



VISITOR TYPOLOGIES IN SUFI RELIGIOUS TOURISM: INSIGHTS FROM HOSTS AT THE EL SAYED AHMED EL-BADAWY SHRINE

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the under-researched area of Sufism within religious tourism, specifically examining how Sufi hosts perceive Muslim and non-Muslim visitors at the El Sayed Ahmed El-Badawy mosque and tomb in Egypt. Utilizing qualitative methods, the research identifies five distinct visitor types based on their behaviors and interactions. Notably, Sufi hosts perceive the concept of the “pious pilgrim” differently from Western literature, emphasizing a broader understanding that includes those who engage meaningfully with Sufi practices and teachings. The findings contribute to tourism marketing strategies by highlighting the diverse demands of different visitor groups, thus enabling better management and interpretation of Sufi sites. This research not only enriches the academic discourse on religious tourism but also offers practical insights for enhancing visitor experiences and sustaining the sanctity of Sufi sites.

KEYWORDS

Sufism, host perceptions, typology of visitors, pious pilgrim, religious tourism, Egypt

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism can be defined as the ways in which religious sites relate to individuals’ needs, interests, and motives (Sharma & Timothy, 2023). Earlier research, such as Vukonic (2002), maintained that a religious tourist is driven solely by religious motives. However, recent scholars (e.g., Choe, 2024; Doğukan Çıkı & Tanrıverdi, 2023) have explored motivations and experiences at various religious sites, indicating that religious tourism often co-occurs with secular

experiences, including relaxation and social activities. Currently, there is no universally accepted definition of religious tourism, but prevailing definitions encompass tourism that satisfies spiritual, educational, cultural, and recreational interests (Choe, 2024). This research lies within the domain of pilgrimages and religious tourism in a Sufi Islamic context. The relationship between tourism and religion has attracted significant interest from scholars and marketers, driven by the economic growth of religious travel and its socio-cultural impacts (Liasidou et al., 2025). Religious tourism



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significantly contributes to the economic development of destinations such as Haifa, Jerusalem, the Vatican City, and Santiago de Compostela (Ezenagu et al., 2022). Tourism scholars, media, and tourism marketers have exhibited a growing interest in the relationship between tourism and religion (Zheng et al., 2022). This interest is driven by the economic growth of religious travel (Shi & Pandi, 2022) and the social, cultural, and physical impacts of tourism on sacred sites (Kayal, 2023). Research on religious hosts' perceptions of visitors at sacred sites can help identify the impacts of tourists and aid in tailoring tours to different visitor types (Prasad et al., 2023).

Hence, this study explores the classification of visitors according to Sufi hosts' perceptions, suggesting that visitors can be broadly divided into five categories based on behavior. Conceptually, this research enhances the understanding of the "pious pilgrim" on the tourism-pilgrimage spectrum. Practically, the five-fold visitor typology is vital for identifying demand among Muslim and non-Muslim consumers. Understanding hosts' views on visitors' activities can aid in managing the sacredness of popular Sufi sites. The intersection of Sufism and tourism has produced increasing academic interest (Hidayat, 2023), yet the perceptions of Muslim hosts towards visitors remain underexplored. Previous studies have primarily focused on the perspectives of religious hosts and visitors in Christianity (Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000; Liasidou et al., 2025; Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014), Jewish (i.e. Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Milman & Oren, 2018), Hindu (i.e. Aukland, 2018; Shinde & Rizello, 2014) and Buddhism (Phi et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2013), highlighting a significant gap in the literature concerning Islamic contexts, particularly Sufi sites. Research by Ghaderi et al. (2020) and Elhadary (2018) emphasizes the economic, spiritual, cultural and social impacts of religious tourism, yet often overlooks the nuanced perceptions of Muslim hosts. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the typology of visitors as perceived by Sufi sheikhs at the shrine of El Sayed Ahmed El-Badawy.

The Egyptian press has documented visitor behaviors at Islamic sites, particularly at the shrine of El Sayed Ahmed El-Badawy during events like the Grand Mawlid. Publications like *Egypt Today* (Asal, 2022) and *Egyptian Streets* ("What is Tanta's Moulid Al-Sayyid Al-Badawi?", 2025) have detailed the activities of diverse visitors, while *Lonely Planet Egypt* (Lee et al., 2023) noted protective measures by Sufi sheikhs. The Grand Mawlid attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors engaging in prayers, meditation, and cultural festivities (Asal, 2022), highlighting the importance of studying behaviors at Islamic sacred sites. The systematic consideration of how visitors' behaviors are perceived by Sufi Muslim hosts requires more empirical work (Elhadary, 2018). The rest of the paper is structured

as follows: Section 2 examines tourism literature on Sufism and visitor classifications; Section 3 discusses research methods; Section 4 provides an overview of the study site; Section 5 highlights the findings; and Section 6 concludes with discussions on key findings, implications, and future research directions.

2. STATE OF THE FIELD

2.1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUFISM AND TOURISM

Sufism, often regarded as Islamic mysticism, seeks experiential knowledge and divine love through devotion (Hidayat, 2023). It is not an autonomous sect but a moderate ideological version of Islam focused on spiritual meditation and ethical values. Sufism has deep historical ties to Egypt, significantly influencing its spiritual and cultural life (Brown, 2011). In Western communities, Sufism is seen as a more tolerant form of Islam, attracting non-Muslim visitors despite declining organized religious participation. Sufi tourism merits special attention for its unique spiritual practices, intentions, and socio-economic impacts (Huma, 2024). While Sufi tourism has not been extensively studied, it is recognized as a significant tourism product contributing to destination differentiation and offering emotional and spiritual benefits. However, presenting Sufi experiences as a tourism product may dilute their traditional religiosity, even as they remain rooted in Islam (Elhadary, 2018). Sufi sites play a vital role in tourism across countries like India, Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt, attracting visitors seeking spiritual experiences and leisure activities (Elhadary, 2018; Huma, 2024). This growing market is acknowledged in business, government, and academic circles as beneficial for regional development. Many Sufi sites serve dual purposes as ritual places and tourist attractions, drawing both devout followers and secular tourists. Notable sites, such as the Shrine of Al-Sayed Al-Badawi in Egypt and the Mausoleum of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi in Turkey, have witnessed growing numbers of domestic and international visitors, capturing the attention of marketers and scholars (Elhadary, 2018; Haq & Medhekar, 2020). This emphasizes the need for empirical research on Sufi hosts' perceptions of visitors and the typology of visitor engagement.

2.2. TYPOLOGIES OF VISITORS AT SACRED SITES AND THE PILGRIM-TOURIST CONTINUUM

Earlier and recent scholars have developed various typologies to understand visitors' experiences at sacred sites, often distinguishing between secular and sacred behaviors. Smith (1992) created the pilgrim-tourist scale,

revealing similarities and differences in motives and experiences. Santos (2002) further explored distinctions between tourists and pilgrims at Santiago de Compostela, which blurred the lines between the two. Later, Triantafyllidou et al. (2010), influenced by Smith (1992), identified four types of religious tourists to the Holy Land. *Pilgrims* are primarily motivated by religious and spiritual factors, engaging in devotional acts, as seen among Buddhist and Baha'i pilgrims. *Pilgrims to tourists* exhibit religious motives while also displaying typical tourist behaviors. *Religious tourists* seek cultural, educational, and experiential inspirations; they often belong to the upper-middle and upper classes and pursue pleasurable experiences. Lastly, *tourists to pilgrims and secular tourists* seek self-improvement and leisure, blending spiritual and vacation desires. This classification aids travel agencies in tailoring marketing strategies to meet the distinct needs of these diverse travelers (Triantafyllidou et al., 2010, p. 385).

Supporting the previous models (Smith, 1992; Triantafyllidou et al., 2010), Collins-Kreiner and Kliot (2000, p. 65) proposed a typology for Jewish holy graves in Israel, which was divided into four categories: *Haredim* (ultra-Orthodox), *Dateim* (religious), *Masortiem* (traditional), and *Hiloneim* (secular). *Haredim* focused solely on religious aspects, while *Dateim* combined religious visits with non-religious sightseeing. The majority, *Masortiem*, were deeply attached to Jewish saints, primarily visiting for supplications. The minority, *Hiloneim*, engaged in heritage tourism for cultural experiences. Later, Wong et al. (2013) and Wong (2019) introduced a typology for a Buddhist site in China, categorizing visitors as *Jushis* (pure pilgrims), *Shinshis* (pilgrim tourists), *Xiankes* (spiritual worshippers), and *leisure tourists* (cultural heritage visitors). Their typology illustrates various motivations and behaviors, highlighting that leisure tourists, despite their lack of devotion, were perceived by hosts as potentially developing a genuine interest in Buddhism. Similarly, Ebadi (2014, p. 317), with reference to the Smith (1992) and Santos (2002) pilgrimage-tourism spectrum, identified five types at an Iranian shrine. Religiously oriented visitors focused on prayer and spiritual help, while cultural spiritual visitors value the site's atmosphere and history without performing rituals. Nostalgic visitors connected with their cultural and heritage identity. Adventure visitors pursued unique experiences in the natural environment, and cultural-secular visitors are curious about the Iranian Turkmen culture without strong religious beliefs. These classifications reflect the diverse motivations of the Iranian shrine's visitors (Ebadi, 2014).

In synthesizing the findings from various typologies of visitors at sacred sites, a clear connection emerges: the continuum between pilgrims and tourists is shaped by the diverse motivations and behaviors exhibited

by visitors. Scholars like Smith (1992) and Santos (2002) emphasize this fluidity, while typologies from Triantafyllidou et al. (2010), Collins-Kreiner (2010), Ebadi (2014) and Wong (2019) illustrate how visitors can embody roles from devout pilgrims into secular heritage tourists. Wong's categorization highlights that even leisure tourists may develop a genuine interest in sacred traditions, suggesting that the sacred-secular divide is a spectrum influenced by cultural and personal aspects. This nuanced understanding enriches our appreciation of the diverse experiences at sacred sites and the evolving nature of pilgrimage and tourism.

Recent studies (Doğukan Çıkı & Tanrıverdi, 2023; Prasad et al., 2023; Shi & Pandi, 2022; Singh et al., 2024) collectively identified three main types of tourists at religious sites: secular/leisure tourists, religious tourists and pure pilgrims. In her study of the Welcome Royal Lord Festival in Donggang, Taiwan, Tsai (2021) identifies four types of religious tourists: *sacred pilgrims*, who seek spiritual comfort; *believers*, who express devotion to Wang Yeh; *experience companions*, who attend mainly to accompany others; and *secular polytheists*, who engage casually with various deities. Tsai highlights that sacred pilgrims and believers report higher satisfaction due to their connections to cultural authenticity, emphasizing potential conflicts between tourism development and religious traditions. This underscores the need for organizers to address diverse visitor motivations while preserving the integrity of religious practices. Along similar lines, according to Liro (2024), visitors to pilgrimage centers in Poland exhibit diverse motivations, categorized into religious, tourist, recreational, social and commercial. Those driven by religious motivations view these sites primarily as places of prayer and personal growth, seeking spiritual fulfillment. In contrast, tourists emphasize cultural and architectural aspects, often perceiving pilgrimage centers as popular destinations rather than sacred spaces. Recreational visitors prioritize leisure and social interactions, while social visitors focus on family gatherings. Satisfaction levels vary significantly based on motivation; religious visitors report higher fulfillment regarding spiritual and community aspects, while tourists find satisfaction in cognitive and cultural experiences. This contemporary landscape of religious tourism reflects a blending of motivations, leading to hybrid visitor profiles, illustrating the complex interplay between motivations, perceptions, experiences, and satisfaction. Understanding this multifaceted nature is crucial for effectively managing pilgrimage sites to meet the diverse needs of all visitors. Recently, building on these insights, Lee and Cho (2025) developed a model that identified seven key scales characterizing visitor experiences at La Vang in Vietnam. Visitors reported significant self-discovery, gaining deeper self-understanding through spiritual engagement,

which often led to self-transformation and improved behaviors. Many found self-realization, achieving peace and clarity in resolving personal conflicts while seeking emotional release and comfort during their visits. Worship was emphasized as visitors expressed gratitude to Our Lady of La Vang, and engaging in religious practices like mass and prayer was common. Additionally, many reported sacred experiences, including witnessing the “miracle of the sun” and feeling healing effects.

In synthesizing the findings from the recent studies above, it is evident that visitor types at religious sites can be classified into overlapping categories, such as secular/leisure tourists, religious tourists, and pure pilgrims. Studies by Tsai (2021) and Liro (2024) both highlight the distinctions between visitors seeking spiritual fulfillment and those drawn by cultural or recreational interests, noting the varying satisfaction levels linked to these motivations. Tsai’s identification of four subcategories of religious tourist, including sacred pilgrims and experience companions, complements Liro’s broader classification, which encompasses social and commercial types. Additionally, Lee and Cho (2025) introduce the notion of self-discovery and emotional release, suggesting that even secular visitors may undergo significant personal transformations similar to those experienced by religious pilgrims. This interplay of motivations across the studies underscores the complexity of religious tourism, emphasizing the need for management strategies that respect the diverse needs of all visitor types while safeguarding the sanctity of religious sites. While different typologies have been developed to categorize types of visitors to Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish sacred sites, there remains a notable lack of empirical studies focused on Muslim Sufi hosts and their perceptions of visitors. This gap is significant as Sufi sites attract diverse visitors, yet their hosts’ perspectives are underexplored. Moreover, it is generally the pilgrims’ and tourists’ motivations, on-site experiences and the potential impacts of a visit on the sacred site and host religious community that are the most frequently researched topics. In their study, Cheraghi et al. (2025) applied stakeholder theory to analyze the dynamics between local communities, acting as hosts, and their interactions with tourists. This theoretical framework offers valuable insights into the perceptions of religious hosts regarding their relationships with different types of visitor. Furthermore, the findings underscore the significance of local community engagement in managing spiritual events, which reinforces the focus on how hosts perceive and respond to visitors at religious sites. This emphasis on community involvement is crucial for understanding the interactions between hosts and tourists, particularly in the context of spiritual tourism. This study aims to provide a unique contribution by focusing on the

Sufi mosque of El Sayed Ahmed El-Badawy, thereby enriching an understanding of how Sufi hosts perceive both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors. By categorizing visitors into distinct typologies based on host perceptions, this work seeks to enhance the dialogue around religious tourism and its implications for Sufi practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

Latest research, such as that by Zheng et al. (2022), Phi et al. (2025) and Shi and Pandi (2022), have utilized a combination of qualitative methods, including the case study method, on-site observations, reflective and academic journals, and semi-structured interviews to explore host perceptions in religious tourism contexts. These methodological approaches enabled them to capture the perspectives and embedded contextual meanings of the religious hosts and visitors. Similarly, the current study also adopted these same methodological approaches. This connection with existing literature enriches the understanding of visitor typologies in religious settings and this work builds on it by focusing explicitly on the Sufi context, thereby filling a critical gap. This nuanced exploration of Sufi perceptions enriches the broader discourse on Islamic spiritual tourism, emphasizing the need for more focused qualitative studies that recognize the unique characteristics and contributions of Sufi practices in the field of religious tourism. Moreover, the classification of visitors into distinct groups based on their behavior and motivations aligns with the pilgrim-tourist continuum proposed by Smith (1992) and Santos (2002). However, this study offers a unique contribution by expanding upon these classifications within the Sufi context, suggesting a more fluid interpretation of the pious pilgrim concept. By doing so, it not only builds on existing frameworks but also challenges them, illustrating how Sufi hosts perceive certain visitor behaviors as outside traditional classifications.

To address research objectives, a mix of qualitative methods was employed, including archival record analysis, documentary case studies, on-site observations, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews with 16 sheikhs. Qualitative research investigates social issues in natural settings, aiming to develop a holistic understanding and elicit narratives from interviewees. Although the sample size is small, qualitative research provides rich data by focusing on interviewees with relevant insights (Mishra et al., 2024). It captures the real opinions of both researchers and participants, often beginning with “what”, “why”, and “how”, yielding diverse perspectives difficult to obtain through quantitative methods (Patton, 2015).

Adopting an integrative qualitative approach allows the authentic voices of sheikhs to emerge and interviews utilized a guide with specific questions and follow-up probes. The case study approach offers insights into how sheikhs perceive visitors, while on-site observations broaden the researcher's perspective. Field notes were recorded as narratives, facilitating the observation of mosque visitors' practices (Mishra et al., 2024).

While this study is limited to the Sufi mosque and tomb of El Sayed Ahmed El-Badawy in Tanta, Egypt, this focused approach allows for a rich, in-depth understanding of the nuanced views of Sufi hosts towards their visitors. By concentrating on a single site, the research provides insights into how Sufi hosts perceive and classify different types of visitor, reflecting the unique dynamics of host-guest interactions within the Sufi context. This case study method facilitates an exploration of the complexities inherent in the Sufi experience, which may otherwise be overlooked in broader works encompassing multiple case study sites. Thus, rather than detracting from the findings, the specificity of this study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of the concept of pious pilgrim within the Sufi tradition and the diverse types of visitors at the site, providing valuable insights that can inform future studies in similar contexts.

Literature on pilgrimage and religious tourism indicates that qualitative research effectively uncovers religious hosts' hidden experiences and enables a systematic analysis of Sufi hosts' perceptions (Elhadary, 2018). Studies by Shi and Pandi (2022) and Zheng et al. (2022) highlighted the lack of qualitative research on religious guides' attitudes toward visitors. Cheraghi et al. (2025) called for more qualitative studies to triangulate hosts' insights. They noted that further qualitative research on host-guest interactions would enhance the pilgrimage management literature. Additionally, they emphasized that many failures in marketing religious sites stem from neglecting the subjective perceptions of site guardians. The researcher adopted a social constructionist perspective, viewing reality as shaped by linguistic and cultural categories, with an inductive process guided by collected data identified common themes. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were used, as little is known about how religious hosts perceive visitors in a Sufi context. This method allows interviewees to express how Sufi tenets influence their perceptions of visitors (Tracy, 2024). Interviewees, employed at the site for 3 to 20 years, serve as "key informants" with deep understanding of visitor types and behaviors (Patton, 2015).

Interview questions addressed four main concerns:

1. What attracts visitors to the mosque?
2. What types of visitors attend?
3. How do visitors behave, and how do sheikhs manage inappropriate behaviors?

4. How do Sufi beliefs affect perceptions of visitors of other faiths?

All respondents, aged 45 to 60, understood the voluntary nature of their participation and were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity (Guest et al., 2006) with site visits and interviews being conducted over four months (April–July 2021). The researcher explained the study's purpose and answered respondents' queries. All information was kept confidential, and respondents signed consent forms for recording. Due to COVID-19, interviews were either face-to-face (13 participants) or online via Zoom (3 participants). The interview style was casual, with each session lasting 50 to 75 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis, a professional translator from Cairo University being consulted to ensure accuracy. The researcher manually analyzed and coded the textual data to construct key categories based on the sheikhs' insights on visitor behaviors (Tracy, 2024).

3.1. DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher employed thematic content analysis to generate initial codes. The analysis began with an immersion in the data through repeated listening to interview recordings, reading transcripts, and examining field notes. A manual coding system was then used to allow the data to "speak for themselves" (Patton, 2015, p. 470). To enhance the reliability of the sheikhs' responses and reveal the meanings behind their perceptions, lengthy quotations from participants were presented. The qualitative analysis followed Tracy's (2024) recommendations, identifying common patterns across interviews and categorizing them accordingly. Similar content was grouped into overarching themes, derived inductively from the data. The coding process involved three stages: open, axial and selective. Open coding segmented the data into manageable parts and created labels. Axial coding linked and grouped similar categories, leading to the creation of more abstract categories while in the final selective coding stage, key themes were identified and refined, resulting in a five-fold visitor typology (Figure 1; Patton, 2015). The researcher also connected the data with the established literature for validation. Data saturation was reached, and the sample of respondents was not deemed a limitation, as careful attention was given to participant selection. The mosque management provided an initial list of 25 religious hosts, deemed effective for obtaining a purposive sample. All 25 participants were willing to participate, and after 16 interviews, no new themes emerged. To ensure data saturation, the researcher continuously analyzed the data, comparing categories until no new themes were identified. An audit trail was maintained to document the collection process and theme development. An

external researcher reviewed the findings and process to ensure credibility. Triangulation of data collection strategies, such as field notes and observations alongside transcribed interviews, addressed trustworthiness and reduced reliance on a single method (Patton, 2015). Before presenting the predominant categories, a general description of the case study site will be provided to offer important background information for understanding the findings.

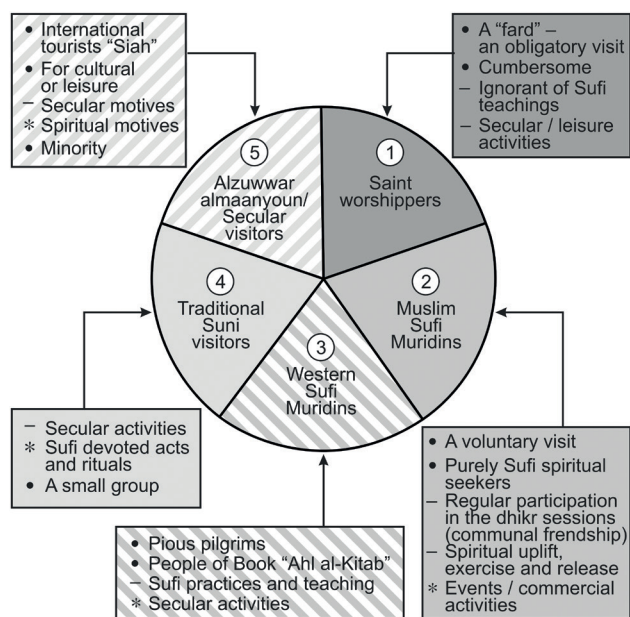


Figure 1. An overview of the five-fold visitor typology at the Sufi site
Source: author

4. BACKGROUND TO THE SUFI MOSQUE AND THE TOMB OF EL SAYED AHMED EL-BADAWY

The research site was deliberately chosen as it is the most prominent Sufi site in Egypt, providing a significant case for exploring visitors' behaviors from participants' perspectives. The Sufi mosque is located in Tanta, Egypt's fifth largest city, home to nearly one million people, situated between Alexandria and Cairo. Renowned for its Islamic and Coptic heritage, Tanta features restored religious sites, including Coptic churches and Sufi shrines, with ongoing pilgrimages to the graves of Sufi saints. The Sufi mosque is a key religious site in Tanta, offering free public access and prearranged guided tours for foreign dignitaries, journalists, international tourists, and academics. These 90-minute tours, led by bilingual sheikhs (faith guides) assigned by the government, are available throughout the day, except during the five daily congregational prayers, which last about 30 minutes. Observations indicated that the shrine

of El-Badawy within the mosque is the most popular spot, where visitors' prolonged presence can hinder the flow of others. The annual eight-day celebration of the saint's birth anniversary attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, fostering a festive environment that appeals to merchants and visitors seeking local food, entertainment and products. Tanta welcomes over two million visitors annually, with a significant influx during the saint's anniversary (Aman, 2017). Preliminary observations revealed that the sheikhs are often the first contact for visitors, addressing inquiries and explaining Sufi principles to non-Muslim guests.

5. STUDY FINDINGS

5.1. A CLASSIFICATION OF VISITORS BASED ON SUFI HOSTS' PERCEPTIONS

Respondents noted that visitors cannot be described as a *zaer aam* (general type); instead, they categorized them into five types based on motives, activities, behaviors, and levels of knowledge about Sufism. The sheikhs used terms like *saint worshippers*, *Muslim Sufi Muridins*¹, *Western Sufi Muridins*, *traditional Sunni visitors* and *Alzuwwar almaanyoun* (secular visitors) to illustrate these distinctions, as shown in Figure 1.

5.2. RELIGIOUS HOSTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SAINT WORSHIPPERS

Many respondents expressed concerns about saint worshippers, viewing their behaviors as a risk to the shrine and an inconvenience to others. One participant stated:

They shout and loudly greet the saint. Many of them thrust themselves at the maqsura in exaltation... (Sheikh Salam).

Their visits are seen not merely as voluntary but as "like a fard" (an obligatory visit) to show gratitude and seek miracles. Their primary motives include prayers for "marriage", "passing exams", or "healing".

Collins-Kreiner (2010) describes similar phenomenon at the graves of saintly Jews in Israel, where *Masortiem* (traditional visitors), mostly Jewish women, brought with them prayers relating to health, marriage or some other individual need. The saint worshippers are obsessively interested in venerating the magical powers of the Sufi saint that are expected to produce miracles or to induce ecstatic visions (Hidayat, 2023; Huma, 2024). The Sufi hosts perceived the saint worshippers as "problematic visitors" with "a very low level of understanding of Sufism". Upon entering

the mosque, they often rush to kiss and touch the maqsura, seeking the saint's blessing. Observations confirmed the popularity of this behavior, as the researcher observed an incident involving a man and his young son and overheard the man advising his son in Arabic to swiftly "run and touch the maqsura to get sheikh El-Badawy's barakah (blessing)". There was a broad consensus among all respondents that the saint worshippers' visits were devoid of any types of commercial behaviour and many of the worshiping activities performed by this type of visitor were deemed as "bida" (innovation) or as "shirk" (polytheism). They are not regarded as "pious visitors" or "true believers" as indicated by Sheikh Nasser:

Visitors pay their respects to the saint by reciting prayers for him. ... They should not try to find God in humans.

This place saint worshippers in a limbo, neither fitting into the categories of true Sufi pilgrims nor secular visitors. This highlights the lack of research on visitor characteristics at Sufi sites.

5.3. RELIGIOUS HOSTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE MUSLIM SUFI MURIDINS AND WESTERN SUFI MURIDINS

The second group includes Muslim Sufi Muridins and Western Sufi Muridins, who exhibit similar behaviors and activities as perceived by the sheikhs. They seek "spiritual comfort" and view their visits as non-obligatory spiritual practices. The site fulfils their wants and needs for "spiritual comfort" and offers them "a new world" (Sheikh Saad). The majority of the Sufi hosts confirmed that these two groups of visitors considered their site visit to be a non-obligatory spiritual practice. The hosts also classified Western Sufi Muridins as "siah" (international tourists) and sometimes as "Ahl al-Ketab" (People of the Book). These visitors, primarily non-Muslims (mostly European and North American Christians and Jews), are captivated by the saint's tariqa (mystical path)². As Sheikh Salah explained:

they are not Western converts to Islam, they are only captivated by the sheikh's tariqa. They want to access and sustain contact with inner divinity through his tariqa rather than through the Bible or Torah.

Sheikh Murad described the Western Sufi Murid as a visitor "of two halves: a true practicing Sufi, but a tourist". Many sheikhs referred to these visitors as "progressive followers", "knowledgeable guests", "pious Hujjaj (Sufi pilgrims)" or "genuine Sufis", with their motives centered on participating in dhikr for "inner tranquility" and "contemplating God's presence". The behaviours of the Muslim Sufi Muridins and Western

Sufi Muridins contrast sharply with saint worshippers where the former groups obviously believe that "only God should be worshipped" (Sheikh Khaled). In this context, the Muslim Sufi Muridins and Western Sufi Muridins do not perceive the saint as a mediator between people and God. In the eyes of the sheikhs, these visitors often paid genuine respect to the saint and seemed to constitute no threat to the sanctity and fabric of the shrine. In this respect, the findings by Wong (2019) on visitation to Pu-Tuo-Shan temple in China are of interest here as the behaviors of the "Buddhist Jushis" are also seemingly similar to the Muslim Sufi Muridins and Western Sufi Muridins. From the sheikhs' point of view, the Muslim Sufi Muridins and Western Sufi Muridins usually combine the Sufi spiritual activities with some forms of tourist activity such as "visiting coffee shops", "markets", "restaurants" and "meeting other visitors".

In this sense, one may describe them as spiritually-oriented tourists who search for spiritual fulfillment and a desire for escape from a post-modern society or an "empty secular society" (Tacey, 2004, p. 2). Their site visit can be regarded as "an aspiration to connect to the Divine" (Singh et al., 2023, p. 13) and "a journey from chaos into another cosmos, from meaninglessness into authentic existence" (Cohen, 1979, p. 191). These findings, while requiring further substantiation, potentially confirms scholars' arguments that materialism and secularism in Western countries (Polus et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023), the rise of Islamic extremism, the skepticism about the strict interpretations of Islam by moderate Muslims, and the modernization efforts in the Muslim world have all led to a growing interest in meditation and spirituality outside of conventional institutional religion (Haq & Medhekar, 2020). It should be noted that, in the context of the visitor's separation from post-modern society, Sufi mosque visiting may offer a spiritual encounter with a sacred site that can be coded as distant, both temporally and spatially.

5.4. RELIGIOUS HOSTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUNNI VISITORS

Traditional Sunni visitors tend to distance themselves from the saint's practices, viewing them as distractions. They constitute a small proportion of visitors, and many sheikhs observed that Sunni visitors generally do not believe in the saint's sacredness. The majority of the sheikhs are candid about the fact that the overwhelming majority of Sunni visitors are not Sufi devotees, and they combine traditional Islamic observances, such as daily prescribed prayers, with a range of leisure activities. From the sheikhs' viewpoint, Sunni visitors generally do not believe very deeply in the perceived sacredness of the saint and do not follow his spiritual practice. Accordingly, their behaviors and activities during the visit clearly reflect the traditional Islamic religious practices and norms found in regular mosques

in Egypt (e.g., performing *salāt al-jama* or congregational prayers, participating in the “public tilawa” or congregational recitation of the Qur’an, while attending *salāt al-jum’a* or Friday noon prayers) rather than the mystical world of Sufism. They also spend less time inside the mosque than do visitors from other groups. It was also clearly noted by many respondents that the Sunni visitors’ activities reflect the fact that their visit is largely devoid of “mystical experiences” and they use the Sufi mosque as a background for recreational activities. In short, although Sunni visitors generally perceive the Sufi mosque as a religious site to visit, secular-leisure activities seem to be the primary reason for it. The reason for this contradiction (as several sheikhs articulated) is that Sunni visitors perceived the mosque as a sacred place merely for Sufi adherents and not as their own selves. In other words, they did not have strong sense of belonging.

5.5. RELIGIOUS HOSTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SECULAR VISITORS (ALZUWWAR ALMAANYOUN)

Alzuwwar almaanyoun (secular visitors) form a small minority, viewed positively by sheikhs for their respectful behavior. Sheikh Atif stated:

All *Alzuwwar almaanyoun* respect the sanctity of the site by behaving and dressing modestly. These kinds of behavior make me want to talk to them. For example, if they speak English, I’ll start a conversation with them and make them aware that Sufis like me believe in the brotherhood of all humanity and I hold believers and unbelievers in the mosque in high esteem.

Of interest is that, in almost all of the interviews, the sheikhs do not necessarily prefer Muslim visitors to secular visitors and Western Muridins, as they welcome increased Western (non-Muslim) attendance mainly for the opportunity to promote the mystical experience and spiritual aspects of Sufi teachings. It is imperative to underscore that during the interviews these sheikhs exhibit an explicit behaviour to undermine perceptions of difference by making a place for non-Muslims (secular visitors and Western Sufi Muridins) in their sacred site. The secular visitors, similar to Western Sufi Muridins, were perceived by the sheikhs as “siah” (international tourists) but these two groups of visitors constituted two differently driven groups with respect to their motives and the way they behaved on site. The Western Sufi Muridins visited the site with a specific interest and involvement in the spiritual practices of the saint. In contrast, according to the participants, the secular visitors generally have a fairly superficial knowledge of the Sufi site, and they learn of the existence of the place through “previous international tourists”, “the Egypt Tourism Authority’s website”, “tour agency brochures” or “videos channels in YouTube” that promote religious

and cultural tourism in Egypt. Three respondents also noted that secular visitors usually decide to visit the mosque since “it was close to Cairo and Alexandria”, “it was free to enter”, or “it was featured in some English guidebooks as an interesting religious site in Egypt with a well-known saint buried”.

According to the accounts of most of the respondents, unlike Western Sufi Muridins, secular visitors were not interested in the spirituality or religiosity of the site; rather they were interested in watching Sufi dances and religious festivities, interacting with religious hosts, buying souvenirs, trying local food and restaurant offerings, viewing icons of religious difference (e.g., pulpit and qibla “prayer hall”), and taking photos of the saint’s shrine and the courtyard’s façade. Finally, the responses of the interviewed sheikhs show a similar phenomenon between Western Sufi Muridins and secular visitors: unlike other groups, they often seek out “personal interactions” and “engagement” with the religious hosts. They often initiate casual conversations and interactions with them and engage with questions about Sufism and the saint’s way of life and his spiritual path.

6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSIONS AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

6.1. CONTRIBUTION TO THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE

This study adds to the body of knowledge on religious tourism by providing a nuanced understanding of how Sufi sheikhs categorize and perceive Muslim and non-Muslim visitors. The findings suggest that visitors to Sufi sites seek a diverse range of experiences, from engaging with Sufi spiritual practices to exploring the cultural richness of the Sufi site. The sheikhs’ classification and perceptions indicate that visitors to the Sufi site do not consist of partially or exclusively motivated pilgrims, but of different types of visitor. According to the sheikhs’ categorizations, some visitors (saint worshippers, Muslim Sufi Muridins and Western Sufi Muridins) are primarily driven by religious/spiritual motivations, others by secular (recreational) incentives (secular visitors) and yet more by semi-religious motivations (Sunni visitors). This diversity indicates that motivations are not uniform; rather, they encompass a spectrum from purely religious to recreational (Liro, 2024; Tsai, 2021). It seems that the Sufi site takes different religious and tourism functions for its visitors depending on the type and motive. It appears also that Sufi tourism market encompasses a diverse array of products that are commonly linked to religious tourism, including Sufi pilgrimage trips or visits, the search for mystical and divine knowledge, attendance at the burial

sites to make specific appeals to Sufi saints, watching Sufi dances and religious festivities, interacting with religious hosts, buying souvenirs, trying local food and restaurant offerings, and viewing icons of religious difference (Elhadary, 2018). Sufi tourism occurs even though the visitors' motives for visiting and their behaviours and activities at these sites are diverse (Haq & Medhekar, 2020).

The sheikhs' identification of five distinct visitor types – each distinguished by particular behaviors, performances, and levels of knowledge about Sufism, provides a critical lens through which to perceive the intersection of spirituality and tourism. This approach moves beyond mere description and engages critically with existing literature. The typology presented in the current study (Figure 1) not merely aligns with the typological frameworks established in earlier (e.g., Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Ebadi, 2014; Wong et al., 2013) and later studies (e.g., Doğukan Çıkı & Tanrıverdi, 2023; Hidayat, 2023; Lee & Cho, 2025; Liro, 2024; Tsai, 2021; Zheng et al., 2022), but also expands the understanding of the “pious pilgrim” concept beyond traditional definitions. The concept of the “pious pilgrim” has often been framed within a Western-centric context that emphasizes obligatory religious practices (Polus et al., 2022). However, this study illustrates that the sheikhs define this term dynamically, incorporating visitors who engage with Sufism's spiritual teachings without necessarily adhering to traditional religious obligations. In other words, Sufi hosts interpreted this term in ways that diverge from traditional Western literature. For example, the saint worshippers are perceived as having a limited understanding of Sufism, contrasting sharply with the deeper spiritual engagement observed in both Muslim and Western Sufi Muridins. This critical engagement allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the pious pilgrim concept, suggesting that the term is dynamic and fluid, shaped by various, though not mutually exclusive, understandings and characteristics.

Hence, this study invites a re-examination of the pilgrimage-tourism continuum proposed by earlier scholars like Santos (2002) and Smith (1992), illustrating how such distinctions can obscure the complexities of visitor experiences. While these frameworks have provided foundational insights, the study findings highlight the need for a more inclusive and context-specific understanding of pilgrimage. For example, the sheikhs perceived the saint worshippers as unworthy of the term “pious Sufi pilgrims”. From a Sufi perspective, those who engage in devotional rituals centered on saint veneration, while avoiding secular activities, are excluded from the linear tourist-pilgrim continuum and saint worshippers were found to occupy an anomalous position, unable to be categorized. Unlike saint worshippers, traditional Sunni visitors showed less commitment to Sufi rituals and were more

interested in secular activities, placing them easily in the middle of the sacred–secular continuum. What distinguishes Western and Muslim Sufi Muridins from the other groups is their aim to experience the authenticity of Sufi practices while maintaining their own beliefs. Accordingly, only these two groups were considered “genuine Sufi spiritual visitors” by the sheikhs, positioning them closer to the pious end of the pilgrimage-tourism continuum. In summary, by analyzing the sheikhs' perspectives, the research underscores that visitor classifications are not static; they are influenced by a myriad of factors, including religious interpretations, socio-economic conditions, and cultural exchanges. This dynamic approach enriches the theoretical framing by situating the concept of the pious pilgrim within a broader discourse about identity, spirituality, and the interplay of religion and tourism.

A deeper reflection on the factors influencing the sheikhs' perceptions reveals the roles of power dynamics, gender and socio-political and -economic contexts. The sheikhs' narratives are not merely personal reflections; they are molded by their positions within a broader socio-political landscape that often marginalizes certain interpretations of Sufism (Çakmaktaş & Özçelik, 2025). For example, the classification of saint worshippers as less knowledgeable may reflect a power dynamic that privileges certain forms of religious expression over others, potentially sidelining the voices of grassroots practitioners who engage in these devotional practices. Also, gender may play a significant role in shaping how visitors are categorized. Interactions between male sheikhs and predominantly male visitors can influence the interpretation of behaviors deemed acceptable or pious. Future research could further investigate whether female visitors are perceived differently and how gender influences the types of spiritual engagement deemed authentic by Sufi hosts. Political and economic contexts also shape these perceptions. The increasing commercialization of Sufi sites can lead to tensions between maintaining spiritual integrity and catering to tourist expectations (Ghaderi et al., 2020). The sheikhs' welcoming stance towards secular visitors may serve as a strategy to promote a more moderate image of Islam in the face of negative global stereotypes, thereby reflecting a political motive to counteract narratives of extremism.

The exploration of host-guest dynamics reveals that Sufi sheikhs maintain an inclusive approach towards all visitors, fostering interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. This approach transcends mere hospitality, functioning as a conscious negotiation of identity and representation in a globalized world (Milman & Oren, 2018). This perspective not only enriches the visitor experience, offering a potentially transformative encounter with Sufi spirituality, but

also promotes a more tolerant and nuanced view of Islam, countering prevalent stereotypes often amplified within the current socio-political climate. The inclusion of non-Muslim visitors challenges the traditional notion of exclusivity often associated with religious sites, aligning instead with theories of cosmopolitanism and intercultural exchange (Guia & Jamal, 2023). This suggests that Sufi spiritual spaces can actively serve as dynamic platforms for cultural exchange and dialogue, becoming contact zones where diverse worldviews intersect, negotiate, and potentially reshape one another. However, critical analysis should also consider the potential power dynamics inherent in such interactions, examining whether this inclusivity serves as a form of subtle proselytization or a genuine effort towards equitable exchange.

The findings also shed some light on the interplay between Sufism's cultural heritage and its spiritual practices. This duality shapes visitor's experiences and expectations, highlighting the complexities that religious hosts face in balancing the preservation of spiritual integrity and authenticity with the demands of tourism. The distinction between Sufism as heritage and Sufism as a living spiritual practice raises critical issues about commodification and authenticity in religious tourism (Singh et al., 2024). Understanding this distinction is important for recognizing how Sufi sites navigate the tensions between maintaining their sacredness and appealing to a broader audience. The commercialization of Sufi practices can lead to further tensions, particularly in maintaining authentic spiritual experiences while catering to tourist expectations. This critical engagement with the commercialization of spirituality underscores the need for Sufi hosts to navigate their roles as custodians of both tradition and tourism. This dynamic is important for understanding the evolving nature of Sufism within the framework of modern religious tourism, revealing how Sufi sites can adapt to contemporary demands while preserving their spiritual essence.

6.2. CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

Integrating the perspectives of Sufi hosts into tourism management practices can significantly enrich the discourse on interfaith dialogue and cultural policy. As Sufi sheikhs exhibit a welcoming attitude towards both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors, their insights can serve as a foundation for fostering mutual understanding and respect among diverse religious communities. This aligns with broader debates on the role of tourism as a medium for interfaith engagement, where shared experiences at sacred sites can break down cultural barriers and challenge the stereotypes associated with Islam in Western societies (Ghaderi et al., 2020). By promoting Sufi spiritual practices and

narratives, tourism stakeholders can leverage these interactions to cultivate an environment of inclusivity, showcasing Sufism's moderate interpretations of Islam and its emphasis on universal brotherhood. Such initiatives not only enhance the visitor experience but also contribute to a more nuanced representation of Muslim cultures in the global tourism landscape (Haq & Medhekar, 2020). Moreover, the typology of visitors developed through this research provides valuable insights for cultural policy formulation, particularly in the context of managing sacred sites. Understanding the diverse motivations and behaviors of visitors, ranging from saint worshippers to secular tourists, enables site managers to tailor experiences that cater to different audience segments in Figure 2. This segmentation is important in developing sustainable tourism strategies that respect the sacredness of Sufi sites while also accommodating the leisure interests of a broader audience. By promoting cultural exchange and fostering respectful interactions through targeted programming, Sufi sites can position themselves as exemplary models of how religious tourism can balance spiritual integrity with commercial viability. This approach not only safeguards the sanctity of these sites but also supports local economies, ultimately contributing to the cultural preservation and promotion of Sufi heritage in a globalized world.

While it is acknowledged that suppliers generally seek profits and may prioritize economic gains over the spiritual experiences of tourists (Lee & Cho, 2025), this study highlights an opportunity for a balanced approach to tourism management. By recognizing the distinct motivations and behaviors of different visitor types, Sufi hosts and local travel agencies can create tailored offerings that not only enhance spiritual engagements but also align with the commercial interests of the tourism sector. This dual focus can help ensure that visitors leave with meaningful experiences that resonate with their spiritual needs, while also contributing to the economic sustainability of Sufi sites. Such an approach encourages respectful interactions between tourists and hosts, fostering a deeper appreciation for Sufi practices and beliefs. By segmenting the visitor market based on discrete behaviors, motivations, and their levels of involvement in recreational activities, Sufi hosts can develop offerings that are both spiritually enriching and economically viable. For example, saint worshippers, who seek a deeper connection through spiritual practices, may require a strictly focused experience devoid of leisure elements, such as guided prayers or rituals centered around the veneration of the saint. In contrast, Muslim and Western Sufi Muridins, who often blend spiritual pursuits with cultural exploration and some recreational activities, might appreciate offerings that include opportunities for engaging in Sufi practices

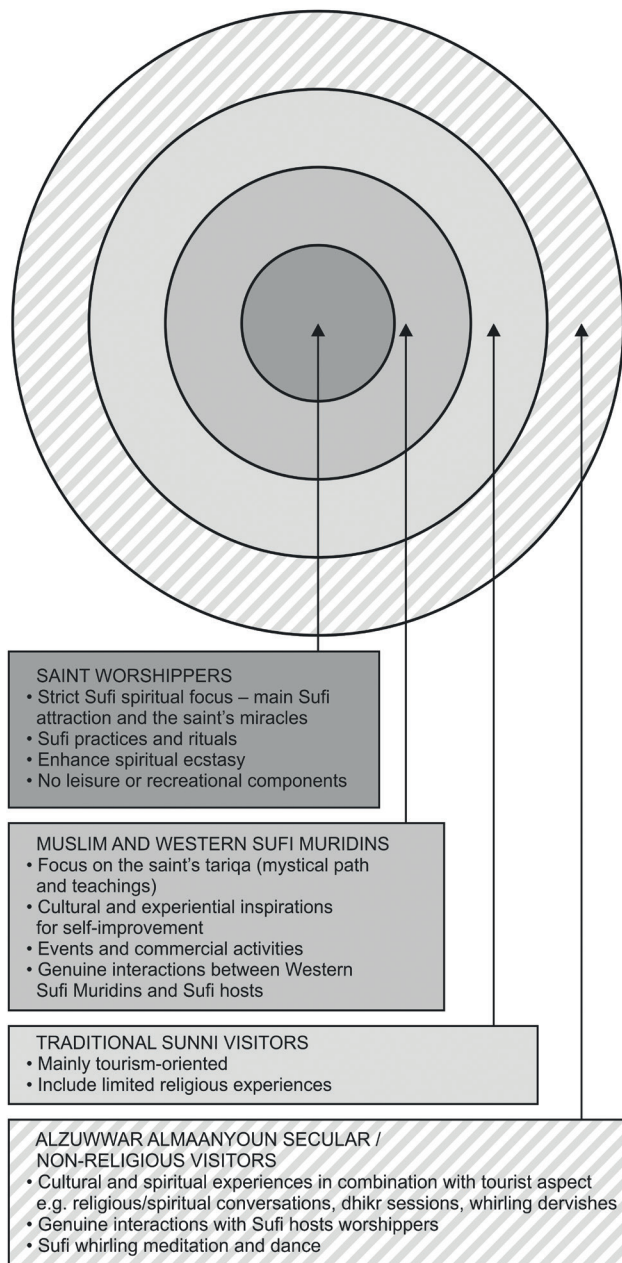


Figure 2. Summary of the ramifications during the development of Sufi spiritual tour packages

Source: author

alongside cultural and leisure experiences, such as local food tastings or music events. By designing these diverse experiences, Sufi hosts can cater to the different interests of visitors, creating a more inclusive environment that honors the essence of Sufism while also tapping into the broader tourism market. This strategic alignment can ultimately lead to increased visitor satisfaction and repeat patronage, fostering a sustainable tourism model that benefits both the community and its visitors.

Finally, Sufi hosts and tourism marketers should leverage promotional materials to market their cities as spiritual destinations by incorporating

Sufi traditions and rituals (Haq & Medhekar, 2020). They can embrace the digital age by promoting Sufi mosques on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Collaboration among Sufi hosts, travel firms, and destination administrators can significantly boost international interest in Sufi mosques. With Sufi Sheikhs generally welcoming siah (Western Sufi Muridins and secular visitors), promoting existing Sufi sites in Egypt and beyond is advisable, as religious tourism provides Egypt with a valuable opportunity to rejuvenate its tourism sector and improve its reputation on the global stage (Adam, 2025). Figure 2 outlines essential considerations for Sufi hosts and travel firms when developing spiritual tour packages, based on the five-fold visitor typology. Additionally, Sufi mosque management should adopt proactive strategies to enhance visitor experience. This includes clear signage prohibiting touching or kissing the saint's tomb and limiting visitor numbers to prevent damage and ensure respectful behavior.

7. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research has inherent limitations. First, as it is based on a single case study site, generalization of the findings may be limited. Only the perspectives of Sufi hosts regarding visitors were examined, excluding actual visitor experiences. Future research should focus on visitors' motivations, experiences, and perceptions of Sufism, including their on-site interactions, to substantiate the five-fold visitor typology. The role of Sufi faith in facilitating positive host-guest interactions can also be further explored. The author plans to conduct such studies as a second stage of this research. Additionally, testing the applicability of the concepts of pious pilgrim and typology in other contexts, such as Shi'a mosques, Baha'i shrines, Jewish synagogues, and Christian sites, is recommended. Finally, qualitative findings could be complemented by quantitative methods to enhance understanding of the phenomenon, as suggested in previous research (Zheng et al., 2022).

ENDNOTES

¹ A Murid is a Sufi seeker or follower of a Sufi saint's devotional path of spiritual development. A Murid endeavors to attain a deeper connection with God through the pursuit of spiritual knowledge and the attainment of spiritual enlightenment.

² The term refers to Sufi saints' devotional path of spiritual development, which encompasses a series of stages involving contemplation and meditation, ultimately culminating in closeness and intimate communion with the Divine.

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