



The sacred: Religious experience and tourism in Cebu

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Abstract

Cebu has become one of the Philippines' liveliest destinations for religious tourism, marked by daily acts of faith, ritual customs, and spiritual activities. This study examines how different groups, such as regular believers, local pilgrims, domestic tourists, international visitors, and commercial stakeholders, interact with the sacred sites of Cebu, including the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño, Simala Shrine, and Magellan's Cross heritage area. Using qualitative and phenomenological methods, like semi-structured interviews, field observations, and spatial-material mapping, the research investigates how sacredness is shaped through embodied practices, sensory experiences, commercial exchanges, social interactions, and digital circulation. The findings reveal four interconnected dynamics: (1) hybrid visitor identities, with individuals switching between pilgrim and tourist roles; (2) the importance of embodied and sensory elements in creating sacred experiences; (3) the merging of devotional sincerity with commercial mediation; and (4) the role of social encounters in forming negotiated ideas of sacredness, particularly among locals and foreigners. The study argues that sacredness in Cebu is not a fixed trait but an ongoing, emergent phenomenon, co-produced through relational, material, and emotional processes. These insights enhance scholarly discussions on lived religion, material religion, spiritual mobility, affective atmospheres, and religious economies in Southeast Asia. The paper also considers implications for managing religious heritage, tourism governance, and community-based site stewardship.

Keywords: *religious tourism, lived religion, material religion, sacred space, pilgrimage*

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1. Introduction

Tourism is widely regarded as a highly effective way to fulfil diverse personal needs, including physical, psychological, mental, social, and religious ones. Sometimes, people voluntarily join groups to satisfy these needs and to engage in meaningful activities that combine entertainment, education, learning, and, importantly, a sense of connection to a particular place, culture, and its people (Kin & So, 2022). In the context of 21st-century tourism, visitors are not merely consumers but active participants in experiences that offer emotional, physical, and spiritual benefits. These memorable and meaningful experiences are considered vital to shaping tourism development and strategic planning (Crouch et al., 2004; Horner & Swarbrooke, 2020).

Religious tourism has become a more significant aspect of global mobility, with scholars observing that modern travelers seek experiences that combine spirituality, heritage, leisure, and emotional connection (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015; Reader, 2014). In Asia, religious sites function as multifaceted destinations, supporting ritual practices, cultural engagement, and tourist exploration (Cohen, 1979; Taylor, 2020; Chen et al., 2024). In the Philippines, a country with a rich history of Catholic devotion, religious tourism is deeply ingrained in both individual spirituality and the country's cultural identity (Cornelio, 2018; Medina, 2000; Dino, 2021). Religious tourism is travel that is motivated by religious purposes, encompassing ritual practices, worship, learning, and the pursuit of peace among communities. It also offers significant psychological and emotional benefits to visitors (Kim & So, 2022; Terzidou et al., 2018).

Cebu is a key centre for religious tourism, renowned for its historic and spiritual sites, such as the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño, the Simala Shrine, and Magellan's Cross, which attract millions of pilgrims and tourists each year. These locations hold multiple layers of significance: they serve as places for prayer and repentance, are associated with miracle stories, attract visitors with their architecture, function as heritage landmarks, and are also prominent digital icons on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (Pertierra, 2018; Lopez, 2014; Berry, 2025). Consequently, Cebu serves as an ideal setting to study how the concept of sacredness is continually negotiated within evolving social, economic, and sensory contexts.

An increasing body of research challenges the simplistic division between "pilgrims" and "tourists," suggesting that today's visitors often assume multiple roles driven by diverse motivations (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, 2016; Olsen & Timothy, 2022). These mixed identities are

especially evident in Cebu, where visitors seamlessly switch between prayer, sightseeing, photography, and engaging in local cultural customs. For many Filipinos, pilgrimage is closely linked to social bonding, food outings, and leisure activities, capturing what Del Castillo et al. (2023) term the “integrated devotional life” typical of Filipino Catholicism. Conversely, international visitors often view these sites through the perspectives of cultural heritage, aesthetics, or spiritual interest.

This study suggests that the idea of sacredness in Cebu is not an inherent trait of religious structures or relics, but rather a dynamic, negotiated, and relational phenomenon. Additionally, Cebu is considered the heart of Philippine history and the queen city of the south, featuring landmarks and memorabilia that are essential to Filipino Christian culture, especially the revered “Sto. Niño - the Holy Child Jesus” and its associated festival, which has been celebrated since the 1980s. The most revered and celebrated event in Cebuano culture is the 'Sinulog' festival, a sacred dance festival reflecting the spiritual devotion of the Cebuano people towards St. Nino, demonstrating their reverence and admiration (Uy, 2016). This view aligns with lived religious perspectives that see spirituality as shaped through everyday actions, bodily experiences, material interactions, and social connections (Ammerman, 2020). It also embraces material religion approaches, highlighting the significance of objects, sensory experiences, and physical settings in forming religious experiences (Houtman & Meyer, 2013; Vásquez & Marquardt, 2003). Therefore, the sacred is not just believed in; it is felt, performed, and expressed within space.

Cebu’s religious sites form part of vibrant religious economies where vendors, souvenir sellers, and informal guides facilitate the exchange of devotional items. Rather than diminishing sacredness, these exchanges often strengthen it, aligning with Southeast Asian studies showing that commerce and devotion frequently coexist in meaningful ways (Tomalin, 2013; Sharpley & Telfer, 2015). Social interactions, whether welcoming, educational, or confrontational, also shape how sacredness is experienced and understood now (Salazar, 2023).

Ultimately, digital platforms function as extensions of sacred space. Studies on digital religion show how online content shapes expectations, motivations, and perceptions of pilgrimage (Campbell, 2021; Evolvi, 2020). In Cebu, images of Simala Shrine’s architecture, miracle stories, and candle-lighting rituals are frequently shared, building emotional anticipation and influencing visitors’ behaviour.

The Sinulog dance in Cebu City embodies a profoundly ingrained urban historical tradition. Kringelback and Skinner (2014) examined how fundamental facets of culture, such as impermanence, fluidity, and the effective utilisation of space within a densely populated city, are manifested through various interpretations of the dance. For instance, the Sinulog dance distinctly integrates an educational function, particularly involving student participation, with an element of consumerism (Valeros, 2012).

This research integrates these theoretical perspectives to examine how sacredness is constructed at different levels, embodied, sensory, social, economic, and digital. It seeks to contribute to broader discussions on religious tourism by offering an in-depth look at sacred making within Southeast Asian Catholic contexts, an area that remains relatively underexplored in global tourism studies.

2. Literature Review

Research on religious tourism in Cebu involves engaging with various scholarly approaches that explore how sacredness is created, experienced, and negotiated. These include lived religion or religious experiences, material religion, sensory anthropology, hybrid spiritual mobility, religious economies, tourism encounter theory, and digital religion. According to Seyer and Muller (2011), religious tourism can be categorised into 12 subgroups, including pilgrimage, missionary travel (as researcher did), religious conferences, religious cruises, stays at sacred sites, Christian (religious) camping, and family tourism. Collectively, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how sacredness evolves as a dynamic sociometrical process, rather than being a static trait of spaces or doctrines.

The lived religion paradigm fundamentally alters how scholars view religious life. Instead of solely analysing institutional structures or doctrines, it concentrates on how people actively practice, embody, and interpret their religiosity daily (Ammerman, 2020; Orsi, 2019). It recognises that religious meaning is constructed through ordinary acts, such as touching relics, lighting candles, whispering prayers, making petitions, or carrying sacred items, which often transcend or bypass formal institutional rules.

In the Philippine context, lived religion holds particular significance. Filipino Catholicism is renowned for its emotional depth, relational nature, and seamless integration of spirituality into daily routines (Cornelio, 2018). Practices such as novenas, panata (vows), Santo Niño rituals, Marian devotion, and the use of anting-anting (sacred amulets) exemplify

this enduring religiosity in everyday life. Religious sites in Cebu vividly exemplify these practices: the candle-lighting at the Basilica and the petition halls at Simala serve as prominent locations where believers actively demonstrate their faith both individually and collectively. Lived religion constitutes the foundation of this study's emphasis on sacred making, as it is influenced by daily embodied engagement, characterised by emotions, bodily sensations, and personal narratives, rather than by abstract theological concepts.

Research in material religion indicates that religious experience is continually shaped by objects, sensory signals, and physical environments (Houtman & Meyer, 2013). Academics emphasise how the sacred is rendered tangible through statues, candles, incense, relics, music, colour symbolism, ritual gestures, and architectural designs. These mediums influence perception, emotion, and memory. Cebu's religious tourism sites exemplify the tangible elements of faith. The Santo Niño statue, Marian figures at Simala, scented candles, flower offerings, holy oils, and vibrant votives act as physical conduits of sacred energy. Sensory environments, light streaming through stained glass, choral music resonating in basilica halls, incense wafting through narrow corridors, cultivate immersive, emotionally resonant atmospheres. Material religion theorists assert that sensory intensity is fundamental to experiencing sacred presence, rather than merely incidental (Coleman & Eade, 2020; Vásquez & Marquardt, 2003; Conelio, 2014; Reagan, 2017). In Cebu, the sacred is expressed through the interaction of bodies, objects, and sensory saturation, underscoring materiality as a crucial element in its construction.

Much of the early pilgrimage literature clearly distinguished between pilgrims, driven by faith, and tourists, motivated by leisure. Currently, most scholars challenge this binary, highlighting that spiritual mobility is characterised by hybridity, multiple motivations, and overlapping reasons (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, 2016; Reader, 2014). People pray fervently before icons, take photos for social media, admire heritage architecture, shop for souvenirs, attend Mass, and explore nearby food and leisure spaces. Scholars suggest viewing these actions not as oppositional but as elements of contemporary spiritual journeys (Valeros, 2012). Visitors to Cebu exemplify this synthesis: Filipino devotees seamlessly transition from prayer at the Basilica to dining at nearby malls, while international tourists alternate between cultural exploration and spiritual contemplation. This hybridity provides a vital perspective for analysing how sacred experiences are constructed through dynamic, evolving identities that continuously adapt according to context and space.

The relationship between commerce and religion has been extensively examined. Western academics frequently consider commodification incompatible with authentic spirituality. Nonetheless, research in Southeast Asia indicates that commercial exchanges often reinforce, rather than diminish, devotional practices (Cornelio, 2018; Sharpley & Telfer, 2015). Souvenirs, candles, oils, scapulars, and statues transcend mere consumer goods; they embody sacred presence and are utilised in prayer, protection, and household altars. Vendors serve as informal catechists, elucidating symbolism, advising on ritual application, and facilitating the dissemination of religious knowledge (Tomalin, 2013). In Cebu, religious commerce is intricately woven with sacred experience. Visitors frequently perceive the purchase of devotional objects as an act of faith, rather than mere consumption. Consequently, the religious economy functions as a spiritual infrastructure that sustains and propagates sacred meaning.

Tourism encounter theory explores how meaning is constructed through interactions among visitors, hosts, and local actors (Salazar, 2023). In sacred tourism contexts, these interactions influence access, interpretation, and behavioural norms. In Cebu, social interactions shaped sacred experiences in various ways: locals guided foreigners through rituals; vendors instructed visitors on proper devotional practices; volunteers enforced dress codes and photography regulations; devotees negotiated crowded spaces collaboratively; and conflicts over noise or disrespectful behaviour clarified norms. These interactions demonstrate that sacredness is not an inherent quality but a social construct maintained through group oversight, welcoming behaviour, and boundary communication.

Research on digital religion highlights those online activities, such as sharing images, viewing miracle testimonies, and posting pilgrimage vlogs, are now vital components of contemporary religious practice (Campbell, 2021; Liu et al., 2025; Evolvi, 2021). Sacred sites are no longer solely physical locations but also digital constructs, shaping expectations and emotional responses prior to visitors' physical attendance. The Simala Shrine and the Basilica stand among the most-photographed religious sites in the Philippines, frequently featured in viral TikTok videos showcasing miracles, answered prayers, and remarkable architecture. This online sharing encourages pilgrimage, frames the interpretation of the sacred, influences ritual performance (“Instagramable devotion”), and extends the sacred presence into virtual communities. Therefore, digital media has become a fundamental aspect of sacred creation, blurring the distinctions between physical and virtual sacredness (Lopez, 2014; Raul, 2018).

By integrating these elements, this study regards sacredness in Cebu as a negotiated sociomaterial process that arises from bodies' embodied practices, sensory engagement, objects such as devotional goods, icons, sensory media, spaces including architecture, atmospheres, ritual zones, economies involving commercial mediation, souvenir practices, encounters encompassing hospitality, conflict, cultural translation, and digital flows, which include miracle narratives, online imagery, and hybrid identities, as well as the fluidity between pilgrims and tourists. This comprehensive theoretical framework perceives sacredness not as an intrinsic attribute but as a co-created, relational, and continually evolving phenomenon, perpetually shaped, reshaped, and interpreted through daily sociometrical interactions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive, and phenomenological methodology to investigate the negotiation of sacredness within the context of religious tourism in Cebu. This approach is consistent with theoretical frameworks emphasising the significance of personal experience, embodiment, sensory perception, and social interactions in the comprehension of contemporary religiosity (Cohen, 1979; Ammerman, 2020; Houtman & Meyer, 2013; Vásquez & Marquardt, 2003). Recognising that the construction of sacred meaning extends beyond cognitive processes, shaped by interactive, emotional, and material influences, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to capture the complexity and depth of visitors' experiences.

3.2. Research Sites

Fieldwork was conducted at three important religious tourism sites in Cebu, showcasing different types of Catholic devotion, heritage identity, and visitor attractions. These sites were chosen to provide a broad view of sacred practices across varied environments, ritual intensities, spatial arrangements, and tourist audiences, and because the researcher has visited them several times.

Basilica Minore del Santo Niño – the spiritual heart of Cebuano Catholicism, characterised by liturgical solemnity, historical continuity, and dense ritual participation. This is where the “Sinulog festival” is celebrated every year in January.

Simala Shrine (Sibonga) – A contemporary Marian pilgrimage site renowned for its striking architecture, testimonies of miracles, and immersive devotional environments. This

religious site attracts not only local visitors but also international religious tourists, including the researcher of the paper, who come for prayer and devotion.

Magellan's Cross – A heritage landmark that signifies both colonial history and the foundational narratives of Christianization, re-assembly, and the beginning of Christianity and the Christian faith in the Philippines (Cebu Province).

3.3. Participants and Sampling

A total of 40 participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of key stakeholder groups that influence sacred experiences. Eighteen (18) Filipino pilgrims and devotees, ten (10) domestic tourists, four (4) foreign tourists, four (4) vendors of religious goods, two (2) clergy or lay religious personnel, and two (2) site administrators or staff. Purposive sampling was used to include individuals with varied motivations, roles, and interpretive perspectives. The focus was on achieving interpretive richness and experiential depth rather than statistical representativeness, aligning with phenomenological approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were approached at locations such as pilgrimage sites, candle stations, souvenir stalls, and queuing areas. When dealing with foreign visitors, explaining the study frequently triggered spontaneous reflections on cross-cultural encounters, providing additional material for analysis.

3.4 Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants signed informed consent forms that explained confidentiality, voluntary involvement, and the right to withdraw. Pseudonyms were employed when reporting the data.

3.5. Data Collection Methods

Data collection involved three main methods: semi-structured interviews, field observations, and material-spatial mapping.

Semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted 25-60 minutes and were conducted in English, Cebuano, or Tagalog, depending on participants' preferences. Bilingual research assistants provided translation support as necessary. Conversations with vendors and shrine staff offered insights into how sacred narratives spread locally and how devotional commerce operates within the religious economy.

Field observations. A total of 56 hours of observation, involving both participants and non-participants, were conducted across weekdays, weekends, and feast days. The focus was on sensory atmospheres, such as sound, smell, temperature, and visual density, as well as bodily actions, such as kneeling and touching icons. Ritual activities like lighting candles, choreography, crowd movements, spatial negotiations, vendor–visitor interactions, informal policing of sacred norms, interactions between foreigners and locals, photographic behaviour, and digital mediation were also observed. Field notes were taken immediately after leaving each session to ensure accuracy and detailed phenomenological recording.

Material-spatial mapping. Material culture and spatial arrangements were documented using hand-drawn maps and written descriptions. This mapping covered sacred zones, boundary areas, movement paths, devotional stations, candle and petition spots, vendor locations, sensory "hotspots," incense zones, choir acoustics, and highly photographed areas. Spatial mapping was essential to understanding how sacred practices relate to embodied geography, showing how space impacts emotional and ritual engagement (Knott, 2005).

3.6. Researcher Positionality

The researcher, an international scholar unfamiliar with Cebuano Catholic culture, held a distinct outsider perspective. This stance influenced the research in three specific ways:

Interpretive distancing – The outsider perspective provided a vantage point for noticing practices that locals considered ordinary or unremarkable.

Cultural vulnerability – The researcher relied on local guidance to correctly interpret rituals, norms, and spatial etiquette.

Reflexive awareness – Regular reflexive journal entries documented assumptions, positional biases, emotional responses, and interpretive uncertainties.

The researcher's foreign background often led local devotees to show hospitality and engage in cultural translation, offering valuable insights into how sacredness is socially negotiated. Reflexivity practices included peer debriefing with Filipino scholars, member checking with bilingual assistants, and repeatedly reviewing field notes to recognise personal biases. This reflective approach ensured both analytical rigour and cultural sensitivity.

3.7. Data Analysis

Data were examined through Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, which encompasses iterative coding, theme development, and interpretive synthesis. The process unfolded in four stages:

Initial coding: Open coding identified patterns related to embodiment, sensory experience, commerce, identity fluidity, social encounters, and digital mediation.

Intermediate categorisation: Codes were clustered into conceptual categories (e.g., sensory sacredness, hybridity, devotional commerce).

Theme development: Four major themes were constructed, each representing a core dimension of negotiated sacredness.

Interpretive integration: Themes were woven into a coherent narrative, drawing from theoretical frameworks to interpret findings within broader scholarly debates.

The analysis emphasised depth, reflexivity, and interpretive richness, aiming to understand how sacredness gains meaning through lived experiences rather than through abstract theological ideas.

4. Findings

The findings indicate that sacredness at Cebu's religious tourism sites is a fluid, dynamic process shaped by diverse sociomaterial interactions. Four main themes were identified: hybrid visitor identities, sensory-driven sacredness, devotional commerce, and the social negotiation of sacred space. These themes demonstrate that sacredness in Cebu is generated through adaptable identity practices, bodily involvement, material and economic exchanges, and interpersonal interactions, all of which help create and regulate sacred experiences.

Figure 1

Thematic model of negotiated sacredness

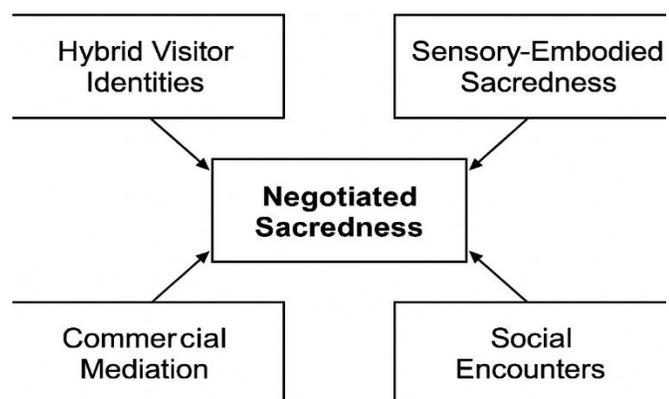


Figure 1 illustrates four core dynamics that produce sacredness in Cebu's religious sites: hybrid visitor identities, sensory experiences, devotional commerce, and social encounters. These elements demonstrate that sacredness is not fixed in space or objects but emerges through visitors' relational and sociomaterial practices.

Theme 1: Hybrid and Fluid Visitor Identities

Visitors often transitioned between devotional and touristic ways of engaging. Many Filipino participants viewed their visits as a blend of spiritual, social, and recreational experiences. Activities such as prayer, photography, family bonding, and heritage appreciation occurred during the same visit. This fluidity reflects scholarship that sees pilgrimage and tourism as overlapping modes rather than separate categories (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, 2016; Reader, 2014). The hybridity was especially evident when visitors moved between sacred areas, such as candle-lighting spots and souvenir stalls, and leisure spaces immediately around the sites.

"I came here to pray for my mother's health, but after Mass, we naturally explore the area, take pictures, and enjoy the day. Why not? It's all part of the experience." — Domestic tourist, Basilica

Another participant expressed guilt about shifting from prayer to sightseeing, indicating how internal negotiations shape identity:

"Sometimes I feel guilty because after lighting candles, I take photos for Facebook. But I believe God understands. You can be both prayerful and enjoy the moment." — Young pilgrim, Simala

For many Filipino participants, prayerful and leisure-oriented activities were not seen as oppositional. A participant at the Basilica explained:

"We come here to pray, attend Mass, take pictures, buy candles, then eat together. It's all part of the visit."

Foreign tourists exhibited their own version of hybridity. Several expressed interest in the architectural beauty of Simala or the historical significance of Magellan's Cross, while also reporting moments of unexpected emotional resonance:

"I don't understand the rituals, but I felt something—maybe because everyone around me was so sincere."

Foreign visitors also exhibited hybrid identities. While some participated mainly for cultural or aesthetic reasons, many experienced unexpected emotional or spiritual connections sparked by the atmosphere. Their presence often prompted explanations and cultural translations from local devotees, highlighting how cross-cultural interactions strengthen community identity and foster reflexive awareness of sacred practices. Overall, hybridity became a common and culturally accepted pattern. Visitors did not see devotion and leisure as opposing but as interconnected aspects of a unified sacred experience.

Theme 2: Sensory and Embodied Sacredness

Sensory immersion and bodily engagement played key roles in shaping participants' perceptions of sacredness. Interviewees repeatedly pointed out how the smell of incense, candlelight, hymn sounds, and the visual richness of religious icons created an atmosphere that “made the place feel holy.” These elements contribute to what Houtman and Meyer (2013) define as material and affective religion, highlighting how sensory environments influence spiritual experience.

Embodied actions like kneeling, touching icons, lighting candles, participating in processions, and moving through crowded spaces were seen as meaningful ritual acts. Many participants linked physical sensations such as warmth, tears, or goosebumps to experiencing the divine, supporting the notion that sacredness is sensed physically before being processed mentally (Vásquez & Marquardt, 2003). These sites served as multisensory, embodied environments that promoted emotional openness and increased spiritual awareness.

Participants consistently referenced sensory cues as key triggers of spiritual emotion. The smell of burning candles, the warmth of crowded spaces, the resonance of choral hymns, and the dim glow of devotional lights created immersive atmospheres. As one devotee described her experience in Simala: “*The moment you enter, the smell and the colours already make you feel close to Mama Mary.*”

Theme 3: Devotional Commerce as Sacred Extension

Commercial activity significantly influenced sacred experiences. Instead of diminishing authenticity, devotional commerce was seen as a key part of religious practice. Vendors not only helped visitors choose candles, oils, rosaries, and statues but also explained

their symbolic meanings and suggested how to use them. Their involvement went beyond simple transactions, serving as informal guides in religious understanding.

Visitors viewed purchased objects as extensions of sacred presence, bringing them into homes, workplaces, and vehicles to serve as sources of protection and spiritual continuity. This supports research on Southeast Asian religious economies, highlighting that commerce and devotion frequently reinforce one another (Cornelio, 2018; Castillo et al., 2023). In Cebu, commerce acts as a ritual infrastructure, enabling sacredness to move beyond the shrine's boundaries. One vendor at Simala explained: *"We don't only sell—we help them pray."*

Theme 4: Social Encounters and the Negotiation of Sacred Space

Social interactions were essential in shaping how visitors perceived and engaged with sacred norms. Acts like guiding foreigners and explaining rituals demonstrated how local devotees actively facilitated access to the sacred. These interactions embodied Filipino cultural values of relationships and fostered openness. Locals frequently guided foreigners on proper rituals, clarified norms, or shared miracle stories. Hospitality functioned as a cultural language for the generous transmission of religious knowledge. As one foreign visitor noted: *"Everyone was kind and explained everything... I felt welcomed into their faith."*

At the same time, instances of conflict or correction, such as reminders about noise, dress, or photography, highlight the collective effort to maintain proper conduct in sacred spaces. Volunteers and devotees enforce these norms gently but assertively, indicating that sacred environments are governed by social rules as much as they are spiritually revered. These interactions demonstrate that sacredness is not just rooted in architecture or objects but is continually negotiated through interpersonal dynamics, shared expectations, and collective acts of respect.

Across the three sites, sacredness manifests through the dynamic interaction of adaptable identities, sensory experiences, devotional objects, and societal controls. These themes highlight the intricate nature of religious tourism in Cebu and emphasise that crafting the sacred is a sociomaterial process rather than an inherent or static feature of space.

5. Discussion

This research explores the idea of sacredness in Cebu's religious tourism as a dynamic, relational, and sociomaterial process. It is influenced by flexible identities, lived experiences,

devotional economies, and socially negotiated norms. This view aligns with broader trends in modern religious studies, which increasingly emphasise mobility, materiality, and daily practices as crucial to understanding religious meaning. By positioning Cebu within these scholarly debates, the analysis demonstrates how this Southeast Asian case offers both empirical insights and theoretical contributions to global discussions on pilgrimage, tourism, and the shifting nature of sacred space.

A key contribution of this research is showing how hybrid visitor identities serve as a typical way of engaging with spirituality. Unlike traditional pilgrimage studies, which often draw a sharp distinction between sacred and secular reasons, the Cebu case reveals that visitors can embody devotional, leisure, and cultural roles during the same visit. This aligns with Collins-Kreiner's (2010, 2016) and Reader's (2014) views that modern pilgrimage occurs within a fluid landscape of spiritual movement, where motivations are multiple and changeable rather than fixed. Cebu demonstrates a form of hybrid identity that is culturally normal, rooted in Filipino views of religion as intertwined with family, social bonds, and communal festivities. This challenges Western binaries and suggests that modern sacred practices require culturally nuanced frameworks rather than rigid universal models.

The study underscores the crucial role of sensory and embodied experiences in the creation of sacred affect. Instead of describing sacredness primarily through doctrinal terms, participants emphasised warmth, goosebumps, tears, and atmosphere. This supports material religion scholarship, which argues that religious meaning is conveyed through objects, spaces, and sensory stimuli (Houtman & Meyer, 2013). In the Philippines, this is vividly demonstrated by sensory richness, such as candle smoke, Marian iconography, choral music, and the collective movement of bodies, which acts as a catalyst for spiritual resonance. Consequently, Cebu's sacred sites function as multisensory infrastructures that promote emotional openness and embodied engagement. This perspective challenges cognitive, belief-focused models of spirituality by highlighting the affective, pre-reflective aspects of sacred perception.

Another important contribution relates to the role of devotional commerce. Instead of threatening authenticity, commercial activities in Cebu, such as selling candles, rosaries, and sacred oils, enrich spiritual engagement by offering tangible connections that bring sacredness into daily life. Vendors serve as interpreters of symbolic meanings, guiding visitors through ritual choices. These insights align with ethnographic studies in Southeast Asia and Latin America, where commerce is seen as part of a "moral economy" of devotion rather than a

straightforward commodification of faith (Salazar, 2023; Sharpley & Telfer; Taylor, 2020). Therefore, Cebu challenges Eurocentric views that associate commercialisation with spiritual decline and shows that religious economies can enhance devotion, strengthen community identity, and support the physical upkeep of sacred spaces (Mojares, 2018).

The social interactions that shape visitor experiences are equally vital. In Cebu, sacred norms are not only upheld by institutional authority but also through daily exchanges, such as showing hospitality to foreigners, gently correcting inappropriate behaviour, and performing acts of reverence together. These interactions reflect Filipino cultural values, such as *pakikipagkapwa* (relational personhood), demonstrating how social connections serve as a form of religious involvement (Reagan, 2017). This supports the observation that tourism experiences are spaces of cultural negotiation, where meanings, emotions, and expectations are collectively formed. In Cebu, the sense of sacredness relies on these relational dynamics; it is maintained, regulated, and passed on through community participation (Reagan, 2017).

The findings broadly enhance discussions on how sacred space evolves in the digital era. Although not the focus, participants' mentions of online testimonies, viral images of Simala, and social media-driven anticipation show that the concept of sacredness now spreads through digital channels before visitors even arrive. This reflects digital religion research (Campbell, 2021), which suggests that physical sacred sites are increasingly intertwined with digital imaginaries. Cebu's shrines serve as a prime example of this dual movement: pilgrims arrive with expectations shaped by online stories, and their photos, videos, and testimonials continue to give the sacred a digital presence.

Cebu's case highlights a broader theoretical idea: sacredness is nowadays seen as something that emerges, is negotiated, and depends on context. It is not only about doctrinal correctness, impressive architecture, or age, but also about the results of sensory atmospheres, bodily practices, social interactions, material exchanges, and the evolving identities of those who enter the space. This supports recent research that describes sacred space as an active, relational process (Vásquez & Marquardt, 2003), rather than a fixed category. This contributes to worldwide discussions on religious tourism by showing how sacredness is constantly constructed and modified through everyday interactions. It provides a well-supported example of Southeast Asian Catholicism's relational, embodied, and material expressions, offering a significant contrast to Western-centric perspectives on spirituality, authenticity, and sacred practices.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that the sacredness of Cebu's religious tourism sites is not a fixed or innate characteristic of their architecture, ritual objects, or traditions. Instead, it develops through active and relational processes influenced by hybrid visitor identities, sensory and embodied participation, devotional commerce, and the social negotiation of sacred norms. These results support current research that sees sacred making as an ongoing sociomaterial practice, rooted in interactions among bodies, objects, atmospheres, and relationships.

Like Catholics, who tend to be more inclined towards spirituality than Protestants and other religions such as Muslims and Buddhists, Albayrak et al. (2018) confirmed that different religions offer unique religious tourism experiences, although some perceptual aspects may overlap. Most reported experiences involved feelings of love and devotion to God or praying to saints. According to Holy Scripture and church doctrines, Catholics observe various customs to demonstrate their devotion and worship, including celebrating patron saints (Rebuya et al., 2020). The study found that motivational factors for religious tourism significantly influence respondents' experiences. Generally, more religious tourists are motivated by these factors and tend to enjoy positive experiences at religious sites. Albayrak et al. (2018) also emphasised that site administrators focus on attracting religious travellers to sacred sites, since this can improve satisfaction and foster loyalty, as religious tourism experiences impact overall tourist satisfaction. The fluid movement of visitors, alternating effortlessly between prayer, photography, leisure, and cultural activities, reflects a growing consensus that pilgrimage and tourism are no longer separate. In Cebu, this blending is common and aligns with Filipino Catholic traditions. Sacredness is created not through separation from leisure or commerce, but by combining diverse motivations into a unified devotional experience.

Cebu's sacred sites are characterised by rich affective and sensory experiences that emphasise embodiment in modern religious practices. Both devotees and tourists describe their sacred encounters using smell, touch, sound, and physical emotions, supporting theories of lived and material religion that focus on the body as a key site of meaning. Additionally, devotional commerce extends sacred space, allowing visitors to establish material connections to spirituality in everyday life and highlighting the role of religious economies in shaping contemporary devotion.

Ultimately, the study emphasises that sacredness is shaped through social negotiation. Acts such as hospitality, mild correction, and collective care demonstrate that sacred space is

constantly created by those who inhabit it. These interactions illustrate that sacredness is a form of relational effort, a communal ethical endeavour expressed through daily interactions.

Cebu illustrates how sacredness is an emergent, negotiated, and intertwined aspect of everyday life. The findings enrich discussions in religious tourism, lived religion, and Southeast Asian Catholicism by demonstrating how sacred experiences endure amid changing identities, embodied rituals, material interactions, and community bonds. As religious tourism grows worldwide, Cebu highlights the importance of viewing the sacred as a fluid process, continually shaped by human activity, cultural contexts, and multisensory engagement.

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AI Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Grammarly software to thoroughly enhance grammar and scholarly tone. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring that research idea, analysis and interpretations are original work.

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