Creating Spiritual Values in Tourism:
Insights from Buddhist Monks and Tour Operators

Tin Doan

1. Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, United Kingdom
2. Faculty of Tourism, Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Vietnam
tin.doan@northumbria.ac.uk
ORCID: 0000-0001-7428-9394

Thi Lan Huong Truong
Faculty of Tourism and Culinary Arts
Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam
huongttl@huit.edu.vn
ORCID: 0000-0002-5592-4767

Wei-Jue Huang
School of Hotel and Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China
sabrina.huang@polyu.edu.hk
ORCID: 0000-0002-8721-9704

Dahlia El-Manstrly
University of Sheffield, United Kingdom
d.el-manstrly@sheffield.ac.uk
ORCID: 0000-0002-4943-1907

Van-Son Ha
Dai Tong Lam Buddhist College, Vietnam
Thichkhaiphap89@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author: Wei-Jue Huang: sabrina.huang@polyu.edu.hk; 17 Science Museum Road, TST East, Kowloon, Hong Kong; +852-34002192.

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Abstract

This study explores the unique role of Buddhist monks in spiritual tourism through the 5V model of value creation. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 22 Vietnamese Buddhist monks and 15 spiritual tour operators. Through thematic analysis, key insights emerged regarding the monks' roles in shaping spiritual values along each dimension of the 5V ontological framework, encompassing Value Proposition, Value Segment, Value Configuration, Value Network, and Value Capture. The findings underscore Buddhist monks' significance in crafting value propositions through spiritual guidance and enlightenment. Their understanding of diverse spiritual seekers and adeptness in configuring spiritual experiences were rooted in the Buddhist principles of interconnectedness and compassion. The study highlights monks' pivotal role within the broader value network in facilitating meaningful connections between travellers, destinations, and spiritual realms. Additionally, the study elucidates the mechanisms of value capture, shedding light on how monks navigate the intersection of spirituality and tourism to sustainably co-create value.

Introduction

In recent years, spiritual tourism has emerged as a significant niche within the tourism industry, attracting travellers seeking transformative experiences and connections with sacred sites and traditions. This phenomenon reflects a growing interest in holistic well-being and personal development, with destinations worldwide capitalizing on their spiritual and cultural heritage to cater to this demand (Smith & Puczkó, 2016; Nair & Dileep, 2021). Within this context, Buddhist destinations captivate seekers of spiritual enlightenment with their historic and religious significance (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995). While sacred sites and experiences underpin spiritual journeys, spiritual tourism differs from religious tourism, though their boundaries often blur (Kujawa, 2017). Willson (2016) notes that religious tourism is more focused and institutional, with specific devotional goals and linked to religious institutions. For example, people go to Bodh Gaya for religious tourism to learn more about the Buddha's enlightenment and strengthen their faith. Spiritual tourism, on the other hand, is characterized by its diverse nature and free from institutional structures, emphasizing individual growth, inner peace, and self-discovery (Cheer et al., 2017). For example, people can experience sacredness and transcendence through a personal journey, visiting lesser-known sites, or just being in nature.

Spiritual tourism is relatively new and, on the rise, due to consumer interest in mental health and wellness, especially post-COVID-19 (Bhalla et al., 2021). While increasing tourist demand for spiritual rejuvenation is evident, it is unclear whether Buddhist monks face any dilemmas in maintaining a religious centre or expanding their offerings to include some spiritual (and

less religious) practices for visitors. It is unclear when Buddhist monks engage with spiritual tourists who may not necessarily share the same faith, how do they co-create spiritual values and experiences? The dynamics of monks' involvement in spiritual tourism remain underexplored, warranting further investigation to deepen our understanding of their unique contribution to this burgeoning sector.

Previous research has primarily focused on examining the roles of other stakeholders such as tourists, DMOs, tour operators and local communities (e.g., Huang & Pearce, 2019; Shinde, 2021). Buddhist monks play a central role in facilitating spiritual encounters and guiding visitors on their journeys of self-discovery (Philp & Mercer, 1999). In support, Yang et al. (2019) indicated the need to seek insights from devout religious leaders' perspectives as they found that DMOs' representation of Shaolin Temple overshadowed spiritual elements (e.g., Buddhism, zen). Moreover, issues relating to spiritual values and developing and managing spiritual tourism destinations, remain under-researched (Wang et al., 2023). Thus, there is a compelling need to examine the intricate interplay between spiritual leaders, such as monks, and the tourism industry (Timothy & Olsen, 2016). This study aims to address these two research questions:

1. In what way do Buddhist monks participate in spiritual tourism experiences?
2. How do Buddhist monks and tour operators co-create spiritual values for tourists and other stakeholders within the 5V model?

In line with Willson, (2016), we argue that spiritual value and religious value vary in certain aspects, such as subjectivity/objectivity, inclusive/exclusionary, and philosophy/faith. Thus, we apply the 5V model which is a comprehensive framework that elucidates the process of value co-creation in tourism contexts (Taran et al., 2021) to the engagement of Buddhist monks with the operators of spiritual tours. By doing so, this research aims to unravel the nuanced dimensions of their involvement in spiritual value co-creation and shed light on their role in shaping spiritual tourism experiences. Furthermore, by offering a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of monks in spiritual tourism, this study contributes to both theoretical advancements and practical implications for the spiritual tourism industry.

Literature Review

Spiritual Tourism

Spiritual tourism has garnered increasing attention from scholars and practitioners due to its profound spiritual, cultural, and economic impacts. It emerged as an alternative form of religiously motivated tourism beyond the context of traditional religion (Christou et al., 2023; Kujawa, 2017; Norman & Pokorny, 2017). Spiritual tourism is related to spiritual needs where religious needs may not exist, offering a way for people to experience continual and dynamic personal growth and discovery (Zheng et al., 2024). According to Timothy and Olsen (2016), spiritual tourism is motivated by spiritual pursuits, such as visiting sacred sites, participating in religious rituals, or seeking personal transformation. Researchers identified the diverse motivations of spiritual tourists, including religious devotion (Huang et al., 2020), quest for inner peace (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Halim et al., 2021; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018), self-discovery (Nair & Dileep, 2021; Wang et al., 2023), and healing (Bhalla et al., 2021). As such, spiritual tourism encompasses a wide array of experiences, from visits to ancient temples and

holy sites to wellness retreats and meditation centres (Cheer et al., 2017). The appeal of spiritual tourism lies in its capacity to offer meaningful encounters with sacred traditions, heritage, and natural landscapes (Christou et al., 2023; Smith & Puczkó, 2016).

Central to spiritual tourism is the notion of sacred space, where individuals may seek connections with the divine or harmony with nature, and experience a sense of transcendence (Timothy, 2011). Sacred sites, ranging from iconic pilgrimage destinations like Mecca and Jerusalem to lesser-known local shrines and pilgrimage routes, serve as focal points for spiritual journeys and cultural exchanges. Moreover, spiritual tourism often intersects with wellness tourism, as travellers seek holistic healing and rejuvenation through practices like yoga, meditation, and alternative therapies (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). This convergence reflects a broader trend towards holistic well-being, driving demand for destinations that offer spiritual nourishment alongside physical relaxation.

In essence, spiritual tourism offers individuals a unique opportunity to delve into the depths of their souls, connect with the world around them, and embark on a journey of self-realization (*See Appendix 1 for a comprehensive literature review*). The role of spiritual leaders, such as Buddhist monks, is instrumental in facilitating these experiences. Their presence and guidance often contribute to creating a conducive environment for spiritual enlightenment (Timothy & Olsen, 2016). Despite its growing popularity, spiritual tourism presents various challenges and ethical considerations, including issues of commodification, cultural appropriation, and environmental degradation (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). The commercialisation of sacred sites and rituals may dilute their spiritual significance and disrupt local communities, leading to tensions between preserving cultural heritage and catering to tourist demands (Heidari et al., 2018).

Furthermore, spiritual tourism can perpetuate inequalities and power imbalances, particularly in destinations reliant on tourism revenue, where locals may face marginalization and loss of cultural autonomy (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Cheer et al., 2017). Hence, scholars emphasize the importance of responsible tourism in mitigating negative impacts while harnessing tourism's potential for sustainability and cross-cultural understanding (Willson, 2016). Previous studies highlight the role of tourism stakeholders in managing spiritual tourism destinations and providing connectivity value to spiritual experiences (Christou et al., 2023). For instance, Christou and Sharpley (2019) observed that engaging in spiritual dialogues with esteemed leaders fosters personal spiritual development. While spiritual mentors, such as monks and guides, are recognised for shaping pilgrims' transformative journeys, their roles and specific contributions to spiritual tourism remain underexplored. There are also gaps in understanding how they balance sacred duties with tourism demands, underscoring the need for further research.

Value Co-creation in Tourism Experiences

The creation of experiences represents the most advanced form of value creation as experiences reside solely in the mind of the individual who has engaged with them on various levels—emotional, physical, intellectual, and even spiritual (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Co-creation denotes an interactive process where at least two actors engage in specific forms of mutually beneficial collaboration, ultimately resulting in value creation for all involved parties (Tajzadeh-Namin, 2012), both materially and symbolically (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014). In the

tourism sector, this process is influenced by interactions between tourists, residents, and the setting, forming the core of tourist experiences. The goal of co-creating experiences is to enhance value for all stakeholders involved, ultimately leading to a more valued service offering (Mathis et al., 2016).

Service-dominant logic evolved to shift thinking about value from an organisation-centric to a customer-centric view (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2017). This perspective emphasizes the relationship between consumers, organisations, and other beneficiaries, where value is co-created by multiple actors, not just delivered by one to another (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Value co-creation represents a paradigm shift, positioning consumers as active players in their experiences, leading to the co-creation of value through interactions and customisation (Bolton et al., 2014; Zatori et al., 2018). Recently, there has been a shift in attention towards the involvement of local communities in the co-creation process (Lin et al., 2017). Within the context of spiritual tourism, it is important to explore the role of religious leaders in value co-creation because they hold a unique position as the embodiment of sacred values and traditions. Spiritual leaders, such as monks and priests, are representatives of a divine spirit attainable by people. Hence, their involvement in tourism transcends the conventional roles found in other forms of tourism (Jiang et al., 2018).

From a business perspective, the value driver approach focuses on factors that enhance the total value created and delivered by a business (Ranta et al., 2018; Taran et al., 2016). The sustainable business model bridges the gap between customer value creation and firm profitability, serving as a crucial managerial tool (Ranta et al., 2018). It enhances the value co-creation process by providing a structured framework for identifying, prioritizing, and leveraging key factors that contribute to value creation.

The 5V Model of Value Creation

The 5V model is a theoretical framework that provides a comprehensive lens to examine value co-creation processes within tourism contexts (Taran, Boer & Nielsen, 2021). This model delineates five key dimensions essential for value creation: Value Proposition, Value Segment, Value Configuration, Value Network, and Value Capture. Each dimension offers insights into the mechanisms through which stakeholders collaborate to generate and exchange value, encompassing both tangible and intangible aspects of tourism experiences.

The Value Proposition dimension of the 5V model pertains to the unique value offerings that attract tourists to particular destinations or experiences (Taran et al., 2021; Berezka et al., 2018). This dimension encompasses tangible attributes, such as accommodation, as well as intangible elements, such as novelty and authenticity. Effective value propositions resonate with tourists' desires and address their needs. Developing a comprehensive value proposition for a region has a positive impact on destination appeal, potentially fostering sustainable regional development (Berezka et al., 2018).

Value Segment focuses on understanding the diverse preferences, motivations, and behaviours of tourist segments (Taran et al., 2021). This dimension acknowledges that tourists are not homogeneous, but with varying interests, demographics, and psychographics. By segmenting the market and tailoring offerings to specific customers, tourism providers can better meet the needs and expectations of different travellers (Debarliev & Mitrovska, 2016).

Value segmentation enables more targeted marketing strategies, product development, and service customization, enhancing the overall destination competitiveness.

The Value Configuration dimension examines the configuration of different resources and activities to efficiently deliver the value proposition in tourism experiences. By optimizing value configurations, destinations and businesses can leverage synergies, minimize inefficiencies, and enhance the quality of the tourism product (Dredge & Jamal, 2013). Moreover, effective value configurations foster innovation and adaptation in response to changing market dynamics and consumer preferences (Buhalis & Costa, 2006).

Value Network elucidates the broader ecosystem of stakeholders and institutions that influence tourism value creation (Taran, Boer & Nielsen, 2021). This dimension recognizes the collaborative processes among actors such as government agencies, non-profit organisations, community groups, and industry associations (Sfandla & Björk, 2013). Value networks play a critical role in shaping destination competitiveness by fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collective action. By analysing value networks, tourism planners and policymakers can identify leverage points for intervention and foster more inclusive and sustainable development strategies.

Value Capture addresses the mechanisms through which stakeholders appropriate value generated through tourism activities (Taran et al., 2021). This dimension encompasses various forms of value capture, including financial returns, social benefits, and cultural preservation. Effective value capture strategies ensure that all stakeholders receive a fair and equitable share of the benefits while minimizing negative externalities and social costs. By aligning value capture mechanisms with sustainable tourism principles and stakeholder interests, destinations can foster long-term prosperity and well-being for both residents and visitors (Sharpley & Telfer, 2014).

In tourism, studies often do not comprehensively cover the five value dimensions. Notably, the research conducted by Debarliev and Mitrovska (2016) focuses on the role of value proposition in crafting unique and memorable experiences for destinations. Likewise, Butler and Szromek (2019) emphasize the importance of value proposition and expand it into value proposition for customers, for the enterprise, and for society. Perić et al. (2019) propose business models for outdoor sport tourism based on value proposition, value capture, value creation, and value network, and use the framework to identify three tourist segments. Given the diverse components of business models, Butler and Szromek (2019) call to identify sustainable development components that provide value for the community and the environment, and suggest actions to integrate them into existing business models for sustainability. Compared to other value-based models, the 5V model highlights the configuration of resources and collaborations among stakeholders, which offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and analysing the complex dynamics of value co-creation. By examining each dimension, we aim to gain deeper insights into the processes through which tourism stakeholders collaborate and identify areas for improvement to deliver compelling spiritual tourism experiences.

Role of Buddhist Monks as Spiritual Leaders in Tourism

Buddhist monks, revered as spiritual leaders and custodians of Buddhist teachings, play a

significant role in shaping the tourism landscape in destinations with Buddhist heritage (Kolås, 2004). Their involvement in tourism encompasses a range of roles as mediators, guides, and educators, contributing to the spiritual and cultural enrichment of tourists (Timothy & Olsen, 2016). While monks' engagement with tourists can foster interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange, it also raises questions about commodification, authenticity, and respect for religious traditions (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Buddhist monks' participation in tourism activities may entail challenges such as maintaining cultural integrity amidst commercial pressures, navigating stereotypes, and preserving sacred sites from over-tourism (Yang et al., 2019). Moreover, their interactions with tourists may lead to value co-destruction by evoking tensions between religious duties and secular demands, prompting reflections on the appropriate boundaries between spiritual guidance and commercial services (Kolås, 2004).

The role of Buddhist monks in tourism reflects broader debates about the ethics and sustainability of spiritual tourism. Scholars advocate for dialogic approaches that engage monks, local communities, operators, and policymakers in co-creating tourism experiences grounded in mutual respect. Initiatives such as community-based tourism and heritage conservation empower monks and residents to leverage tourism as a tool for socio-economic development while safeguarding sacred sites and intangible heritage (Christou et al., 2023). By fostering partnerships based on reciprocity and social responsibility, monks can harness the potential of tourism to promote spiritual well-being, cultural preservation, and sustainable livelihoods, thereby enriching both visitors' experiences and the resilience of destination communities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in constructivist epistemology, to explore in depth the experiences of Buddhist monks interacting with tourists (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This qualitative lens will uncover nuanced insights into the complex dynamics of value co-creation between monks and tour operators, facilitating a deeper understanding of their roles in spiritual tourism.

Context of Buddhism in Vietnam

The unique form of Buddhist-centred spiritual tourism in Vietnam provides a suitable setting to examine the involvement of religious leaders in delivering spiritual experiences to tourists. Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam around the 2nd century BCE, primarily through trade routes from India and China. The propagation of Buddhism gained momentum during the Ly and Tran dynasties (11th to 14th century CE) when it received royal patronage and flourished across the country (Lauser, 2016). The presence of Buddhism has significantly influenced Vietnam's tourism landscape, with numerous Buddhist sites serving as major tourist attractions. Tourists often engage in meditation retreats, prayer rituals, and cultural festivals, fostering a deeper appreciation for Buddhist traditions and Vietnamese culture.

Vietnam's unique blend of Buddhism with indigenous beliefs and practices has given rise to syncretic forms of spirituality that attract a diverse range of tourists. The incorporation of Daoist elements, folk traditions, and ancestral worship creates a rich tapestry of spiritual

experiences that resonate with both domestic and international visitors (Lauser, 2016). Buddhism in Vietnam serves as a cornerstone of the country's tourism industry, offering a multifaceted experience that combines spiritual exploration, cultural discovery, and natural beauty.

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Buddhist monks and operators involved in pilgrimage tours, cultural events, and meditation camps to explore their roles, benefits, and challenges in co-creating value in spiritual tourism. The 5V model of value creation (Taran et al., 2016) was used to guide the interview questions on the process of creating spiritual experiences for visitors (See Appendix 2: Interview Protocol). The questions revolved around their roles, engaging activities, and strategies to interact and co-create spiritual experiences for tourists. For example, one of the questions to the monks is "What are your roles and responsibilities in offering spiritual tourism activities?". Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and the authors returned to 37 interviews to discuss evolving analysis and conclusions.

Sampling and Data Collection

This study adopts an emancipatory approach to qualitative research, which seeks to amplify the voices of underrepresented populations and actively involve them in the research process (Doan et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in the spiritual tourism context, where Buddhist monks often hold valuable but underexplored perspectives. The approach ensured that monks were not merely participants but active collaborators, contributing to defining the research scope, refining questions, and guiding aspects of data collection. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure participants possessed firsthand knowledge and insights into the phenomenon under investigation, enriching the depth of the data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research team's direct involvement with the Buddhist community—particularly through one team member who is a monk—enhanced the study's contextual sensitivity and access to participants. By leveraging professional and personal networks within the Vietnamese Buddhist Association, Buddhist colleges, and tourism associations, the study secured the voluntary participation of 22 monks and 15 tour operators (TOs) in Vietnam (Table 1).

[Table 1]

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study follows a thematic analysis approach, which involves identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within the qualitative data collected through interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is useful in examining the perspectives of different research participants and generating meaningful insights (King, 2004). Initially, transcripts of the interviews, in Vietnamese, were thoroughly reviewed and coded through open coding to identify recurring themes and concepts relevant to monks' roles in spiritual tourism. Subsequently, through axial coding, these codes were organized into overarching themes and sub-themes, iteratively refined through constant comparison and discussion among the research team. NVivo 14 was used for the coding and classification of codes into themes. We assessed the reliability of the generated themes by involving a second coder with significant qualitative

research experience who examined all of the transcripts. In cases of disagreements, we had extensive discussions between the coders until we reached an agreement. Interview quotes were translated into English when reporting the findings to an international audience.

Researcher positionality acknowledges that researchers are not neutral observers; rather, their social, cultural, and personal identities shape the research process, from framing questions to interpreting data (Kapinga, Huizinga, & Shaker, 2022). Recognizing positionality is essential, as it enables researchers to reflect on the biases and assumptions they bring to the study (Yip, 2008). Reflexivity, in this context, refers to the practice of self-awareness, where researchers critically examine their assumptions and the potential impact of their positionality on the research (Skeggs, 2002). In this study, one team member is a monk, while others had spiritual tourism experiences. Their "insider" positionality played a vital role in establishing rapport and creating an environment where participants felt at ease sharing their experiences. On the other hand, the research team constantly remained alert to avoid projecting their own assumptions during the data collection and analysis.

The trustworthiness of the study was assessed by applying the four criteria introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985): (1) *credibility* was ensured by the significant number of interviews conducted and the inclusion of monks as knowledge co-creators; (2) *generality* was established through the length of the interviews and their openness to elicit many different aspects of the phenomenon; (3) *transfer-ability* was based on the usage of a sample of research participants representing different perspectives and demographics; and (4) *integrity* was ensured by neutrality in the conduct of the interview and guarantee of participant anonymity.

Findings

The interviews shed light on how Buddhist monks participate in spiritual tourism and create value for tourists as well as other stakeholders. Guided by the 5V model (Taran et al., 2016), the process consists of five steps: 1) identifying the core values of spiritual tourism based on tourist needs, 2) understanding different tourist segments, 3) shaping a holistic spiritual journey, 4) collaborating with a network of partners, and 5) generating value for local communities as well as tourists beyond the tours.

Crafting Spiritual Values
Core value: inner peace & transformation. Buddhist monks play a central role in shaping spiritual tourism by offering transformative experiences rooted in inner peace and mindfulness. This aligns with the value proposition of spiritual tourism, where the emphasis is on personal growth rather than passive sightseeing. As Tour Operator (TO)_3 explains, "*Our aim is not merely to entertain or enlighten, but to cultivate a deep sense of inner peace and connection with the sacred.*" This reflects the shift from conventional tourism toward immersive, meaningful engagement that fosters self-discovery.

From the monks' perspective, participating in these tours is not just an act of hospitality but a fulfilment of their spiritual mission. As Monk_8 states, "*We want to have these opportunities to teach and guide small groups of tourists to practice their spiritual journey and do our duties as monks.*" This highlights the synergy between monastic values and tourism, where monks share their teachings while tourists gain spiritual insights. The interviews suggest that this

exchange creates a strong value proposition—offering tourists a transformative journey while preserving the integrity of Buddhist practice. However, there are challenges in balancing monastic duties with tourism activities. As noted by Monk_14, while they welcome invitations from tour operators, they would join *"if we can arrange our time,"* which suggests that time constraints may prevent them from responding to all tour invitations.

Achieving tourist need to reconnect with self. Spiritual tourism serves as a sanctuary for tourists seeking respite from the chaos of everyday life, aligning with their intrinsic need for self-reconnection. Monks play a vital role in facilitating this experience by providing meditation, chanting, and contemplative practices and creating spaces conducive to introspection and renewal. As Monk_2 explains, *"The values of spiritual tours and cultural event experiences for Buddhist followers and visitors lies in offering seekers a peaceful time and a sanctuary for the soul, where they can find solace in the serenity of our monastic spaces."*

Key activities: teaching, interacting and facilitating. Interview data further highlights monks' deeper role as facilitators of spiritual growth. As monks share ancient wisdom and guide visitors in meditation, they are key figures in delivering an authentic spiritual experience. According to Monk_11, *"Our role goes beyond providing surface-level experiences like any other tours; it's about facilitating profound encounters with the Dharma, the teachings of Buddha, practicing your faith."* This underscores the monks' commitment to transmitting Buddhist wisdom and fostering meaningful engagement rather than offering passive cultural exposure. Tour operators also emphasize the importance of spiritual experiences, particularly through the selection of heritage sites that enhance the transformative potential of these journeys. As TO_5 explains, *"Crafting spiritual experiences for visitors requires authenticity and reverence for the sacred. We create a space where visitors can engage with Buddhist rituals and traditions coordinated by knowledgeable monks and their colleagues".*

These insights reinforce the unique value proposition of spiritual tourism—where guided experiences and sacred spaces come together to help tourists reconnect with themselves and embark on a path of personal transformation. Monks lead in cultivating inner peace and transformation, prioritizing tourists' spiritual growth over entertainment. They view guiding tourists as a core duty. However, this commitment faces challenges, as tourism's demand for *"accessible experiences risks diluting sacred practices into performative acts"* (TO_11). The pressure to balance authenticity with visitor expectations may strain monks' ability to maintain the spiritual integrity central to their mission.

Understanding Diverse Spiritual Seekers

Interview insights prove the deep commitment of tour operators and monks to understanding and embracing the diversity among spiritual seekers. Their approach emphasizes empathy, compassion, and inclusivity, creating an environment where visitors feel supported and valued on their spiritual paths.

Recognising differences in tourist demand. Monks and tour operators demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusivity, tailoring spiritual experiences to meet the diverse needs of visitors.

They acknowledge that each seeker embarks on a unique journey, influenced by their background, beliefs, and cultural expectations. As Monk_7 explains, "*We had Vietnamese and foreign visitors in our programs. Many are not Buddhist, but they joined us in a peaceful and united way.*" With international tourists, a challenge is that monks "*must have the capacity of speaking in English to communicate*" (Monk_7).

Interviewees also noted the difference between Vietnamese and foreign spiritual tourists:

> *To organise tours for Vietnamese to travel overseas, they prefer well-known monks who they used to practice with. They also wanted to visit famous Buddhist sites with the story of Buddha footprints or heritage… For foreigners in Vietnam…, we need to care more about working with monks who can speak English or the language of tourist groups. They care more about the activities than Vietnamese tourists.* (TO_7)

This distinction shapes how spiritual tours are designed and led for different value segments. For Vietnamese visitors, rituals such as worship and offering preparations hold great importance. As TO_10 states, "*To worship and to pray to Buddha at the site are the first activities before any meditation or self-reflection activities during the spiritual trips for Vietnamese…, our monks will lead them with their wisdom during the tours.*" This suggests that Buddhist tourists prioritize ritual practices more than non-Buddhist visitors, reinforcing the need for tailored spiritual programming.

Navigating differences to connect with tourists. Understanding different visitor segments allows monks to deepen their empathy and create meaningful connections with spiritual seekers. TO_1 emphasizes, "*By embracing this diversity, we expand our capacity for empathy and compassion, recognizing that each person's journey is valid and worthy of support and guidance.*" Through engagement with tourists, monks gain insights into universal human experiences, strengthening their ability to guide and connect. As Monk_22 explains, "*By listening deeply to their stories and concerns, we gain insights into the universal human experience and cultivate a sense of interconnectedness that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries.*" Similarly, Monk_5 highlights, "*Our role in understanding diverse spiritual seekers extends beyond tolerance; it is about celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of every individual*".

Buddhist principles such as interconnectedness, loving-kindness, and equanimity guide monks in fostering an inclusive spiritual space. As Monk_15 describes, "*Through mindful presence and genuine curiosity, we seek to bridge differences and forge meaningful connections with spiritual seekers from all walks of life.*" By recognizing diversity and adapting their approach, monks and tour operators create spiritual experiences that honour different backgrounds. This commitment strengthens the value segmentation of spiritual tourism, ensuring that seekers from all walks of life find personal growth, reflection, and connection. Monks and tour operators tailor offerings to diverse seekers, recognizing unique aspirations and adapting for local and foreign visitors, such as worship-focused Vietnamese vs. activity-oriented foreigners.

Shaping Holistic Spiritual Journeys

The holistic and transformative approach is taken by Buddhist monks in shaping spiritual

journeys for travellers engaged in spiritual tourism. Their emphasis on mindfulness, compassion, and authenticity creates an environment conducive to deep introspection, spiritual growth, and connection with the sacred.

Space for contemplation and introspection. The first step is to create environments conducive to contemplation and introspection. Monks and tour operators recognise the necessity of curating sacred spaces when configuring spiritual journeys. According to TO_14, "*We recognize the importance of creating spaces. By offering rituals, meditation, and opportunities for silent reflection and enlightenment, we facilitate encounters with the divine and inspire seekers to delve deeper into the mysteries of existence.*"

Mix of immersive elements. The immersive nature of the experiences curated by monks is also crucial in spiritual tourism. Monks, through their careful configuration of immersive experiences, ensure that tourists have the opportunity to experience lasting spiritual value. TO_8 also explains, "*Our approach to spiritual tours centres on creating immersive experiences. By weaving together elements of storytelling, rituals, and contemplative practices, we invite travellers to embark on profound encounters with themselves, the natural world, and the sacred.*"

Curating transformative encounters. The interview data highlights the approaches of monks in curating transformative spiritual encounters for tourists. Both tour operators and monks develop a deep commitment to facilitating meaningful transformations in the lives of those who seek spiritual growth. As Monk_2 explains, "*Providing value in spiritual tourism goes beyond service; it involves creating experiences that are transforming and leave a lasting impression on tourists… We strive to orchestrate moments of transcendence and awakening long after the journey ends.*"

Facilitating Connections and Exchanges

The interview provides a great insight into the pivotal role of Buddhist monks and tour operators within the value network of spiritual tourism. Their efforts to cultivate networks of compassion, collaboration, and understanding contribute to the creation of meaningful and intrapersonal experiences for travellers, while also promoting a sense of unity and interconnectedness among all stakeholders involved in spiritual tourism.

Connect with local communities. Being facilitators of connections and exchanges is one of the main purposes for monks in working with tourists and tour operators. Through building the tourist spiritual experience in a collective approach, monks and tour operators encourage tourists to engage with local communities, fostering meaningful relationships through shared Buddhist and humanistic values. According to Monk_7, "*Through our interactions with pilgrims, tourists, and local communities, we cultivate networks of compassion, solidarity, and mutual support, enriching the tapestry of human relationships.*" TO_6 also provides examples of how their tours include charity and cultural exchange programs, such as visiting local schools and delivering vegan foods to orphanages.

Connect with service providers. The monks also demonstrate their efforts to foster a culture of collaboration and reciprocity within the value network of spiritual tourism. By using their Buddhist community networks, monks can connect tour operators and tourists with local service providers, such as food and accommodation: *"By cultivating partnerships with tour operators, hospitality providers, and cultural institutions, we create synergies that amplify the self-transformative and healing power of pilgrimage and spiritual practices"* (Monk_15). Connecting tourists with local providers is a way to contribute to local economy. Tour operators also consult with monks to achieve this goal: "*When we work with monks, we always ask for their recommendations on whom we can work with to not only offer the best experiences… but sharing benefits to the local monastic community and businesses*" (TO_10).

Join the global community. The interview expands on the monks' engagement in the value network of spiritual tourism, emphasizing their focus on co-creating spaces of belonging and shared meaning globally. Monk_2 explains that Buddhist teachings can vary in different countries, but "*What makes us come together is that we believe in Buddhism and humanity. This has helped tourists who engaged in the tours understand each other and share compassion."* Through dialogue, education, and cultural exchange, monks assist tourists to broaden their view and connection with the global Buddhist and non-Buddhist community. The view is echoed by TO_8, who believes that they "*forge connections that bridge divides and cultivate understanding, contributing to the emergence of a more compassionate and inclusive global community."*

Sustainable Co-Creation and Exchange Mechanisms

Sustaining established relationships. The critical part of value capture in spiritual tourism is to strengthen relationships, promote transparency and equality, and prioritise long-term sustainability and collective well-being. Monks' approach reflects a holistic understanding of value creation. According to Monk_20, they emphasise the co-creation of social, cultural, and environmental values with visitors: *"In our pursuit of long-life value capture, we recognize the interconnectedness of economic prosperity, social well-being, and environmental stewardship."* Tour operators also continue to connect with tourists through different channels after the spiritual tours. Through online events, they entice tourists to become part of a community promoting spiritual well-being:

> *Since tourists registered for tours with us, they could join our online community on Facebook and mail lists. Whenever we or our monks organise some online mediation class or events, we update in our groups. These are very helpful as our guests can join anywhere.* (TO_7)

Mechanisms for spiritual exchange. Monks and tour operators discuss the idea that spiritual experiences can go beyond tours. They emphasise the importance of mutual exchange, ensuring that the benefits derived from tourism flow back to local communities. Monk_11 expresses his strong opinion on activating the "*mechanisms that prioritise long-term sustainability, humanity, and collective flourishing over short-term gains"* through investing in education,

infrastructure, and conservation for the sustainable development of spiritual tourism. Tour operators also work with monks to support the development of local communities. As shared by TO_5, "*Generating positive energy in spiritual tourism transcends monetary transactions; it is about fostering relationships of trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit… through transparent and equitable exchange mechanisms.*" While monks and tour operators capture value through sustained relationships and equitable exchanges, limited financial returns to fund spiritual tourism initiatives may strain their sustainability efforts. Noting the importance of economic prosperity, Monk_20 pointed out that "*nothing or no one can stand alone to survive.*" Monks participating in spiritual tourism may become more reliant on the support of other stakeholders in terms of funds and resources. These challenges highlight practical hurdles, potentially overshadowed by their focus on collective well-being.

Discussion

The interviews with monks and tour operators highlight the multifaceted value of spiritual tourism experiences, including the transformative and healing dimensions inherent in spiritual journeys (Bhalla et al., 2021; Halim et al., 2021; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Willson, 2016). Through meaningful encounters with Buddhist teachings, spiritual practices, and rituals, tourists are offered opportunities for personal growth and spiritual development (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Ee & Kahl, 2014). These values encapsulate a multidimensional exchange where tourists, monks, and tourism companies can derive meaningful benefits (Figure 1). For spiritual tourists who seek inner peace, solace, enlightenment, and a deeper connection with themselves and the world around them, spiritual experiences offered by the monks may guide them towards paths of awakening and self-discovery. Monks fulfil their spiritual duty by nurturing visitors' spiritual journeys, reinforcing their sense of purpose. Additionally, tour companies benefit from the value generated by facilitating these experiences, enhancing their reputation, attracting more visitors, and ultimately, driving economic growth. This symbiotic relationship underscores the profound impact of spiritual tourism for all stakeholders.

[Figure 1]

The 5V Model of Spiritual Tourism

Value Proposition.   The exchange of values in spiritual tourism experiences aligns closely with the five dimensions of the value model developed by Taran et al. (2021) (Table 2). The core offering of spiritual tourism guided by Buddhist monks lies in its ability to facilitate personal transformation, self-discovery, and inner peace (Bhalla et al., 2021; Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Zheng et al., 2024). Unlike conventional tourism which focuses on entertainment or sightseeing, these experiences immerse visitors in spiritual practices such as meditation, chanting, and contemplation (Buzinde, 2020; Halim et al., 2021). Monks provide safe sanctuaries, offering tourists a haven from the stress of everyday life while guiding them toward spiritual awakening and self-exploration (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018). These experiences present a transformative value proposition that fosters deep psychological and emotional benefits for visitors.

Value Segment.   The primary target audience for spiritual tourism experiences includes

individuals seeking inner peace and emotional well-being (Bhalla et al., 2021), self-discovery and enlightenment through structured spiritual practices (Christou et al., 2023), and authentic cultural and religious immersion in sacred Buddhist traditions (Ee & Kahl, 2014). This segment includes diverse demographics, from domestic visitors to international tourists, and from spiritually inclined travellers to wellness tourists and those seeking mental and emotional healing. By understanding these value segments, monks and tour operators can tailor experiences that align with the spiritual and psychological needs of these travellers (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). In navigating differences, monks use Buddhist principles—interconnectedness, loving-kindness—to connect with seekers. While the value segment dimension aims to boost competitiveness (Debarliev & Mitrovska, 2016), spiritual tourism providers prioritise personal validation over market expansion, demonstrating the 5V model's applicability to non-commercial contexts.

Value Configuration. The structured design and delivery of spiritual tourism experiences form the value configuration. Monks act as both facilitators and co-creators of value by offering guided spiritual practices such as meditation retreats and rituals (Zheng et al., 2024), personalized guidance that aligns with tourists' spiritual aspirations (Halim et al., 2021), and immersive experiences that integrate Buddhist teachings with contemporary wellness approaches (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018). These structured activities ensure that the experience is authentic, impactful, and culturally sensitive, allowing tourists to engage deeply with Buddhist philosophies and connect with sacred traditions (Palmer, 2014).

Value Network. The interconnected relationships between monks, tourists, and tour operators define the value network in spiritual tourism (Taran et al., 2021). These stakeholders work collaboratively to create a seamless, meaningful experience. Monks act as spiritual guides and knowledge providers, ensuring the authenticity and depth of experiences. Tour operators facilitate logistics, promotion, and infrastructure while respecting the sacred nature of the experience. Tourists also become a part of the value network when they connect with local communities through various activities. This network not only supports sustainable tourism but fosters economic and cultural benefits for local communities by promoting ethical tourism practices and community engagement (Ross & Saxena, 2019).

Value Capture. The final aspect of the 5V model focuses on how stakeholders derive benefits from spiritual tourism, as high-quality experiences attract more visitors, enhance brand equity, and generate sustainable revenue streams (Wang et al., 2023). Monks and tour operators sustain relationships with mindful exchanges and online communities, prioritising social and cultural benefits. Spiritual exchange mechanisms channel gains to locals and sustainability, favouring reciprocity over profit. The study underscores how spiritual tourism is not merely a commercial endeavour but a multi-dimensional value system where all stakeholders benefit, reinforcing value co-creation principles in the spiritual tourism industry.

[Table 2]

This study demonstrates the unique role of Buddhist monks in the value co-creation process

of spiritual tourism through the 5-value model (Christou et al., 2023). Monks' roles are diverse and extend throughout the entire value co-creation process. They are not only value proposers but excellent marketing researchers who understand how to segment and position value appropriately for each segment and guide the overall market. From the tour operators' perspectives, they highlight the monks' integral role in value co-creation within spiritual tourism, aligning with the 5V model to deliver respectful and impactful spiritual experiences while supporting community development (Butler & Szromek, 2019).

Findings also reveal the challenges monks encounter when offering spiritual tourism, including time management, language barriers, and the risks of resource strain and commodification. Nevertheless, monks and tour operators generally expressed positive views on the experiences and values sustained through spiritual tourism. Such positivity might stem from Buddhist philosophy, which embraces hardships as part of interconnectedness and impermanence, as seen in their compassion and resilience. Rather than voicing complaints, monks may accept these barriers as opportunities to serve, aligning with Willson's (2016) view of spirituality's subjective resilience. These hurdles—duty conflicts, resource demands, and potential commodification—underscore the complexity of monks' engagement with tourism's secular dynamics, supporting Yang et al.'s (2019) caution against cultural dilution in spiritual contexts.

Theoretical Implications

Buddhist monks play a profound role in the value creation process of spiritual tourism. Serving as conduits for spiritual transmission, monks offer visitors insights into Buddhist philosophy, rituals, and meditation practices (Prebish & Baumann, 2002). This study adopts the 5V model (Taran et al., 2021) as a multi-dimensional approach to examine value co-creation across tangible (e.g., nature, space), intangible (e.g., inner peace), and relational (e.g., networks) aspects in spiritual tourism. By embedding Buddhist principles, such as compassion, mindfulness, and interconnectedness, across different dimensions, the findings extend the 5V model to a spiritual co-creation context. This study shifts the focus of the 5V model from enterprise-centric innovation to sacred, human-centric value, addressing calls for a deeper exploration of spiritual tourism dynamics (Willson, 2016; Kujawa, 2017). The emphasis on spiritual wellness over economic gains expands the scope of "value" within the 5V model's business orientation, such as values for the local community and natural environment (Butler & Szromek, 2019).

Monks' presence at sacred sites and monastic communities adds authenticity and reverence to the tourism experience, attracting seekers of spiritual enlightenment and inner peace (Philp & Mercer, 1999). These new findings contribute to academic knowledge on spiritual tourism by shedding light on the under-researched role of religious leaders within this context. By delving into the depth and intentionality with which Buddhist monks approach their role in spiritual tourism, these findings shed light on previously understudied aspects of the phenomenon (Timothy & Olsen, 2016; Christou et al., 2023). Specifically, they highlight how spiritual leaders, such as monks, serve as guides for visitors seeking spiritual experiences (Timothy & Olsen, 2016). Through their insights into the core values of Buddhism, monks facilitate meaningful encounters with spiritual teachings and practices (Prebish & Baumann,

2002). This study bridges a gap in the current literature on spiritual leaders' roles (Yang et al., 2019), and enriches our understanding of spiritual tourism by highlighting how spiritual leaders shape and facilitate transformative experiences for travellers.

These results also align with previous studies on the transformative nature of tourism experiences (Bhalla et al., 2021; Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Zheng et al., 2024). Specifically, studies have examined how travelling can lead to personal growth (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Ee & Kahl, 2014), increased self-awareness (Buzinde, 2020; Halim et al., 2021), and enhanced well-being (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). This is consistent with studies that have demonstrated how exposure to different cultures and spiritual traditions can empower tourists by expanding their perspectives (Cole, 2006). Buddhist monks contribute to individual transformation and empowerment by encouraging visitors to focus on personal growth and well-being. Their involvement in spiritual tourism provides an intriguing lens through which to explore empowerment theory, suggesting that empowerment may go beyond traditional notions of control and autonomy to encompass spiritual development and self-actualization (Christou et al., 2023; Buzinde, 2020).

Implications for Spiritual Tourism Industry and Practice

By examining the unique role of Buddhist monks in spiritual tourism, the study contributes to the advancement of responsible and sustainable tourism practices within this niche sector. Firstly, insights into monks' contributions to value co-creation processes, such as crafting authentic experiences and facilitating meaningful connections, can guide tourism stakeholders in designing immersive and transformative offerings (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). By integrating elements of mindfulness, contemplation, and cultural immersion into spiritual tourism activities, destinations can differentiate themselves and attract travellers (Kolås, 2004). Moreover, study findings inform the development of diversified tourism products that resonate with the spiritual aspirations and preferences of different traveller segments. By understanding tourist needs and connecting with them, tourists can grow to appreciate the values of spiritual tourism, and share the same principles when interacting with local communities or with others in their daily lives.

Furthermore, the study's findings underscore the importance of fostering collaborative partnerships between monastic communities, tour operators, and local authorities to ensure the responsible management and promotion of spiritual tourism. By engaging monks as key stakeholders in destination development, tourism practitioners can leverage their cultural knowledge, spiritual leadership, and community ties to enhance the authenticity and sustainability of tourism offerings. This collaborative approach promotes mutual respect, cultural sensitivity, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits, fostering positive socio-economic impacts and cultural preservation. Moreover, the study's findings may have implications for tourism policy and governance, highlighting the need for regulations and guidelines that balance tourism development with the protection of sacred sites, cultural heritage, and environmental integrity (Timothy & Olsen, 2016). This proactive approach aligns with the principles of responsible tourism and ensures the long-term viability of spiritual tourism as a means of cultural exchange, spiritual enrichment, and socio-economic development (Timothy, 2011).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the unique role of Buddhist monks in the spiritual tourism value co-creation process. Through qualitative analysis of interviews with Vietnamese monks, the study elucidated the multifaceted ways in which monks contribute to the creation of authentic and transformative experiences for spiritual seekers. By crafting spiritual experiences, understanding diverse spiritual seekers, shaping spiritual journeys, facilitating connections and exchanges, and promoting sustainable co-creation mechanisms, monks play a pivotal role in enriching the spiritual tourism industry and fostering meaningful encounters between spiritual tourists and Buddhist heritage.

Despite the valuable insights generated, this study is not without limitations, which offer fruitful directions for future research. Firstly, the study's focus on Buddhist monks' and tour operators' perspectives may overlook the voices and experiences of other stakeholders, such as tourists, local communities, or tourism authorities whose insights could offer complementary perspectives on the dynamics of spiritual tourism value co-creation. Second, comparative studies across diverse cultural and religious contexts could deepen our understanding of how monks' roles and practices vary across different geographical regions and belief systems. Thirdly, longitudinal studies tracking tourists' experiences and perceptions before, during, and after engaging with monks could elucidate the long-term impacts and transformative effects of spiritual tourism encounters. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches drawing on fields such as anthropology, psychology, and sustainability studies could enrich our understanding of the complex interplay between spirituality, tourism, and cultural heritage conservation in an increasingly interconnected world.

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