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Exploring pilgrims' information behaviour and spiritual skills development

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Abstract

Introduction. An understanding of pilgrim information behaviour in relation to spiritual skills development is barely represented in information science. This research explores the dynamics and interrelations between Hajj pilgrims' information practices, information needs and spiritual skills development.

Method. The initial phase of research investigates pilgrims' information behaviour through an online semi-structured survey in Arabic and English. This overview of the demographics, information behaviour, learning processes and spiritual skills development before, during and after the Hajj provides an initial understanding of pilgrims' information practices.

Analysis. Completed survey responses from 126 participants were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results. The Hajj constitutes a transformative experience in which information behaviours, learning strategies and spiritual practices intersect. Findings highlight the pivotal roles of trust, accessibility and community in supporting and influencing pilgrims' experiences; the blending of traditional and digital resources; and the importance of a communal environment for learning and fostering spiritual development.

Conclusion. This study contributes to understanding how Hajj pilgrims obtain and use information during this sacred journey, and their underlying information needs, preferred media and formats and learning strategies to cultivate and nurture spirituality.

Introduction

Pilgrimages are ‘one of the oldest and most basic forms of population mobility known to human society’ (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, p. 440). They are rooted in a shared human quest for meaning, transformative experiences and a profound connection with personal or collective spirituality (Devereux and Carnegie, 2006).

It has been argued that pilgrimages may also be journeys of transformative learning, personal growth, understanding and meaningful change, thus encouraging self-reflection and perspective shifts for long-term personal growth (Carr-Chellman and Kroth, 2020). Spirituality inspires good deeds, rejection of materialism, and simplicity (Delgado, 2005). Spiritual information, in an analogue or digital form, may facilitate access to and engagement with spiritual knowledge and transformative learning by shaping spiritual beliefs and approaches to religious teachings, practices and communities (Kari, 2007). A deeper understanding and intentional practice of spiritual skills and competencies help people understand and practise life’s purpose (Nangia and Ruthven, 2023).

While various disciplines consider pilgrimages as transformative experiences, understanding religious performances and the processes associated with acquiring and developing spirituality require further investigation (Tisdell, 2017). In information science there is interest in pilgrimage and information practices in relation to social media use (Caidi, 2019; Caidi et al., 2018; Caidi and Innocenti, 2018) and how pilgrims document, share and curate before, during and after their journeys (Innocenti, 2023).

As one of the pillars of Islam, Hajj is a sacred pilgrimage to the holy city of Makkah in Saudi Arabia (Niu, 2023), and is the biggest annual gathering in the world (Alnabulsi et al., 2020). Performing the Hajj is mandatory for all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey at least once in their lifetime (Gatrad and Sheikh, 2005). This pilgrimage typically takes four to six days and constitutes a deeply personal and spiritual journey in which participants wear identical clothing and perform prescribed rituals, fulfilling an obligatory religious duty and seeking spiritual enlightenment (Alnabulsi et al., 2020; Gatrad and Sheikh, 2005). As a transformative pilgrimage, Hajj provides a unique opportunity for skills development through personal reflection and community interaction (Caidi, 2023).

This research explores the dynamics and interrelations between pilgrim information behaviours and spiritual skills development during the Hajj. The aims are to improve understanding of how Hajj pilgrims seek and use information, and how such practices contribute to developing spiritual skills and addressing diverse learning needs. Two research questions inform the work:

1. How does pilgrims’ information seeking and learning intersect with their spiritual journey before, during and after the Hajj?
2. How do pilgrims develop their spiritual skills before, during and after the Hajj?

Method

In the first phase of the research, an online semi-structured survey was carried out in 2024. The survey furnished an overview of the demographics of the Hajj pilgrims’ community and an initial understanding of their information behaviour, learning processes and spiritual skills development before, during and after the Hajj.

Participants had either recently completed the Hajj or were planning to embark on one. The survey was published with Qualtrics in both Arabic and English. A total of 181 surveys were received, 126 of which were complete. Arabic responses were translated into English, and data were checked in Excel before conducting reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019; Byrne, 2022).

Findings

The survey data reveals how diverse cultural, educational, and experiential backgrounds shape Hajj practices, and how family and regional accessibility affect participation. Overall, 75 men and 51 women completed the survey: this a higher percentage of men than in the Saudi Hajj data for 2024 and previous years (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2024). Most respondents (95) were 35-64 years old; many (108) were living in Saudi Arabia, and a smaller group in the UK (16). External visitors normally make up the majority of Hajj pilgrims, and such a demographic group can help to shed light on local pilgrimage experiences (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2024).

The Hajj had been performed by 109 of the 126 of the participants. Of these, 43 had done this pilgrimage once, whereas others had completed it multiple times: 23 people did the Hajj twice; 18 participants completed it four to five times; 15 did it six to eight times; one pilgrim nine to ten times; nine respondents did not specify the exact number of times they performed this pilgrimage, stating '*many times*'. This distribution shows a range of pilgrims' experiences, from beginners to experts suggesting both new and repeated spiritual involvement.

Our survey suggests how Hajj pilgrims develop their spirituality through information seeking, using and sharing, while undergoing a spiritual transformation after intensive information processing to learn and acquire knowledge. Situational experiences, personal actions and reflections during the pilgrimage shaped pilgrims' initial understandings. Through rituals, prayers and collective practices, participants reported a greater sense of oneness, connection with a higher being and spiritual awareness. Findings point to a development of the pilgrim's spiritual competencies, preparing them for life changes.

Information-seeking practices and spiritual learning before during, and after the Hajj constitute the three main themes identified through reflexive thematic analysis of the survey responses. These are discussed below.

Information-seeking and spiritual learning before the Hajj

This theme encompasses pilgrim's information-seeking practices while preparing for the Hajj, types of trustworthy and reliable sources of information, and how pilgrims learn.

Survey participants emphasised the importance of consulting scholars or well-established religious organisations to guarantee the accuracy of received information and mitigate risks that may compromise their Hajj. One survey respondent stated that '*it's better to ask someone who understands religion, such as a female preacher to Islam or a mufti*'. Another similarly noted that '*There is a lot of information and sometimes I don't feel like I can trust it*'.

Data suggest that pilgrims prepare for the Hajj in different ways, value using authoritative and trusted sources (provided by the Saudi Hajj Ministry or Al-Azhar Mosque), consult scholars or well-established religious organisations, learn in groups and check sources to get accurate ritual information. Some respondents relied on Google (19), the Saudi Hajj website (18), online Hajj free books (17), and scholars (16). Consulting prior Hajj pilgrims for information was another choice (10), followed by asking family members (9), imams (7) and friends (4). Searching on YouTube (9) and social media groups (4) were other options.

Friends were the most frequently cited source of information (44) when seeking how to perform rituals. Formal sources like mosque imams (who lead pilgrimages organised by licensed tour agencies) and Hajj tour guides were the second most common source for 41 participants. Pilgrims also sought reliable ritual information by learning in groups and searching on their own. This verifying approach is consistent with prior research on the dissemination of Hajj information

practices within communities (Caidi, 2020; Caidi, 2023). It also fits with earlier research that shows how pilgrims share information (Hyldegård, 2006; Innocenti, 2023).

Information-seeking and spiritual learning during the Hajj

Addressing aspects of information seeking and learning during the pilgrimage, this theme encompasses media and human source reliability, privacy concerns, verification of information trustworthiness and credibility, and individual versus group-based learning approaches.

During the Hajj, pilgrims' survey responses indicate a mixed use and integration of in-person and online resources for trust, accuracy and validation, from digital platforms to personal relationships, religious authorities and other authoritative sources (Figure 1). This suggests a preference for a blend of interpersonal, visual and textual learning resources, as online platforms may lack ritualistic, communal and tangible aspects of traditional spiritual practices. The Hajj is also often a communal journey undertaken with one's family; family members were reported as a readily available resource for Hajj information by 16 participants.

Respondents noted a preference to consult in person or online with religious leaders, scholars, fatwa issuers, mosque imams, university professors, and relatives and friends who have performed the Hajj. Several participants indicated following a strategy akin to triangulation – using several sources to cross-check and verify material. Some used a layered approach, first consulting recognised religious authorities then confirming this information using online tools and personal networks. A participant explained that *'I searched for information about various rituals and religious practices by using official religious websites, YouTube videos, books on Hajj, and from friends and family who performed Hajj in recent years'*. Another retrieved information *'from our Imam Sheik, as being the group leader and from my other member groups who have the knowledge and more experiences,'* while one indicated *'joining [...] several Hajj preparations groups on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. These groups are filled with experienced Hajjis who share tips and answer questions.'*

During the Hajj, Saudi government-recommended texts were given priority over Google searches. Several participants indicated that reading reputable Islamic books and first-hand accounts was useful, with one stating: *'Reading books on Islamic teachings, the Quran, and the Hadith can deepen your understanding. Authors like Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) have written about their conversion experiences.'* Another pilgrim, who had become a tour guide with a Hajj travel agency, noted, *'I found information everywhere I could possibly find it—books, lectures, induction programs, scholarly opinions, videos—everywhere I could access information'*. A few pilgrims also blogged.

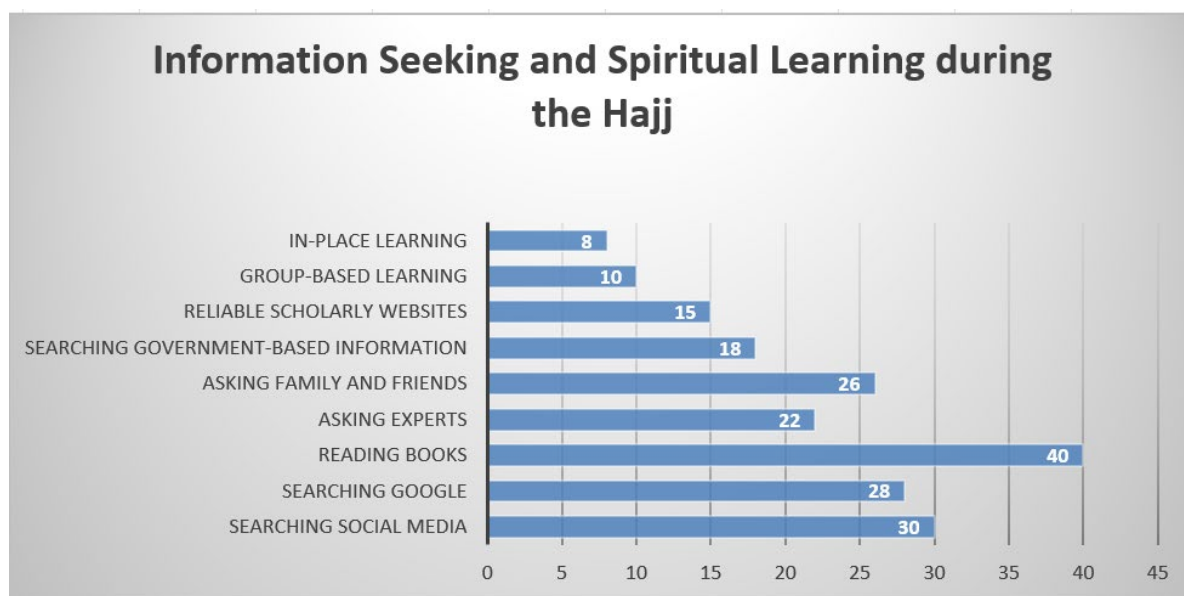


Figure 1: Information-seeking and spiritual learning during the Hajj (The authors)

The survey insights echo previous studies suggesting that people engaging in religious or spiritual practices value reliable, authoritative sources for those practices ((Nangia and Ruthven, 2023; Robinson, 2021; Caidi, 2019, 2020). The findings point to a multi-tiered validation and confirmation strategy that includes authoritative and easily accessible sources (Yap et al., 2016). Trusted digital and social media resources may also provide pilgrims with diverse insights and advice during the pilgrimage (Innocenti, 2023; Caidi, 2019; Caidi et al., 2018; Qurashi, 2018; Hill-Smith, 2011). Travellers can share advice and form communities with pilgrims, which improves readiness and confidence (Hussain and Wang, 2024). Some Hajj pilgrims in this survey also mentioned ‘*informing*’ themselves and acquiring information leading to knowledge creation, thus adding an interesting dimension to the nature of information seeking, which is traditionally approached as a form of human activity that is directed to informational objects (information sources) existing outside the information seeker (Savolainen, 1995).

Information-seeking and spiritual learning after the Hajj

Following the pilgrimage, many participants share informal knowledge online and offline. This may take place in person via succinct interactions with family, friends and others. As one participant noted, ‘*by sharing my experiences with my closest family and friends, I am able to engage in meaningful and honest conversations. It facilitates more profound connections and offers a personalised touch*’. Sharing can also happen through more elaborated textual and multimedia exchanges via social media, particularly WhatsApp and Telegram groups. These groups act as support networks offering advice, sharing and group discussions to support spiritual learning; accuracy of information was again highlighted as important here.

Not only do some Hajj pilgrims share text, photos and videos, they also establish groups on one or more social media platforms. Spiritual insights may be a driver compelling pilgrims to become writers and share their Hajj experiences so that others may learn, find useful information on rituals and socialise with others. Pilgrims document and disseminate experiences and knowledge through weblogs and online diaries. One mentioned:

I have created a weblog to share Hajj activities and allow people to learn and share it. I also uploaded short videos with my friends to educate themselves and take it as an example for making their Hajj in the future. Additionally I share Hajj experiences with places I visit and

allowing friends to ask and learn. I created a forum as well about these activities to generate and share knowledge later with followers.

This experience and information-sharing suggests the idea of a pilgrim community of practice. Through such interactions, pilgrims develop habits that aid short- and long-term learning (Caidi, 2023; Hattingh, 2019). Previous studies note how collaborative processes meet immediate needs and foster continuous spiritual learning, enabling meaningful problem-solving that transcends mere information exchange (Kari, 2007; Nangia and Ruthven, 2023; Park, 2005, 2010). As shared knowledge expands, it establishes markers of fundamental information, enabling pilgrims to confront obstacles and improve the community learning experience. Additionally, pilgrims can share and adapt guidelines, ideas, best practices and lessons learnt with other community members to enhance learning, thereby indirectly contributing to what Van der Beek (2019) refers to as '*digital rituals*'. It may be argued that this could enhance the transfer of spiritual knowledge across social media platforms, thereby supporting short-term and long-term learning objectives (Tisdell, 2017).

Van der Beek (2019) has also noted the effectiveness of storytelling in disseminating existing knowledge and facilitating reflective thinking. Storytelling transcends mere information dissemination; it embodies wisdom and experiences, enabling the acquisition of knowledge over an extended period (McDowell, 2021). Finally, embodied information, an essential element in long-distance walking, has relevance for pilgrimage, where physical and sensory experiences are fundamental to learning and knowledge sharing (Munro et al., 2022; Innocenti et al., 2022; Hyatt et al., 2021). Embodied information enables pilgrims to immerse themselves in physically challenging rituals and multiple social interactions, cultivating tacit knowledge understood through individual and collective experience.

Conclusion and next steps

This study shows that the Hajj constitutes a transformative experience in which information behaviours, learning strategies and spiritual practices intersect. The survey results highlight the pivotal roles of trust, accessibility and community in supporting and influencing pilgrims' experiences; the blending of traditional and digital resources; and the importance of a communal environment for learning and fostering spiritual development. Building on the survey insights, interviews with Hajj pilgrims were carried out in 2024 for a more granular understanding of these phenomena.

Further research might address cross-cultural pilgrimage practices, the analysis of gender and age roles in shaping experiences, and the investigation of technology's influence on spiritual development. Such studies could enhance our comprehension of how pilgrims from varied cultural backgrounds adjust to the interaction between modern technology and traditional practices in their spiritual journeys.

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