

# Pilgrimage Reconfigured: Vision 2030, Religious Tourism, and the Shifting Imaginaries of Flemish Muslims

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## Pilgrimage Reconfigured: Vision 2030, Religious Tourism, and the Shifting Imaginaries of Flemish Muslims

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is transforming the practice and perception of religious tourism, with a focus on Flemish Muslims who have performed Hajj or Umrah since the implementation of the reform agenda. Drawing on 125 survey responses and supporting interviews, the study analyzes shifts in travel motivations, tourist imaginaries, and perceptions of Saudi society. It situates these findings within the broader academic literature on mobility regimes, religious tourism, and digital media.

The results indicate that while spiritual and religious motivations remain central, many pilgrims experienced a broadening of their expectations and engagement with Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030's infrastructural improvements, cultural promotion, and social media campaigns have influenced how the Kingdom is imagined as not only a sacred destination but also a modern, diverse, and accessible tourism space. However, the study also highlights tensions related to commercialization, digital regulation (e.g., the Nusuk app), labor migration, and political discontent, particularly regarding Saudi Arabia's geopolitical role.

By integrating empirical data with analytical concepts such as the Tourist Gaze 3.0 and tourist imaginaries, this article demonstrates that religious tourism under Vision 2030 is increasingly complex, multifaceted, and embedded in global discourses of faith, identity, and power. The findings contribute to ongoing debates about the commercialization of pilgrimage, digital governance in sacred contexts, and the evolving role of the state in shaping religious experience.

**Keywords:** Vision 2030, religious tourism, Umrah<sup>1</sup>, Hajj<sup>2</sup>, Saudi Arabia, tourist imaginaries, Nusuk, social media, mobility regimes, Flemish Muslims

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<sup>1</sup> *Umrah* is a non-mandatory, lesser pilgrimage that can be performed at any time of the year.

<sup>2</sup> *Hajj* is the major Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, mandatory once in a lifetime for all Muslims who are physically and financially able.

## RESEARCHER VIGNETTE

In September 2024, I embarked on my first Umrah pilgrimage—a spiritual journey I had long hoped to undertake. Like many pilgrims, I imagined a deeply sacred experience, centered on prayer, reflection, and devotion. But upon arriving in Mecca and Medina, I was immediately struck by something I had not fully anticipated: the overwhelming presence of construction, the polished infrastructure, the towering cranes, and the ever-present slogans of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

Vision 2030, the Kingdom's ambitious reform plan, seemed to be everywhere—from glossy billboards to the regulated organization of pilgrim flows through digital tools like the Nusuk app. My experience was no longer only about spiritual fulfillment; it was also shaped by modern architecture, commercial zones near the holy sites, and curated images of Saudi Arabia as a welcoming, modern tourism destination. This blend of tradition and transformation stirred questions in me: How is pilgrimage being reimagined in the context of national development strategies? How are these changes influencing the way pilgrims, like myself, perceive and experience this sacred journey?

In conversations with others who had recently performed Umrah or Hajj, similar reflections surfaced. Some expressed appreciation for the comfort and improved organization, while others voiced discomfort about the commercialization and the sense that the sacredness of the journey was, at times, overshadowed by its packaging as a global tourism product. Social media, too, seemed to play a role in shaping expectations—often portraying the pilgrimage as not only spiritually fulfilling but also aesthetically curated and luxurious.

These personal observations became the starting point for this research. They raised the central question of this study:

*How has Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 influenced the perceptions, motivations, and experiences of Flemish Muslim pilgrims undertaking Hajj or Umrah?*

Through this research, I aim to explore how spiritual, cultural, and social dimensions of pilgrimage intersect within the changing landscape of religious tourism. As both a pilgrim and a researcher, I approach this topic from within the community I study, with the hope of contributing to a deeper understanding of how development projects, state policy, and global imaginaries are reshaping one of Islam's most profound religious practices.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual framework

The concept of tourist imaginaries is essential for understanding how potential pilgrims perceive destinations like Saudi Arabia, often before any physical encounter. These imaginaries consist of mental images, narratives, and expectations shaped by political agendas, media portrayals, historical legacies, and personal experiences (Salazar, 2012; Graburn & Gravari-Barbas, 2016). Far from static, they evolve in response to shifting socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts.

Tourist imaginaries also align with broader theories that frame tourism as a cultural and symbolic practice—one that transforms places into global destinations through both collective discourse and individual fantasy. This is particularly relevant in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which aims to reposition the Kingdom beyond its traditional role as a religious site into a multifaceted cultural, leisure, and economic hub (Ali & Salameh, 2021).

Historically associated with spiritual devotion through Hajj and Umrah, Saudi Arabia is now actively promoting cultural heritage, modern infrastructure, and more liberal social policies as part of its tourism diversification strategy (Government Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017). This transformation encourages pilgrims to reimagine the Kingdom not only as a religious destination but also as a site for broader cultural and leisure experiences (Abuhjeeleh, 2019).

This transformation is conceptually linked to Urry and Larsen's (2011) tourist gaze 3.0, which emphasizes how tourism is increasingly shaped by interrelated social, cultural, political, and technological factors. Rather than being passive consumers, modern travelers—including religious tourists—engage with destinations through dynamic and often digitally mediated lenses. This perspective helps to understand how changing narratives, such as those promoted under Vision 2030, can alter how destinations like Saudi Arabia are imagined and experienced in the global tourism landscape.

### Vision 2030's impact on religious tourism

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is a key initiative for economic diversification, positioning tourism—particularly religious tourism—as a central pillar of growth. While Hajj and Umrah have historically defined the Kingdom's global significance (Ali & Salameh, 2021), Vision 2030 builds on this foundation by aiming to expand pilgrimage capacity and enhance the overall visitor experience (Abuhjeeleh, 2019).

The plan emphasizes infrastructural development, including modernized transport, expanded accommodations, and improved services for pilgrims (Alammash et al., 2021). This reflects the broader shift noted by Battour et al. (2014), where religious tourism increasingly integrates cultural exchange, personal enrichment, and leisure alongside spiritual devotion.

Beyond pilgrimage, Vision 2030 promotes Saudi Arabia as a multifaceted destination—combining religious, cultural, heritage, and business tourism (Khan, 2020). This diversification encourages pilgrims to engage not only in spiritual practices but also in cultural and historical exploration, reshaping perceptions of the Kingdom.

The 2017 Vision statement highlights this dual focus on heritage and progress, affirming Saudi Arabia's commitment to both religious duties and national identity while embracing modernization (Government Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017). The initiative's strategic investments around Mecca and Medina aim to make religious travel more accessible and attractive to a global audience.

However, Vision 2030's ambitious scope has raised concerns about financial feasibility. Recent reports indicate that the NEOM megaproject—originally intended to cost \$500 billion—has been significantly scaled back, with projections now exceeding \$1.5 trillion and goals for 2030 reduced due to financial and logistical constraints (Fattah & Nereim, 2024; Drennan, 2024).

As Bashir (2024) suggests, this integration of religious journeys with leisure and cultural experiences transforms traditional pilgrimage into a more complex, multidimensional form of travel—where spiritual fulfillment coexists with cultural engagement and relaxation.

#### Role of social media in shaping tourist imaginaries

In the digital age, social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter/X play a crucial role in shaping tourist imaginaries—informing perceptions of destinations before pilgrimages even arrive (Muslim et al., 2019). Especially in religious contexts such as Umrah, these platforms influence travel decisions and shape expectations about places like Saudi Arabia.

As Salazar (2012) and Graburn & Gravari-Barbas (2016) argue, tourist imaginaries are constructed through a mix of media portrayals, institutional narratives, and personal experiences. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategically uses digital campaigns to promote its cultural heritage and modern image, positioning the Kingdom as both a spiritual center and a hub of luxury and cultural richness (Ali & Salameh, 2021; Abuhjeeleh, 2019).

This approach aligns with Urry and Larsen's (2011) *Tourist Gaze 3.0*, which conceptualizes tourism as an interactive, digitally connected experience shaped by social and technological

engagement. Through digital media and virtual content, pilgrims can explore Saudi Arabia virtually, reshaping their imaginaries before physically participating in the pilgrimage.

Social media thus becomes a key instrument in redefining the perception of Saudi Arabia, blending spiritual fulfillment with cultural exploration and leisure. Targeted campaigns emphasize development and cultural openness, broadening the Kingdom's appeal to diverse audiences and reframing pilgrimage as part of a wider, multidimensional travel experience (Muslim et al., 2019; Abuhjeeleh, 2019).

#### Evolving motivations for religious and cultural tourism

The concept of regimes of mobility (Schiller & Salazar, 2013) highlights how policies and power structures shape global movement. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, with its liberalized visa policies and investments in infrastructure, exemplifies such a regime—aimed not just at increasing tourist numbers but at reshaping the frameworks of pilgrimage mobility (Alammash et al., 2021).

While Muslim pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia have traditionally centered on religious devotion through Hajj and Umrah, recent research shows a shift toward diversified motivations that go beyond spiritual fulfillment. Pilgrims increasingly combine religious duties with cultural exploration, leisure, and relaxation (Almuhrzi & Alsawafi, 2017; Battour et al., 2014).

This evolution has been documented in several studies. Wu and Mursid (2020) identify factors like Expected Organizational Rewards (EOR) and Enjoyment in Helping Others (EHO) as influential in Umrah pilgrimage motivations, reflecting desires for convenience, personal satisfaction, and social engagement. Similarly, Battour et al. (2014) emphasize that religious tourism now integrates cultural immersion and community bonding alongside spirituality.

Such findings underscore a growing trend where pilgrimages are viewed as multifaceted experiences, blending spiritual rewards with personal growth, cultural discovery, and social interaction. This aligns with Vision 2030's strategic focus on enhancing religious tourism through modern infrastructure, improved services, and diversified offerings (Abuhjeeleh, 2019; Ali & Salameh, 2021).

By integrating leisure and cultural activities with spiritual journeys, Saudi Arabia positions itself as a modern, welcoming, and multifaceted destination. This reflects broader shifts in global tourism, where visitors seek comprehensive experiences that combine religious obligation with cultural enrichment and relaxation (Khan, 2020; Almuhrzi & Alsawafi, 2017; Wu & Mursid, 2020).

Ultimately, these developments transform how pilgrims imagine their journey—no longer solely as acts of devotion but as holistic travel experiences shaped by contemporary values and diversified expectations.

#### Diplomacy and tourism in vision 2030

An important dimension of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is the strategic integration of tourism with diplomacy. Religious tourism—particularly Hajj and Umrah—has long served as a diplomatic tool to strengthen Saudi Arabia's international relations, especially with Muslim-majority countries (Alammash et al., 2021). Vision 2030 builds on this role, using tourism to expand the Kingdom's global presence and influence.

While pilgrimage has existed for centuries, tourism as a structured, large-scale phenomenon is relatively modern—emerging alongside processes of industrialization, globalization, and mass mobility (Urry & Larsen, 2011). The rise of international tourism reflects broader transformations in how states project soft power and engage in cultural diplomacy.

This approach reframes Saudi Arabia not only as a site of religious devotion but also as a political and cultural actor on the global stage (Ali & Salameh, 2021; Alammash et al., 2021). The internationalization of religious tourism fosters global solidarity and intercultural exchange, positioning the Kingdom as a hub for both spiritual connection and cultural diplomacy (Abuhjeeleh, 2019).

By aligning religious tourism with diplomatic objectives, Vision 2030 transforms pilgrimages into platforms for international cooperation and cultural dialogue. This strategy supports Saudi Arabia's broader ambition to redefine its global identity as a center for religious, cultural, and political engagement (Government Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017; Alammash et al., 2021).

#### Economic and infrastructure developments

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 positions tourism as a key strategy for economic diversification and reducing dependence on oil revenues (Government Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017; Abuhjeeleh, 2019). This includes investments in infrastructure, visa liberalization, and the development of tourism packages aimed at attracting international visitors (Abuhjeeleh, 2019; Almuhrzi & Alsawafi, 2017; Budayri, 2023).

Central to this strategy are enhanced transportation networks, upgraded accommodations, and the introduction of cultural and leisure attractions—all designed to elevate the pilgrim and tourist experience (Ali & Salameh, 2021). These developments reshape global perceptions of

Saudi Arabia, presenting the Kingdom not only as a site for religious devotion but also as a modern, accessible tourism destination.

As Wu and Mursid (2020) note, contemporary pilgrims increasingly seek experiences that combine spiritual enrichment with cultural exploration and leisure. Vision 2030's infrastructure improvements directly respond to these evolving expectations, offering visitors a more holistic and multidimensional travel experience.

Through these transformations, Saudi Arabia positions itself as a dynamic and multifaceted player in global tourism, seamlessly integrating spirituality, culture, and recreation (Abuhjeeleh, 2019; Ali & Salameh, 2021).

#### Migration, solidarity, and cultural encounters

A key aspect of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is its intersection with migration, particularly through the facilitation of religious tourism. This intersects with a longer history of migration management in the Gulf. Since the late 1970s, Gulf states have strategically shifted away from Arab labor migration in favor of South and Southeast Asian workers. As Babar (2011) argues, this shift aimed to reduce transnational Arab solidarity rooted in shared language, culture, and political ideals—particularly in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the rise of Arab nationalism and republicanism.

Reflecting on Jamal's (2015) analysis of migration "tiering," Vision 2030 similarly shapes access to pilgrimage through visa liberalization and infrastructural development, influencing who can participate and under what conditions (Ali & Salameh, 2021; Government Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017).

By improving transport, accommodation, and visa procedures, the Kingdom expands opportunities for a more diverse range of pilgrims, potentially reshaping both migration patterns and pilgrimage imaginaries (Abuhjeeleh, 2019; Budayri, 2023). These efforts align with broader goals of fostering 'inclusivity' and accessibility within the tourism sector (Almuhzzi & Alsawafi, 2017).

Beyond facilitating mobility, Vision 2030 positions Saudi Arabia as a site for cultural encounters and global solidarity. By bringing together pilgrims from varied backgrounds, these shared experiences promote intercultural dialogue, unity, and a deeper sense of community among participants (Khan, 2020; Ali & Salameh, 2021).

### Transforming religious tourism?

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 marks a significant transformation in religious tourism, aiming to enhance service quality, modernize infrastructure, and rebrand the Kingdom as a diverse and inclusive destination. These efforts reshape pilgrimage experiences, expanding the scope beyond traditional spiritual practices.

Alshaibi (2024) highlights the role of service quality—including hospitality, transportation, healthcare, and safety—in improving the Hajj experience, particularly for U.S. pilgrims. Modernized facilities and access to cultural sites further enrich the journey, aligning with Vision 2030's goal of offering a holistic tourism experience that integrates spirituality with recreation.

Similarly, Alshamrani (2023) explores UK Muslims' views on combining pilgrimage with cultural exploration. While many support integrating religious devotion with visits to Islamic landmarks and cultural activities, concerns remain about financial constraints and moral reservations. Vision 2030's media campaigns help address these barriers, promoting Saudi Arabia as a multifaceted tourism destination.

Bashir (2024) emphasizes spiritual motivations such as enlightenment, personal growth, and heritage connection. These aspirations are supported by Vision 2030's infrastructural upgrades, including improved transport, modern facilities, and enhanced accessibility, which encourage broader engagement with both religious and cultural experiences.

Together, these studies demonstrate how Vision 2030 fosters a paradigm shift in religious tourism. Through strategic investments, service improvements, and effective communication, Saudi Arabia is redefining pilgrimage as a comprehensive experience—bridging spiritual fulfillment with cultural enrichment and positioning itself as a global leader in religious and cultural tourism.

### The role of nusuk in structuring the pilgrimage experience

Nusuk, the official platform for managing Umrah and Hajj travel to Saudi Arabia, plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of international pilgrims. As an online portal and mobile application, it centralizes visa applications, travel bookings, and on-site services, functioning as a state-controlled digital infrastructure that governs pilgrimage mobility (Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, 2025).

A key aspect of Nusuk's relevance to this study is its impact on accessibility and bureaucratic processes. By simplifying the visa process and reducing the need for intermediaries such as travel

agencies, Nusuk enhances efficiency but may also create challenges for certain pilgrims—particularly those unfamiliar with digital platforms or in need of personalized assistance. Investigating how pilgrims navigate Nusuk provides insight into the broader implications of digitalization in religious mobility .

Nusuk exemplifies a state-controlled mobility regime, aligning with migration and movement governance literature (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Jørgensen & Fischer, 2022). The platform enables Saudi authorities to regulate who may enter the country, under what conditions, and for how long—reflecting the concept of hierarchical mobility, where different groups of pilgrims experience varying degrees of access and restriction (Jamal, 2021). Examining pilgrims' interactions with Nusuk thus contributes to debates on how mobility regimes operate at the intersection of religion, governance, and technology.

Beyond visa facilitation, Nusuk allows pilgrims to manage other aspects of their pilgrimage experience (Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, 2025), including:

- Booking Rawdah appointments at the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina (limited to once every 365 days).
- Reserving Umrah slots to regulate pilgrim flow in the Grand Mosque in Mecca.
- Arranging hotels, transport, and cashless transactions.
- Accessing digital guides and support for real-time information on rituals and safety.

This shift from traditional travel agencies to a fully digitalized system reflects broader trends in the commercialization and development of religious tourism. While some pilgrims may appreciate the efficiency of this model, others may view it as bureaucratic control that alters the spiritual and communal dimensions of the pilgrimage (Abuhjeeleh, 2019; Ali & Salameh, 2021).

Recent Saudi regulations further illustrate how pilgrimage mobility is governed:

- Health Requirements: Mandatory vaccinations (e.g., meningitis, influenza, yellow fever, polio) to mitigate disease risks during mass gatherings (moh.gov.sa, 2025).
- Child Participation Restrictions: Children are now prohibited from accompanying adult pilgrims during Hajj, citing health and safety concerns (Saudi Visa, 2025).
- Prioritization of First-Time Pilgrims: A new policy prioritizes Hajj permits for first-time participants to promote wider access, reflecting a form of mobility justice (Saudi Visa, 2025).

These developments highlight the evolving governance of pilgrimage, shaped by both religious obligations and state intervention. Understanding Nusuk's role is therefore essential for analyzing how digitalization, health policies, and mobility regimes intersect in the organization of contemporary religious travel.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### Procedure

This study employed a mixed methods approach, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews, supported by additional contextual observations on social media. The online survey was conducted between March 11 and April 6 2025, and recruitment followed two parallel strategies. First, I reached out to 118 mosques across Flanders. The list of mosques was compiled from the Belgian Muslim Executive (Executief van de Moslims van België) (Executief van de Moslims van België, 2023), which provided only the names and addresses of the mosques. Contact details were gathered through independent online searches to maximize outreach, such as email addresses, Facebook pages, and phone numbers. Second, I shared the survey through my personal social network, including family, friends, and broader contacts within the Flemish Muslim community.

I used Qualtrics to design the survey and collect the data. The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions designed to explore participants' motivations, perceptions, and experiences regarding religious travel to Saudi Arabia since the introduction of Vision 2030.

After closing the survey and conducting an initial review of the responses, I carried out four open interviews between April 11 and April 16 2025. These interviews were intended to address gaps that emerged from the survey data and to explore certain topics more deeply based on the participants' individual experiences. All interviewees were selected from my own network. I chose an open interview format to allow participants to share their personal stories freely while I followed up on themes or details that were not fully captured through the survey.

In addition to these data collection methods, I engaged in informal observation of online content. This involved monitoring how Saudi Arabia presents itself as a pilgrimage destination on social media and how influencers and individual pilgrimages document their Umrah or Hajj experiences on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. These observations helped me to contextualize the data within the broader media landscape surrounding religious tourism and Vision 2030.

### Participants

In Flanders, approximately 6% of the population has roots in Muslim-majority countries, primarily of Moroccan and Turkish descent, alongside smaller communities from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria (Roels et al., 2017; Vlaams Centrum voor Agro- en Visserijmarketing, 2019). Previous research highlights the socio-economic integration and rising middle class within these communities, which may influence their engagement with both religious and cultural tourism (Roels et al., 2017). Given Vision 2030's aim to diversify Saudi Arabia's tourism sector, this group represents a relevant population for examining how religious motivations increasingly intersect with cultural and leisure interests.

The participants in this study were Flemish Muslims who had undertaken Umrah or Hajj since the launch of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The sample consisted of 125 survey respondents and four interviewees, providing a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. While the survey participants were not selected based on specific demographic quotas, the sample reflects a cross-section of the Flemish Muslim community in terms of age, gender, and pilgrimage experiences

The interviewees were selected to complement the survey data by offering deeper insight into individual experiences, motivations, and perceptions related to pilgrimage.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Type of Pilgrimage</b>	<b>Travel Period</b>
Female	46	Umrah (twice)	September 2024, March 2025
Male	20	Umrah (twice)	February 2024, September 2024
Female	24	Hajj	June 2024
Female	39	Umrah	March 2025

## Measures

To examine how Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has influenced the perceptions and motivations of Flemish pilgrimages undertaking Umrah or Hajj, a structured survey was developed. The target population consists of individuals from Flanders who have visited Saudi Arabia for religious purposes since the introduction of Vision 2030. The survey was designed to collect quantitative data on respondents' demographic profiles, travel motivations, perceptions of Saudi Arabia, and their experiences during the pilgrimage.

The instrument focused on the following key dimensions:

- **Demographic Information:** Including variables such as age, gender, religious background, and prior travel experience, to contextualize the respondents' profiles.
- **Motivations for Traveling to Saudi Arabia:** Exploring the primary reasons for undertaking Umrah or Hajj, with particular attention to whether motivations have shifted from purely religious devotion toward including cultural exploration, leisure activities, or a combination of these factors.
- **Perceptions of Saudi Arabia Post-Vision 2030:** Assessing how Vision 2030-related developments—such as infrastructure improvements, diversification of tourism offerings, and changes in the international portrayal of Saudi Arabia—may have shaped respondents' perceptions of the Kingdom as a destination for religious tourism.
- **Experiences in Saudi Arabia:** Capturing the alignment between pilgrimages' expectations and their actual experiences, particularly in relation to the evolving religious and cultural landscape under Vision 2030.

The survey was designed to provide insight into the evolving motivations and perceptions of Flemish Muslim pilgrimages and to evaluate the extent to which Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiatives are reshaping the pilgrimage experience.

All collected data will be stored securely in encrypted digital files through Qualtrics, accessible only to me as a researcher. To decide on data sharing, I will prioritize participant confidentiality and comply with GDPR regulations, ensuring no personal identifiers are shared. This plan will be communicated to participants through a written consent form outlining how their data will be used, stored, and shared, as well as their rights (which is also mentioned in the beginning of the survey).

For the data analysis, I used descriptive statistics to present and interpret the quantitative survey results. The qualitative data, including the open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts, were analyzed manually without the use of software. I printed out all the gathered data and conducted a thematic analysis by identifying recurring patterns, categorizing responses, and organizing the material into key themes relevant to the research questions.

### Limitations

While this research provides valuable insights into the perceptions and motivations of Flemish Muslim pilgrimages regarding Umrah and Hajj in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, as the study was conducted in Dutch and later translated into English for the purpose of analysis and reporting, there is a possibility that certain meanings, nuances, or cultural references may have been lost or altered in translation. Although I made efforts to ensure accuracy, the process of translation always carries the risk of subtle shifts in meaning.

Second, despite outreach to 118 mosques across Flanders and the use of my personal network, the survey resulted in 125 responses. Only a small number of mosques responded to confirm that they would distribute the survey via their communication channels such as Facebook, WhatsApp groups, or within their local communities. This limited the reach of the survey and may have impacted the diversity of the sample. To mitigate this limitation and to gather richer insights, I supplemented the survey with four qualitative interviews to deepen the understanding of individual experiences and fill potential gaps left by the survey data.

Third, the time frame of the research, constrained by the scope of a master's thesis, restricted the duration of the data collection phase. A longer survey period and the possibility of conducting more interviews could have allowed for broader participation and potentially more varied responses. Given more time, the inclusion of a larger number of interviews and a wider sample might have enhanced the depth and representativeness of the findings.

Finally, given the sample size and recruitment method, the findings should not be generalized to the entire Flemish Muslim population but offer valuable insights into the experiences of those who participated.

### Positionality

As a researcher, I am part of the Flemish Muslim community myself and have also recently performed Umrah. This personal background has shaped both my interest in the topic and my understanding of the religious, social, and cultural dynamics surrounding pilgrimage

experiences. My position as an insider allowed me to approach participants with a certain level of trust and familiarity, which may have facilitated more open and honest responses, particularly during the interviews.

However, I am also aware that my proximity to the subject may have influenced how I interpreted the data or engaged with participants. Throughout the research process, I actively reflected on my own assumptions and experiences to minimize bias and maintain critical distance. During data collection and analysis, I remained conscious of the need to allow participants' voices to speak for themselves, rather than projecting my own experiences onto their narratives.

At the same time, my position as a member of the community provided valuable cultural insight that helped me to understand context-specific references, religious sensitivities, and the nuanced ways in which motivations and perceptions are shaped within this group. This insider perspective contributed to a deeper engagement with the data while also requiring ongoing self-reflection to ensure the integrity and balance of the research process.

## **RESULTS**

### [Demographic profile of the respondents survey](#)

A total of 125 individuals participated in the survey. The largest share of respondents fell within the 18–25 age category (54%), followed by 20% aged between 26 and 35, and 18% aged between 36 and 45. A small proportion of participants were under 18 (2%), between 46 and 55 (4%), or aged 56 and above (2%).

In terms of gender, 61% of respondents identified as female, 37% as male, and 2% preferred not to disclose their gender.

The vast majority of participants (93%) identified with Sunni Islam. A smaller group adhered to Shi'a Islam (4%), while 3% indicated affiliation with other Islamic traditions, such as Hanifism or a general adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah without further classification.

Regarding pilgrimage experience, 85% of respondents had performed both Umrah and Hajj. Additionally, 12% had only completed Umrah, while 3% had only performed Hajj.

When asked about the period in which they traveled to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage, most respondents (81%) had undertaken their journey between 2022 and the time of the survey (April 2025). Smaller groups had traveled prior to 2016 (15%), between 2016 and 2019 (13%), or between 2020 and 2022 (3%).

Finally, 9% of participants reported having visited Saudi Arabia for non-religious purposes—such as tourism or cultural activities—while the remaining 91% had only traveled for religious reasons.

Changing motivations and perceptions

Respondents were asked about their primary reasons for traveling to Saudi Arabia. As shown in Figure 1, the most frequently mentioned motivations were spiritual enrichment (70%) and the religious obligation of Hajj (45%). Tourism and leisure were selected by a smaller group (13%), while 14% indicated other reasons, such as family visits or a personal search for religious growth

*“Umrah was seen as an obligation according to some scholars.” (Participant survey)*

*“I wanted to find peace and reconnect with my faith.” (Participant survey)*

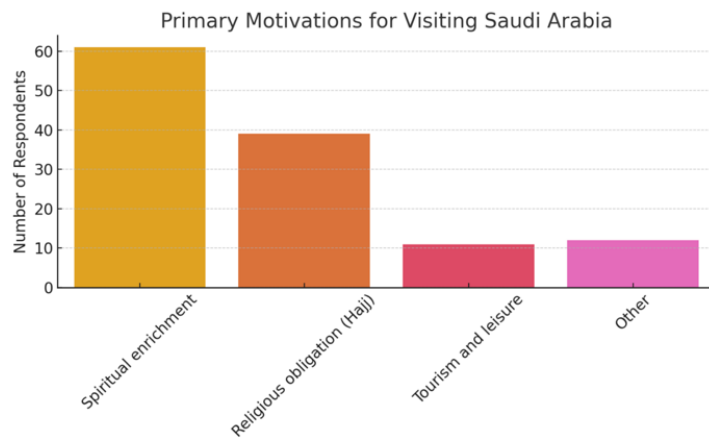


Figure 1: Primary motivations for visiting Saudi Arabia

After completing their pilgrimage, many respondents reported a shift in their travel motivations. As shown in Figure 2, 59% of respondents stated that they now place more emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the experience. Additionally, 16% developed a greater interest in the cultural or touristic aspects of Saudi Arabia. About one-third (33%) indicated that their motivations remained unchanged.

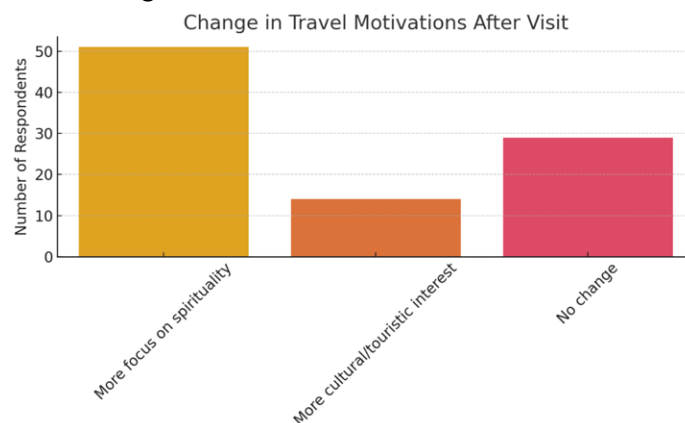


Figure 2: Change in travel motivations after visit

To assess how perceptions may have evolved through experience, participants were asked to reflect on three statements. Prior to their journey, most respondents perceived Saudi Arabia primarily as a religious destination. Figure 3 shows that 62% agreed or strongly agreed with this characterization.

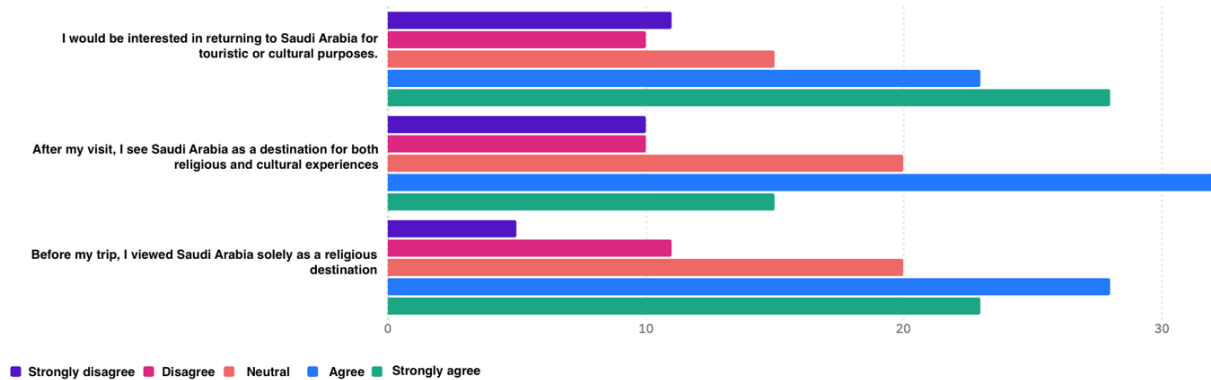


Figure 3: Perceptions on statements

Following their pilgrimage, views began to shift. 54% agreed or strongly agreed that they now view Saudi Arabia as a destination for both religious and cultural experiences:

*“After my visit, I realized how much cultural history is embedded in the cities. I now want to explore more.” (Participant survey)*

*“I always thought it was only spiritual, but now I see it’s also a modern, diverse country.” (Participant survey)*

This shift is also reflected in participants’ willingness to return for non-religious purposes. 63% expressed interest in returning for touristic or cultural reasons:

*“I would love to go back to visit other cities like Taif or explore historical sites in Medina.” (Participant survey)*

In sum, while religious devotion remained the dominant driver for travel to Saudi Arabia, many participants experienced a broadening of their motivations and perceptions post-visit. These findings support the idea that Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030—aimed at expanding tourism and diversifying its global image—may be gradually influencing how pilgrims view the country.

### Experiences with modernization and infrastructure

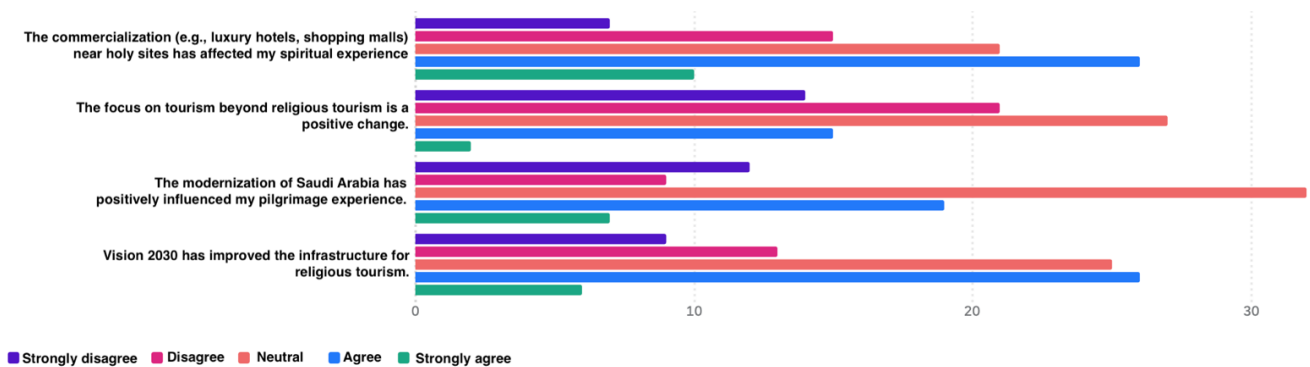
Respondents were asked to describe their general perception of Saudi Arabia prior to their visit. Many described the country primarily as a spiritual and religious place, with a strong emphasis on sacredness and obligation. Some respondents also noted a sense of cultural conservatism or strict societal norms.

Following their journey, 55% of participants indicated that their perception of Saudi Arabia had changed. Most described this shift as positive, mentioning greater awareness of modern developments and improved infrastructure. Others expressed a more nuanced view, balancing appreciation for progress with concerns about commercial influences.

*“Before my visit I saw it only as a spiritual country, now I know it’s much more developed than I imagined.” (Participant survey)*

*“It felt safer and more welcoming than I expected.” (Participant survey)*

Respondents were then asked to reflect on several statements regarding *Vision 2030*, the national transformation plan launched in 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. As shown in Figure 4, the majority of participants agreed that the initiative had improved infrastructure for religious tourism. A similar majority viewed the general modernization efforts as having positively influenced their pilgrimage experience.



*Figure 4: Respondent agreement with statements on Vision 2030 and religious tourism*

Furthermore, most respondents supported the government's broader focus on developing tourism beyond religious pilgrimage, seeing it as a constructive step toward national diversification. However, views were more mixed regarding the commercialization around holy sites: while some participants felt unaffected, a notable number expressed concern about its impact on spiritual immersion.

These mixed perceptions were further explored during the interviews and several participants expressed reservations about the Crown Prince himself. While Vision 2030 was recognized as ambitious and impactful, some questioned the religious legitimacy of a leader whose reforms have

included the introduction of nightclubs, entertainment venues, and discussions around legalizing alcohol—elements seen as fundamentally incompatible with Islamic values. A few even voiced discomfort with the idea of such a figure being responsible for the protection and administration of Islam’s holiest sites, Mecca and Medina:

*“I’m not sure someone who promotes these things should be in charge of the holy places.”*  
(Participant interview 1)

*“The reforms may help tourism, but they don’t represent the values of the Ummah (worldwide muslim community).”* (Participant interview 1)

There was also distrust rooted in geopolitical concerns. More specifically, participants criticized the Saudi government’s increasingly visible diplomatic and economic ties with Israel.

### Role of digitalization

#### 1) Social media

In addition to government-led changes, social media also played a role in shaping public perceptions. About 45% of respondents indicated that platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube influenced how they viewed Saudi Arabia, particularly by showcasing its modern cities, hospitality, and hidden cultural gems.

When asked about the role of state campaigns and online branding, respondents were divided. Some saw these efforts as effective and necessary in attracting international visitors, while others criticized them for offering a selective or overly polished image of the country.

*“The government presents an ideal image, but you need to go there to understand the full picture.”*(Participant survey)

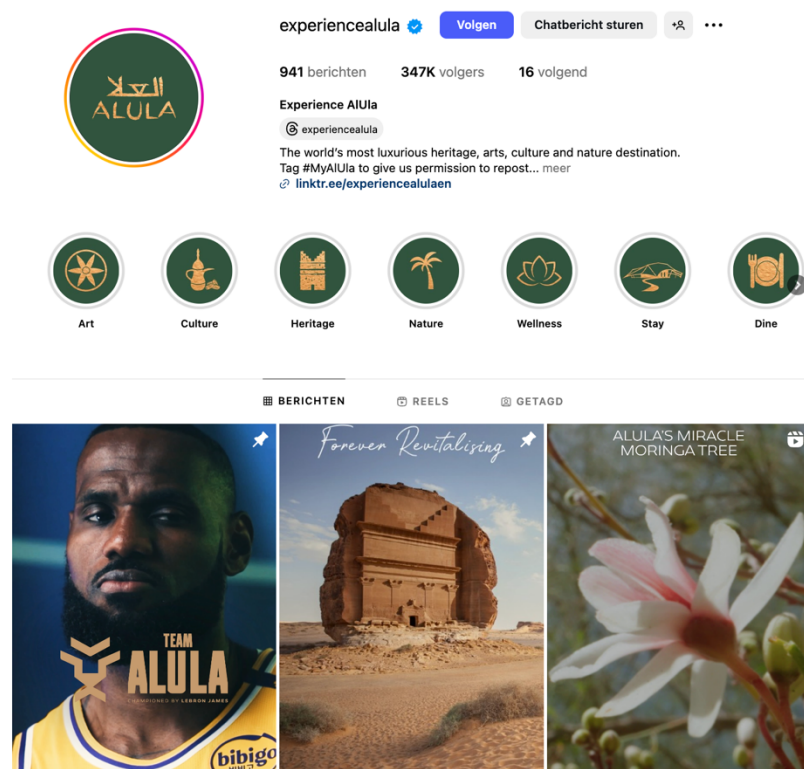
*“Social media helped me see that Saudi Arabia has more to offer than just pilgrimage.”*  
(Participant survey)

In addition to survey data, social media was examined as a key platform through which perceptions are shaped. As part of this study, I explored how Saudi Arabia presents itself online. It became clear that a great deal of effort is invested in branding the country as a luxurious, serene, and modern destination—something akin to a hidden gem. Promotional videos often highlight stability, cleanliness, calmness, and high-end experiences, creating the impression of a peaceful and welcoming place ideal for relaxation.

This branding is reinforced by the way religious tourism is portrayed online. I observed a growing trend among young adult influencers who share their journeys to Mecca and Medina on platforms like

Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. These posts often frame the experience not only as religiously fulfilling but also as joyful, beautiful, and aesthetically pleasing. They focus on the emotional highs, stunning architecture, and even leisure elements of the trip. This is not unexpected, as social media typically favors idealized depictions of life experiences.

A striking example can be found on the Instagram account @experiencealula, where Saudi Arabia promotes ALUla as a premium cultural and lifestyle destination. Here, heritage is presented not as exclusively Islamic, but as ancient, luxurious, and globally appealing. Posts include curated visuals of pre-Islamic archaeological sites, nature, wellness, and even celebrity endorsements. This reflects a broader repositioning of the Kingdom’s image: one that is visually compelling, culturally diverse, and commercially attractive — even for Muslim audiences.



Source: Instagram, May 2025.

Social media also served as a powerful preparation tool. Many participants reported that they relied on online platforms for practical tips and emotional readiness before embarking on their pilgrimage:

*“Prepare yourself well! There’s so much content on social media to help you make the most out of your pilgrimage. You need patience—children, impatient people walking over you during prayer—you really need to go early to get a spot on the carpet, otherwise you’re on bare floors.”*

*(Participant survey)*

While this visibility can normalize and encourage religious travel among younger audiences, it also raises questions about authenticity, commercialization, and how the Saudi state benefits from this type of digital ambassadorship—both officially and informally.

## 2) Practical aspects

Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their pilgrimage. As shown in Figure 5, overall satisfaction was high. Accommodation received the most positive feedback, with 96% of the respondents indicating they were either satisfied or very satisfied. Other aspects such as accessibility to religious sites and infrastructure near holy places also received notably high ratings.

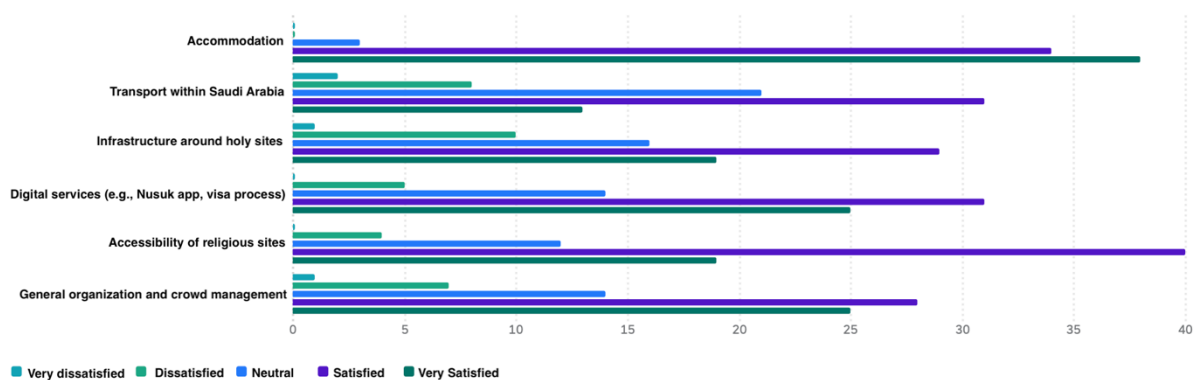


Figure 5: Satisfaction with aspects of the pilgrimage

Digital services, including the Nusuk app and the visa process, were well received by most participants, although a small group expressed dissatisfaction—likely related to technical difficulties or limited usability. Transport within Saudi Arabia and overall crowd management received slightly more mixed responses, with a notable share of respondents reporting neutral or dissatisfied experiences.

In addition to performing pilgrimage rituals, 68% of respondents reported engaging in non-religious activities such as visiting cultural sites such as date farming, camel farms where people can drink camel milk. Besides that the most mentioned by participants were shopping, or exploring the local cuisine. This suggests that many pilgrims experienced the journey as both spiritual and recreational.

## 3) Nusuk app

Digital tools played an increasingly central role in the organization of the pilgrimage. Approximately 68% of respondents used the Nusuk app, and while many found it useful, there were concerns regarding specific features—most notably the restriction that the Rawdah in the Prophet's Mosque (Al-Masjid an-Nabawi) can only be visited once every 365 days. A majority of users (63%) disagreed with this limitation.

*“I went without expectations. I was able to do everything I wanted to do. The only downside was the stress of booking an appointment for the Rawdah through the Nusuk app” (Participant survey)*

*“The Nusuk app was very annoying when it came to the Rawdah. It was really hard to book an appointment during my time. Normally the schedule is available two weeks before the date, yet for me it was only available to do it two and a half days before the date. It was super stressful considering I could miss my only chance to visit the Rawdah. Who knows if I ever will have the opportunity to visit Medina again. I would have been devastated if I couldn’t visit the Rawdah”*  
(Participant interview 4)

### Social realities: inequality, labor, and commercialization

#### 1) Poverty

Although the pilgrimage experience is often framed in overwhelmingly spiritual and emotional terms, many participants shared critical reflections on the social realities they encountered in Saudi Arabia—particularly outside the immediate surroundings of the holy sites. A recurring theme in both survey responses and interviews was the striking contrast between the modernized, polished infrastructure near the mosques and the underdeveloped or neglected conditions in surrounding neighborhoods.

One respondent recalled getting lost in Medina and being shocked by the condition of the residential areas far from Al-Masjid an-Nabawi:

*“We got a bit lost in the neighborhoods of Medina, far from the mosque. It was shocking how randomly constructed the area looked. That was a side of Saudi I had never seen on social media. The infrastructure around the holy sites is clearly being improved, but I think there are forgotten neighborhoods beyond that.”* (Participant survey)

Other participants echoed this sentiment, commenting on the disparity between the image presented online and the reality on the ground. Another noted:

*“I thought Saudi Arabia was wealthier, but I saw a lot of poverty.”* (Participant survey)

Such observations challenged previously held assumptions and sparked reflection on the broader socio-economic inequality in the Kingdom. While Vision 2030 has brought visible change to areas of religious and commercial significance, these developments seem to be unevenly distributed.

#### 2) Bad infrastructure

The issue of cleanliness and basic infrastructure in areas outside the mosque zones was also mentioned:

*“Regarding infrastructure: the area around the mosque was not very clean. Maybe it was because I went during a busy time, but still, it didn’t feel well maintained.”* (Participant survey)

These comments suggest that participants were not only attentive to spiritual logistics, but also to the physical and social environments they moved through.

The presence of decaying urban architecture and empty buildings reinforced the sense that tourism development has been highly selective:

*“As for tourism, I would not recommend it. Many buildings were old, abandoned, outdated—there were even ghettos.” (Participant survey)*

These reflections point to a fundamental tension in the pilgrimage experience: while the infrastructure and organization around Mecca and Medina have improved, the spiritual journey intersects with visible signs of inequality, marginalization, and ethical discomfort. As one respondent bluntly noted:

*“Outside the religious sites, the neighborhoods are randomly constructed.” (Participant survey)*

Together, these insights highlight the complexity of contemporary religious tourism in Saudi Arabia. They show how pilgrims are not only spiritual visitors but also social observers, whose experiences are shaped by both reverence and realism. The juxtaposition between sacredness and systemic neglect contributes to a more layered understanding of how Vision 2030 is perceived from the ground up.

### 3) Migrant labor

This sense of selective modernization also influenced perceptions of labor practices in the Kingdom. Several respondents reflected on the extensive reliance on migrant workers and the exploitative conditions many of them seemed to endure:

*“It’s a modern country now, but it’s built on the back of slave labor. It’s beautiful and modern, but they exploit people from poorer countries and treat them badly. Otherwise, I would recommend going.” (Participant survey)*

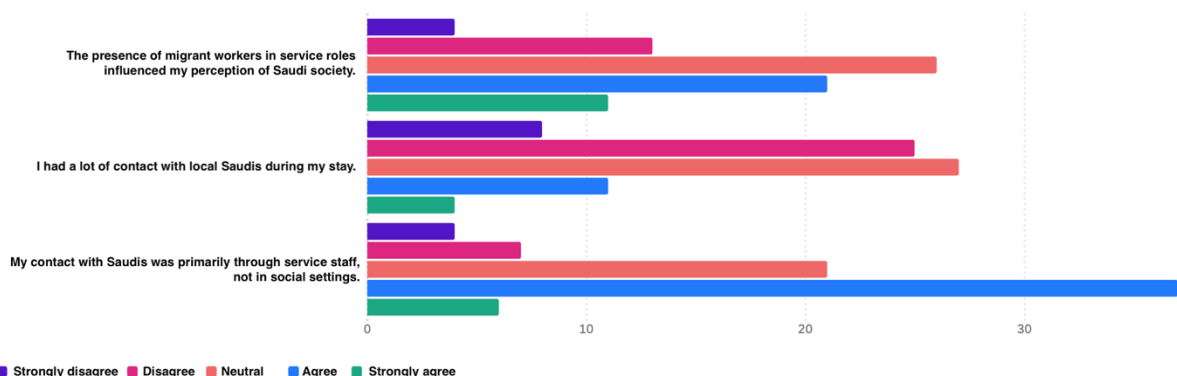


Figure 6: Contact with migrant workers and the Saudis

The role of migrant laborers in service sectors such as hospitality, transport, and food service was another theme noted during the survey and interviews. Many respondents were struck by the visibility

of these workers and reflected on the ethical dimensions of their presence, labor conditions, and treatment—especially within a context of heightened luxury and religious significance.

*“I saw more migrant workers than the Saudi’s. Which was a culture shock to me. I did not feel like I was in Saudi Arabia but more in a South Asian country. In a few days I even picked up some words in Urdu that shop owners yell on the streets when they are selling something. I mostly saw Saudi’s in jewelry stores.” (Participant interview 1)*

#### 4) Interaction with Saudis

Social interactions also shaped participant experiences. When asked whether they had noticed a change in how Saudi citizens interacted with foreign pilgrims, 26% said Saudis had become more welcoming and hospitable, while another 27% noted increased distance or formality. Nearly half (47%) felt that the social dynamics remained unchanged. These mixed observations suggest that, while infrastructure is evolving, societal attitudes may be shifting more gradually.

#### 5) Modernization

Participants were asked whether they had observed elements related to Saudi Arabia’s *Vision 2030*, such as new construction projects, luxury hotels, or modern transport. Over half of the respondents (52%) indicated that they had noticed such developments, with many stating that these changes had a noticeable impact on their experience—both positively and critically.

When asked specifically about how modernization affected their spiritual experience, responses were mixed. While 53% said that better infrastructure made their pilgrimage more comfortable, others expressed concerns about authenticity. For example, 26% reported that the experience felt “less traditional,” and 22% found the level of commercialization—such as luxury shopping centers near holy sites—distracting. These impressions were echoed in responses to a separate question about commercial development, where 27% felt it provided comfort, but 19% believed it disrupted the spiritual atmosphere.

#### 6) Regulation

Opinions were more unified when it came to policy regulations. A significant majority (79%) supported the new policy, introduced in 2025, that gives priority for Hajj registration to those who have never performed it before. Participants framed this rule as fair and aligned with the Islamic principle of offering everyone the chance to fulfill this religious duty.

The same pattern of broad acceptance emerged in relation to the mandatory vaccination requirements for Hajj and Umrah. Most respondents (53%) viewed these regulations positively, citing the importance of safeguarding public health during mass gatherings. Another 32% were neutral, acknowledging the

necessity but recognizing potential difficulties. Only 14% considered the requirements burdensome. When asked whether the vaccination rules affected their decision to perform Hajj or Umrah, 82% stated it had no influence, while a small number felt either encouraged or discouraged by the policy due to health or practical reasons.

#### [Returning pilgrims and shifts in perception](#)

Among respondents who had previously visited Saudi Arabia, 65% reported that their perception of the country had changed over time. Of these, most characterized the change as positive. The main factors driving this shift included the visible modernization of infrastructure (65%), improved organization of the pilgrimage experience (55%), and a growing range of cultural and touristic opportunities (45%). However, 25% of these respondents also mentioned the increased commercialization of religious areas, and 15% pointed to broader societal changes as relevant to their evolving views.

When asked to reflect on how their most recent pilgrimage compared to previous visits, responses were largely favorable. Based on the Net Promoter Score scale used, 55% of respondents were categorized as “promoters,” indicating a highly positive experience, while 30% were “passives” and 15% “detractors.” This distribution suggests that, for most returning visitors, the experience had either improved or remained consistent with previous expectations.

Vision 2030 played a notable role in shaping these perceptions. When asked how the reform agenda influenced their overall view of Saudi Arabia, 25% reported a positive impact, noting increased openness, infrastructure development, and modernization efforts. Another 20% expressed negative sentiment, citing concerns about the loss of religious and cultural authenticity or discomfort with political and social reforms. However, the majority (55%) stated that Vision 2030 had not significantly altered their perception, suggesting that while the program is widely visible, its influence on long-standing beliefs about Saudi Arabia remains mixed among returning pilgrims.

#### [Political discontent and Vision 2030’s legitimacy](#)

Beyond concerns about development and commercialization, a notable undercurrent of political discontent emerged among several participants—particularly in relation to Saudi Arabia’s position in the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. While the pilgrimage itself was framed by most as a deeply personal and spiritual journey, some participants emphasized that their experience could not be fully separated from geopolitical realities. Distrust toward Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—previously discussed in relation to Vision 2030—was also closely tied to broader frustrations about perceived betrayal of the Muslim *ummah*.

This discontent must be understood within a broader political and historical context. Since the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has maintained a close alliance with Western powers, in part through the petrodollar system which channels oil revenues into Western financial markets (Gowan, 2022). More recently, the Kingdom has been cautiously associated with normalization efforts toward Israel, particularly in the wake of the Abraham Accords—despite not formally signing them (Abulof, 2021). For some Muslims, these developments are seen as symbolic of a growing misalignment between the Saudi state and the wider *ummah*, especially against the backdrop of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Several respondents directly linked their discomfort to Saudi Arabia's diplomatic stance. One participant expressed this clearly, stating:

*“I discourage performing Umrah because of Saudi Arabia’s position during the Palestinian genocide.”*  
(Participant survey)

For others, the sense of political tension was experienced more directly on the ground. One participant recalled:

*“A man came up to a friend of mine and told him to remove his ‘Free Palestine’ shirt because the police would consider it problematic.”* (Participant survey)

These experiences reinforced a perception of state-imposed censorship and a loss of moral authority by the Saudi regime. This sentiment was most pointedly captured in the following remark:

*“Go to Umrah and Hajj for the sake of Allah, but don’t forget Saudi’s betrayal of the ummah! (Palestine)”* (Participant survey)

Such perspectives highlight that for many Muslims, especially younger and politically aware pilgrims, religious travel is not disconnected from issues of justice, solidarity, and transnational Muslim identity. While the pilgrimage remains an obligation and deeply meaningful experience, the credibility and moral authority of the Saudi state are actively questioned in light of its foreign policy. These critiques, though voiced by a segment of the sample, offer a powerful reminder of how global politics continue to shape religious journeys in the contemporary era.

### [Hajj-booking](#)

In one of the interviews a Flemish pilgrim highlighted the considerable challenges faced during the Hajj booking process. The interviewee described the experience as a “disaster,” pointing to significant logistical and technological barriers. Under the reformed Saudi system, pilgrims are required to register via authorized travel agencies and through the official Nusuk Hajj website, which allocates a specific quota per country to ensure equitable access. According to the interviewee, the first round of packages

is distributed to each country based on this quota. However, despite multiple attempts, she was unable to log in.

*"I kept getting kicked out, I truly lost all hope." (Participant interview 3)*

She emphasized the importance of informal online communities, such as Telegram groups, which kept her informed about a second round of package releases. These packages consisted of unused quotas from countries that did not fill their allocated slots. Again, she encountered technical difficulties: *"The Nusuk Hajj Europe website went offline. I stayed up the entire night waiting... Suddenly at 5 AM I could finally log in."* She immediately secured a package and described her relief: *"I was incredibly happy, because it truly felt like hell to secure one."* She concluded that the platform was fundamentally unprepared for the volume of users: *"The system was simply not designed to handle this level of demand."*

This testimony aligns with the survey results, in which 21% of respondents reported issues with digital services such as the Nusuk app, despite an overall average satisfaction rating of 4.01 out of 5. It underscores a central tension within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: while the strategy aims to modernize and digitize religious tourism infrastructure, the lived experiences of international pilgrims reveal gaps in accessibility, preparedness, and inclusivity.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal a complex and evolving landscape of religious tourism in Saudi Arabia, shaped significantly by the Kingdom's Vision 2030 reform agenda. Drawing on both quantitative data from Flemish pilgrims and a rich body of literature, this discussion explores how development efforts, digital governance, and shifting mobility regimes are reframing tourist imaginaries and religious motivations.

### [Reframing tourist imaginaries and motivations](#)

The data shows that while spiritual enrichment (70%) and religious obligation (45%) remain dominant motivations for pilgrimage, a significant portion of respondents (16%) reported a growing interest in Saudi Arabia's cultural and touristic dimensions following their visit. This aligns with Salazar's (2012) concept of tourist imaginaries, which evolve through interaction with media, policy, and personal experience. Participants' shifting perceptions—from viewing Saudi Arabia as a purely religious destination to a more complex cultural space—mirror Urry and Larsen's (2011) Tourist Gaze 3.0, where technologically mediated images and narratives play a central role in shaping how destinations are imagined.

Vision 2030's emphasis on tourism diversification appears to be achieving its intended effect. As noted by Ali and Salameh (2021), this strategy is not simply about attracting more visitors, but about rebranding the nation's identity. Our respondents' increasing openness to returning for non-religious purposes (63%) suggests a growing receptivity to this new narrative. This also corresponds with literature highlighting that religious tourism today is not solely driven by ritual obligation but increasingly includes elements of personal growth, leisure, and cultural engagement (Battour et al., 2014; Almuhrzi & Alsawafi, 2017).

#### The role of social media in shaping perception and preparation

Social media plays a pivotal role in reshaping how Saudi Arabia is imagined by pilgrims before, during, and after their journey. In the survey, 45% of participants stated that platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube had positively influenced their perception of the country. This supports Salazar's (2012) claim that tourist imaginaries are increasingly formed digitally—through curated narratives, visual aesthetics, and emotional storytelling. Urry and Larsen's (2011) concept of *Tourist Gaze 3.0* becomes especially relevant here, where social media does not merely reflect reality but constructs and filters it through idealized and aspirational lenses.

This finding is also directly supported by Muslim et al. (2019), whose study on Gen X and Y Muslim pilgrimages found that social media significantly affects behavioral intentions and attitudes toward Umrah packages. Their work highlights how platforms function not only as a marketing tool but also as a space for religious, emotional, and communal engagement—especially among younger Muslims navigating modern expressions of faith.

In line with this, many respondents appreciated the preparation and insight social media offered: "There's so much content on social media to help you make the most out of your pilgrimage," noted one participant. Others, however, pointed out the contrast between the polished digital portrayal and the reality on the ground—particularly with regard to poverty, inequality, and commercialization. These responses reflect Graburn and Gravari-Barbas' (2016) assertion that tourist imaginaries are co-produced through both institutional and individual storytelling, often resulting in tension between expectation and experience.

Thus, social media is not just an information platform but an emotional and cultural filter through which modern religious tourism is interpreted. It facilitates spiritual anticipation, enhances practical preparation, and fosters a sense of transnational Muslim solidarity—yet also raises questions about commodification, authenticity, and power in digital representation.

### Digitalization and governance of pilgrimage

The integration of digital infrastructure, notably the Nusuk app, demonstrates how mobility regimes are being technologically restructured. While most respondents (68%) used the app and found it helpful, there were widespread frustrations, particularly concerning the Rawdah appointment limitation. As Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) argue, digitalization often reinforces hierarchical access within mobility regimes. The Nusuk app, while efficient for some, also illustrates how digital tools can introduce new barriers, especially for those less familiar with technology or constrained by time-sensitive systems.

However, these dynamics of differentiated access go beyond digital literacy alone. A significant structural factor is that not all Muslims worldwide have access to stable internet, smartphones, or the financial means required to engage with such systems in the first place. Millions of Muslims—especially from poorer regions in Africa, South and Southeast Asia—may never be able to afford the costs of Hajj or Umrah, regardless of technological facilitation. Furthermore, the visa system itself operates through national quotas and commercialized package deals, which structurally privilege certain groups over others. These conditions reinforce existing global inequalities in the ability to fulfill religious obligations.

Moreover, the digitization of pilgrimage logistics is not neutral. It reflects broader state efforts to assert control over mobility, access, and religious experience. As one interviewee noted, securing a Hajj package through Nusuk was described as “hell,” revealing the stress and inequities embedded in the supposedly streamlined system. This underscores a key tension identified in the literature: modernization enhances efficiency and global appeal, but often at the cost of accessibility and spiritual spontaneity.

### Infrastructure, inequality, and commercialization

Survey participants were overwhelmingly positive about the improved infrastructure (accommodation scored 4.47/5; infrastructure near holy sites 3.73/5), consistent with government claims of enhanced service delivery under Vision 2030 (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2017). However, many also expressed concern about the commercialization and social inequality these changes exacerbate. While 53% said modernization improved their spiritual experience, 26% felt the pilgrimage had become less traditional, and 22% reported that luxury developments disrupted the spiritual atmosphere.

This paradox reflects the arguments of Bashir (2024) and Alshaibi (2024), who contend that while infrastructural improvements enrich the pilgrim experience materially, they risk diluting its religious

authenticity. As participants observed ghettos, decaying neighborhoods, and the stark visibility of poverty beyond the sanitized zones of Mecca and Medina, they confronted the selective nature of development under Vision 2030. These firsthand reflections affirm Jamal's (2015) analysis of tiered migration regimes and urban inequality in the Gulf, where modernity is spatially uneven and socially stratified.

#### [Migrant labor and ethical observations](#)

The near-ubiquitous presence of migrant workers in service roles also struck respondents. Many echoed concerns over labor exploitation, echoing critiques found in Jamal (2015) and Schiller and Salazar (2013) regarding the hierarchization of labor in the Gulf. These reflections resonate with Ali (2021), who describes the Gulf as a "gilded cage" for South Asian laborers trapped in cycles of precarity under the guise of opportunity. Similarly, Kathiravelu (2016) highlights the racialized and classed divisions in cities like Dubai, where migrant labor remains invisible yet essential to the spectacle of modernity.

Pilgrims described Saudi Arabia as modern but "built on the backs of slave labor," calling attention to the dissonance between the grandeur of religious infrastructure and the precarity of those who maintain it. These perceptions problematize the Kingdom's image management efforts and expose the ethical complexities embedded in religious tourism.

#### [Politics, palestine, and religious legitimacy](#)

A small but vocal group of respondents questioned the legitimacy of Vision 2030 due to Saudi Arabia's political alignment with Israel and its perceived betrayal of the Muslim ummah. These sentiments echo a broader concern within transnational Muslim publics regarding the moral authority of the Saudi leadership. The intersection of spiritual travel with geopolitical consciousness complicates the state's tourism ambitions. As one respondent noted, "Go to Umrah and Hajj for Allah, but don't forget Saudi's betrayal of the ummah."

Such critiques are not only political, but also embedded in longstanding Islamic debates about legitimate authority. In many Sunni traditions and in broader currents of political Islam, leadership is considered legitimate when it upholds *sharī'a*, protects the Muslim community, and acts in moral service to the *ummaḥ*. The custodianship of the two holy cities (*ḥimāyat al-ḥaramayn*) is thus seen not merely as a logistical or political responsibility, but as a sacred trust tied to justice, piety, and solidarity with oppressed Muslims (Mandaville, 2007). When pilgrims perceive a disconnect between

these ideals and the Saudi state's actions, particularly in relation to Palestine, it undermines claims to religious and moral legitimacy.

This politicization of pilgrimage experiences points to the limits of state-led image rebranding and highlights the resilience of moral and religious narratives that transcend national boundaries. As noted in Alammash et al. (2021), while Vision 2030 may enhance Saudi Arabia's diplomatic influence, it also exposes the Kingdom to intensified moral scrutiny.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined how Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is reshaping the landscape of religious tourism through infrastructural development, media campaigns, and digital governance, and how these transformations are perceived by Flemish Muslims who have undertaken Hajj or Umrah. Drawing from literature on tourist imaginaries (Salazar, 2012), mobility regimes (Schiller & Salazar, 2013), and the digital tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011), and supported by empirical insights from a targeted survey and interviews, the research illustrates the multifaceted and evolving nature of pilgrimage in the 21st century.

While religious devotion and spiritual enrichment remain core motivations, many participants reported a shift in their perceptions and expectations after their visit. Social media and government branding campaigns have played a significant role in this shift, influencing how pilgrims imagine and prepare for their journeys. As Muslim et al. (2019) have shown, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok now function as both sources of inspiration and practical information, particularly among younger pilgrims.

Participants generally expressed high satisfaction with the infrastructural improvements under Vision 2030, yet this appreciation was often accompanied by critical reflections on commercialization, digital access barriers (e.g., Nusuk), and visible socio-economic inequality—particularly in relation to migrant labor. These dual responses reflect the broader tension between modernization and authenticity, comfort and spirituality, development and marginalization. Some respondents also raised ethical concerns regarding the political role of Saudi leadership, particularly in the context of Palestine, demonstrating that pilgrimage today cannot be fully separated from global geopolitical narratives.

This study contributes to the understanding of how state-driven development projects such as Vision 2030 interact with global Muslim mobility, spiritual identity, and transnational solidarity. It also highlights the agency of pilgrims as not only pilgrimages but observers, critics, and co-creators of

meaning. As religious tourism continues to evolve, future research could examine how these dynamics play out across different demographics and regions, and how digital technologies will further influence religious practices and imaginaries in years to come.

Ultimately, Vision 2030 is not merely transforming the physical landscape of pilgrimage—it is also reshaping the symbolic, spiritual, and social experiences of those who undertake it.

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This research holds personal significance to me, as my own experience of performing Umrah was not only spiritually meaningful but also sparked the curiosity and motivation behind this study. It is my hope that this work contributes, even in a small way, to a deeper understanding of the evolving experiences of pilgrims today.

This research utilized AI-assisted writing tools to support the refinement of textual content. AI assistance was used to improve clarity and ensure coherence in the written sections. However, all critical analyses, interpretations, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the author, ensuring academic integrity and originality.

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