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## **A Discourse Analysis of Pilgrimage Reviews**

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## **A Discourse Analysis of Pilgrimage Reviews**

### **Abstract**

This paper is the first to provide an account of the discursive features of online consumer reviews of pilgrimage sites. Drawing from pilgrimage studies and narrativity theory in consumer research, we explore how consumers communicate the spiritual and material aspects of pilgrimage experiences by examining a corpus of 833 consumer reviews on TripAdvisor of the most sacred pilgrimage sites of the world's major five faith groups. Pilgrims include analytical discursive features to communicate the material aspect of their consumption experience. They reserve narration for spiritual transformation and the experience of strong emotions. Moreover, review ratings are only reflective of the spiritual aspect of their consumption experience. As such, our research complements previous studies by highlighting the material, physical aspect of this extraordinary consumption experience.

### **Keywords**

discourse analysis; marketization of spirituality; material-spiritual; pilgrimage; spiritual consumption; storytelling

## **Summary statement of contribution**

Some scholars have been exploring extraordinary consumption experiences, such as pilgrimage. Drawing from pilgrimage studies and narrativity theory in consumer research, we conduct a discourse analysis of TripAdvisor reviews of pilgrimage sites. We complement previous accounts of pilgrimage by revealing the linguistic work of pilgrims and the matches between the spiritual/narration and the material/analysis. Our findings further contribute to larger conversations about this consumption experience by uncovering that review ratings only reflect pilgrimages' spiritual aspects.

All this hurrying from place to place won't bring you any relief, for you're travelling in the company of your own emotions, followed by your troubles all the way.

—Seneca (65/1969, Letter XXVIII)

## **Introduction**

The realm of the spiritual is increasingly permeated by marketization, which involves applying capitalist practices and principles to institutions and social fields that formerly were 'above' the logic of the market (McAlexander, Leavenworth Dufault, Martin, & Schouten, 2014). Consider the growing influence of a profit mentality and the consequent move towards privatization in education, healthcare, and government services (e.g., private prisons). It appears spirituality is no exception. The proliferation of Buddha pendants, halal nail polish, healing gemstones, megachurches, and Wiccan spell kits, suggest that the spiritual and the material increasingly coexist with contrasting effect (Gauthier & Martikainen, 2013; Izberk-Bilgin, 2015).

Whereas the spiritual is concerned with 'a subjective, personal quest to understand the ultimate questions about life, meaning, and the sacred' (Rinallo, Scott, & Maclaran, 2013, p. 3), the material 'reflects the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions' (Belk, 1984, p. 291). One interesting extension of this juxtaposition is that even spiritual experiences have become 'rateable' and 'reviewable' online today. For example, pilgrimage, a journey undertaken in quest of spiritual enlightenment, is considered an extraordinary consumption experience (Husemann, Eckhardt, Grohs, & Saceanu, 2016) that is often personal, sacred, and transformational in nature, yet is increasingly shared online. According to Park, Seo, and Kandampully (2016), the number of consumer reviews of pilgrimage sites from Christianity

to Islam, from Buddhism to Judaism, that are posted on the Internet has exploded over the last decade. Pilgrims ordinarily consult such reviews and online platforms like TripAdvisor while planning their trip. In the words of Husemann and Eckhardt (2018, p. 13), ‘Most pilgrims prepare in advance by participating in online forums offering advice on how to best plan for the walk and what to wear or bring’.

Given the drive toward experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) and consumers’ increasing reliance on online reviews as electronic word of mouth, it is rather surprising that—despite some notable strides (Ghose, Ipeirotis, & Li, 2012; Mankad, Han, Goh, & Gavirneni, 2016)—little is known about *how* consumers communicate experiential consumption, particularly those that are considered extraordinary, such as pilgrimage. Furthermore, the online pilgrimage review seems to have rapidly evolved into a computer-mediated communication genre that has become ‘naturalised’ and taken for granted (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 2). Yet, recent research shows that numerous linguistic choices are involved in the actual construction of online consumer review texts (van Laer, Escalas, Ludwig, & van den Hende, 2018). Since culture and language are interrelated, these linguistic choices may reveal interesting details about pilgrims’ consumption experience. Considering that many pilgrims produce, read, and interact with online pilgrimage reviews before their spiritual consumption (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018), it is important to study systematically these computer-mediated communications of pilgrimage experiences.

Our paper explores the intersection of the spiritual and the material in pilgrimage experiences. Drawing primarily from pilgrimage studies and narrativity theory in consumer research, we examine the language that is characteristic of the computer-mediated communication genre of pilgrimage reviews. Specifically, we apply discourse analysis and explore pilgrims’ narration and analysis of their experience through online reviews of the most sacred sites of the world’s five major faith groups (i.e., Christianity’s Church of the

Holy Sepulchre, Islam's Grand Mosque, Hinduism's Ganga Aarti, Buddhism's Maya Devi Temple, and Judaism's Western Wall), according to Christian and Hinduist religious scholars (Alter, 2001; Carson & Cerrito, 2003; Hayes, 2018) and Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim holy texts: the Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta, the Tanakh, and the Qur'ān. As part of our exploration, we ask and answer two research questions: (1) Upon which linguistic elements do pilgrims rely as they communicate the spiritual aspect of their consumption experience and (2) what are the linguistic elements that pilgrims use to communicate the material aspect of their consumption experience?

Our paper makes two core contributions to pilgrimage and consumer research. First, we demonstrate which linguistic style pilgrims use, not only when communicating the spiritual aspect of their journey, but also when evaluating the material, physical aspect of their experience. In that regard, our additional focus on the material complements previous research which demonstrates that the pilgrimage experience is a highly emotive and transformative one (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014, 2016, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann et al., 2016). As such, we do not only reveal the locutionary speech act of pilgrimage reviews (i.e., what pilgrims say), but also their perlocutionary speech act (i.e., the potential effect of the utterance on its audience, Searle, 1969). In the language of Philips (2002) and Potter (1996), we consider what the texts are doing. Second, we extend the emerging literature in consumer behaviour on conducting analyses of consumer reviews and ratings (for an overview, see Vásquez, 2014) by examining the extraordinary experience of pilgrimage. We investigate which central themes or topics of interest (e.g., transformation and recommendation) occur in all the reviews collected here to suggest which discourse may be relevant across different faith groups' pilgrimage experiences. As a result, we can demonstrate the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative evaluations of pilgrimage experiences.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. First, we review the relevant literature on pilgrimage and narrativity theory. Second, we offer a detailed account of our methodology and analyse our findings in depth. Third, we connect our findings to our main theories of interest as well as practice in the discussion section. Finally, we clarify the limitations of our approach and offer some directions for further research.

### **Spirituality in consumer behaviour**

Consumer researchers have been exploring issues related to spirituality dating back to the seminal work of Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), particularly focusing on consumption's role in experiencing the sacred. Early research has investigated how the sacred is commercialized (O'Guinn & Belk, 1989) and the profane is sacralised (Belk & Wallendorf, 1990). Post 1990, increasing marketization of spirituality led to the emergence of an entire consumptionscape of faith as demonstrated by the popularity of movies like *The Passion of the Christ*, music genres like Christian rock and Jesus metal, and paraphernalia like crucifixion necklaces (Twitchell, 2007). As a result, consumer researchers became ever more interested in exploring the intersection of the spiritual and the material. Scholars began examining spirituality as a market-mediated experience and noted that brand community members reported spiritual experiences, which suggests that spirituality can extend to material objects that have become a sacred totem in the eyes of loyal consumers (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005). Within this growing body of literature, a handful of works examine pilgrimage, the focus of our study. Next, we take a closer look at these specific studies.

## **Extraordinary consumption experiences: pilgrimage**

Recently, some scholars have been exploring extraordinary consumption experiences, such as pilgrimage (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014, 2016, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann et al., 2016). A pilgrimage is a unique consumption experience that involves a geographic journey, often an arduous one, undertaken in quest of a transformative outcome, such as enlightenment, forgiveness of sins, or healing. Campbell (2013, p. 32) notes that pilgrimage ‘takes place on foot as a physical journey from a familiar or an everyday place to a faraway place that is sacred and often miraculous.’ It is believed that the hardships that the physical aspects and the long duration of the journey bring about, help separate the individual from the mundane world, and in turn, enrich the consumption experience (Husemann et al., 2016). In many cultures, pilgrims engage in series of rituals to prepare for the challenging journey ahead by abstaining, fasting, meditating, or simplifying their lifestyles.

Higgins and Hamilton (2014, 2016, 2018) and Husemann, Eckhardt, and colleagues (2018; 2016) demonstrate the highly emotive nature of pilgrimages. Higgins and Hamilton (2014)’s ethnography of Lourdes uncovers not only how the journey facilitates family bonding, but also how powerful emotions, such as hope and love, undergird this extraordinary experience. The ‘mini-miracles,’ or the stories of physical and spiritual transformations that the pilgrims tell (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016), as well as the tensions they feel balancing the spiritual and material aspects of the journey (Husemann et al., 2016) support the emotionally laden nature of pilgrimages. Furthermore, Higgins and Hamilton (2018) reveal how pilgrimage sites enable performances of emotional suffering, leading the authors to conceptualize pilgrimage sites as therapeutic servicescapes. The specific sensory and symbolic elements of these sacred sites, combined with the presence of likeminded others and

norms, such as the social acceptability of crying, create an environment that surfaces and heals emotional pain. Moreover, Husemann and Eckhardt's (2018) study of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage highlights how these spiritual journeys help consumers decelerate, that is, perceive that their temporal experience has slowed down. The tensions that pilgrims experience in their quest to slow down and be spiritually transformed are an underlying theme in this study. In summary, consumer research on pilgrimages has repeatedly demonstrated that the spiritual and the material are juxtaposed and do not peacefully coexist in these extraordinary consumption experiences.

### **Growing influence of digital platforms in extraordinary consumption experiences**

Storytelling is important for extraordinary consumption experiences. For example, pilgrims tell stories of transformation about the Lourdes pilgrimage site (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014), the magic of one supernatural belief system over another in Brazil (Rodner, Preece, & Belk, 2018), self-inflicted toe pain on the Camino de Santiago (Cova, Cova, & Cayla, 2018), or attachment to material objects in relationship to deities (Janssen Pires de Santana & Botelho, 2018). These stories can act as powerful word of mouth. As van Laer et al. (2014) note more broadly, stories permeate human life; people love to hear a captivating story that transports them into the narrative world. Storytelling also lies at the core of marketing; a successful brand is arguably a compelling story that humbles, inspires, or moves us. If there is anything more authentic and powerful than a brand story that marketers tell, it is the stories consumers tell about products and services. Research suggests that consumer narratives are a prominent form of word of mouth that is more effective than advertising (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010), creates value for consumers (Figueiredo & Scaraboto, 2016), and significantly influences

their behaviour (van Laer et al., 2018). In a digital world, where consumers are eager to share their stories and these narratives are instantly accessible to all, it is easy to recognize the power of electronic word of mouth as evidenced by the proliferation of various review-hosting sites based on user-generated content, such as Angie's List, HomeAdvisor, TripAdvisor, or Yelp, not to mention many online businesses that rely on consumer reviews, such as Airbnb, Amazon, or eBay. With the growing marketization of spirituality, not only the material, but also the spiritual, from churches to pilgrimages, has become reviewable and rateable, either on general review-hosting sites like TripAdvisor or dedicated ones like the Camino de Santiago Forum (Ivar, 2004).

Many consumers base their purchase decisions on consumer reviews (Nielsen, 2015; van Laer et al., 2018). Moreover, testimonials are important for marketing experiences (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004) and captivating, transporting stories (e.g., consumer reviews) affect attitudes and behavioural intentions (Green, 2008). Given that modern pilgrims read online reviews and forums to prepare for their journey (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018), it is critical to know, both from theoretical and practical perspectives, *how* pilgrims talk about their extraordinary consumption experiences online. Despite its importance however, little attention has been paid to the language that pilgrims use when they describe their experience. Narrativity theory offers a framework to make sense of narratives and thus analyse the discourse of consumer reviews. Next, we briefly review this theory.

### **Narrativity theory**

Narrativity is the extent to which a text tells a story (Sturges, 1992; van Laer et al., 2018). In contrast to arguments-based analysis, narrative communication relies on stories that contain

characters and events. As a result, it impacts beliefs differently (Green & Brock, 2002). In arguments-based analysis, the presentation order of the arguments is material to the effectiveness of the message in which they appear as constituents (O'Keefe, 2002); yet, they can still stand alone and be assessed for their inherent strength or weakness. In contrast, in narrative communication, characters and events derive their strength and power from their evocation of narrative discourse elements (Culler, 2002), such as an emotional story shape and a dramatic climax. Characters and events transform in the context of a story, but they have reduced strength as isolated representations. More importantly, their order of presentation cannot be altered without changing the story's dramatic impact (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982; Steiner, 1984). Characters and events acquire intensity because of their role in the story; whether they cause corresponding belief changes in consumers is a function of the extent of narrative transportation that those consumers experience (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2014).

Another major difference between arguments-based analysis and narrative communication is in their commerciality. Noncommercial stories of pilgrimage acknowledge and maintain the experience's emotive and transformative nature, whereas commercial analyses are told with a different aim in mind (i.e., recommendation). According to Holt (2002, p. 83), to be deemed transporting, stories must be perceived as produced by storytellers 'who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value,' without an overtly commercial aim. When consumers instead realize a commercial motive behind a story—its 'sponsored persuasion' (Holt, 2002, p. 85)—narrative transportation may be inhibited. As a result, consumers would be inclined to question the authenticity of pilgrimage reviews that appear to have solely commercial aspects.

Consumers 'storify' their experiences to create a sense of coherence or order on what might otherwise seem like chaotic and random series of life events (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

At the same time, when consumers tell personal stories, those stories often resonate with other consumers. Poststructuralists (Holt, 1997; Thompson, 1997) explain that this is because stories unfold in cultural, historical, and social contexts. These coexisting, dual properties of stories should make them an ideal focus for exploration in pilgrimage reviews. On the one hand, pilgrimages are about subjective, unique consumption experiences; on the other hand, they reflect broader social norms, scripts, and understandings. Each pilgrimage story may offer insights into larger experiences of transcendence.

Conversely, the main purpose of pilgrimage reviews is for pilgrims to analyse, evaluate, and rate, and on that basis, to provide recommendations to other pilgrims for or against a pilgrimage site. In this respect, research from computational linguistics—specifically in the area of genre extraction—may offer some insights (van Laer et al., 2018). Automated text analyses typically involve a computerised process designed to classify large amounts of digital text into categories (Humphreys & Wang, 2018). These categories then predict a quantitative dependent variable, such as star rating (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). However, analysis of pilgrimage is highly context-specific (Olsen, 1995), and review ratings can carry different meanings depending on the aspect of the consumption experience (i.e., the spiritual or the material). In other words, no rating is inherently positive or negative. Instead, it is the linguistic and social context that determines whether reviews are to be interpreted as positive or negative evaluations.

It is curious that despite a growing number of studies on pilgrimage, little is known about the narratives that pilgrims tell other consumers and the analytical features they use to evaluate their experiences. We seek to address the gap in the literature about how pilgrims communicate their consumption experiences online by analysing the discourse of reviews of the most sacred pilgrimage sites of the world's five major faith groups (i.e., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism). Specifically, we wish to highlight the ways in

which pilgrims' reviews are dependent on both spiritual and material aspects of their extraordinary consumption experiences. Our study therefore focuses on two specific research questions: Upon which linguistic elements do pilgrims rely as they communicate the spiritual aspect of their consumption experience and what are the linguistic elements that pilgrims use to communicate the material aspect of their consumption experience?

## **Method**

### *The chosen context: the pilgrimage sites*

This study examines discourse phenomena in a sample of publicly available pilgrimage reviews from TripAdvisor, the most inclusive hosting website for travel-related reviews. Because the goal of this paper is to gain greater insights into the pilgrimage review genre specifically, we built a representative corpus of reviews of different pilgrimage sites from a single review-hosting website. For the sake of representativeness, we sampled reviews that cut across the world's major five faith groups. According to Christian and Hinduist religious scholars (Alter, 2001; Carson & Cerrito, 2003; Hayes, 2018), holy texts (the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Tanakh, and the Qur'ān), and millions of annual visitors (Orcutt, 2012), they are their faith group's most sacred sites.

### *The dataset: the sample of reviews*

We manually downloaded English texts following TripAdvisor's founding in February 2000. In this case, 'text' is the part of the review composed of words by the pilgrim since consumers on TripAdvisor cannot comment on reviews. We only collected reviews that feature the word 'spiritual.' This enabled us to strike a balance between the manageability and the richness of

data. Using the keyword spiritual allowed us to capture the coexistence of the spiritual and the material in pilgrims' communication, while keeping the dataset manageable for qualitative analysis purposes. We did not sample reviews in languages other than English because of the difficulties of interlingual comparison in discourse analysis. While our dataset is large enough to be representative of pilgrimage reviews in general, it is also small enough to be analysed manually and qualitatively. As Humphreys and Wang (2018) note, close analysis of consumer texts provides benefits that strictly quantitative approaches, such as text mining, cannot.

Table 1 provides details about the dataset, including what each pilgrimage site entails and symbolizes to believers as well as per site the total number of reviews sampled, the median number of words per review and the average rating. The total dataset consists of 833 English-language texts. Since the Western Wall receives more reviews in total on TripAdvisor ( $n = 8,833$ ), the share of Western Wall reviews in the corpus is notably large. The word total of the dataset is 88,415 words. The higher number of words in reviews of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre compared to the reviews of other sites is due to a few outliers ( $Mdn = 116$ ; ranging from 20 to 579 words). Review ratings range from one ('terrible') to five ('excellent'), with an average of 4.63.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1. Descriptive information for the dataset, broken down by pilgrimage site

	Church of the Holy Sepulchre	Grand Mosque	Pilgrimage site Ganga Aarti	Maya Devi Temple	Western Wall
Faith group	Christianity	Islam	Hinduism	Buddhism	Judaism
Adherents (billions, Pew Research Center, 2017)	2.3	1.8	1.1	0.5	0.01
Importance	Christians believe the church to be built over the biblical Calvary, or Golgotha, where Jesus was nailed to the cross, died, and rose from the dead. For the past 16 centuries pilgrims have travelled far to Jerusalem, Israel to worship there.	For Muslims living outside Saudi Arabia, a visit to Mecca is a lifelong dream as they prepare for the hajj pilgrimage, an obligation that all Muslims must perform if they are financially and physical able to do so.	The Ganges is worshipped in Hinduism as a goddess. Every evening the Ganges comes alive with flickering flames as floating offerings are released onto the river. It is especially busy from May to October when most Hindus descend upon the river in India.	The spiritual heart of Buddhism, the Maya Devi Temple in Lumbini, Nepal marks the spot where Queen Maya Devi gave birth to Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. In the adjoining sacred garden, maroon- and saffron-robed pilgrims congregate under a sprawling Bodhi (sacred fig) tree decorated with prayer flags.	At this wall in Jerusalem, pilgrims recite scriptures, lay their hands on 2,000-year-old stone, and utter impassioned prayers. The Western Wall supports the outer portion of Temple Mount, upon which the Second Temple once stood.
TripAdvisor Number of reviews	5,429	957	1,764	363	8,833

Top 3 languages (%)	English (52.96) Russian (13.48) Spanish (8.10)	English (65.41) Arabic (20.69) Indonesian (6.90)	English (95.24) French (0.85) Italian (0.68)	English (76.58) Chinese (10.74) French (4.68)	English (55.36) Russian (9.27) Spanish (8.00)
Reviews containing the word 'spiritual'	6.09	10.06	8.87	6.12	8.77
Our corpus					
Number of reviews	175	63	149	17	429
Total number of words	22,702	6,195	14,135	1,748	43,635
Median number of words per review	116	56	88	86	95
(Mdn)					
Average rating (1-5)	4.55	4.96	4.55	4.42	4.69

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### *The adopted discourse analytic techniques*

We draw on insights from narrative analysis and corpus linguistics (Paltridge, 2012). First, we applied van Laer et al.'s (2018) narrativity framework to explore what narrative elements are most common in different reviews. According to their model, a narrative consists of six elements: landscapes of affective and cognitive consciousness (Bruner, 1986), spatial (Escalas & Bettman, 2000) and temporal embedding (Thompson, 1997), an emotional story shape (Gergen & Gergen, 1988), and a dramatic climax (Burke, 1962). The landscapes represent characters' feelings, thoughts, and other mental states. Spatial and temporal embedding provide information about the circumstances and context for the story. The emotional story shape results from the modulation of the dramatic intensity along the storyline. The climax identifies the most extreme state of the drama and is commonly derived from the most (un)fortunate event. The framework considers narrative as a fuzzy set as opposed to a binary category—with each instance as an example of a narrative to a different extent.

Second, we used a bottom-up, inductive approach of repeated readings and annotations of our data to identify the common analytical elements that occur in reviews. These elements include concordances, rhetorical questions, sharing the opinions of others within the review text, and providing a rationale for the overall (star) rating given. Concordances can 'bring together many instances of a given word from many sources, allowing us to observe the typical contexts of that word, in particular, the other words that it most usually occurs with' (Channell, 2000, p. 38). As such, it can be helpful in learning about positive or negative connotations associated with a word, such as 'again' or 'back', as well as identifying frequent patterns of cooccurrence with verbs. Rhetorical questions provide a masking practice (Canniford & Shankar, 2013) through which pilgrims can offer an indirect analysis of some aspect of the pilgrimage being discussed (Gayle, Preiss, & Allen, 1998). Sharing the opinions of others is an extremely persuasive analytical element for

communicating the relative success of a particular consumption experience (Martin, Hewstone, & Martin, 2007). We identified the importance of justifying the overall rating in previous Internet research on blogs (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010), news sites (Neurauter-Kessels, 2011), online property advertising (Zappavigna, 2012), and social networking sites (Pounds, 2011). We used the tools of corpus linguistics to help us identify these lexicogrammatical resources that pilgrims use across the dataset to discuss their spiritual consumption, including concordancing programs AntConc and MonoConc and word frequency lists.

## **Findings**

Table 2 illustrates the different narrative and analytical elements in reviews.

*Upon which linguistic elements do pilgrims rely as they communicate the spiritual aspect of their consumption experience?*

Pilgrimages have been found to lend themselves to spiritual transformation and strong emotions (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014, 2016, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann et al., 2016). In line with previous studies, our data reveals several locutionary speech acts representative of spiritual transformation and replete with emotions. The next example was selected as a particularly noteworthy case of spiritual transformation and an emotional story shape (see Table 2). It also includes the other five elements of narrativity.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Table 2. Narrative and analytical elements: representative excerpts

Element	Representative excerpt
Narrative	
Landscapes of affective consciousness	‘I have not felt such a tranquility anywhere. The Vibrations of Buddha can be felt from inside. Sitting under a tree, looking at the Puskarini Pond, gives you the inner peace.’
Landscape of cognitive consciousness	‘a place where history lives on. one can’t be here without thinking about the events across two millennia.’
Spatial embedding	‘the Western Wall in Jerusalem. It is an amazingly spiritual place that can't fail to leave a lasting impression. It is in a word awesome. Full of history and beauty. One of my favourite places to visit in Israel.’
Temporal embedding	‘on Shavuot (holiday commemorating receiving the 10 commandments)’
Emotional story shape	‘No words can adequately describe what happens to a person here spiritually at this wall. My husband and I were both blown away. For my husband everything went white and completely quiet, he felt incredibly spiritually uplifted. For me a quiet buzzing radiated throughout my whole body and everything went quiet as well when I touched this wall. One has to go there to experience the incredible effects. We will be forever changed because of it.’
Dramatic climax	‘Spiritually life changing, no words can adequately describe what happens to oneself here. My husband and I both left changed people.’
Analytical	
Concordances	‘I would return here again.’  ‘Every time I leave, I feel as if I would like to come back here again and again and again.’  ‘I really enjoyed the Ganga Aarti at Har-ki-Pauri and definitely come again.’
Rhetorical questions	‘Where are the discreet signs informing those of all faiths and none as to what is before them? Why is any one of the myriad churches responsible for managing this place allowing guides to ply their trade on consecrated ground? Are the faithful really incapable of genning up before they go in?’  ‘One older woman kicked a family member twice in the knee-- Once is an accident, but twice--in the knee? Was she angry that westerners were there? Did she just want a better view?’

Sharing the  
opinions of others  
within the review  
text

‘Those rooms can be a little stuffy and cramped and possibly won't smell great, but, at least you're out of the rain, right?’

‘My sister and I went with Birthright Israel and it was Amazing.’

Providing a  
rationale for the  
overall (star) rating  
given

‘I would give this 5 stars if there were no crowds or not many people.’

‘However I can't put 5 stars as the place is too overcrowded and I just couldn't concentrate and pray mindfully!’

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[Western Wall; rating: 5] ‘No words can adequately describe what happens to a person here spiritually at this wall. My husband and I were both blown away. For my husband everything went white and completely quiet, he felt incredibly spiritually uplifted. For me a quiet buzzing radiated throughout my whole body and everything went quiet as well when I touched this wall. One has to go there to experience the incredible effects. We will be forever changed because of it.’

The pilgrim’s experience appears to have been transcendent and s/he chooses to share it as a narrative instead of simply providing an analysis of the consumption experience. The review begins with a literary device (‘No words can adequately describe [...]’), which serves to establish shared background knowledge for the pilgrim and the reader, and as a result, it opens the emotional story shape. This modulation of the dramatic intensity along the story lines arrives at an extreme state of drama in the second sentence. Derived from the most fortunate event (‘blown away’), the climax connects the pilgrim to another character (‘My husband’). The third and fourth sentences contain landscapes of consciousness and spatial embedding to describe both characters touching the Western Wall: their mental (and physical) states (‘everything went white’ and ‘throughout my whole body’) and the event’s context (‘this wall’). While the fifth sentence has a literary prose quality (‘One has to go’), the final sentence reads like the conclusion of a creative work, such as a short story, and temporally embeds the narrative by providing information on the circumstances (‘forever changed’).

Below, we unpack another extraordinarily narrative review:

[Western Wall; rating: 5] ‘The most spiritual visit was on Shavuot (holiday commemorating receiving the 10 commandments). It's traditional to stay up all night studying Torah at a synagogue. Although we didn't do this we heard that in Jerusalem around 3 or 4 a.m. tens of thousands of Jews who have been up all night start walking

towards the Western Wall for sunrise from all neighborhoods in Jerusalem. We woke up at 3:30a.m. and started walking towards the Wall, it was quite an experience.’

It is easy to note in this review that the pilgrim draws readers in by spatially (‘at a synagogue’) and temporally (‘on Shavuot’) embedding the narrative. As such, readers can appreciate the uniqueness of walking towards the Wall with ‘tens of thousands of Jews’ in the middle of the night as a spiritually transformative experience. The closing expression of awe regarding the sacrifice that believers make and the dedication they show by staying up all night to study sacred texts as well as a sense of togetherness stemming from the shared walk is vital to developing a captivating landscape of affective consciousness here.

While not all pilgrimage reviews include narrativity to such an extent, those that communicate the spiritual aspect of the consumption experience generally are comprised of narrative elements. The landscapes of consciousness may be presented in a straightforward fashion, with the narrators concentrating more on the outcome of the presumed transformation than on their personal, emotional and rational reactions to the experience. The consistent embedding of space and time, and presence of exciting, complicating drama however makes these accounts of the spiritual aspect of pilgrimage narrative ones.

Past research reveals that pilgrimage is generally mentally transformative due to the arduous nature of these journeys (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014, 2016, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann et al., 2016). We see this spiritual aspect of the consumption experience results in articulate landscapes of consciousness full of awe, hope, love, and togetherness. Spatial and temporal embedding in turn highlights the spiritual aspect of the trip and the pilgrimage sites as well as the perlocutionary speech act. Together, the narrative elements help an audience of review readers realise how the emotionally and cognitively taxing geographical journey chronologically flows into and is causally linked to the pilgrims’ self-transformation.

### *The coexistence of the spiritual and the material*

TripAdvisor may be a unique space where pilgrims tell and rate their consumption experiences and where the spiritual and the material coexist. Before we focus exclusively on the material subsequently, we bring to the fore the following review to juxtapose the two competing aspects:

[Grand Mosque; rating: 5] ‘A marvelous and spiritual experience and the sight of the Kaabah is truly special. Be patient with the crowds and remember Allah at all times. Be careful with your shoes / slippers as it might disappear. Bring them with you using the plastic bags available. If you lose them during the hot day, be careful of the hot floor surface which are not marble. If you are lucky you might find someone selling slippers.’

Here we see evidence of both aspects at work. The more spiritual section (‘remember Allah at all times’) is more narrative, whereas the more material section (‘Be careful with your shoes / slippers as it might disappear’) is more analytical and altruistic in terms of a sense of moral duty to help other pilgrims. Specifically, the pilgrim uses the review to offer suggestions and alternatives. The material section is comprised of suggestions which provide options for what to do with removed footwear before entering the Grand Mosque. As a result, this review does not only reveal the feeling of the pilgrim writing it (i.e., the locutionary speech act), but also speaks to the way in which it may be consumed and what effect it may have on those reading it (i.e., the perlocutionary speech act).

*What are the linguistic elements that pilgrims use to communicate the material aspect of their consumption experience?*

Pilgrimage review sections that communicate the material have very few, if any, narrative elements. Although authors may spatially embed the material, fewer first-person references

are included that let readers experience the pilgrims' landscape of consciousness. Instead of being constructed as a first-person narrative, these sections are presented more as impersonal description in general, verb-less constructions. Such reviews, without well-developed landscapes of consciousness or many spatially and temporally embedded events, can be characterised as more analytical than narrative.

Material sections, of which there are many in reviews, use several analytical elements to communicate this aspect of the consumption experience. They occur across the pilgrimage sites and comprise both explicit and implicit strategies. One productive form of explicit strategy is the indication of a desire to repeat the consumption experience, using the adverbs 'again' and 'back'. Conveying a sense of anticipatory repetition, verb + 'again' or verb + 'back' constructions in reviews provide examples of how an adverb is used as a form of analysis in signalling the desire or plan on the part of the pilgrims to repeat the material aspect of the consumption experience (see Table 2). For the faith-based tourism industry, a desire to return for a repeat experience to a pilgrimage site is clearly a way for pilgrims to indicate their positive analysis of the material aspect of the consumption experience.

These constructions did not appear when pilgrims expressed negative evaluations. As can be seen in the example below and in Table 2, the overall tone in those reviews is one of incredulity.

[Church of the Holy Sepulchre; rating: 2] 'Where are the discreet signs informing those of all faiths and none as to what is before them? Why is any one of the myriad churches responsible for managing this place allowing guides to ply their trade on consecrated ground? Are the faithful really incapable of genning up before they go in?'

As this example illustrates, sometimes several rhetorical questions appear near one another for added emphasis. These series of interjecting questions create a sense of involvement for

readers. On twenty-five occasions, negative analyses of the material aspect of the consumption experience were expressed through rhetorical questions and despite high ratings. As such, pilgrims use rhetorical questions as implicit, indirect accusations. That said, some reviews (< 1%) are clearly negative. These also tend to be the shortest in length, as can be seen from the following example:

[Western Wall; rating: 1] ‘no food allowed too many people for spiritual visit only a lot of security free transport from the first stop great falafel.’

This review is quite extreme, which means that while it is perfect for studying complaints, it is not typical of most reviews. Reviews are ordinarily more eloquent and pilgrimage companions are often mentioned as sharing the overall opinion of the pilgrim (see Table 2). Some reference to the reaction of others is a way for pilgrims to establish their credibility. In mentioning others’ reactions to the pilgrimage, pilgrims indicate that their analyses are not merely based on their own subjective judgements, but that others corroborate them.

Another feature associated with analysis—justifying the overall rating—occurs more frequently for some pilgrimage sites than for others. Only Christian and Jewish pilgrims comment meta-linguistically within their review text on the star rating they gave and offer some type of rationale for assigning the number of stars that they did, as seen in Table 2. When this phenomenon of referencing the number of stars that the pilgrim has given occurs, there seems to be a more detailed justification of why the rating was given. Among other functions, this analytical element allows pilgrims to focus on the material, such as crowds, footwear, and surfaces without compromising their (high) rating for the spiritual.

Interestingly, these findings hint at the marketplace logic to which pilgrims are subconsciously subjected (Kedzior, 2013). Pilgrims do not feel the need to dampen their spiritual storytelling but appear to understand that TripAdvisor’s normative system advocates analytical reviews. To respond to both, pilgrims reserve narrative discourse for the spiritual

and analytical discourse for the material aspects of the consumption experience. As such, they show their audience of review readers not only their spiritual transformation but also that they can discern, discriminate, and be fair about a pilgrimage, carefully weighing its strengths and weaknesses. The perlocutionary speech act of the latter, material sections appears to be that pilgrims are seen as reasonable reviewers with a sense of moral duty to help fellow pilgrims.

## **Discussion**

We contribute to larger conversations about the nature of pilgrims' extraordinary consumption experience (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014, 2016, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann et al., 2016) in the following two ways:

### *The spiritual is narrative; the material is narrative and analytical*

Ever more storytelling takes place in online contexts in general (Page, 2012). Overt claims and arguments are especially rare in experience reviews' content; instead, the content, structure, and style are narrative (Jurafsky, Chahuneau, Routledge, & Smith, 2014). We demonstrate new evidence of how the spiritual and material aspects of consumption experiences are utilised and consider how these uses speak to the communicative component of these experiences. In line with Page and Jurafsky et al., we conclude that more spiritual, immaterial aspects are exclusively narrative and individually transformative, whereas more material aspects are both (somewhat) narrative and (predominantly) analytically in form, guided by social motivations to help other pilgrims with functional advice. Apparently, the spiritual lends itself well to the story vessel, but pilgrims seem to feel they need to also be advisory and analytical when reviewing the material aspect of their consumption experience.

This examination into communication associated with the spiritual and the material in this genre also highlights the ways in which pilgrimage reviews are dependent on both the spiritual and the material and taps into some larger themes associated with travel in late modernity. Since previous researchers generally conducted depth ethnographies or interviews (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014, 2018; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Husemann et al., 2016; Kedzior, 2013), consumer narratives about spiritual experiences are abundant in these studies. Instead, our study took place within the normative system of TripAdvisor. In such a digital context, the norm is to give succinct advice; not to tell stories or write detailed exposes. Consumers are expected to skim and gain information quickly, so cognizant pilgrims would create reviews of the material based on this normative expectation while simultaneously fulfilling their own need for “the transfer of symbolic meaning of goods through storytelling” (Arsel & Dobscha, 2011, p. 66) of the spiritual aspect of their consumption experience. As a result, this contextual difference seems to have allowed the spiritual and material aspects of the consumption experience to surface and coexist peacefully within the same review. As such, the digital context enriches our understanding and complements the notable work by Higgins and Hamilton (2014, 2016, 2018) and Husemann, Eckhardt, and colleagues (2018; 2016).

*Review ratings are connected to the spiritual; not the material*

Previous work claims that review ratings are an important source of insights (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). We looked more deeply into the coexistence of spiritual and material aspects of consumption experiences in review texts and their relationship with review ratings. Our work shows that ratings for pilgrimage sites reflect the spiritual only, which risks an overly positive interpretation of the material. Delinked from their ratings, pilgrimage review texts are valuable to understand pilgrims’ analyses of specific material aspects of the pilgrimage sites

however. In line with Eade (1992) and Husemann et al. (2016) but in contrast to the reviews' quantitative ratings, the material sections of the pilgrimage review texts show that negative experiences are not uncommon on pilgrimage. Highlighting the (dis)connect between the pilgrimage review text and its quantitative rating allows us to shed new light on this extraordinary consumption experience therefore. Our findings present a more analytical, less descriptive, and arguably less romanticised experience of pilgrimage than those discussed to date in consumer research.

### *Practical implications*

Several practical implications can be derived from this work due to three fundamental differences between pilgrimage reviews and earlier texts about spirituality: scale, scope, and distribution of expertise.

By scale, we mean that with pilgrimage reviews as with user-generated content more generally, there are now more opinions available to consumers than what they could access before when they relied only on traditional texts or a handful of opinions from clerics. In other words, both consumers and clerics need to figure out how to make sense of pilgrimage reviews, such as the ones highlighted in this paper: think critically, learn how to reconcile differing sets of opinions or perspectives, and understand the roles that both the spiritual and the material play for the discourse around this consumption experience. Whereas purely narrative accounts of the spiritual may portray a sense of fanaticism that turn away nonbelievers, analytical and succinct reviews that focus on the material may lead more nonbelievers to go to these sites.

With respect to scope, the opinions are no longer restricted to a subset of pilgrimage sites. Instead, consumers can now find reviews about the remotest sites (e.g., the Maya Devi Temple in Lumbini, Nepal). The ability to access more information about a wider-than-ever-

before range of pilgrimage sites can result in information overload, which means there is a role for digital curation by clerics where reviews are concerned (Synder, 2015).

Finally, reviews are no longer restricted to a handful of elite reviewers (e.g., clerics or professional travel writers) but any pilgrim can write about any sacred site, distributing and democratising expertise. This means that any pilgrim with an Internet connection and an opinion can claim to be an expert. The advantage is that consumers thus have access to a multitude of different perspectives instead of only those of a professional cadre. Teaching the faithful how to distinguish quality, useful pilgrimage reviews from less helpful or relevant ones is a skill that clerics at all levels may consider cultivating. Consistent with these emerging issues of expertise and digital literacy, many houses of worship are experimenting with digital initiatives to connect with the faithful through these new media. For example, the Church of England has launched a capability for the virtual assistant Alexa to allow followers to access prayers and worship in their homes (Sherwood, 2018). Other clerics may also wish to cultivate digital literacy skills as part of their mission.

#### *Limitations and directions for further research*

The motivation to focus specifically on the juxtaposition of the spiritual and the material has driven our study. As such, we sampled pilgrimage reviews that contained the keyword 'spiritual'. As a result, we captured the coexistence of these two aspects of pilgrims' communication (Hamilton, 2000). However, using different, yet conceptually similar terms, such as holy, religious, religion, sacred or transcendental, could yield a different corpus. Another limitation of our sample is that not every pilgrimage site is reviewed as much as would be expected from the number of adherents to the faith group to which they belong; particularly Judaism's Western Wall is overrepresented (expected: 1, observed: 429), whereas Islam's Grand Mosque (expected: 263, observed: 63) and Buddhism's Maya Devi Temple

(expected: 73, observed: 17) are underrepresented. Future research could explore whether using different keywords yields possibly different linguistic styles and a more equally representative sample of pilgrimage reviews. Likewise, future research could compare different forms of digital texts such as blogs or tweets that consumers use to share their experiences in addition to online reviews. While a different level of analysis, pictures are associated with semiotic systems that connect with, contribute to, and support review texts, so future researchers will perhaps wish to consider this other modality for a more comprehensive examination. Alternatively, future researchers could investigate why Jewish pilgrims are more interested in using TripAdvisor than other consumers. Any reasons behind this difference could speak to the impact of spiritual culture and identity on online consumer behaviour.

In conclusion, regardless of what their faith happens to be, the world in which consumers hurry from one sacred site to another, is populated with innumerable pilgrimage reviews among other types of spiritual texts. A popular genre, pilgrimage reviews' power and impact are undeniable. To avoid trouble, we think it important to travel in the company of a better understanding of their discourse.

7,596 words

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The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in, or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article.

## **Appendix**

### *Research ethics*

A challenge facing Internet researchers is navigating the murky waters of research ethics in this relatively new, though continuously changing, online setting. Internet scholars, who have aimed to establish basic guidelines (Humphreys & Wang, 2018; Kozinets, 2015; Mackiewicz, 2010; Whiting & Pritchard, 2018), have informed our decision-making. More specifically, we chose TripAdvisor because its texts are intended as public and normally not sensitive.

Furthermore, our focus is on the textual properties of the reviews. We do not include personally identifying information about the pilgrims, such as user ID or information from their profile (Mackiewicz, 2010). Finally, Kozinets (2015) notes that manual, nonautomated access of information on publicly available webpages is acceptable without special actions or permissions. In summary, our work falls within ethical guidelines, because our primary focus is on language and texts as opposed to individual pilgrims or pilgrimage sites, and we use publicly available, existing online data as opposed to data that requires some intervention on our part as researchers.

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