

EDUCATIONAL MOTIVATIONS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON RELIGIOUS TOURISM AMONG YOUNG TOURISTS

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ABSTRACT

Monasteries are not only preserved cultural assets of humanity but also hold significant value for local communities, making them important both economically and as tourist destinations. In the context of modern mass tourism, religious tourism is increasingly associated with environmental concerns, sustainable and rural development, and the preservation of heritage sites. This paper explores the relationship between tourism and religious sites, which are often regarded as both cultural and natural heritage. The study focuses on the Royal Monastery of Studenica, located in the heart of the "Golija-Studenica" Biosphere Reserve in the Republic of Serbia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Quantitative research was conducted using a randomized questionnaire and mixed data collection methods, targeting individuals up to 35 years of age. Data were analyzed using PLS-SEM 4.0 software. The findings highlight the role of religious consciousness as a key motivational factor for tourists visiting monasteries. The research also reveals how educational motivations influence the tourist experience and identifies additional drivers of religious tourism, such as ecological, rural, and cultural interests.

Keywords: educational motivation, culture, religious tourism, biosphere reserve

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INTRODUCTION

Human movement driven by religious motives is not a recent phenomenon—it has existed for thousands of years. Over time, these religious journeys have evolved and become more organized, eventually taking on characteristics associated with tourism. In fact, religious tourism is considered one of the oldest forms of tourism, originating from these early faith-based migrations [1]. Religious tourism encompasses all types of travel where religion is the primary motivation and the destination is a religious site. As noted by Raj and Morpeth [2], religious tourism typically involves voluntary, short-term, and unpaid travel. While religion remains the core reason for such trips, it is often accompanied by additional motives. The destination is usually a religious site, which may hold local, national, or international significance.

Before the Industrial Revolution and the advent of modern transportation in the 19th century, most religious pilgrims were required to travel on foot to reach their sacred destinations. Travel by horse or carriage was a luxury reserved for the wealthy. However, with the profound social and cultural changes of the past centuries—particularly advancements in transportation and the effects of globalization—pilgrimage has become one of the most widespread forms of human mobility, as highlighted by scholars [3].

Moreover, religious tourism has become an integral part of a nation's cultural heritage resources and serves as a key driver of cultural tourism [4]. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recognizes religious tourism as a significant contributor to economic growth and the enhancement of tourism offerings, referring to it as a catalyst for cultural understanding [5].

The literature on religious tourism highlights that the religiosity of young people is significantly influenced by broader social trends [6]. This underscores the importance of examining the topic from a scientific perspective. The aim of this study is to explore how educational motivation influences young people's willingness to engage in religious tourism. The focus is specifically on young individuals who have visited religious sites.

Historically, the connection between tourism and religion began with pilgrimages, which eventually evolved into the modern concept of religious tourism. Religion continues to shape not only how people travel but also where they choose to go [7][8]. Many religious tourists are seen as custodians of national traditions [9], both within their home countries and abroad. Today, religion remains a defining characteristic of many populations. It is estimated that approximately 200 million people visit religious shrines annually, accounting for about one-quarter of all global tourist activity [10].

The elderly population is often regarded as the primary bearer of humanity's cultural and religious heritage. However, the widespread belief that religious tourism is associated exclusively with older people is a misconception, as it includes participants from all age groups [11]. Young people, in particular, play an important role in learning, transmitting, and preserving the cultural identity of a population. Cohen [12] paid special attention to the relationship between young people, pilgrimage, and tourism by introducing the concept of the educational pilgrimage into the literature. In order to increase young people's interest in religious tourism, various projects have been launched and routes have been created to encourage visits to religious destinations (e.g., the Route of Saints Cyril and Methodius). However, there are relatively few studies, such as that of Nieminen [13], that examine whether younger generations and women are interested in religious tourism or whether it primarily attracts older generations.

Recent studies have emphasized that young tourists are particularly receptive to meaningful and educational travel experiences. According to Blackwell (2007), young people often perceive religious sites not only as sacred spaces but also as opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, critical reflection, and social connection. These experiences can foster greater intercultural understanding and contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of global religious diversity [14].

A growing body of literature has explored the intersection between educational motivations and religious tourism, particularly among younger populations. While traditional religious motivations—such as spiritual fulfillment, pilgrimage, and devotion—remain central, many young tourists today are also drawn to religious sites for educational and cultural enrichment [15][16].

Educational motivations in this context often include a desire to learn about history, architecture, art, and the cultural practices embedded in religious traditions. Religious sites such as monasteries, churches, mosques, and temples serve as living classrooms, providing young visitors with immersive experiences

that foster both personal and intellectual growth. This aligns with the concept of "experiential learning," where travel becomes a tool for self-development and global awareness [17].

Scholars such as Čerović, Knežević, and Simonović [18] have emphasized the importance of religious tourism as both a cultural and educational experience, particularly for the youth population. Their research highlights how Serbian monasteries serve not only as sacred spaces but also as historical and educational landmarks that attract young visitors eager to learn about the country's spiritual and cultural heritage. According to Petrović, Blešić, and Gajić [19], young people's engagement in religious tourism in Serbia is often influenced by a combination of spiritual, cultural, and educational motives, with monasteries representing places for contemplation, learning, and cultural connection.

The study by Bilim [20] investigates the motivations, perceptions, and behaviors of young Turkish tourists visiting Konya, a significant religious destination. The findings indicate that while traditional religious motives are present, many young tourists are also driven by educational and cultural interests, seeking self-actualization and learning experiences. The study by Gajić et al. [21] explores the factors influencing destination choices among Serbian youth aged 18–26. The findings reveal that educational and self-realization motives significantly influence their travel decisions, highlighting the importance of educational content in religious tourism offerings.

The literature highlights that religious tourism, as a key segment of cultural tourism, has experienced a resurgence in recent years. Since the 1990s, new forms of religious tourism have emerged that extend beyond traditional pilgrimage. These modern expressions often involve not only visits to sacred sites but also participation in social events such as religious or gospel music festivals, cultural gatherings, and educational programs aimed at spiritual enrichment. This evolving trend is commonly referred to as new religious tourism [22].

This study aims to expand current knowledge of religious tourism and raise public awareness of its significance, particularly among younger generations. The findings are expected to inform alternative strategies for improving the management of religious tourism and to emphasize the value of spiritual visits to monasteries.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

The UNESCO World Heritage List is often considered a tourism brand that enhances the visibility of destinations, increases visitor numbers, and stimulates academic interest in studying these sites [23]. In this regard, there are many sacred sites throughout Europe, but one of the most important is the Studenica Monastery in Serbia. Every nation has its place in religious culture. Through tourism, nations have the opportunity to utilize their cultural potential and transform it into a source of development [24]. The Republic of Serbia possesses an exceptional historical and religious heritage, much of which is included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In addition, many of these resources remain insufficiently explored with regard to their potential contribution to sustainable economic development.

The Golija-Studenica Biosphere Reserve is the first biosphere reserve in Serbia, covering an area of 53,804 ha and encompassing many of the country's most valuable natural and cultural sites. It is located in southwestern Serbia and was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2001. This area provides an exceptional setting for learning and research, offering opportunities for knowledge exchange, tourism development, and other forms of sustainable development recognized at both the national and international levels. The designation of biosphere reserve was granted on the basis of the natural values of the Golija Nature Park, as well as the rich cultural heritage of the 12th-century Studenica Monastery, which has been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1986. Bearing all of the above in mind, it is clear that this area is of interest not only to the natural sciences but also to the social sciences.

It should be noted that the majority of religious tourists visiting the Studenica Monastery are domestic visitors, and as such they represent an important part of Serbian cultural identity. Religious tourists are considered to play a significant role in maintaining, preserving, and strengthening that identity [8].

DATA COLLECTION AND MODEL

Data were collected through a field survey conducted at the Studenica Monastery, strategically positioned near the entrance to maximize visitor participation. Researchers approached visitors directly using a random interception method to ensure a diverse sample. This approach involved estimating the age of potential participants before inviting them to complete the survey, allowing the researchers to target the intended age group more effectively. The survey was conducted over a six-month period, with data collected on different days, including weekends and days of special events. This approach enabled the researchers to capture a broad range of visitors, thereby improving the representativeness of the sample. The questionnaire was available in both English and Serbian to accommodate visitors with different linguistic backgrounds. Despite these efforts, some visitors declined to participate, primarily because of time constraints.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents

	Frequency (%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	27
Female	73
<i>Age (years)</i>	
18-25	60
26-35	40
<i>Education</i>	
Secondary/high school	27.5
University degree	41.4
Master's degree	19.5
PhD	11.5
<i>Monthly income</i>	
< 300 EUR	20.7
301 – 500 EUR	13.8
501 – 700 EUR	12.6
701 – 1000 EUR	6.9
> 1000 EUR	6.9
No statement	39.1

Source: Authors' calculation.

The sampling method employed was non-probability sampling through random interception, which was considered appropriate given the transient nature of the visitor population at the monastery. Potential participants were approached based on their presence at the entrance, an area with consistent visitor traffic, ensuring a reasonably random selection of individuals. In total, 280 visitors were initially approached, of whom 140 completed the questionnaire. The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents revealed a notable gender imbalance, with 73% female and 27% male participants. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that women are generally more willing to participate in surveys, particularly in the context of community and religious events, as reported by Nieminen [13].

In addition to the findings of this study, age structure is an important factor for tourism planners and destination managers, as it provides valuable information for designing tourism offerings [10]. The same author also points out that the interests of young people differ from those of middle-aged and older visitors.

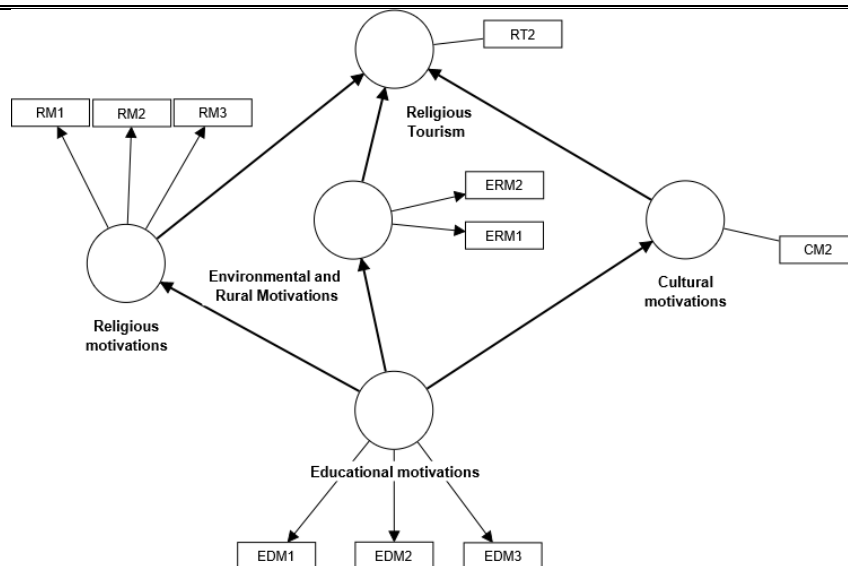


Figure 1. Research model

Source: Authors' calculation.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for data analysis. SmartPLS uses the partial least squares estimation method and does not impose strict requirements regarding sample size. PLS-SEM is particularly suitable for studies with relatively small samples, which is an important consideration given that this study included 140 respondents. Conventional covariance-based SEM techniques generally require larger samples to achieve adequate statistical power, making PLS-SEM a more appropriate choice in this case (Hair et al., 2017) [25,26]. Version 4.0.8.3 of the SmartPLS software was used for the analysis. The analysis followed the standard two-step procedure, consisting of the evaluation of the measurement model and the evaluation of the structural model. This approach is well suited to exploratory research, allowing the assessment of complex relationships between observed and latent variables without strict distributional assumptions. Since this study aims to examine the factors influencing visitors' experiences at the monastery, PLS-SEM represents an appropriate analytical method [27,28].

Based on the reviewed literature, it can be concluded that educational motivation in religious tourism has been examined from various perspectives. However, the literature review also indicates that relatively few studies focus specifically on young people and their interest in and motivation for religious tourism. Accordingly, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Educational motivation (EDM), through religious motivation (RM), has a positive impact on religious tourism (RT) among young tourists.

H2: Educational motivation (EDM), through environmental and rural motivation (ERM), has a positive impact on religious tourism (RT) among young tourists.

H3: Educational motivation (EDM), through cultural motivation (CM), has a positive impact on religious tourism (RT).

H4: Educational motivation (EDM) positively influences religious tourism (RT) among young tourists.

RESULTS

The first part of the results presents the evaluation of the measurement model. The validity of the theoretical model of educational motivation in religious tourism among young tourists was tested using SmartPLS software. The SmartPLS software (version 4.0.8.3) is particularly user-friendly, offering robust least squares estimation without imposing stringent sample size requirements. The analysis conducted using SmartPLS involved two critical stages: evaluating the measurement model to ensure construct validity and reliability, followed by assessing the structural model to examine the relationships among the latent variables [29].

Internal consistency and convergent validity were assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Cronbach's alpha coefficient [30] was used to assess internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha values for the latent variables are presented in Table 2.

Nunnally [31] suggests that values ≥ 0.7 are considered acceptable, while Churchill [32] proposes that a value of 0.6 is also acceptable, indicating that the internal consistency requirement of the proposed model has been satisfied. In addition, convergent validity was confirmed ($AVE \geq 0.5$), as all factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.1$, $p < 0.05$) [33]. Table 2 presents the values of construct reliability and validity.

Table 2. Results for convergent validity and internal consistency reliability

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho a)	Composite reliability (rho c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Educational Motivations	0.860	0.865	0.915	0.782
Environmental and Rural Motivations	0.794	0.795	0.907	0.829
Religious Motivations	0.697	0.702	0.831	0.621

Source: Authors' calculation.

In the following stage, further statistical analysis was performed to obtain the values of the indicators included in the proposed structural model.

During the evaluation of the structural model, model fit indices were not considered because, although covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) relies heavily on model fit, this is much less important in PLS-SEM [27]. As Westland [34] points out, researchers may incorrectly conclude that PLS-SEM is not suitable for theory testing and confirmation. Therefore, researchers should exercise caution when considering the applicability of model fit measures in PLS-SEM [35]. The latent variables and the questionnaire used in this study were developed based on the research of Robina Ramírez and Fernández Portillo [36], with the questionnaire adapted to the geographical context investigated in this study.

Following the recommendations of Hair [27], bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was performed. During the initial iteration, the measurement model did not satisfy the required criteria because of a low AVE value. Therefore, two indicators (RT1 and CM1) were removed from the model. After the revised model satisfied all requirements for internal consistency and convergent validity, the PLS algorithm was applied.

Table 3. PLS algorithm after bootstrapping

Path	Path coefficient (β)	<i>P</i> values	Inference
Cultural Motivations -> Religious Tourism	0.190	0.125	Not confirmed
Educational Motivations -> Cultural Motivations	0.224	0.069	Not confirmed
Educational Motivations -> Environmental and Rural Motivations	0.304	0.000	Confirmed
Educational Motivations -> Religious Motivations	0.702	0.000	Confirmed
Environmental and Rural Motivations -> Religious Tourism	0.138	0.197	Not confirmed
Religious Motivations -> Religious Tourism	0.460	0.000	Confirmed
<i>Total Indirect Effect</i>			
Educational Motivations -> Religious Tourism	0.309	0.000	Confirmed

Source: Authors' calculation.

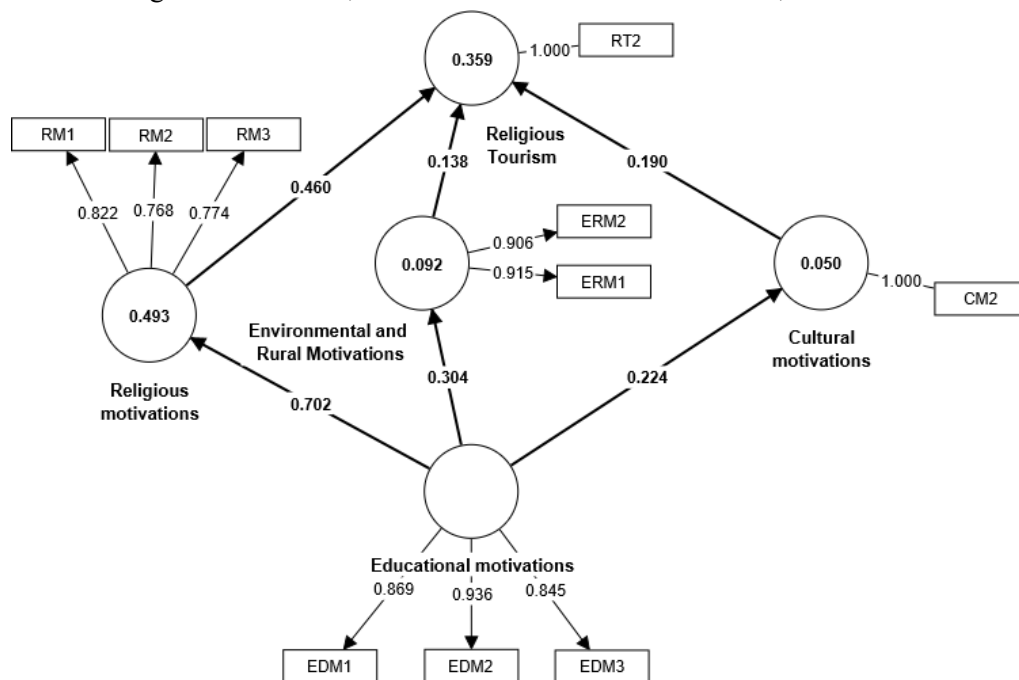
In order to validate the model, it is necessary to examine the outer loading values presented in Table 4. It is generally recommended that these values exceed 0.7. As shown in the table, all outer loadings for the observed construct variables are above the recommended threshold. Furthermore, all outer loading values are statistically significant ($p = 0.000$).

Table 4. *Outer loadings*

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
CM2 <- Cultural Motivations	1.000	1.000	0	0	0.000
EDM1 <- Educational Motivations	0.869	0.870	0.033	26.429	0.000
EDM2 <- Educational Motivations	0.936	0.935	0.015	62.455	0.000
EDM3 <- Educational Motivations	0.845	0.844	0.037	22.781	0.000
ERM1 <- Environmental and Rural Motivations	0.915	0.914	0.038	23.864	0.000
ERM2 <- Environmental and Rural Motivations	0.906	0.899	0.048	18.681	0.000
RM1 <- Religious Motivations	0.822	0.819	0.051	16.137	0.000
RM2 <- Religious Motivations	0.768	0.768	0.051	15.137	0.000
RM3 <- Religious Motivations	0.774	0.773	0.057	13.521	0.000
RT2 <- Religious Tourism	1.000	1.000	0	0	0.000

Source: Authors' calculation.

Figure 2 presents the path coefficients, indicating the direct and indirect effects of different types of motivation on religious tourism. The path coefficients for the relationships between educational motivation and all latent variables included in the model are positive, indicating that educational motivation has a positive effect on religious motivation, environmental and rural motivation, and cultural motivation.

**Figure 2.** *Path coefficients (β) of the proposed model*

Source: Authors' calculation.

According to the proposed hypotheses, educational motivation has a strong and positive indirect effect on religious tourism through religious motivation. The relationship between educational motivation and religious motivation is strong ($\beta = 0.702$) and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), while religious motivation also has a positive and statistically significant effect on religious tourism ($\beta = 0.460$; $p < 0.01$). These findings indicate that an increase in educational motivation contributes positively to religious tourism. Therefore, H1 is supported. These results are consistent with previous studies indicating the positive effects of religious motivation while emphasizing the importance of including extrinsic tourism motivations as well [37].

Furthermore, educational motivation (EDM) has a positive effect on environmental and rural motivation among young tourists, as indicated by a statistically significant path coefficient ($\beta = 0.304$, $p < 0.01$). Environmental and rural motivation also shows a positive effect on religious tourism ($\beta = 0.138$); however, this relationship is not statistically significant ($p = 0.197$). Therefore, H2 cannot be fully confirmed. Although educational motivation significantly influences environmental and rural motivation, the indirect effect on religious tourism is not statistically significant. These findings are consistent with those of Gambhir [38], who states that tourism in rural areas may be partially or entirely motivated by religious factors.

Regarding the relationship between educational motivation (EDM) and cultural motivation (CM), a positive relationship ($\beta = 0.224$) was identified among young respondents; however, it was not statistically significant ($p = 0.069$). Similarly, the positive effect of cultural motivation on religious tourism ($\beta = 0.190$) was also not statistically significant ($p = 0.125$). Therefore, H3 is rejected. Moaven [39] explains this finding by suggesting that other variables, such as modern communication and information technologies, may exert a stronger influence on religious tourism.

Finally, the PLS algorithm revealed a significant total indirect effect, indicating a positive relationship ($\beta = 0.309$) between educational motivation and religious tourism among young tourists. This relationship is statistically significant ($p = 0.000$), providing support for H4. Similar findings have been reported by several previous studies [9,36,40]. As Bilim and Düzgüner [41] concluded, the effects associated with religious tourism are predominantly positive, promoting peace and tolerance rather than negative outcomes.

Overall, the path analysis confirms the statistical significance of two hypotheses. Specifically, H1 and H4 are supported, H2 is partially supported, whereas H3 is not statistically significant and is therefore rejected.

CONCLUSION

This study represents a valuable scientific contribution to the academic literature on educational motivation and religious tourism, particularly through the perspective of young people. It is important to clarify that the focus of this paper is not on religion as a concept or on different religions, but rather on how young people perceive the relationship between education and religious tourism.

In the theoretical part of the paper, the authors focused on religious tourism, its definition and significance, as well as on the role of motivation among young people. Regardless of the different academic perspectives on pilgrims and tourists, this study identified a common finding: the positive influence of educational motivation on religious tourism among young people. The paper also highlights the importance of education for preserving national identity, which is transmitted and reinforced through tourism.

The findings of this research underscore the potential of religious tourism to serve as a vehicle for education, cultural awareness, and the strengthening of national identity among young people. Educational motivation can enhance the tourism experience, making it more meaningful and enriching. By incorporating educational elements into religious tourism, providers can not only attract a younger audience but also foster more informed and engaged visitors who respect and appreciate cultural heritage. Moreover, the inclusion of educational programs in religious tourism can stimulate local economies and encourage sustainable tourism practices. As educated tourists often seek deeper connections with their destinations, religious tourism sites can benefit from increased visitor satisfaction and, consequently, repeat visits. Additionally, these educational efforts can reinforce the historical and cultural significance of sites such as the Studenica Monastery, helping to ensure their preservation and relevance for future generations.

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The territorial focus on a single monastery in the Republic of Serbia may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the sample size of 140 respondents suggests the need for broader data collection to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of young people's perceptions and motivations.

Future research could expand on these findings by conducting comparative analyses of youth religious tourism and silver tourism. Such comparisons could reveal differences in motivations and perceptions across age groups and ultimately support the development of more targeted strategies within the religious tourism sector. In addition, policymakers should consider the findings demonstrating the positive influence of educational motivation on religious tourism. Destination managers should develop programs that incorporate educational components, such as workshops or guided tours emphasizing the historical significance and cultural context of religious sites, to ensure that the benefits and costs of tourism remain balanced [42,43]. This approach can enrich the visitor experience while better addressing the interests of younger tourists.

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