



**Research Publishing
Academy (RPA)**
London, United Kingdom (UK)

ITHJ

International Tourism and Hospitality Journal (ITHJ)
Journal Homepage: <https://rpajournals.com/ithj>

A Qualitative Study of Pilgrimage Destination Branding: Comparison between pre-covid and during-covid Consumer Brand Journey

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Abstract

Religious tourism refers to traveling for sacred or spiritual purposes at religiously-prescribed locations. The pandemic has critically damaged the religious tourism sector. The concept of destination branding differentiates a tourism destination from its competitors and helps achieve a competitive edge. Unfortunately, the extant literature on destination branding in religious tourism is untapped from a developing country's context. To evaluate the evolution of the pilgrimage brand journey before and during covid, the present study obtains the pilgrims' consumer profiles and brand journey maps during the Umrah experience of the Bangladeshi Muslim urban elite. The initial data is collected from the in-depth interview, transcribed, codified, and then analyzed ethnographically using thematic analysis. The study finds customer disappointments in their brand journey from logistic touchpoints during the covid-era. Through mapping brand touchpoints and constructing consumer profiles, it is found that brand love and loyalty precede the destination brand's consumption in the context of Hajj and Umrah. The study findings offer significant implications in the destination brands domain, implying that brand consumption is essential to brand loyalty and advocacy, thereby extending the body of knowledge of brand love and brand loyalty.

Keywords: Destination branding, Religious Tourism, Pilgrimage brand journey, Brand touchpoints, Hajj and Umrah, Brand love

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37227/ITHJ-2022-05-923>

Introduction

Through religious tourism, the tourists aim to fulfill their religious commitments at a specific sacred location. The pandemic has critically damaged the religious tourism sector. Destination branding differentiates a tourism destination from its competitors and helps achieve a competitive edge. Unfortunately, the extant literature on destination branding in religious tourism is untapped from a developing country's context. To evaluate the evolution of the pilgrimage brand journey before and during covid, the present study obtains the Muslim pilgrims' consumer profiles and brand journey maps during *Umrah*. The initial data is collected from the in-depth interview,

transcribed, codified, and then analyzed ethnographically using thematic analysis. The study finds customer disappointments in their brand journey from logistic touchpoints during the covid-era. Through mapping brand touchpoints and constructing consumer profiles, it is found that brand love and loyalty precede the destination brand's consumption in the context of *Hajj and Umrah*. The study findings offer significant implications in the destination brands domain, implying that brand consumption is essential to brand loyalty and advocacy, thereby extending the body of knowledge of brand love and brand loyalty.

Religious tourism, i.e., tourism is driven by commitment and obligation towards religious beliefs and obligations, is one of human history's oldest forms of tourism. This phenomenon contrasts with traditional forms of tourism, which are generally driven by a pursuit of pleasure and leisure. Religious tourism serves to help one fulfill their religious commitments and strengthen the narrative of the particular faith the tourist in question subscribes to (Hassan et al., 2016). For Muslims, the biggest drivers behind religious tourism are the "Hajj" and "Umrah" (Othman et al., 2020). Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), one of the five main pillars of Islam religion and obligatory at least once in a lifetime upon each adult follower of the Islamic faith physically and financially capable. Hajj is also one of the largest international mass gathering events, drawing in around two to three million Muslim pilgrims annually from about 180 countries (Hoang et al., 2020). Umrah, by contrast, is voluntary but still of much religious significance. Hajj occurs annually during the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar, while Umrah can be performed all year round (Gannon et al., 2017; Jafari & Scott, 2014). When considering Umrah, the number of pilgrims traveling to the KSA for religious tourism typically reaches around 10 million yearly (Yezli & Khan, 2020).

As of December 2019, the world has been under the grasp of the highly contagious Covid-19 pandemic, which originated in the Wuhan province of China. The respiratory disease, caused by the Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus, is transmitted through contact with or inhalation of droplets and can remain dormant before showing symptoms for 2-14 days. With the onset of this virulent pandemic, governments worldwide have implemented a range of public health and safety measures, commonly including quarantines and social distancing to curb the spread of microbes among the populace (Alam et al., 2021). As a result, one of the areas of business that has suffered the most from this pandemic has been tourism, especially due to measures such as travel restrictions and border closures (Azougagh & Rao, 2022). The pandemic has also significantly impacted mass gathering events such as the Muslim religious pilgrimages of Hajj and Umrah and their associated religious tourism (Alam et al., 2021).

Several crises have hit the travel and tourism industries over the decades worldwide (Mwamwaja & Mlozi, 2020). Given the international significance of the Muslim pilgrimages of Hajj and Umrah and the impacts which the Covid-19 pandemic has had on it, this study aims to contrast and evaluate the consumer journeys undertaken by pilgrims from the urban elite socioeconomic background of Bangladesh in the context of pre-Covid and during-Covid eras, thus adding to the existing body of knowledge by:

- Creating consumer personas, i.e., consumer profiles, embodying the archetypes of pilgrims who undertake religious tourism for Hajj and Umrah.
- Undertaking consumer journey mapping to identify and illustrate the unique consumer brand journeys encountered by pilgrims before and after the proliferation of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Presenting a critical evaluation of the evolution of the consumer brand journey of the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Highlight future research and evaluation areas to enhance knowledge, theory, and practice in destination branding and religious tourism.

Literature Review

An Overview of Destination Branding

To properly understand destination branding, the concept of a "destination" must first be explored. One definition of destinations is "places where people travel, and there they choose to stay for a while to experience certain features or characteristics – a perceived attraction of some sort" (Leiper, 2004). On the contrary, Buhalis (2004) proposes that a destination can be a subjectively interpreted concept, depending on the purpose of travel and prior experience and the demographic and psychographic characteristics of the tourist at hand. A destination can be considered a combination of the physical geographic place of pilgrimage, including its attractions and how consumers interpret them based on their inherent characteristics (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). Shaw and Williams (2009) argue that a destination includes products, facilities, and services that form the travel experience. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (2007) agrees with the former by stating that accessibility, public and private amenities, attractions, human resources, image and character, and price are the most important for attracting consumers to a destination.

As such, in tourism, it is important to craft and promote brands for destinations so that they may be competitive with other options in the market, allowing for better positioning and emphasis on said destination's USPs. (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020) Branding is "the process of defining a point of difference and organizational culture and communicating them internally and externally" (Mearns, 2007). This branding process helps a company be competitive in the market and can be used by customers in their decision-making process (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). According to Pereira, Correria, and Schutz (2012), branding includes naming a product, targeting and positioning, and communicating its benefits to consumers.

Mapping Consumer-Brand Interactions (Consumer Journeys)

Forrester Research Inc. defines consumer journey maps as "Documents that visually illustrate customers' processes, needs, and perceptions throughout their relationships with a company." (Temkin, 2010). Consumer journey mapping takes an omnichannel approach to examining customer interactions with brand touchpoints. It seeks to understand customers' purchase process experiences from start to finish, keeping in mind that the paths to purchases may or may not be linear (Berman, 2020). Customer journey maps, also called touchpoint maps, illustrate the experiences consumers undergo as they interact with various brand touchpoints and how those experiences shape the relationships between consumers and the brand. "Consumer profiles" and "product persona connections" are defined through the process of crafting customer journey maps (Temkin, 2010). Consumer profiles give humanistic insight into consumers as people. The "product persona connection" reveals the attitudes and feelings they hold towards a brand and its products or services (Ciunci, 2016).

When mapping consumer journeys, three paths are specifically important to understand. These paths are the most actionable and have the most significant impact on revenue growth: the approach to the initial acquisition, the way to first purchase, and the path to repeat purchases. The course to initial investment deals with how the general consumers become the prospective customers of a brand through brand awareness and highlight how well that brand's USPs align with the prospective customers' wants and needs. The path to first purchase outlines the key customer experiences that ultimately help brand awareness generate revenue. At this point, customers are voting with their wallets, and their experiences at this stage will strongly dictate their attitudes toward a brand going forward. The path to repeat purchase illustrates the journey from second purchase to sustained brand loyalty. It provides valuable information which the brand can use to build sustainably profitable long-term relationships with its customers (Walters, 2015).

Humanizing Consumers as People

A Consumer profile, often interchangeably used with the terms such as consumer persona, customer persona, buyer persona, and buyer profile, is a tool that is, in essence, a realistic semi-fictional archetype that can illustrate a specific type or group of consumers within a target

consumer segment, and enables a brand to humanize its consumers (Russo Spena & Bifulco, 2021; Rinjani & Dellyana, 2017; Scott, 2015; Revella, 2015). Consumer profiles enable companies to see their consumers as real people with real stories, struggles, and motivations. Well-constructed consumer profiles allow a brand to empathize with its target consumers and thus communicate with them more effectively (Revella, 2015). These tools, when utilized appropriately, take the guesswork out of the equation of when and how to effectively reach target consumers, providing brands with insight into how those consumers think and function. This, in turn, empowers brands to craft strategies for their promotional and marketing activities with much greater precision than traditional segmentation practices by providing insight into the inner psyche of their buyers (Scott, 2015). Such accuracy enables brands to zero in on consumers even within segments who could be exceptionally profitable, have been experiencing undetected dissatisfaction, or may even leave the brand for a competitor soon if left unaddressed.

Consumers' Goals and Aspirations

Goals are what drive and motivate consumers to perform any actions, be they the purchase of goods or services from a brand, or be they just their regular day-to-day activities, whether these goals be ones originating from external influences, innately present, or resultant from conscious thought processes (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999). Consumers' goals also shape how they perceive their experiences while interacting with a brand and approach the interaction itself (Higgins & Scholer, 2009). Furthermore, plans can vary wildly from consumer to consumer. Any two consumers of the same product can react very differently to the same brand stimuli because their underlying goals are completely different (Puccinelli et al., 2009).

Furthermore, on top of consumption-specific short-term oriented goals, actions undertaken by consumers are also heavily driven by the larger-than-life themes they subscribe to and the long-term aspirations they set for themselves, which are deeply tied to their identities as autonomous individuals. Through the consumption of goods and services, consumers achieve personal agency, i.e., a feeling of control over their actions (Bandura, 1989), both through self-authenticating efforts (i.e., creating something new through consumption) and by prescribing authenticating meanings (i.e., attaching personal/emotional values to what is being consumed). A consumer's sense of self (i.e., self-concept) and associated aspirations and themes impact and influence how they process and react to their experiences (Arnould & Price, 2000). When the experiences customers undergo during their purchase processes align with their goals and aspirations, those experiences are perceived as positives and thus positively impact their attitudes toward a brand, and vice versa when said experiences do not align (Heinonen et al., 2010).

Brand Preference, Brand Awareness, Consumers' Self-Concept, and Consumer Satisfaction

Brand preference is a practical manifestation of consumer attitude that influences purchasing decisions, which significantly affects the choices consumers make when choosing between competing products of the same category, and is psychologically composed of cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects (Tsai et al., 2015; Hellier et al., 2003; Keller, 1993). The mental formation of brand preference is contingent on the recognition of differentiating elements within a brand's offerings compared to its competitors in the minds of consumers as a manifestation of brand awareness (Tsai et al., 2015; Aaker, 1996).

Typically, brand awareness stems from the aggregate information a customer has contacted regarding similar products through brand recall (Riding & Cheema, 1991). The affection, i.e., the emotional formation of brand preference, is irrational and develops the emotional responses a customer feels when exposed to a brand, its products, and its elements. The behavioral aspect is the practical expression of brand preference, either stemming from cognitive, affective, or combined sources and is characterized by how customers choose a particular brand's products over competing ones or make repeat purchases from the same brand (Tsai et al., 2015). Brand preference is also significantly influenced by any given customer's self-concept. Products from brands with a brand image that align with that customer's self-concept are preferred over competitors (Grohmann, 2009; Sirgy, 1982).

Consumer satisfaction is yet another key variable in building brand preference. Higher levels of consumer satisfaction increase brand recall, thereby empowering the mental formation of brand preference (Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). Greater satisfaction also encourages repeat purchases, thus encouraging the behavioral aspect of brand preference (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1980; Cardozo, 1965).

Brand Love, Brand Loyalty, and Word of Mouth Advocacy

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) define brand love as "the degree of passionate, emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name." They explain that the concepts of brand love and consumer satisfaction are related but different. According to these researchers, brand love is an expression of consumer satisfaction found in a portion of satisfied customers, but not in all. Furthermore, it is different from regular satisfaction in several distinct characteristics. Firstly, the researchers postulate that brand love has a much stronger affection, i.e., emotional element, whereas satisfaction has a more cognitive component. While satisfaction is transactional, they add that brand love comes about after a long-term relationship with a brand involving repeat purchases. The researchers also state that while satisfaction and dissatisfaction depend on fulfilling or failing to meet expectations, brand love depends on no such paradigm. A consumer experiencing brand love is already familiar enough with the brand to know its benefits and shortcomings fully. The researchers found that brand love significantly increased brand loyalty, positive word of mouth, and repeat purchases through their study.

Through multiple studies, Batra et al. (2012) not only agree with the findings of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) but also add that brand love results in a willingness to pay higher prices for the same products and a resistance to being influenced by negative information regarding the brand in question. They also find that a self-brand integration, i.e., brand images that align with a consumer's self-concept and identity, is one of the strongest antecedents of the manifestation of brand love.

Kemp et al. (2012) also note that consumers become committed to brands that facilitate the expression of their self-concepts and self-images. When connections form between a consumer's self-identity and a brand's image, they are likely to share a positive word of mouth regarding the brand with other people. They can effectively become advocates for the brand who motivate others towards adoption. As Keller (2007) notes, word of mouth is nothing new, with research from the 60s and 70s highlighting its impact even back then, and its importance has only grown even more in modern times. Other researchers have found that, especially when it comes to destination branding, engagement with a destination plays a pivotal part in whether or not word-of-mouth advocacy takes place (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020).

Impact of Covid-19 on Tourism, the Hajj, and the Umrah

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the tourism industry worldwide has suffered major losses. Its contribution to the worldwide Gross Domestic Product is almost halved in 2020, leading to global job losses of 18.5% (Rasethuntsa, 2021). As mentioned before in the introductory chapter of this study, most of this impact stems from travel restrictions and border closures. Furthermore, the pandemic has affected attitudes towards tourism in both the sector's customers, i.e., tourists, and the residents of destinations who are key stakeholders in the industry, as they are primary agents of tourism development (Azougagh & Rao, 2022).

As for the impacts of the pandemic on the pilgrimages, in February of 2020, the Saudi government had restricted Hajj attendees to mere 1000 pilgrims from those residing in the KSA. A tiny fraction of the 2.5 million attendees from the year before temporarily suspended the Umrah altogether. Strict guidelines and protocols were set in place for the health and safety of those pilgrims, and some of the previously participating countries had officially withdrawn from the Hajj even before the announcement of restrictions. Furthermore, various aspects of the usual rituals were outright banned, such as touching and kissing the central "Kaaba", to mitigate the risks of viral transmission. In prior years, most pilgrims travelled to the KSA from countries with inadequate public healthcare systems, and many were elderly pilgrims with high comorbidity issues.

Furthermore, due to mass gatherings, respiratory issues have historically been commonplace during the Hajj. The drastic measures put in place by the KSA authorities had been extremely necessary, which signals a need for stringent standards as we advance during the immediate Hajj following the pandemic (Goni et al., 2021). From October 2020, Umrah was allowed to resume with Covid-19 restrictions for the residents of the KSA. It started including foreign residents in November 2020, subject to Covid-19 conditions (Deutsche Welle, 2020; an-Nablusi & Aliyev, 2020).

Research Methodology

This research aims to understand consumer brand journeys concerning the pilgrimages within the context of their experiences before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. This particular area of knowledge has not been explored in detail before the current study, and the data collected and analyzed is qualitative. This research method allows the researchers to examine or investigate the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun 2015). The qualitative analysis largely focuses on making sense of a phenomenon rather than envisaging or explaining it (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022).

Interpretivism has been adopted for the study as the aim is to understand consumer brand journeys from a humanistic viewpoint, taking into account their feelings, emotions, and experiences while interacting with the destination branding of Hajj and Umrah. Given this study's qualitative nature and objectives, particularly in developing an in-depth understanding of consumers, the researchers set the sampling method and sample size based on the Data Saturation Method, which is rooted in the application of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The sample size was thus set to 6 total samples, with three samples each for pre-Covid and during-Covid consumer brand journeys, for data saturation was found to occur at this sample size. The interviews were conducted using in-person, phone, and internet-based teleconferencing platforms.

The collected data was transcribed, codified, and then analyzed ethnographically through thematic analysis to obtain consumer profiles and brand journey maps in pre-Covid and during-Covid contexts. Using thematic analysis entails searching across a dataset to spot, scrutinize, and describe recurrent patterns. The themes are obtained following the interpretation of codes or categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Islam, Hunt, Jantan, Hashim, & Chong, 2020). The journey maps were then further compared and contrasted through cross-analysis to obtain comparative insights on the differences between the pilgrims' pre-Covid and during-Covid consumer brand journeys. While collecting primary data, standard research best practices were strictly followed. Before every interview, consent of the voluntary participation of every respondent was ensured and recorded. The participants were informed that they could stop the interview process at any given time if they did not wish to proceed further and were briefed regarding the uses of the collected data.

Results and Analysis

The findings from the interviews conducted in the form of a consumer journey map in the pre-covid and during-covid eras and discusses the differences in those consumer journeys:

The Pre-Covid Consumer Journey and Usual Touchpoints



Fig 1: The pre-Covid Hajj and Umrah touchpoint map

For Muslims, some level of awareness of the pilgrimage of Hajj comes from simply being part of the faith, as the Hajj is religiously obligatory for all financially and physically capable Muslims and is one of the five basic pillars of the religion (Hoang et al., 2020). The consumer journey for pilgrims before the Covid-19 pandemic starts with this initial level of brand awareness, which is further amplified through information regarding Hajj from family members and peer groups such as colleagues and religious groups. The next step after understanding has been established is the

choice situation. Since there is no alternative to Hajj in Islam and it is an obligatory duty, the choice boils down to from whom the pilgrims would avail logistical services for the pilgrimage. Our respondents indicate that there are generally two choices: full-fledged travel agencies and independent contractors or agents referred to as *Muallem*. The interviewees describe a *Muallem* as a 'religious leader' and a 'trip organizer/leader.' The respondents reported making choices based on personal connections and convenience, as some chose based on the agent being their "father's friend," while others chose agencies in their geographical region.

Once this agent or agency is appointed, the logistics of the pilgrimage are largely in their hands, with the pilgrims now gaining functional knowledge on the particulars of the pilgrimage and its rites, as well as relevant regulations. The sources for such knowledge seem to be either from experienced family members who have already completed a Hajj pilgrimage or from the Agency or *Muallem*. In the case of the Agency or *Muallem* imparting knowledge, this is done through several practice sessions called *Taleem* and through books provided by travel agencies. Once the pilgrim's documents such as air ticket, boarding pass, and visas are in order, they typically set out for the actual trip from the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The respondents have reported that they fly by either Saudi Arabia's national airline, Saudia, or Bangladesh's national airline, Bangladesh Biman. They eventually arrive at the international airport in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, at which point one of their first activities is to get a prepaid SIM card for mobile connectivity. The respondents report that they bought SIM cards from the Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC), Zain, and Telenor.

After that, the pilgrims go to their lodgings, which generally seem to be hotels in the premium price category. One interviewee, however, also reported that locals voluntarily offered their private residences to pilgrims and that they had stayed in such lodgings. After being situated in their lodgings in Mecca, the pilgrims eventually start the Hajj's main or actual religious rites. On the eighth day of *Dhul-Hijjah*, the 12th month of the Islamic calendar, pilgrims enter a state of ritual purity called *Ihram*. This entails wearing specific plain white clothes and restraint from rage and sexual activity (Al Jazeera, 2009).

After entering the state of *Ihram*, all pilgrims head to the location known as Mina, which is composed almost entirely of tents. Here the pilgrims spend the whole day in prayer and reverence for God. On the ninth of *Dhul-Hijjah*, the pilgrims set out to Mount Mercy at Arafat and spend the day praying up to sunset. After sunset, they leave for *Muzdalifah*, where they spend the night under an open sky and collect pebbles for the rites of the next day. The 10th of *Dhul-Hijjah* is what can be considered the main event of the Hajj and is the day of Eid al-Adha, which is the most important celebration in Islam. The pilgrims start from *Muzdalifah* before sunrise and head back to Mina. Once there, they throw seven of the previously collected pebbles at the largest of three *Jamarat*, which are large columns symbolizing the devil. After this rite, the pilgrims participate in ritual animal sacrifice, usually by paying for an animal to be sacrificed in their name. After the gift, the pilgrims change out of the special *Ihram* clothes, with men shaving their heads and women cutting a small lock of hair from the ends, and then go to Mecca to perform the rites of Tawaf and Sa'ee. Tawaf involves circling the Kaaba on foot seven times, and Sa'ee is the rite of walking between the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times (Al Jazeera, 2009). Out of our respondents, half reported that the Tawaf, in particular, had caused strong positive emotional responses, with one reporting they will always cherish the moment when they saw the Kaaba, another feeling "serenity and peace." At the same time, yet another felt that they "can closely connect with Muslims of all colors, races, and cultures."

Afterward, the pilgrims return to Mina, where they will stay for at least two days and throw seven pebbles at all three of the *Jamarat*, as mentioned earlier. Afterward, they will return to Mecca and perform the rite of walking around the *Kaaba* one last time, thus concluding the rituals of the Hajj (Al Jazeera, 2009). When they are at the Kaaba, pilgrims will drink water from the *Zamzam* and even bottle some of it as souvenirs. While this is not technically a mandatory rite of Hajj, the water is considered sacred according to Islamic traditions and is believed to have many health benefits (Al Arabiya English, 2020).

For Umrah, the rites are much simpler, cover only a few steps, and change the order of the rituals somewhat. Pilgrims start with the *Ihram*, then go to *Mecca* to perform the rites as mentioned earlier of *Tawaf* and *Sa'ee*, and finish by removing the *Ihram* and shaving their heads (men) or cutting a small portion of their hair (women) (Islamic Relief, 2022). The rites of *Umrah* are also not bound by a rigid time frame like those of Hajj and can be completed within a few hours if so chosen by the pilgrim (Ayoub, 2021). Although the actual rites of *Hajj or Umrah* are complete by this point, pilgrims use the opportunity of being in Saudi Arabia to visit many of Islam's other holiest sites, especially in the city of Medina. Praying at the *Riad-ul-Jannah*, a part of the *Masjid-E-Nabawi* (Mosque of the Prophet), close to the Prophet Mohammad's (SA) tomb, is most common among our respondents. Visiting other holy sites is also something they partook in, including but not limited to the *Quba Mosque*, *Masjid al-Qiblatayn*, *Masjid Nimrah*, *Mount Uhud*, and *Mount Hira*. Respondents who performed the Hajj pre-covid also spent a good deal of time shopping for souvenirs, electronics, and gold at various supermarkets and local retailers. They also reported enjoying exploring local cuisine before returning to their home country.

When asked whether they would recommend the pilgrimage they experienced to someone else, all of our pre-covid respondents enthusiastically informed us that they would recommend it.

The During-Covid Consumer Journey and Changes

During the covid, almost all of the experience has been altered in the consumer journey, although many touchpoints remain the same. These changes have been visualized in Figure 2, the touchpoint map, through the color orange. From the stage of choosing the logistics provider, i.e., the choice between travel agencies and a Muallem, all of our during-covid pilgrims reported much higher costs, with one reporting that the cost was increased by "20 to 30 thousand" BDT, which is equivalent to almost 200 to 300 USD. Air ticket prices and hotel tariffs were also reported to be increased. Two respondents also reported that the group size was restricted to 7 to 9 members, whereas one reported that the group size had remained unchanged. They also had to get two covid tests to be eligible for the pilgrimage.

Furthermore, they had to register and get approval for all their Hajj and hajj-related prayer ritual plans ahead of time through Saudi Arabia's Tawakkalna app. Most respondents also reported that Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal Airport's service quality had severely deteriorated. One described the situation as "it was all chaos," and another said, "There was much mismanagement in Dhaka Airport. That has been quite a hassle for us." According to one of the respondents, service quality at the hotel was also subpar, and the Saudi police seem to have been unfair to them based on nationality.

The core rites of the pilgrimage were limited in various ways to stop the spread of the Covid 19 virus. Our Interviewees reported that 1 meter of social distancing was strictly enforced, and so were facemasks, with violations of these directives carrying hefty fines throughout the pilgrimage. No one was allowed near the Kaaba for Tawaf and had to perform it at a distance. Due to safety concerns, no one was allowed to touch the Kaaba or kiss the Hajar Aswad (a holy stone relic). No one was even allowed to enter the Haram Sharif (the mosque around the Kaaba) without a valid vaccine card. The respondents also added that directly drinking from the Zamzam had been suspended, with the water now being provided in bottled form.

The divergence in experiences did not stop just at the core pilgrimage rites. All respondents reported offering prayers at the *Riad-ul-Jannah*, as mentioned earlier, with them having access to fixed time slots. Besides the *Riad-ul-Jannah* and the *Masjid-E-Nabawi* complex, the during-covid pilgrims could not visit much outside of religiously mandatory because such tour services had been suspended. Shopping options were very limited for them compared to those who went pre covid, with one reporting, "Besides Al Safia Bridge, Bilal and other gold markets were dark and empty. Most of the fast-food shops were closed too. Only Bin Dawood and a small percentage of shops were open in Makkah (Mecca) and Madinah (Medina)." Another said, "Even in the city, most shops were closed. The roadside shops were not much visible. Only the big shops in Zamzam Pullman Makkah hotel, Hilton Makkah hotel, Taiba Madinah Hotel, and some limited food courts were operating," implying that the options for exploring local food were limited.

Of special note, even after considering all of the adverse effects of the during-pandemic scenario, most of our respondents in this category still reported that they would recommend the experience to others. Only one person had conditional reservations on the matter and said they would refrain from recommending it and suggest a different time. The other person is not very religious and had never gone before, reasoning that the covid restrictions limited certain rites and rituals.



Fig.2: The during-Covid Hajj and Umrah touchpoint map

Consumer Profile of Hajj and Umrah Pilgrim

We have created the following consumer profile templates from our pool of respondents. It is demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: The pilgrimage profile of the respondents

Particulars	Respondent (1)	Respondent (2)
Name:	Kamal	Nazneen
Age:	69	35
Gender:	Male	Female
Relationship status	Married	Married
Occupation	Businessman	Senior Lecturer
Socio-economic status	Affluent class	Upper Class
Location	Dhaka, Bangladesh	Dhaka, Bangladesh
Family Size	Joint	Nuclear
Identity	Grand Father, father, husband, religious Muslim	Mother, Wife, Religious Muslim
Hobbies	Traveling, spending time with family members and friends	Cooking, spending time with family members
Self Esteem	very high.	Very high.
Source of Influence	Family members, faith in God.	Family members, faith in God.
Challenge in Life:	High work-related stresses.	High career stresses.
Solutions to Challenges:	Introspection; seeks comfort in religion, accepts as divine plan.	Introspection; seeks comfort in religion, accepts as divine plan.
Life goals:	seeing dependents grow up as religious, seeing dependents going on pilgrimage.	PhD Degree. Seeing dependents going on pilgrimage.
Particulars	Respondent (3)	Respondent (4)
Name:	Ali	Mita
Age:	29	39
Gender:	Male	Female
Relationship status	Unmarried	Married
Occupation	Businessman	Manager at a multinational firm
Socio-economic status	Upper Middle class	Upper Middle class
Location	Dhaka, Bangladesh	Chittagong, Bangladesh
Family Size	Joint	Joint
Identity	Son, brother, religious Muslim	Mother, Wife, Religious Muslim
Hobbies	Traveling, trying new cuisine	Traveling, spending time with family members
Self Esteem	High.	Very high.
Source of Influence	Father, faith in God.	Husband, faith in God.
Challenge in Life:	Hectic life due to uncertain business structure	Maintaining work-life balance
Solutions to Challenges:	Patience; seeks comfort in religion, accepts as divine plan.	Seeks comfort in religion and accepts it as a divine plan.
Life goals:	Getting a religious and righteous spouse.	Seeing dependents focus on morality and humanity than bookish education
Particulars	Respondent (5)	Respondent (6)
Name:	Karim	Rahman
Age:	41	55
Gender:	Male	Male
Relationship status	Married	Married
Occupation	Banker	Gas Station Manager
Socio-economic status	Upper Middle Class	Upper Middle Class
Location	Sylhet, Bangladesh	Savar, Bangladesh
Family Size	Joint	Nuclear
Identity	Father, husband, religious Muslim	Father, husband, Religious Muslim
Hobbies	Traveling, playing virtual games	Spending time with family members, visiting relatives
Self Esteem	very high.	Moderately high.

Source of Influence	Family members, faith in God.	Elder brother, faith in God.
Challenge in Life:	High career stresses and uncertainty in work.	Family issues
Solutions to Challenges:	Seeks comfort in religion and accepts it as a divine plan.	Seeks blessings as a disguise for problems; accepts as divine plan.
Life goals:	seeing dependents grow up as religious and righteous.	Educating daughters in Arabic medium. Seeing dependents to get religious spouses.

Discussion

From our findings, as a result of Covid, the first major difference seems to be price. The costs of hiring an agency / Muallem, airfares, and hotel tariffs have increased significantly. An educated estimation of the root of this problem is mostly due to airfares and the costs of accommodations. The global airline industry faced a massive decline due to worldwide travel restrictions during the pandemic. By May 2020, the global airline industry had suffered a market value loss of 49%, with stock prices severely crashing. Additionally, the sharp downturn in revenues and massive cash burns made the industry rely heavily on borrowing.

Furthermore, due to the devaluation of shares, poor industry outlook, and uncertainty of the future, lending institutions significantly increased the cost of borrowing capital for the airline industry. These factors led to airlines suffering unprecedented losses due to the pandemic (Dube et al., 2021). The hospitality industry also suffered from major declines due to the pandemic. Revenue losses resulting from tariff drops and travel restrictions had a severe financial impact, resulting in the number of active hotels declining sharply due to the pandemic (Arabadzhyan et al., 2021). It makes sense that companies in both industries would take advantage of any possible opportunity to draw in additional revenue, even if that means indiscriminately raising prices.

One factor that should be kept in mind here is that the pilgrimages of Hajj and Umrah are relatively inelastic regarding demand and supply. This means that increases or decreases in prices lead to little to no change in the quantity demanded and supplied. Hajj has inelastic demand because the pilgrimage is a mandatory religious obligation and one of the five primary pillars of Islam, and therefore entirely unavoidable for pious practitioners of the religion who fit the prescribed criteria (Hoang et al., 2020). Additionally, while the Umrah is voluntary, it is still recommended directly in the core holy text of Islam, the Qur'an, in Sura Al-Baqarah as, "And complete the Hajj and 'umrah for Allah" (The Qur'an, 2:196), thereby making the demand for Umrah quite inelastic in the minds of pious Muslims. As such, prices or costs play a little factor in the quantity demanded, as the demand has a large obligatory component. Furthermore, secondly, the quantity supplied is largely determined by the capabilities of existing infrastructure, as evidenced by hajj quotas from pre-pandemic periods where the government of the KSA assigned country-specific quotas for the number of pilgrims allowed (Khan, 2018; Kaiffee, 2018). It can be logically argued that the price increase resulted from revenue-starved industries taking advantage of an economically inelastic phenomenon.

There also seems to be a disappointment in service quality, with respondents reporting subpar service from Bangladeshi and Saudi Arabian touchpoints. The touchpoints, in particular, were staff at the Bangladeshi airport and staff directly facilitating safety restrictions during Hajj rites. However, given the complexity of handling a mass gathering event amid a deadly global pandemic, one can logically argue that some drop-in service quality can be expected and even excused in public health and safety. Furthermore, while there was disappointment among the respondents, ultimately, it did not affect their willingness to recommend the consumer journey they had experienced and, therefore, can be excused when considering the antecedent factors. As for service quality at the airport in Bangladesh, the touchpoint seems entirely outside the control of those involved with the arrangement and management of the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages and therefore falls outside the scope of this paper.

Implementing safety measures such as social distancing, mandatory vaccinations, and fewer attendees was necessary to keep covid at bay. The during-covid pilgrims still feel restricted from key aspects of the experience (such as touching the Kaaba). Even the regular visits to holy sites not directly related to the Hajj were affected, with access to the Riad-ul-Jannah being strictly

controlled and guided tours of other sites being offered. However, given that all of these restrictions were put in place to protect the health and safety of all stakeholders involved in the face of a highly contagious pandemic and that the mass gathering nature of the pilgrimages historically contributes to increases in the spread of infectious respiratory illnesses (Goni et al., 2021), the benefits of these drawbacks ultimately far outweigh the negatives, and therefore are simply part of the reality of Hajj and Umrah during pandemic-adjacent times.

It was also apparent that the local businesses have been suffering due to the pandemic, as there are such a small handful of retailers even operational after the pandemic. This was reflected in how respondents among the during-pandemic pilgrims did not get to partake in much shopping, nor did they experience much of the local cuisine, compared to those among pre-pandemic pilgrims. That being said, businesses remaining closed were not unique to the KSA during this period. The Covid-19 pandemic caused governments around the globe to impose lockdowns and social distancing measures, as well as created a worldwide public health crisis (Alam et al., 2021), and these factors led to many small businesses suffering financially and shutting down on a global scale (Kalogiannidis, 2020). Once again, the little shopping and dining opportunities were simply an unavoidable product of the overall impact of the pandemic.

Overall, be it the core rites and rituals, the supporting logistical touchpoints, or optional elements of the pilgrimage brand, the consumer journeys of Hajj and Umrah in the during-covid era seem to have many shortcomings compared to how things were in a pre-covid world. Nevertheless, one striking fact stands out from our findings: irrespective of pre-Covid and during-Covid era, all of our respondents reported feelings of great emotional impact and spiritual connection during their pilgrimages. Furthermore, as stated in Chapter 4, most during-pandemic pilgrims would still recommend the journey to others, irrespective of shortcomings. This indicates a strong brand love towards the destination brand of the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages. As we see from the consumer profiles in section 4.3 of this paper, the consumers for the pilgrimages are already very religious and pious by nature. These people seek comfort in their religious beliefs when facing challenges in life and accept them as plans of God. Before going on the pilgrimage, they are pre-conditioned to have brand love for it, as it strongly connects with their self-concepts as pious and religious Muslims.

This situation flips the entire script for consumer journeys on its head. Generally, consumer journeys document the transition that a customer may experience from brand awareness to first purchase to satisfaction and repeat purchase, and eventually sustained brand loyalty (Walters, 2015). The goals and aspirations that drive the consumer (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999), their approach to brand interactions (Higgins & Scholer, 2009), the experiences and emotions they undergo during those interactions (Arnould & Price, 2000), and the satisfaction they may experience at each touchpoint (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1980; Cardozo, 1965) all contribute towards repeat purchases and brand loyalty in the long run. However, the religious 'pre-conditioning' that pilgrims have due to their faith-based backgrounds mean that they are already at the end goal of brand loyalty and brand love at the start of the touchpoints of the journey. This indicates that the usual touchpoint mapping methods for formulating strategies to increase market share by reaching customers are a moot point.

As Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) stated, brand love has a much more emotional basis than what is usually called satisfaction, which is evident in the respondents' expressions of emotional joy, as quoted in section 4.2. Again, as Batra et al. (2012) postulate, those with brand love are resistant to negative information and willing to pay higher prices. These characteristics are also displayed by the respondents, who chose to stay in luxurious hotels during the pilgrimage even though prices were higher to begin with and still act as positive word of mouth advocates for the Hajj and Umrah destination brand despite the many shortcomings caused directly and indirectly because of the Covid 19 pandemic. However, one might wonder about the apparent lack of a long-term relationship with the brand that leads to brand love, as Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Batra et al. (2012) stated. While at face value, it might appear that such a relationship does not exist, it becomes clear that indeed it did exist when one considers that these pilgrims were religious Muslims to begin with, and that the pilgrimages have always been important aspects of their faith.

Logically, their brand awareness and relationship with the brand started far before their actual purchase of the destination brand. It may even be possible that even the brand love at play here has existed for many years or even decades before actual consumption.

Theoretical Implications

The established body of knowledge postulates that brand loyalty and brand advocacy can come about as a result of either brand love or customer satisfaction, where brand love comes about as a result of a stronger affective element after a long-term relationship of repeat purchases, and satisfaction comes about as a result of a stronger cognitive element (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra et al., 2012). Brand loyalty, i.e., repeat purchase behavior of the same brand, is also seen as the practical expression of brand preference, which in turn is a consequence of the progression of brand awareness to consumer satisfaction (Tsai et al., 2015; Aaker, 1996; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1980; Cardozo, 1965), is generally thought to be largely affected by the alignment of a brand's image with the consumer's self-concept (Kemp et al., 2012; Heinonen et al., 2010; Grohmann, 2009; Sirgy, 1982). Especially in the case of destination brands, such phenomena are thought to result from increased engagement with the destination itself (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020), implying that brand consumption is an essential precursor to brand loyalty and advocacy.

Mapping brand touchpoints in the form of consumer journey maps are thought to visually illustrate the process of transformation from brand awareness to brand loyalty and brand love, highlighting how experiences at each touchpoint define changes in consumer attitude towards the brand (Berman, 2020; Walters, 2015; Temkin, 2010), with consumer profiles giving more nuanced insight into the human factors at play (Ciunci, 2016; Temkin, 2010). However, the findings of this study, including the constructed journey maps and consumer profiles, starkly contrast much of this existing literature, as the existence of brand love and brand loyalty is found to supersede the actual purchase and consumption of the Muslim pilgrimage brand of Hajj and Umrah. When applied to religious pilgrimages, this questions the efficacy of existing brand love and brand loyalty literature, especially destination branding.

Managerial Implications

The managers and authorities of the tourism sector need to emphasize winning back the trust of the travelers, as the decision to travel to a particular destination is largely based on the perception of the safety level of that destination (Mwamwaja & Mlozi, 2020). The managerial implications of the findings of this study lie in the consumer profiles constructed from the information gathered from its respondents. Consumer profiles enable companies to gain insight into how to reach their target consumers (Revella, 2015) most successfully. The profiles presented in the study can allow Hajj and Umrah adjacent vendors and service providers, ranging from travel agencies and accommodation providers to retailers and restaurants, to better target and communicate with pilgrims through improved marketing activities and address their needs more effectively (Scott, 2015).

Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study was conducted with participants from among the urban elites of Bangladesh. The study's findings may not apply to pilgrims from other socioeconomic backgrounds or those from different geographic locations, whether from within Bangladesh or from other countries. Therefore, future research can explore the Hajj and Umrah brand journeys from the perspectives of pilgrims from different socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds.

For the during-covid brand journeys, only pilgrims who had undertaken the Umrah were available for interviews, as, during the years 2020 and 2021, the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had restricted participation of the Hajj to its residents and did not allow residents of foreign nations to take part (Hussain, 2021). While many brand touchpoints remain common between the two pilgrimages, the differences in obligatory rites and rituals may lead to more variations in consumer journeys than in this study. Future researchers with access to pilgrims who

are residents of the KSA and have participated in the Hajj in 2020 and 2021 may consider exploring their experiences as a plan for future research.

Lastly, as stated before, this study found potential mismatches between the current understanding of brand love and brand loyalty formation in Muslim pilgrimage destination branding, specifically in the case of Hajj and Umrah. It does not, however, explore the implications of consumer journeys, brand love, and brand advocacy in the context of other Muslim religious tourism, such as Ziarah/Ziarat, i.e., religiously inspired tourism, or Rihla, i.e., travel in pursuit of knowledge (Jafari & Scott, 2014). It also does not explore the implications of these concepts in the contexts of religious tourism of other religions and faiths. Exploring these concepts in light of pilgrimages outside of Hajj and Umrah, both those of Muslims and those of adherents of other faiths should be treated as a prime area for future research to further research and enhance the body of academic knowledge of destination branding.

Conclusions

Through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews, this study analyzes the differences between the brand journeys experienced by consumers of the Hajj and Umrah Muslim pilgrimage destination brands, before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, from the perspectives of the urban elite socioeconomic group of Bangladesh. Through mapping brand touchpoints and constructing consumer personas, it is found that brand love and brand loyalty precede the consumption of the destination brand itself, thereby calling the applicability of the existing body of knowledge regarding brand love and brand loyalty as applied to destination branding into question in the context of Hajj and Umrah. It further outlines the investigation of the applicability of existing knowledge from the perspectives of pilgrims of Hajj and Umrah from other socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds, applicability for other forms of Muslim religious tourism, and applicability for religious tourism as found in other faiths and religions as agendas for future research.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to Dr. Md. Asadul Islam, Assistant Professor of BRAC University, for his genuine inspiration and Research Publishing Academy (RPA) for funding the research. Authors are also thankful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments.

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