

CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN GREEK URBAN AND REGIONAL AREAS

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Abstract

In the rapidly evolving global landscape, visual communication has become a preeminent form of expression. Investigating the impact of alternative photographic narratives, in contrast to the antiquated pictures disseminated by religious tourist organizations, is crucial for reinterpreting religious tours in both urban and rural regions of Greece. This strategy addresses the increasing demand for educational coherence in this developing sector of tourism.

This study aims to investigate the efficacy of contemporary photographic testimonies related to holy sites in Greece as an educational tool for enhancing their associations to religious tourism. Additionally, it seeks to ascertain whether this approach, through the use of appropriate visual media, can provoke interest for its development.

Methodologically, a multifaceted research approach was adopted. Initially, questionnaires were distributed to a random sample of 134 students enrolled in tourism programs across various institutions in Greece, focusing on their perspectives of religious tourism and sacred sites in the Hellenic urban and rural areas. In the subsequent phase, an experimental group from the original random sample was exposed to compelling photographic trends depicting holy landmarks and significant centers or events in urban and regional areas. Following this, semi-structured interviews were performed with each member in this group to evaluate potential transformations.

The study's primary findings indicate a significant shift in the participants' original opinions. This alteration is an indication of fresh viewpoints that have the capacity to forge more profound connections and reshape the manner in which contemporary tourism students perceive religious heritage. Unpretentious contemporary photographic narratives have demonstrated efficacy as educational tools that motivate and equip the upcoming generation

with knowledge and insights, so introducing broader travel perspectives to religious tourism in Greece.

Key words: *Photography, religious tourism, educational tool, Greece.*

1. Introduction

Greece is a country with a strong religious identity, deeply intertwined with its rich cultural, historical, and spiritual heritage. However, the Greek religious tourism sector has not yet fully capitalized on this unique legacy. Despite its potential, it remains underdeveloped, with modern tourism strategies and the revitalization of this alternative sector failing to receive the attention they require. Greek travel agencies, in most cases, rely on pre-established pilgrimage routes and generic promotional tactics, overlooking the deeper, experiential aspects of religious sites and traditions. A recent case study on inaccessible religious festivals ("panigiria") in Sifnos found that a considerable number of tourists are encouraged to attend these events after being exposed to the first-hand stories of others uploaded on social media platforms (Tsilimpokou, 2023). However, ongoing observations indicate that this kind of event's authentic experiences and atmosphere, which often attract alternative tourism enthusiasts (Hung et al., 2020) and are shared in social media through photography (Wood et al., 2023), remain insufficiently represented in mainstream promotional campaigns for Greek religious tourism (Chrysanthi et al., 2015). This gap between the unfiltered experience and tourism promotion underscores the need for new approaches that convey both the deeper essence and contemporary perspective of religious tourism, making it more appealing to visitors and future tourism professionals.

Such an innovative approach lies in contemporary photographic narratives, which, as the dominant "global" language of our time, carry the power to bridge the divide between tourism marketing and the complex needs of alternative travelers. Although the younger generation typically demonstrates limited interest in religious tourism (Hardy and Taylor, 2024), it shows a strong predilection for photographic travel content (Khoa et al., 2021). This observation directs us to the core of the research, which examines the potential intersection between religious tourism — a sector that frequently struggles to engage youth — and contemporary photographic narratives. Visual testimonies resonate profoundly with younger audiences and are increasingly recognized as a valuable educational tool (Shaw, 2020). The study seeks to determine whether this interconnection can positively influence tourism students, ultimately shaping the next generation of travelers. In the future, these students will play a crucial role in successfully developing and sustaining the sector, thus supporting the Greek regional and urban religious destinations.

Photography, when exploited in a strategic and meaningful way, stops being just a medium of record, but becomes a dynamic narrative instrument capable of conveying the depth, atmosphere, and intangible aspects of religious experiences. To understand more precisely the scope of this study, it is important to clarify two key terms of the title. Photographic narratives refer to visual representations that:

- Serve as powerful tools for communicating true stories
- Portray issues honestly and without bias
- Capture authentic representations of both tangible and intangible elements of religious and spiritual life (sacred sites, religious customs etc.)
- Do not mislead viewers or promote specific agendas

Additionally, the term "contemporary" refers to:

- Modern or current trends in photography

- The latest visual and storytelling techniques in photography
- Approaches that reflect today's aesthetic, technological advancements, & conceptual ideas

With this in mind, photography can be used as an educational tool that not only provides information about religious destinations but also fosters a deeper connection between students and the country's religious heritage (Putra and Nindhia, 2024; Han, 2024).

Primarily, this study seeks to investigate and evaluate whether contemporary photographic narratives can serve as an effective educational means for understanding religious tourism and encourage their active engagement with the sector. In particular, it examines whether such photos can:

- Stimulate students' interest in religious tourism
- Reshape their perceptions of this topic culturally, socially, and conceptually
- Encourage active engagement in its development
- Strengthen young people's association with Greek religious destinations
- Inspire students to explore various aspects of the Greek religious tourism and therefore, contributing to the sustainable development of both regional and urban religious destinations in Greece.

By addressing these issues, this research contributes to a wider academic discourse on innovation in tourist education. In addition, it emphasizes photography's transformational significance, not simply as a passive medium of representation, but as a dynamic tool of experiential reception with the potential to redefine how religious tourism is taught, promoted, and ultimately experienced.

2.Theoretical Framework

In the ever-changing world of alternative travel, religious tourism is a multifaceted concept, navigating between the impacts of modern technological changes and the broader sociocultural context. By introducing new ideas and identities, the rise of new market segments such as volunteer-focused activities, spiritual retreats, and New Age spiritual journeys ushers in a new age (Iliev, 2020). A notable example is the term "spiritual development tourism," which emphasizes introspection and highlights the critical need for a comprehensive typology that addresses both religious and secular seekers of meaningful spiritual experiences (Robledo, 2015).

Given that religious tourism has become an integral part of the wider tourism industry (Raj and Morpeth, 2007), and through its unique characteristics, which enhance cultural development and cooperation between major divine religions, it plays a central role in guiding human evolution. Also, it provides a fertile ground for innovation and cultural flourishing (Budovich, 2023). In light of these considerations, it is vital to prioritize the critical reappraisal and revitalization of its core, especially among the younger generation and future professionals in the industry. Encouraging their perceptions to be not only updated but also free from any preconceived notions or misconceptions, they can contribute to a more progressive attitude and management towards this form of alternative tourism to promote sustainable development (GOAL 4, UNITED NATIONS).

For the integration of new concepts, there is no more suitable environment than educational institutions and specifically tourism professions schools, where ideas multiply with increased momentum and are embraced with a new perspective, fostering a lively ambiance that favors their rapid diffusion. The contemporary trajectory of social progress has required a critical reassessment of pedagogical methodologies and educational paradigms (Meghan, 2019). Of course, the shortcomings of the current tourism curriculum, highlighted by the partial vision of teachers, the lack of value-based education in sustainable tourism, and

the absence of practical skills for the labor market, highlight the urgent need for alterations towards a new educational approach that incorporates specific skills, especially innovative thinking, into the study plans for authentic alignment with the principles and mission of the university (Mínguez et al., 2021).

While academics extensively document the impact of technology on religious tourism, as in almost every aspect of everyday life, there is a notable tendency from their position to delve deeper into exploring the impacts rather than extending knowledge and conclusions to predict future behaviors, revealing a critical gap in the formulation of well-informed contributions to the field (Rashid, 2018). Within the same stream, the ubiquitous growth of images as the primary means of communication, particularly prevalent among young people, is becoming undeniable, as it has now become the most popular user-generated content (Taecharungroj and Mathayomchan, 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Zhan et al., 2023). Recognizing photography as a language that resonates with students could be used to a considerable extent to enhance teaching. Consequently, their delving into the religious tourism prospects necessitates the transmutation of data into visual language, epitomizing a primary aspect of our time.

Photography has proven to serve as an invaluable educational tool. It inspires, encourages reflection, prompts reflective observation, enhances creativity, and helps educators visualize abstract concepts and introduce intangible elements (Currie and Göttert, 2023). Therefore, incorporating contemporary photographic trends, such as current styles, techniques, or storytelling methods, into educational practices can complement the traditional tools, providing a strategic advantage in restructuring pedagogical approaches in the religious tourism field. Images sourced from prominent social media platforms such as Instagram can serve as valuable and representative data for comprehensive studies in the tourism sector, as Ning et al. (2023) pointed out.

Furthermore, as a visual guide, unaffected photographic evidence could provide a powerful means of navigation in complex historical and cultural contexts, enhancing a deeper understanding of religious sites. This is proven by the success of photo-based virtual tours, particularly in cultural heritage, which highlight distinctive and breathtaking features through interactive map visualizations that improve comprehension and make it easier to plan an in-person visit (Antinozzi et al., 2022). In parallel, the dimension of religious tourism, which includes cultural globalization, suggests the increasing international exchange of goods and cultural symbols daily (Moaven et al., 2017). Thus, the common visual language between nations becomes integral to this interconnected narrative.

As demonstrated by the preceding points, modern photographic records could serve as a powerful educational instrument in fostering student engagement with religious tourism, offering a visually immersive approach that could deepen understanding and appreciation of cultural-spiritual heritage. By integrating carefully curated contemporary photos of religious destinations into tourism studies, students could develop a stronger connection to these sites (Onyekuru, 2024). In addition to stimulating scholarly curiosity, this visual method may raise critical awareness of the evolving role of religious tourism in regional and urban sustainability, especially in Greece, where sacred landmarks and pilgrimage sites constitute an essential component of the country's cultural environment. As students gain insight into the economic and social impact of religious tourism, they could become more inclined to support and promote sustainable tourism practices, ensuring the long-term preservation of these destinations while contributing to local economies. Thus, present-day photographic storytelling could transcend mere documentation, becoming a transformative medium that bridges education, culture, and sustainable tourism development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Stages

This study implemented a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014), using a combination of techniques such as structured questionnaires, exposure to actual images chosen by photo experts and academics for a tailored course, and individual interviews. According to Miles and Hubermann (1994) and Robson (2007), mixed research methods allow a more thorough study by combining qualitative and quantitative data. This process provides for a more in-depth examination of the research issue, allowing for insights that are feasible in real-world scenarios (Saunders et al., 2016). The subsequent sections will thoroughly cover the research phases in detail.

Phase 1: Pre-Intervention Questionnaires

In the initial phase of this study, a questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 134 students enrolled in tourism-related programs at various educational institutions in Greece. This approach was designed to include a rather wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, enhancing the study's findings' external validity and generalizability. The sample was carefully balanced to ensure gender representation, with 59% women and 41% men. The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale to gather data on key areas of interest related to religious tourism. These areas included: personal interest in religious tourism, the interest in religious tourism as part of academic studies, the influence of social media and friends on religious tourism choices, the role of Greek travel agencies in shaping religious tourism preferences, and previous participation in religious tourism experiences. The object of this phase was to gain a fundamental understanding of participants' initial ideas and intentions concerning religious tourism, along with any prior knowledge or experience regarding sacred tourist attractions in general and in Greece.

Phase 2: Selection of the Experimental Group & Educational Intervention

Following the collection of the questionnaire outcomes, a data analysis process was conducted to identify students exhibiting the lowest level of interest in religious tourism. From this subset of students, 15 were randomly selected to form the experimental group. These 15 students then participated in a carefully curated 45-minute educational intervention designed to increase their involvement with religious tourism.

This intervention included the display of genuine photographic narratives that laid emphasis on sacred locations, events, historical or cultural elements, and personal experiences from religious travels. The selected photographs illustrated the distinguished value of each place while also accentuating its cultural wealth, incorporating characteristics of the natural surroundings. Furthermore, they captured both material and intangible facets, reflecting the broader religious heritage alongside Greek places' unique regional and urban features. These images also depicted scenes that offered visitors opportunities for spiritual fulfillment or joy, enhancing their experience of the sacred atmosphere. Serving as a foundation for analysis and discussion, these visual materials encouraged deeper engagement with religious tourism.

The photographic documents used in this intervention were carefully selected from an assortment of digital media and personal archives, ensuring an appropriate modern thematic and unbiased depiction of both tourist and local engagements with these religious sites. They also highlighted aspects of religious travel beyond the conventional approaches, intentionally deviating from the conventional promotional content typically offered by travel agencies (Cooper, 1994).

This approach provided that the educational intervention was both instructive and culturally appealing for the participants in the experimental group. It conformed to the study process by offering a well-informed and comprehensive portrayal of Greek holy sites through well-curated photographic narratives.

Phase 3: Post-Intervention Interviews

Immediately after the educational intervention, each student in the experimental group participated in individual interviews, as discourse, dialogue, and argumentation are key instruments in qualitative approaches (Issari and Pourkos, 2015). The questions for these interviews were designed to facilitate an unguided positioning of the participants' thoughts and feelings, providing an authentic depiction of their views about religious tourism. Additionally, particular attention was given to the researcher/interviewer as an essential factor for developing a dialogue with the participants (Rapley, 2001), encouraging them to share their thoughts, even on subjects indirectly related to the main theme.

The interviews were conducted directly after the course to assess any immediate changes in the students' perspectives regarding religious tourism in Greece. The goal was to examine shifts in students' viewpoints and measure any alterations in their interest levels in religious travels following the intervention. By focusing on their reactions and reflections, these interviews provided valuable qualitative data on the effectiveness of the intervention and helped in understanding its broader impact on the students' perceptions.

3.2 Ethical Issues

In the evolving field of research methodology, where social and technological innovations drive rapid fluid changes, the fundamental guide is the ethical compass (Iphofen, 2020). In this context, the present research followed the steps mentioned by Tatsis (2004), according to which informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and providing them with the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

4. Results

4.1 Pre-Intervention Quantitative findings & analysis

The quantitative data collected from the Likert scale questionnaire (before the intervention) were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Excel, focusing on frequency distribution to represent the number of students' responses. The results, displayed in the bar chart, show the distribution of responses to the question regarding personal interest in participating in religious tourism activities.

As illustrated in *Figure 1*, 61.6% of students strongly disagreed with the idea, while 24.8% disagreed. Meanwhile, 17.6% remained neutral, and only a small fraction—3.2%—agreed. Notably, none of the respondents strongly agreed with participating in such activities. These findings indicate a predominant lack of enthusiasm among students regarding religious tourism. This result suggests that students generally do not perceive religious tourism as an appealing activity, possibly due to beliefs, lack of interest, or alternative travel preferences. A similar trend was observed in a recent study by García-del Junco et al. (2021), which found that Generation Z higher education students are less likely to participate in religious tourism activities, indicating a shift towards secularization and diverse travel motivations.

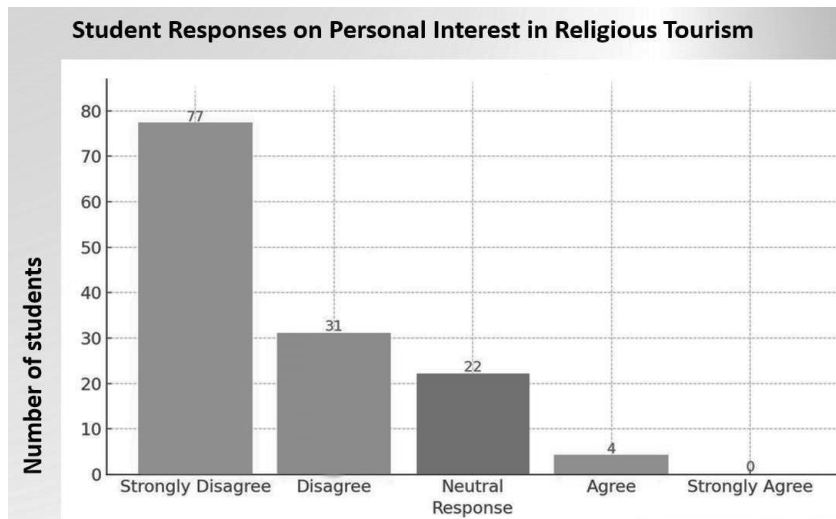


Figure 1. Distribution of students' personal interest in religious tourism

Building on this, in the question regarding their interest in religious tourism as a subject within their academic tourism studies, the results indicate that a significant majority of students are not interested in the topic. Specifically, 69.4% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement (Figure 2). Additionally, 21.6% of students remained neutral on the matter, and only 9.0% agreed, with no students strongly agreeing (0%). These data indicate that the majority of students do not see religious tourism as an engaging or intriguing topic in their academic curriculum, with none expressing significant excitement for its ceremonial features. Recent research indicates that young people's lack of interest in religion is a crucial element impacting their views toward religious education in schools (Makosa, 2022). This may also suggest that students confuse religion with religious tourism, further distancing themselves from its deeper cultural and spiritual dimensions.

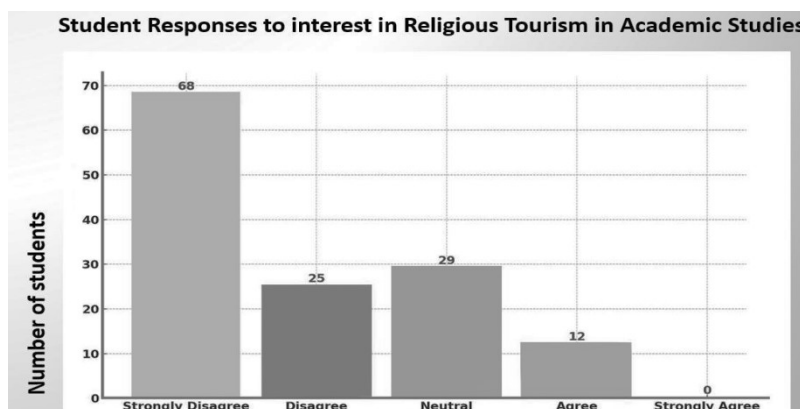


Figure 2. Distribution of Students' Interest in Religious Tourism as Part of

In continuation, 100% of students strongly disagreed with the statement that their interest or participation in religious tourism experiences has been influenced by religious travel agencies in Greece. This result suggests that Greek religious travel agencies have had little or no impact on shaping students' interest or participation in religious tours. It may indicate that the promotional efforts of these agencies are either insufficient or not effectively targeting the younger demographic. The fact that the students assessed have not been influenced by such travel companies may indicate a weakness in the way religious tourism is advertised and promoted. It may be essential for these travel agencies to rethink their marketing strategies by

adjusting their approaches to better cater to the evolving preferences of tourists, focusing on enhancing the overall customer experience, as suggested by Ho et al. (2024), and specifically targeting the needs of younger demographics.

Furthermore, 81% of students either agree or strongly agree with the statement that any interest or involvement they have in religious tourism experiences has been influenced by photos on social media and the visual storytelling of their friends. Conversely, 19% of students remained neutral, while no respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (Figure 3).

This suggests that visual content shared on social media plays a significant role in shaping students' perceptions and engagement with any kind of religious travel. The absence of disagreement highlights the powerful influence of social media in fostering interest in tourism experiences, particularly among younger generations. This aligns with recent research that emphasizes the importance of generational segmentation in the marketing strategies of tourism destinations (Correia et al., 2025). By understanding the role of UGC (user-generated content) in shaping cognitive and emotional perceptions, religious tourism marketers can more effectively tailor their strategies to engage younger demographics and strengthen their connection with this alternative form of tourism.

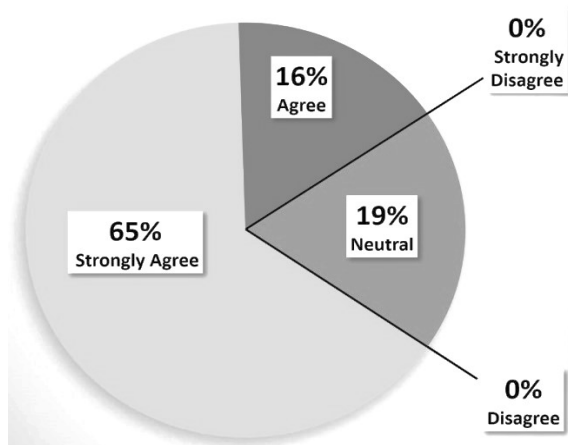


Figure 3. Students' responses influenced by social media regarding religious tourism.

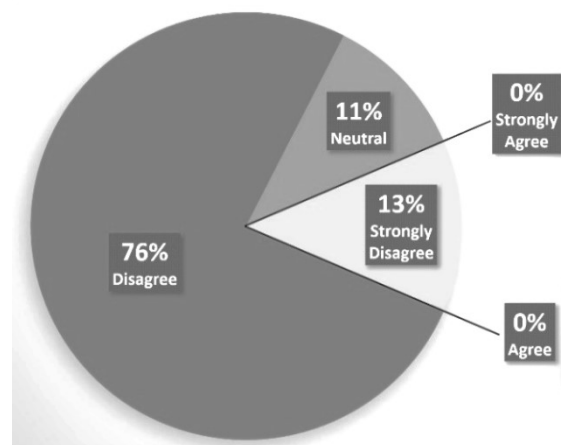


Figure 4. Students' responses to the statement about how frequently they have participated in religious tourism experiences, either in the past or currently.

In response to the statement, "I frequently participated in religious tourism experiences in the past or recently," the distribution of responses further highlights the limited engagement of students in such activities. As Figure 4 shows, a majority of respondents (76%) disagreed with the statement, indicating that they rarely engage in religious tourism, while an additional 13% strongly disagreed, signifying a complete lack of participation. Only 11% of students remained neutral, suggesting occasional involvement, whereas no respondents selected agree or strongly agree, demonstrating that frequent or consistent participation in religious trips is virtually nonexistent among the surveyed group. The results suggest that travel related to religion is not a prevalent activity among the surveyed students, with the overwhelming majority either rarely participating or not participating at all. Regardless of personal interest, engagement in religious tourism remains low, which may suggest the influence of structural, social, or cultural barriers. This is supported by Nguyen (2024), who noted that factors such as travel motivation and trip costs significantly impact young people's decisions to engage in spiritual tourism, implying that such barriers may limit participation.

4.2 Post-Intervention Qualitative Findings and Analysis

Following the quantitative analysis, qualitative data were collected to delve deeper into students' opinions of religious tourism and the influence of modern photographic narratives. A chosen subset of students, determined by their first negative reactions to religious tourism, took part in a carefully curated and well-structured course that presented them with genuine current visual narratives involving religious travel. In-depth post-exposure interviews offered immediate insights into changes in their opinions, enabling a more complete understanding of how present-day photo storytelling can influence religious tourist interest.

One of the most noteworthy findings was the shift in students' perceptions of religious tourism as an experience. Many initially regarded religious travels as rigid, outdated, or solely focused on religious obligations. However, exposure to suitable, trendy, and visually appealing images enabled them to reinterpret this aspect more dynamically and engagingly. As one student (Participant 6) remarked:

"...The pics were so cool!... different from what we normally see... showing that a religious trip can actually be interesting and fun...not just about the typical visits we're used to knowing..."

This response demonstrates the effectiveness of current visual storytelling in reshaping cognitive associations with religious tourism. Furthermore, the findings indicate that when holy sites are presented more appealingly and unconventionally, beyond their ritualistic functions, they can spark curiosity and attract a broader audience, particularly younger demographics. Moreover, as future tourism professionals, these scholars will play a key role in redefining the appeal of religious destinations and could contribute to their sustainable development. Students learn through photography that a well-created place brand must authentically integrate sustainable attributes to ensure its long-term relevance and appeal to diverse audiences, like skilled tourism experts shape place branding by fostering emotional connections that deepen visitor engagement, as underscored by Jarratt et al. (2019).

Another key finding that emerged was the way modern visual stories disrupted stereotypes surrounding religious tourism. Before the intervention, students commonly associated such trips with passive participation, prayer, and limited engaging activities. However, after viewing the photographs, a shift occurred in their perceptions. For example, Participant 3 stated:

"...Seeing these photo stories made me realize that one could go on such trips with peers, not just to pray and look around in silence, but to explore historic sites in beautiful natural landscapes ...participate in activities, in cultural events ... simply enjoy themselves...."

The statement reflects a broader trend in tourism research, where younger travelers increasingly seek participatory and experience-driven engagements rather than passive observation (Sharma et al., 2024). This transformation implies that religious traveling can be redefined as a multidimensional experience incorporating not merely spiritual aspects but also cultural exploration, entertainment, and interactive activities, a view following the findings of Bond et al. (2015), who reported a high level of interest in history and culture at religious destinations.

Furthermore, the interviews indicated an underlying generational shift in how travel experiences are valued. In contrast to previous eras, younger tourists prioritize shared experiences and digital storytelling over traditional motivations for religious travel (Ranjan and Chaturvedi, 2025). This reinforces the need for tourist marketers to embrace a more interactive and socially driven promotional approach.

In addition, students also emphasized how the contemporary visual storytelling of the course presented religious tourism in a more appealing and accessible manner compared to conventional promotional materials. Participant 8 specifically noted:

“...These photos made religious tourism seem way more interesting...festivals, history, architecture... showing that it's not the usual, boring kind of trip we've seen from religious travel agencies in Greece.”

The emphasis on visual impact underscores the role of carefully selected photographic material in capturing the viewer's attention, which aligns with the theory of cognitive stimulation and interest development reported by Bransford (1979), Gordon (2004), and Eysenck (2020), highlighting that exposure to unique and unconventional stimuli can increase interest levels. Additionally, incorporating this approach into touristic education can enhance students' awareness of the sense of place associated with this significant form of tourism (Deale, 2014).

At the same time, the student's critique of conventional religious promotions in Greek marketing strategies underscores their inability to attract the evolving interests of younger audiences. Advertisers seem to struggle to match the need for visually appealing and technologically connected marketing tactics. Recent research has demonstrated that visual storytelling is particularly effective in influencing tourism decision-making, as it fosters emotional connections and provides a sense of authenticity (Zhang et al., 2023). Campaigns with authentic photographic material that highlights the diverse activities within religious destinations while embedding a modern aesthetic in their ambiance, tourism agencies can bridge the gap between traditional pilgrimage tourism and the evolving expectations of younger travelers.

An anticipated but important insight emerged regarding the perceived limitations of religious tourism. Many students had previously associated it exclusively with older demographics and rigorous, pre-structured itineraries. However, after the course, some reconsidered its potential for adventure and exploration. Participant 14 explicitly stated:

“...Religious tourism tends to be more suitable for older people... I never considered it to be an adventurous activity... after watching the course's images... I suppose certain religious journeys might be fun and unusual if done with buddies ...”

The student's remark underlines a fundamental issue within religious tourism in Greece: its deep-rooted reliance on traditional representations that fail to evolve with contemporary perspectives. It also demonstrates that the sector remains anchored in the past, not because of an intrinsic resistance to modernization, but rather due to a persistent adherence to outdated tactics for presentation. The reluctance to adopt innovative visual storytelling techniques limits its appeal to younger generations, perpetuating the perception of religious tourism as rigid and predictable. However, this drawback also provides a tremendous learning opportunity for tourism students, motivating them to get involved in the industry and contribute to a more modern and dynamic transformation of religious tourism in Greece.

Perception is shaped not only by the inherent essence of a destination but also by how it is framed and communicated (Terzidou et al., 2021). A spiritual visit through a religious urban and rural area of Greece can introduce new perspectives to travel marketers, demonstrating that religious tourism can coexist with excitement and exploration. Furthermore, such a finding offers useful insights for tourism experts, underlining the need for organizing trips that promote peer-group experiences, thus increasing the appeal and significance of these places for younger tourists while also promoting their sustainable development (Gambhir et al., 2021).

5. Conclusions

In current society, visual media constitutes a new alphabet that tells a story unlike any other. Images transcend their traditional function, dominantly influencing the knowledge that

motivates travel activities (Alvarado-Sizzo, 2021), while their meaning is constantly shaped according to social norms and the perceptions that originate also from them.

Religious tourism in Greece, a sector brimming with enormous potential due to its exceptional blend of ancient traditions, rich heritage, and spiritual significance, remains underrepresented compared with other forms of alternative tourism. While it has the potential to offer much of what a modern traveler is looking for (Shinde and Olsen, 2020), it is not yet ready to accomplish it. One of the keys to this transformative evolution lies in modern photographic content and scholarship, as the research concludes.

Contemporary photographic narratives as an educational tool in Greek tourism institutions offered an innovative approach to religious studies. By having been exposed to genuine visual storytelling, students moved beyond misconceptions, developing a more profound understanding of religious tourism as a cultural, historical, and spiritual phenomenon. Based on our findings, youngers as tourists are not necessarily disconnected from religious tourism but may require a readjustment of its portrayal. A substantial redesign that highlights personal involvement, experiential learning, active participation, and shared social experiences. This is consistent with Hampu and Coroş (2022) study, which argues that many young people cannot recall seeing any good marketing efforts that promote religious sites as something appealing to them. So, by leveraging UGC and innovative storytelling techniques, tourism stakeholders can invent more compelling plans (Lariba, 2023) that resonate with this demographic.

Moreover, this instructional material ensures a lasting impact by fostering creativity and revitalization. It allows learners to form personal connections with the religious heritage of each urban or rural area, making it more accessible and relevant over time (Levi and Kocher, 2009). In our case, real stories from sacred places, even in a broad gaze, communicated meanings and stirred emotions that went beyond social and language obstacles, supporting Das and Chakrabarti's (2021) approach. Through this action, the unique religious destinations of Greece can not only be preserved but also reinterpreted in the current world.

Authentic up-to-date images as a training tool eluded from the rigid pedagogical models, raised awareness, opened new avenues for learning, and encouraged interdisciplinary perspectives capable of bridging history, culture, and modern tourism dynamics. This framework equips future tourism professionals with a profound understanding of both tangible and intangible religious heritage and equips them skills to delve into it. Thus, harmonizing the appreciation for religious depth with contemporary travel needs will ensure that Greece's urban and regional religious sites will not only be preserved but also actively integrated into sustainable tourism strategies. In essence, the appropriate new-age photos can serve as both an educational tool and a strategic driver for a long-term vision of religious tourism in Greece.

Moreover, the integration of photographic material from social media as a tool in the course gives students what they are seeking, while having the power to equip future industry leaders with trends and fundamental features of religious traveling. According to Kim and Cake (2024) younger generation searches for information through social media because it desires personal growth, enjoyment through others' experiences, and shaping its perspectives on various topics. In agreement with that, practically, we brought social media into their classrooms with the key difference that the photographic content in this setting was carefully curated, real, focused, and highly informative. There possibly lies the student's remarkable shifts in their views after the intervention. However, in continuing, another pivotal conclusion is drawn from these alterations. It demonstrates that innovation in this field does not require altering traditions themselves but rather redefining how they are communicated and experienced. By reimagining the way tradition is visually and conceptually framed, religious

characteristics can maintain their authenticity while resonating with the sensibilities of the modern era.

The study's outcomes about how students perceived religious traveling before and after the intervention give valuable impartations for tourism marketers, travel agencies, and religious institutions, pursuing not only to attract younger audiences to sacred landscapes but also to equip professionals for careers in the field. Involving new generations in this sector can foster long-term stewardship and strengthen the tourism economy. As Budovich (2023) emphasizes, religious tourism significantly contributes to economic growth despite existing challenges. Moreover, this educational approach could highlight the unexploited potential of lesser-known destinations, redefining their significance in the evolving global tourism setting. Since destination consumption tendencies still require ceaseless identification, these findings serve as a resource for developing more effective marketing and promotional efforts.

This research significantly contributes to advancing the understanding of the behavior of young students in the religious tourism sector. Taking everything into account, the overall conclusion is that contemporary photographic narratives, as an educational tool, possess the capacity to significantly redefine & improve the trajectory of religious tourism, fostering its development across both urban and regional areas of Greece. This underscores once again the fundamental role of photography in education as a catalyst behind any meaningful change.

6. Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study, like any research, has limitations. First, the relatively small sample size limits the applicability of the conclusions to a wider population. This limitation is particularly important in tourism studies, given that different subgroups, such as age groups or cultural backgrounds, may react differently to religious tourism and the photographic material presented.

Furthermore, the use of photographic narratives in the study implies that the results are inextricably linked to the content, quality, and presentation of the intervention images. The professionals who will collect the images, from the various mass media and generally from modern information platforms, should be fully trained in photography or the semiology of the image and, in parallel, have experience in teaching techniques. Variations in these parameters may have a significant impact on educational performance and, therefore, on the expansion of religious tourism. Another limitation is that the photographic narratives focus exclusively on Greek religious institutions, restricting the study's applicability to wider global settings.

Future studies could overcome these limitations by employing an extended approach. This would allow researchers to examine changes over time in young people's views on and behavior toward holy sites after being exposed to photographic narratives. This technique would allow for a deeper comprehension of how the current photographic content affects the experience of religious tourism over time.

The above suggestions seek not only to address the observed shortcomings but also to broaden and deepen future studies. Thus, there will be the potential for achieving larger-scale outcomes that will assist stakeholders in the field of religious tourism.

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