sacred space in any number of human-made or natural sites, such as temples, cathedrals, mountains, groves, and so on. As the narratives of sacred sites "occur within the disclosure of particular religious traditions . . . the meaningful experience articulated in the narrative of the place must have some larger discursive framework that orients an understanding of sacrality" [51] (p. 30), this study focused on the sacred places of the city of Turkestan within the Muslim and nomad traditions of the people living in Central Asia. The selection of this area was justified by the following factors: (a) Turkestan has been an important trade and religious center in Central Asia for centuries; (b) it has many historical and religious sites for tourists and pilgrims to visit; (c) the city is considered as the most important pilgrimage site in Kazakhstan; (d) it is close to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan; and (e) it is included in the Central Asian regional tours for tourists (see Figure 1).

Traveling to sacred places in Central Asia is mostly related to visits to Muslim holy sites. After achieving independence from an enforced 70-year-long secularization and atheism, the former Soviet Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have been anticipating an Islamic revival. The size of the population in this region has increased from 17.5 million in 1950 to 61.3 million in 2010, and is projected to be 85.2 million by 2050. The proportion of Muslims increased from 67% in 1950 to 89% in 2010 [26]. The corresponding individual data for each country in this region are summarized in Table 1.

**Figure 1.** Map of cultural and heritage tours in Central Asia. Reprinted with permission from Source: [52].

**Table 1.** Muslim population trends in Central Asia, 1950–2050 (in millions).

|  | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 | 2020 | 2030 | 2040 | 2050 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Uzbekistan** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Population | 6.314 | 8.559 | 11.973 | 15.952 | 20.515 | 24.776 | 27.794 | 31.080 | 33.790 | 35.300 | 36.110 |
| Muslims | 5.316 | 6.947 | 9.920 | 13.650 | 18.164 | 23.859 | 26.766 | 30.180 | 32.900 | 34.500 | 35.300 |
| Muslims % | 84.20 | 81.17 | 82.85 | 85.57 | 88.54 | 96.30 | 96.30 | 97.10 | 97.37 | 97.73 | 97.76 |
| **Kazakhstan** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Population | 6.703 | 9.996 | 13.110 | 14.919 | 16.530 | 14.957 | 15.753 | 17.880 | 19.240 | 20.500 | 21.680 |
| Muslims | 2.891 | 3.733 | 5.096 | 6.403 | 7.807 | 9.206 | 11.161 | 12.870 | 14.190 | 15.510 | 16.770 |
| Muslims % | 43.13 | 37.34 | 38.87 | 42.92 | 47.23 | 61.55 | 70.85 | 71.98 | 73.75 | 75.66 | 77.35 |
| **Tajikistan** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Population | 1.532 | 2.082 | 2.942 | 3.953 | 5.303 | 6.173 | 7.075 | 8.430 | 9.910 | 11.170 | 12.280 |
| Muslims | 1.356 | 1.702 | 2.469 | 3.404 | 4.759 | 6.088 | 6.978 | 8.130 | 9.540 | 10.750 | 11.800 |
| Muslims % | 88.51 | 81.72 | 83.95 | 86.11 | 89.74 | 98.63 | 98.63 | 96.44 | 96.27 | 96.24 | 96.09 |
| **Kyrgyzstan** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Population | 1.740 | 2.173 | 2.964 | 3.627 | 4.395 | 4.955 | 5.550 | 6.190 | 6.940 | 7.630 | 8.220 |
| Muslims | 1.181 | 1.288 | 1.837 | 2.414 | 3.170 | 4.217 | 5.049 | 5.540 | 6.280 | 6.980 | 7.600 |
| Muslims % | 67.86 | 59.28 | 61.97 | 66.56 | 72.13 | 85.10 | 90.97 | 89.50 | 90.49 | 91.48 | 92.46 |

**Table 1.** *Cont.*

|  | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 | 2020 | 2030 | 2040 | 2050 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Turkmenistan** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Population | 1.211 | 1.594 | 2.188 | 2.861 | 3.668 | 4.502 | 5.177 | 5.740 | 6.300 | 6.680 | 6.910 |
| Muslims | 0.930 | 1.250 | 1.783 | 2.402 | 3.249 | 4.191 | 4.819 | 5.340 | 5.850 | 6.210 | 6.420 |
| Muslims % | 76.81 | 78.44 | 81.45 | 83.97 | 88.58 | 93.09 | 93.09 | 93.03 | 92.86 | 92.96 | 92.91 |
| **Total Central Asia** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Population | 17.499 | 24.403 | 33.177 | 41.312 | 50.411 | 55.362 | 61.349 | 69.320 | 76.180 | 81.280 | 85.200 |
| Muslims | 11.674 | 14.919 | 21.105 | 28.274 | 37.149 | 47.560 | 54.773 | 62.060 | 68.760 | 73.950 | 77.890 |
| Muslims % | 66.71 | 61.14 | 63.61 | 68.44 | 73.69 | 85.91 | 89.2 | 89.53 | 90.26 | 90.98 | 91.42 |

Sources: The author adapted from [53,54].

As of the 2010 census data [53], Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have the largest Muslim populations (98.6% and 96.3%), followed by Turkmenistan (93%) and Kyrgyzstan (91%), while Kazakhstan has the lowest share of Muslims (70.8%). Central Asian countries, and in particular, Kazakhstan, proved to be flexible in incorporating pre-Islamic traditions and local folk customs [55]. As the conversion of the nomads of the steppe to Islam in the 12th–16th centuries was carried out by Sufi missionaries such as Nakhbandiya, Yasaui, and Kadiriya [56,57], the places related to these historic persons (e.g., the mausoleum of Kozha Akhmed Yasaui in Turkestan) are extremely important to the citizens from Central Asian countries, and are visited by them.

Turkestan is considered the most important pilgrimage site in Kazakhstan (see Figure 1). It is located in South Kazakhstan. The main attraction is the grand mausoleum of the first great Turkic Muslim holy man, Sufi teacher, and mystical poet Kozha Akhmed Yasaui, who lived there in the 12th century. Kozha Akhmed Yasaui founded the Yasauia Sufi order and was famous for his gift of communicating his wisdom to ordinary people through sermons and poems in a Turkic vernacular language. The astoundingly beautiful tiled mausoleum, with a turquoise 18 m-wide dome above a vast 2000 kg metal cauldron for holy water, was built by Timur in the late 14th century. It is protected as a national monument of Kazakhstan. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized it as the country's first site of patrimony and declared the monument a World Heritage Site in 2003 [58].

As Turkestan has been an important trade and religious center in Central Asia for centuries, it has many other historical and religious sites for tourists and pilgrims, including the Aristan Bab Mausoleum, the Mausoleum of Rabigha-Sultan Begum, the Hilvet Semi-Underground Mosque, the Friday Mosque, the Sauran Ruins, and the best preserved and most atmospheric ruins of the many ruined Silk Road cities in the Syr-Darya valley. Tourists can also visit the Historical Culture Ethnographic Centre, with three floors of exhibits on regional history, from prehistoric petroglyphs and household implements of the Kazakh nomad's modern times, and the History Museum in the Yasaui Mausoleum grounds, focusing mostly on Kozha Akhmed Yasaui, Sufism, and Islamic learning. Turkestan played an important role in the area's history and is a sacred town for a significant portion of people from Kazakhstan and neighboring countries, including Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In addition to traditional religious places, Turkestan has several other sacred spaces. At the Mausoleum of Aisha Bibi and Mount Besik Tobe (Cradle), women pray and make rituals for maternity and women's health. There is an old well at the Aristan Bab Mausoleum where any visitor can try to get holy water; however, the well will judge the person and will give an amount of water accordingly. People pack the water from the well into containers for future consumption to purify the mind and heal the body. All in all, the architectural monuments, religious structures, and sacred places continue to draw pilgrims and tourists from across Central Asia to Turkestan. The current study explored the motivations for

visiting sacred places in Turkestan among tourists from three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

### 2.3. Research Method and Data Collection

Mixed methods and the triangulation research method [59] are widely used in contemporary tourism research. Triangulation has been "initially conceived as the conduct of parallel (or otherwise duplicated) studies using different methods to achieve the same purpose, with a view to providing corroborating evidence for the conclusions drawn" [60]. However, more recently, it is often used as a synonym for mixed methods. Mixed methods research, a type of research in which elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches are combined, is recommended for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration [61,62].

With more research undertaken in mixed methods, a three-dimensional typology, including the level of mixing, time orientation, and emphasis, has been proposed [63]. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of each procedure and the research questions for the current study, a partially mixed sequential equal status design, with the quantitative and qualitative phases having equal weight, was adopted to explore the motivations of visitors at sacred sites in Central Asia. The context of visiting Muslim sacred places by travelers from the region where religion was banned during the 70 years of the Soviet regime is unique and different from past studies. In the first stage, traveler motivations were explored based on the analysis of qualitative interviews. In the second stage, quantitative survey data were used to test the relationship between resulting motivation factors and tourist satisfaction. Both stages, the in-depth interviews and the survey, were conducted in Turkestan, which is famous for its sacred and healing places and annually attracts numerous tourists from the Central Asian region.

The present study used a sampling scheme consisting of non-random sampling for the qualitative component and random sampling for the quantitative component. In light of the advantages and disadvantages of the twenty-four sampling schemes identified by Onwuegbuzie and Leech [64], the current study used a combination of several of these. Mixed purposeful sampling, combining maximum variation and critical cases, was employed for the first stage. Individuals having specific demographic characteristics were selected to maximize the variety of perspectives and provide more detailed insights for this research project. The minimum sample size for the first stage was identified using the guidance provided by Onwuegbuzie and Collins [65], based on the works of other researchers: 12 participants for the interviews, as suggested by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson [66]. The final sample consisted of four tourism industry experts and ten tourists who visited at least one of the sacred sites in the Turkestan area. The interviews took place in March 2019. The experts were selected from the tour operators and guides who operate in Turkestan (three male and one female). The tourists were approached in the waiting area of the Yasaui Mausoleum and invited to participate in the interview. Participants were given a local souvenir as a token of appreciation after completion of the interview. After the tenth interview, there were no new themes generated from the interviews; the data collection had reached a saturation point [67].

For the Stage Two quantitative survey, systematic sampling (also known as interval sampling) was applied. This method is recommended when a stream of representative people is available—visitors to the Yasaui Mausoleum, in this case. The administration office of the heritage complex was contacted first to gain consent to conduct data collection at the site and to estimate the total population of visitors. As there were fluctuations in the number of visitors, and considering the driving time from the nearest big city of Shymkent, where the airport is located, data collection was arranged in the afternoon of every day of the week. A thousand questionnaires were distributed over a period of four weeks in April and May of 2019, by pre-trained research assistants.

To address the research questions of this study, direct qualitative research procedures, in which the purpose of the project was disclosed to the respondents, were employed in

Stage One. The 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore motivations to visit sacred sites. The interviews were conducted on the following topics: (a) travel motivations (i.e., "Why do you/people travel to this site? What motivates you/people to visit this place? Are there any religious/heritage/history/cultural/educational/personal/natural/social/or other motives relating to travel? Please explain."); (b) experience and satisfaction (i.e., "How would you describe your experience at this site? What do you like at this site? What are you satisfied with? Is there anything you dislike? In your opinion, what do travelers like about this place?"); and (c) Destination loyalty/intention to revisit and recommendation to others (i.e., "Will you come to this site again? Would you recommend this place to your friends and relatives? Do you think visitors will come to this place again?"). The interviews lasted from 20 to 40 min per person and they were transcribed into text. The texts were analyzed first for the general sense of the information and subsequently analyzed in more detail employing content analysis [68]. The words and phrases from content analysis were further used to develop quantitative questionnaire items for Stage Two.

The Stage Two survey consisted of three parts: motivational variables, destination loyalty measures, and demographic information. Motivation variables were developed on the basis of a review of the related literature and were modified based on the analysis of the qualitative interviews to apply to the specific research site and target population. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, the following procedures were conducted. The list of 41 motivational items, initially generated, was reviewed by two faculty members and one tourism industry expert (all fluent in English, Russian, and Kazakh languages). Modifications were made by removing or combining items that had similar meanings (e.g., "I enjoy the beautiful landscape" and "I like the beauty of the nature") and rephrasing several items due to translation inconsistencies. The final list contained thirty motivational factors relating to visiting sacred sites. Destination loyalty was measured by three items adapted from past studies [69]. These were two indicators relating to intention to revisit and one indicator pertaining to recommendations to relatives and friends. The intention to revisit items were as follows: "In the next three years, I will definitely take another trip to this sacred site" and "I plan to revisit this site in the future". The recommendation item was as follows: "I will recommend this destination to my friends/relatives to visit". A five-point Likert-type scale was used as the response format for the motivation and destination loyalty variables, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree". The last part of the questionnaire contained socioeconomic and demographic questions. The questionnaire (the format and translations) was finalized after a pilot test with 34 respondents at the site. The data analysis for Stage Two included descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and regression analysis. The selection of regression analysis was justified because it is a simple yet powerful statistical method that allows the researcher to examine the relationship between the variables of interest and identify the strength of the effect that the independent variables have on a dependent variable.

## 3. Results

The Stage One final sample consisted of four tourism industry experts and ten tourists who visited at least one of the sacred sites in the Turkestan area. The analysis of 14 semi-structured interviews revealed several groups of motivations to visit sacred sites, such as cultural, heritage, spiritual and religious, natural and sightseeing, wellness and healing, family and social motives. About 500 paper questionnaires were collected for the quantitative analysis in Stage Two; however, after cleaning, only 211 completed questionnaires could be used for further analysis. The reason for this relatively low response rate is that visitors were busy with sightseeing and other activities at the site and many questionnaires were only partially completed. The sample characteristics are presented in Table 2. The sample was made up of 62% females and 38% males. The age of the respondents varied from 16 to 76, with a median age of 43 years. The age groups were represented as follows: 34.6% were younger than 30, 52.6% were aged between 30 and 50 years, and 11.8% were

older than 50. Their self-reported income level was distributed as 49.3% at the average, 15.2% above the average, and 35.5% below the average for the Central Asian region. The relatively high proportion of the below-average group can be explained by the fact that visitors come from several countries of Central Asia with different levels of economic development. Moreover, 70% of visitors come from rural places. The citizenship included 52.6% from Kazakhstan, 34.6% from Uzbekistan, 3.8% from Kyrgyzstan, and 9% from other countries. The composition of the nationalities can be explained by the location of the site—it is located in the territory of Kazakhstan but is close to the borders of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the total population of Uzbekistan is much higher than that of Kyrgyzstan.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the Sample (*n* = 211).

| Variable | Category | Percent (Population) |
|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | Male | 38.4% (81) |
| | Female | 61.6% (130) |
| **Age** | Younger than 30 | 34.6% (73) |
| | 30 to 50 years old | 52.6% (111) |
| | Older than 50 | 11.8% (27) |
| **Income** | Below average | 35.5% (75) |
| | Average | 49.3% (104) |
| | Above average | 15.2% (32) |

*3.1. Factor Analysis*

Exploratory Factor Analysis was performed on thirty motivational items with Principal Component Factor analysis and varimax rotation. Four items that produced low loadings (less than 0.5) and items that loaded on more than one factor were eliminated from further analysis. Factor analysis extracted five factors accounting for 72.3% of the total variance. Table 3 presents the resulting factors and item loadings.

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy of 0.95 is classified as 'marvelous' and is far above the minimum level of 0.5. This means that the sample can be used for factor analysis. Reliability of the scales was established using Cronbach's Alpha; for both motivation and satisfaction scales, alpha values are "respectable or better", that is, higher than 0.7, as recommended in the literature [70]. Moreover, the average variance estimate (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) were further applied to assess the validity of the measures. Composite reliability (CR), ranging from 0.89 to 0.92, was higher than the suggested level of 0.8 [71]. Only two AVE values of 0.50 and 0.51 met the recommended level of 0.5; the others were less than 0.5. The literature states that if AVE is less than 0.5, but composite reliability is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still adequate [72].

After examining the items composing each factor, the name was assigned to each factor according to the nature of questions in each dimension. The first factor (F1) was named "Cultural and Historic Motives". This factor included five items with a mean score of 3.41. The second factor (F2), containing six items, was named "Spiritual and Religious Motives". This factor reflected both the spiritual and religious needs of visitors. The mean score was 3.53. The third factor (F3), consisting of six items, was called "Fun/Social Contact", as the questions addressed meeting with other people, participating in various activities, and enjoying local food and drinks. The mean score was 3.40. The fourth factor (F4) was named "Nature". It included three items describing the beauty of nature, one item watching wild animals and birds, and one item about escaping the city to breathe fresh air. The mean score was 3.50. The last factor (F5) was called "Wellness and Healing". This had 4 items describing wellness and the healing of body, mind, and emotions. The mean score was 3.45. The factors generated by factor analysis were used in a regression analysis with the five motivational factors as independent variables (F1—Cultural and Historic Motives, F2—Spiritual and Religious Motives, F3—Fun and Social Contact, F4—

Nature, and F5—Wellness and Healing) and destination loyalty as the dependent variable (Figure 2).

**Table 3.** Factor analysis results.

| Factor (F)/Item | Loading |
| --- | --- |
| **F1: Cultural and Historic Motives** | |
| I like exploring the legends and interesting stories about a place. | 0.545 |
| Authentic experiences help me understand the cultural heritage of my people. | 0.745 |
| I like to expand my knowledge when I visit a sacred site. | 0.787 |
| I am interested in the history of sacred sites. | 0.745 |
| I am interested in the historical figures who were connected to sacred sites. | 0.721 |
| **F2: Spiritual and Religious Motives** | |
| I do enjoy my trips to sacred sites because it releases my spiritual potential. | 0.709 |
| When I visit sacred sites, I seek the meaning of my life and my being. | 0.744 |
| When I travel to sacred sites, I feel a closeness to and with something sacred. | 0.718 |
| Travel to sacred sites offers me a new reality that replaces my existing reality. | 0.691 |
| Visiting sacred sites allows me to express love and respect for God. | 0.559 |
| I always pray at the sacred site. | 0.574 |
| **F3: Fun and Social Contact** | |
| I enjoy time with my family and friends during a trip. | 0.672 |
| Travel to sacred sites allows for meeting new interesting people. | 0.733 |
| Nice and helpful local residents really make me feel welcome. | 0.619 |
| I like to choose between many different activities on a sacred site tourist destination. | 0.605 |
| I like participating in activities and rituals at sacred sites. | 0.623 |
| I enjoy local food and drinks in a tourist destination. | 0.518 |
| **F4: Nature** | |
| I enjoy the beautiful landscape and the beauty of the nature. | 0.710 |
| I like to escape from the city to breathe fresh air. | 0.614 |
| Travel to the sacred site offers nice views. | 0.629 |
| I like the mix of picturesque mountains and endless steppes. | 0.527 |
| On the trip, I enjoy watching wild animals and birds. | 0.568 |
| **F5: Wellness and Healing** | |
| Travel to sacred sites purifies my mind and improves my mental health. | 0.645 |
| Travel to sacred sites relieves stress and harmonizes my emotions. | 0.711 |
| At sacred sites, God is closer to help with problems incurable by traditional medicine. | 0.763 |
| Travel to sacred sites heals my body. | 0.734 |
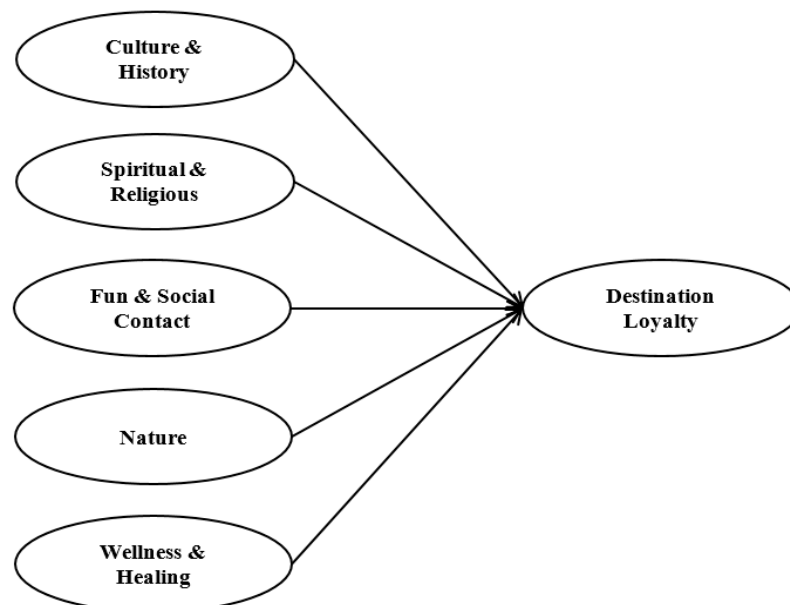


**Figure 2.** Motivational Factors in Destination Loyalty.

*3.2. Regression Analysis*

To perform a regression analysis, an examination of assumptions is required. The linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables was checked by adding non-linear variables to the model. The comparison of the full and restricted models did not produce a significant improvement in the model fit measure. The adjusted R square for the linear model was 0.764, while the R square change was 0.002. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 4 and descriptive statistics are in Table 5. The regression results show that, of the five motivational factors identified in this study, only three have a statistically significant relationship with sacred site destination loyalty.

**Table 4.** Regression results (*n* = 211).

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | *t* | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **B** | **Std. Error** | **Beta** | | |
| **(Constant)** | **−0.107** | **0.153** | | **−0.696** | **0.487** |
| F1: Culture & History | 0.152 | 0.062 | 0.146 | 2.444 | 0.015 * |
| F2: Spiritual & Religious | 0.637 | 0.067 | 0.593 | 9.477 | 0.000 * |
| F3: Fun & Social Contact | 0.060 | 0.071 | 0.051 | 0.843 | 0.400 |
| F4: Nature | 0.042 | 0.070 | 0.036 | 0.602 | 0.548 |
| F5: Wellness & Healing | 0.142 | 0.053 | 0.131 | 2.649 | 0.009 * |

Dependent Variable: Destination Loyalty (DL) * significant at *p* < 0.05.

**Table 5.** Mean and standard deviation for travel motivations and destination loyalty (*n* = 211).

| Travel Motivation Factors | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| DL (Destination Loyalty) | 3.5024 | 0.90230 |
| F1: Culture & History | 3.4171 | 0.86569 |
| F2: Spiritual & Religious | 3.5324 | 0.84021 |
| F3: Fun & Social Contact | 3.4092 | 0.77616 |
| F4: Nature | 3.5081 | 0.78175 |
| F5: Wellness & Healing | 3.4573 | 0.83271 |

Among the significant factors, "Spiritual and Religious Motives" (*p* = 0.000) has the highest Beta coefficient (0.593), implying that travelers who are motivated to visit sacred sites to release their spiritual potential, seek the meaning of life and being, feel closeness and attachment to something sacred, and to pray and express love and respect for God, would have higher destination loyalty for the sacred site. The second significant factor is "Cultural and Historical Motives" (*p* = 0.015, Beta coefficient = 0.146). Sacred sites per se are locations with history, and this includes the culture of people living there. The findings suggest that visitors who value authentic experiences to promote their understanding of the cultural heritage of the destination and who are interested in the history of the sacred sites and historical figures connected to the sacred sites, as well as any legends and interesting stories about them, are more loyal to the sacred site destination. The third significant factor is "Healing" (*p* = 0.009, Beta coefficient = 0.131). Travelers to sacred sites who seek to balance the interdependence of physical, emotional, and mental experiences as being essential for wellbeing will have a higher loyalty to a sacred place destination. The remaining two factors, "Nature" and "Fun and Social Contact" have not been proven to have a significant relationship with destination loyalty.

## 4. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the motivations for visiting sacred spaces among tourists from Central Asia and examine the relationships between resulting motivation factors and destination loyalty. The analysis produced five motivational factors: Cultural and Historical Motives, Spiritual and Religious Motives, Fun and Social Contact Motives, Nature Motives, and Healing Motives. These findings match previous research

showing that tourists visiting religious places are motivated by both religious and secular motives [12,14,73]. The results of the study show that Spiritual and Religious Motives and Healing Motives prevail in comparison with Cultural and Historical Motives, and Fun and Social Contact Motives. This indicates that most of the visitors were religious travelers. Past studies produced somewhat mixed results in terms of relative importance of religious versus secular motives. Recent research on religious travel and visiting sacred spaces shows higher religious and spiritual motivations in comparison with secular motives. For example, a study on visiting one of the most famous sacred places for orthodox Christians in Serbia, using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) model to explore and rank motivations, reported the strong prevalence of religious motives (67.3%) and secular motives, such as surrounding nature, cultural value, and architecture and historic values, being higher ranked than the motive of healing, even though this place is famous for its healing powers [12].

Similarly, another study on visiting a Christian destination in Greece reported on the higher importance of religious and spiritual motives in comparison with secular and cultural motives. However, a study on religious tourism in the Philippines found historical significance and customs and traditions to be higher motivations than holiness and spirituality of the sacred place [74]. The study on visiting Malaysia as an Islamic tourism destination revealed that Islamic compliance with self-esteem needs, relationship needs, and physiological needs has significant effects on destination loyalty [24].

While research on motivations to attend the annual pilgrimage of Hajj (one of the Five Pillars of Islam) indicated that the main motivations were to fulfill religious obligations, spiritual enhancement, and to follow teachings of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad [75,76]. Spirituality was found to be one of the major attractions for international tourists visiting ashrams and yoga centers in India [77,78]. Thus, it could be suggested that motivations to visit sacred places depend on the profile of the visitors and the characteristics of the sacred place. Where sacred places attract mostly pilgrims or are restricted only to pilgrims, religious motivations are dominant. However, if the place is open to any type of tourists, profane visitors would demonstrate more secular motives, such as curiosity of visiting a sacred place, sightseeing, recreation, and interest in history and culture.

## 5. Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the overall motivations for visiting sacred spaces in Turkestan, and specifically, the wellness motivators among tourists from Central Asia. Moreover, as repeat purchases and recommendations to others are essential for the success of a destination, the relationship between motivation factors and destination loyally was examined. The study found that spiritual and religious motivations, healing motivations, and cultural and historical motivations are related to destination loyalty, while fun and social contact motivations and nature motivations were not found to be significantly related to destination loyalty. These findings have implications for tourist operators providing tours to destinations that can be categorized as sacred places. The context of Central Asia shapes the motivations of travelers to sacred places. After 70 years of the Soviet regime, when all religious activities were strictly prohibited, these newly independent states have claimed freedom of religion. The understanding of being religious among the population is quite liberal. Therefore, traveling for spiritual growth, as opposed to the traditional notion of religious pilgrimage, matches the global shift from a "religious" to a "spiritual" experience of travel [46]. The positioning of a place for spiritual growth can positively affect demand, especially considering the diverse ethnical groups living in Central Asia, where traditional Muslim, Christian Orthodox, and Catholic traditions are represented along with New Age movements.

As sacred places are famous for their healing power, they can serve as attractions for health-oriented and wellness tourism. The increased popularity of complementary and alternative medicine, blended with the beliefs of local people in the supernatural power of sacred places, poses the opportunity for healing as a pull factor of the destination. Healing

can be a major contributor for repeat visits or longer stays to receive treatment. Healing appeals here to the state of body, mind, and emotions, providing balanced wellness as "a special state of health comprising an overall sense of wellbeing, which sees a human being as consisting of body, spirit, and mind, and being dependent on their environment" [37] (p. 530). Lastly, the heritage sites and new augmented facilities, such as museums, art galleries, exhibitions, and cultural villages, attract visitors interested in history and culture. Understanding tourist motivations can help sacred site managers, tourism promoters, and operators to segment tourists on the basis of their motivation to travel, and to develop customized packages for more spiritual-seeking and secular tourists. Therefore, our study of travel motivations can help destinations gain a competitive advantage through a better understanding of the needs and wants of various visitors, so that they can cater to different groups more effectively.

This study has several limitations. It only explored the motivations of travelers visiting the city of Turkestan, which is historically and culturally a part of the Islamic tradition. Future research should address sacred places relating to other religious traditions. Additionally, only the motivations of the site were studied; factors related to the journey to the site were not considered. Also, the sample was drawn from tourists coming by bus to the city, thus, independent travelers, those visiting friends and relatives (VFR), and tourists from far away were not included. These segments could exhibit different behaviors and motivations in comparison to the tourists who undertake a guided tour to a sacred place. The results of the study show that, in Turkestan, traditional religious motives significantly prevailed. Taking into account such outcomes, perhaps it would be worthwhile to engage in a polemical discussion with people claiming the 'death' of religious tourism in its traditional forms in future studies.

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