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Travel burnout: Exploring the return journeys of pilgrim-tourists amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the timely, yet academically unexplored, topic of travel burnout. The study explores the return journeys of pilgrim-tourists from Iran to Pakistan during COVID-19 pandemic and contextualizes travel burnout as a negative emotional state placed in the existing theoretical streams. The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989; 2004) provided theoretical support to guide current study’s research agenda. On the basis of a qualitative grounded theory research design, 47 in-depth interviews of pilgrim-tourists were conducted. Travel burnout emerged as a multidimensional concept comprising 3 core dimensions, i.e., low tourist self-efficacy, travel exhaustion and emotional maladaptation. Travel burnout anchors emerged as those factors that facilitated preservation of the tourists’ resources when travel circumstances became beyond their regulation. The results pave the way for a more theoretically sound conceptualization of travel burnout. For destination marketing organizations, various avenues are identified that need attention to alleviate the tourist concerns that lead to burnout.

1. Introduction

The global penetration of COVID-19 appears to be a significant situational factor in studying the strategic aspects associated with the tourism and hospitality industry, which is particularly susceptible to changes in such situational factors (Wen et al., 2020). There is sufficient evidence regarding the adverse effects of pandemics and diseases on tourism prospects in a region/country. For instance, similar tourism crisis patterns occurred in countries affected by the Ebola virus (Novelli et al., 2018), SARS (Kuo et al., 2008), Swine Flu (Page et al., 2012) and influenza pandemics (Page et al., 2006), but the research agenda of the current study moves beyond the obvious crisis induced tourism studies of the past. This study explores and attempt to conceptualize the travel burnout arising out of the long return journeys of pilgrim-tourists who were caught amidst COVID-19 pandemic in Iran when the country was rapidly becoming the global hot spot of COVID-19 in the months of February and March 2020. As Iran was engaged in dealing with its own epidemic returned to their home countries, there was an increasing risk of community transmission of disease, which made the return journeys of the pilgrims extremely challenging, as they faced strict border inspections, health protocols, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and quarantine strategies.

Burnout is conceptualized as a multidimensional concept by Maslach and Jackson (1981) that comprises three core constructs, i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and feelings of reduced accomplishment. The burnout concept is studied extensively in organizational behavior studies regarding workplace stressors, in service industry studies, with a focus on frontline employees and in the sport science field, regarding the burnout of professional athletes as a result of excessive travelling (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009; Fowler et al., 2015). However, in the tourism and travel research, the burnout concept is seldom discussed. The lack of research on travel burnout can be attributed to the lack of extraordinary circumstances of tourism crisis situations in the past. With COVID-19 being considered the most impactful event of the 21st century, it has created implausible circumstances that have drawn attention to underlying relationships needing novel theoretical explanations. Moreover, travel and vacations are usually considered as avenues to destress and rejuvenate the mundane life routine, which traditionally led tourism researchers to approach travel as a source of positive emotional states for tourists. Similarly, Fennel (2017) contends...
that the negative states of tourist psychology and physiology are scanty researched by tourism and travel scholars. This omission is attributed to the inherent demand for scholarly tourism research in traditionally popular domains, such as sustainability, authenticity, and tourist motivations, which are predominantly considered positive emotional states experienced by tourists (Filep & Laing, 2019). This prevalent infatuation with the positive emotional states of tourists has wider implications for the inadequate or lack of the clear operationalization of the negative emotional states experienced by tourists (Sun et al., 2020), which has kept scholars further away from navigating into the relatively uncharted territories of negative psychological states such as travel burnout.

In addition to this, negative psychological states, such as burnout, have conventionally adhered to the restrictive conceptualization of being linked to workplace or occupational settings, which may not have attracted the interest of tourism researchers to consider new lines of inquiry regarding the applicability of the concept in the travel context. However, this context-dependability is a point of ongoing debate and criticism in the burnout literature, as the cross-domain applicability of the burnout concept to life conditions outside workplace setting is sufficiently evidenced (Bianchi et al., 2014; Pines et al., 2011). Another reason that tourism researchers have not investigated the burnout concept among tourists is probably because the connotation of the term burnout is considered too strong in some cultural pretexts, implying severity or end stage and, hence, a remote possibility of recovery; therefore, relatively milder terms, such as ‘exhaustion’ (Schaufeli et al., 2009), tourism fatigue (Sun et al., 2020) and aggregate stress levels (Taylor et al., 2017), are used. However, this is at odds with the original conceptualization of burnout, which was thought to encapsulate the complete continuum from mild to severe cases. The tourism industry has not suffered a crisis of such an epic proportion in recent human history as is engendered by COVID-19, and considering the severity of the existential threats posed by COVID-19, we expect the prevalence of extreme negative emotional states settling in the form of travel burnout among returning pilgrims.

The theoretical support for the current study is drawn from the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2004), which provides a useful explanation of how the well-being of tourists who found themselves stuck in the middle of the pandemic may be severely affected by the situational demands of travel. The COR perspective reiterates that individuals possess a finite supply of resources and continually strive to preserve, retain and attain their resources. This continuous struggle becomes a prevalent phenomenon due to the strenuous and stressful situational demands engendered as a result of COVID-19, such as long hauls, strict health inspections, quarantine protocols, restricted mobility, and unplanned itineraries, along with the existential concerns about their safety and well-being, which play a crucial role in depleting their resources, such as individual energies, self-efficacy and positive mood among others, which could manifest as travel burnout.

The study has the following two main research objectives: i) to explore the return journeys of pilgrim-tourists and understand their emotional responses to various aspects of their long travel back home; and ii) to conceptualize and contextualize travel burnout as a negative emotional state in the existing theoretical streams of the contemporary tourism literature. The rest of the research paper is organized as follows. First, the literature review section builds the theoretical foundation of the research based on the relevant scholarship. This is followed by the methodology section and the iterative thematic analysis utilizing qualitative grounded theory approach. Lastly, the conclusions based on the study results are presented and implications for research scholars and policy makers are discussed followed by limitations and recommendations for the future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical backdrop

Traditionally, burnout is conceptualized as a multidimensional notion comprising three core components (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The first, i.e., emotional exhaustion is a constant state of physical and emotional depletion resulting from excessive or continuous activity. The second, i.e., depersonalization, covers the interpersonal dimension of burnout and epitomizes feelings of detachment and decreased involvement in relationships. The third, i.e., reduced accomplishment, is the self-appraisal dimension of burnout and is characterized by feelings of accomplishing nothing worthwhile (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). There is an apparent omission of burnout research in the travel and tourism studies for the reasons delineated in the introduction section. However, it was only recently that Sun et al. (2020), conceptualized and developed a scale to gauge tourism fatigue. They described tourism fatigue as a negative state caused by excessive interaction between the destination and tourists that manifested in diverse psychological and physiological aspects. Further, Sun et al. (2020) uphold that tourism fatigue accumulates gradually over a long period of time and it is more prominent in long-term travel. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2017) discuss the concept of aggregate travel stress to signify the accumulated strain experienced during the course of travel. Comparing tourism fatigue and the aggregate travel stress with the concept of burnout reveals that both the concepts bear striking similarity to one of the core constructs of the burnout concept, i.e., emotional exhaustion, which also epitomizes feeling of tiredness and weariness and manifests itself after excessive or continuous activity (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Moreover, it is believed that prolonged fatigue/aggregate stress and emotional exhaustion essentially conceptualize the same concept (Michielsen et al., 2004). Therefore, tourism fatigue (Sun et al., 2020) and aggregate travel stress (Taylor et al., 2017) are more proximate to the emotional exhaustion construct of burnout. Although exhaustion remains the central component of burnout, Schaufeli & Taris (2005) and Schaufeli et al. (2009) have cautioned against reducing the burnout concept to merely emotional exhaustion. On the same grounds, this study deconstructs the negative experiences of pilgrims to understand their emotional responses to various aspects of their return journey (Shilon & Shamir, 2016) and contextualizes travel burnout as a more holistic concept encapsulating the complete continuum of the negative emotional states of burnout instead of reducing it to its single dimension. The COR framework (Hobfoll, 1989, 2004) suggests that an individual possesses a limited supply of resources in terms of possessions of physical objects, prevalence of personal characteristics, such as self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-mastery, presence of personal conditions, e.g., familial and occupational statuses and permeation of energies in terms of time, focus, knowledge and attention, among others. These resources are valuable to the extent that they assist in attaining and cultivating personal well-being, but when individuals perceive threats to their existing resources, they experience high levels of stress (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993). This stress drains the individuals’ reservoir of valued resources, consequently debilitating their personal well-being and impairing their ability to adequately respond to the environmental demands to the extent that burnout settles in (Hobfoll, 2001; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Maslach & Leiter, 2006).

2.2. Context: pilgrim-tourists and COVID-19

Religiously motivated travel is considered one of the oldest mobility motives and is recognized among the largest gatherings of tourists in the world (Wu et al., 2019). Traditionally, in tourism studies there is a pervasive notion to perceive tourists and pilgrims as two evidently dichotomous groups due to different travel motivations and destination choices, i.e., pilgrims are driven by religious and spiritual inspirations to sacrosanct sites, while tourists are motivated by secular interests and
hedonic pleasures (Shuo et al., 2009). However, the contemporary
literature on travel and tourism has somewhat opposed this binary op-
position between pilgrims and tourists and does not characterize only
those individuals who are motivated by inherent leisure hedonic ori-
entations as tourists (Nyaupane et al., 2015), thereby implying that the
motives of travel do not define who a tourist is, and religiously moti-
vated travel represents a form of special interest tourism (Ron, 2009).
Even the motivations of tourists to visit sacred sites are complex and
multifaceted, as some seek a life changing experiences, some yearn for
worship and prayer, while others are motivated by cultural explorations
or the natural environment (Finney et al., 2009). Therefore, Delhi Dora
(2012) concludes that the difference between pilgrims and tourists is
highly indistinguishable and the boundary between the two continues to
converge; thus, they are commonly being referred to as religious-tourists
or pilgrim-tourists. In the rest of the paper, the term pilgrim-tourist will
be used for consistency.

Close to 7.8 million tourists visited Iran in the year 2019, with ma-
jority of them being pilgrim-tourists hailing from Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq
and Azerbaijan (UNWTO, 2019). The spring season from mid-February
until late March is traditionally considered a favorable time for
pilgrim-tourists to visit Iran (Badshah et al., 2020). Unfortunately, the
months of February and March in the year 2020 concurred with the
COVID-19 pandemic. When Iran was becoming one of the worst hit
countries by the COVID-19 pandemic in the month of February and
March, as infections and death tolls escalated, there were thousands of
pilgrim-tourists stuck in Iran. As Iran became busy in dealing with its
own pandemic crisis, the pilgrim-tourists from the neighboring coun-
tries were involuntarily sent back across their borders (Atyani & Khan,
2020). Although the international border between Pakistan and Iran was
sealed, the influx of pilgrim-tourists from Iran continued to increase and
the pilgrim-tourists remained stranded on the Iranian side of the
Pakistan-Iran border for days until they were allowed by the Pakistani
government to enter (Badshah et al., 2020). Temporary quarantine
camps were setup in the border town of Taftan, located on the Pakistani
side of the border with Iran, to isolate the returning pilgrim-tourists.
However, due to the overburden on facilities in the Taftan border
town, pilgrim-tourists were shifted to major cities where they were
supposed to be tested for COVID-19 and quarantined for 2 weeks at
purpose-built centers. Therefore, overstretched travel of pilgrim-tourists
in negative emotional states, accumulating a series of negative experi-
ences with decreasing control over their travel arrangements, qualify
them as information-rich sources to theorize the concept of travel
burnout.

2.3. Theorizing the relationship between travel burnout and pilgrim-
tourists from COR perspective

For pilgrim-tourists, resources can be defined to encompass all those
things that they value to the extent that they are perceived to help them
attain their travel goals. Having said that, these resources are finite in
nature and possessing an abundance of resources does not necessarily
ensure that individuals will thrive, but the appropriate allocation of
these resources to maximize the environmental fit is deemed more
consequential by Hobfoll (2011). In this milieu, one of the most valued
resources that pilgrim-tourists possess is their faith and spirituality. The
environment during their pilgrimage visitation constitutes the active
community participation of prayers and rituals from fellow worshippers
(Kim et al., 2016). Encompassed in religious narratives, divinity is
perceived to be closer and divine intervention is believed to heal their
emotional and physically mundane sufferings (Sharpley, 2009, pp.
237–253). Time is another highly valued resource, being one of the few
absolutes that tourists encounter, as they cannot accumulate it to use at a
future date (Truong & Hensher, 1985). The time-bound tourism activity
is not only related to the absolute time available but also refers to the
number of activities tourists have planned during their stay at a desti-
nation (McKercher et al., 2006). In the middle of lockdown, when there
is limited mobility and the short-span visa limit is approaching, time
resources are rapidly depleting for pilgrim-tourists as the travel goals
of pilgrimaging to religious sites remain unfulfilled. Moreover, the anxiety
fomented by pandemics is believed to consume the mental resources of
individuals, which incapacitates their daily functioning and quality of
life (Scalabrini et al., 2020).

The personal conditions of tourists, such as their social-cultural
background, geographical origins and nationality, influence their in-
teractions with travel destinations (Yan, 2003). For instance, cultural
proximity between the tourist’s home country and destination can be a
useful resource (Yousaf et al., 2020) and affect their choices of tourist
attractions at the destination, which are markedly different from tourists
who source from culturally distance markets (Flognfeldt, 1999). The
pilgrim-tourists come from countries that are culturally, religiously and
geographically proximate to Iran, but this valued resource reservoir
continued to drain as the pilgrim-tourists found themselves in the
middle of their journeys surrounded by societal apprehensions. It is also
pertinent to mention that the resources deemed valuable by individuals
may not necessarily hold value for them in a specific context, i.e., re-
sources are more valued in their idiocentric context (Winkel et al.,
2011). Therefore, the proximity with Iranian socioreligious and cultural
life in normal circumstances could prove to be a very valuable resource
for pilgrim-tourists, but in this pandemic situation, its value may not be
realized.

As nonpharmaceutical interventions, such as border control, social
distancing and quarantine, went into effect, the uncertainty associated
with travel was fueled, inhibiting the pilgrim-tourists’ ability to appro-
priately respond to these unique environmental challenges. Addition-
ally, to contain the spread of the virus, the unprecedented measures of
lockdown, restrictions on inbound and outbound travel and limited in-
ternal movement drastically transformed the societies and lifestyles of
people in the first quarter of 2020 to adapt to this external change (Lee,
2020). Another important aspect is that COVID-19 is perceived to be an
existential threat, as one’s sense of self and others is existentially
threatened by the danger of becoming infected, infecting others or losing
a social relation (Scalabrini et al., 2020). The mass tragedies caused by
infectious diseases are believed to trigger a heightened sense of fear and
anxiety among people, severely affecting their mental and psychological
well-being (Balaratnasingam & Janca, 2006). In this milieu, the personal
characteristics of pilgrim-tourists that were stuck amidst the COVID-19
pandemic in Iran, including the resources such as morale, self-control
and perseverance, were severely threatened.

The COR framework suggests that when individual resources are
continuously being drained but environmental demands do not subside
and continue to persist, this is the stage where burnout settles in
(Hobfoll, 2001). The pilgrim-tourists on return journeys to their home
countries in the middle of a pandemic crisis are vulnerable to experi-
encing travel burnout instead of merely tourism fatigue (Sun et al.,
2020) or aggregate travel stress (Taylor et al., 2017), which are appro-
priate operationalizations of the weariness engendered in general
touristic journeys but may fall short of encapsulating the tourism crisis
produced by extraordinary emergency situations such as COVID-19.

3. Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative grounded theory approach.
The grounded theory supports establishing the theory following an
iterative analysis, allowing researchers to visualize the emerging pat-
tterns from raw data on the basis of their conceptual proximity and un-
derlying theoretical underpinnings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss &
Corbin, 1990). The grounded theory approach allows researchers to
discover the theory from data through an iterative procedure which
produce conceptual nodes of solution and help researchers recognize
links between them (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). In doing so, the phe-
omenon under investigation can be understood better through the
grounded theory framework. The data was collected from
tourist-tourists who travelled to Iran in the months of February and March. This study covered a population of 1270 pilgrim-tourists shifted to the South Punjab quarantine center in the city of Multan. These 1270 pilgrim-tourists came in 33 buses travelling a distance of close to 1260 KMs from Taftan border-town to Multan. After the initial screening for COVID-19 was completed and the health protocols of the quarantine time period were fulfilled, no sign of virus was detected in any pilgrim and they were allowed to return to their homes (Badshah et al., 2020).

The snowball sampling technique was used to recruit potential participants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Few of the pilgrim-tourists were known to the author through personal contacts and invitations to participate in the interviews were sent out to them in the beginning. The purpose of the research was explained to them and they were further requested to nominate other pilgrim-tourists from their social networks who were part of the same return journey from Iran. This cycle was repeated until a sizable number of appropriately informed candidates were identified and recruited. The following qualifying criteria were used in selecting the participants. The first, following the grounded theory design, only information rich participants were selected to provide deeper understanding of their travel experiences and furnish the best data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Second, no face to face interviewing was possible to maintain the mandatory social distancing. Therefore, Zoom/WhatsApp/Skype were deemed the preferred mediums to record the interviews. Lastly, all the interviewees had incomplete trips, as the visits to many religious sites in their original plans remained unfulfilled and no such interviewees were made part of the sample who travelled other than by bus (e.g., plane) during their entire journey to ensure the homogeneity of the sample. As a result, 47 pilgrim-tourists were selected to share their experiences. The interviews were recorded in the local Urdu language and were transcribed into a written English script by the author. On average, each interview lasted from 15 to 30 min. The respondents consist of 35 males (74%) and 12 females (26%), with ages ranging from 28 to 64 years old, with the average age being 42 years old; approximately 70% (33) of the respondents had completed intermediate education (high school). The length of the overall journey including the quarantine period of two weeks and border stays lasted from a minimum of 24 days to a maximum of 38 days, with the average length of travel being 32 days.

The data was sorted through NVivo, following the essential grounded theory method of iteration proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and delineated by YousaF and Fan (2020). In the first stage, the data reduction process was instituted by transcribing the interviews into written form and attaining familiarity with the data by comprehensively reading the transcripts of the interviews and interview-notes and listening/watching the recorded interviews. In the second stage, the screening and coding of the transcripts were performed in accordance with the interview questions and the underlying theoretical underpinnings postulated by the study. As a result, a large number of conceptual nodes of solutions were produced. In the third stage, the conceptual nodes of solutions were segregated into subcategories and categories on the basis of their conceptual closeness and theoretical proximity. Following the same principle, thematic similarities were closely examined and the coded information was ordered by associating conceptual nodes with key themes. The transcripts were continuously consulted and themes were alluded repeatedly to determine the presence of coinciding nodes that would later be consolidated to form a singular node. The nodes were further refined on the basis of theoretical and conceptual closeness to ensure that the nodes within the themes, categories and subcategories are connected to each other but were still mutually exclusive. In the penultimate data interpretation stage, the thematic findings were corroborated by referring to the relevant literature to facilitate a more theoretically informed analysis. Last, the iterative process was reviewed again to further purify the formation of the themes, categories and subcategories to establish clear links with the theory and research purpose.

4. Findings

4.1. Travel burnout constitutes

The first theme alludes at the emergence of a multidimensional concept of travel burnout comprising the following three core constitutents: low tourist self-efficacy, tourist exhaustion and emotional maladaptation.

4.1.1. Low tourist self-efficacy

Tourists are likely to experience exasperation when uncertainty regarding their travel plans occurs and there is a likelihood of unfavorable consequences (Larsen et al., 2009), and situations infused with international turmoil are especially likely to increase tourists’ apprehensions (Brun et al., 2011). In this milieu, tourist self-efficacy refers to the confidence tourists have in their capabilities to approach difficult and challenging situations during their travel (Jin et al., 2016). A pivotal part of the COR theory is the doctrine that individuals endeavor to acquire and preserve the resources they fundamentally value, which largely determines how they fit into the larger context (Hobfoll, 2012). Maintaining a positive sense of self is a universally valued resource, but when a cataclysmic situation, such as COVID-19, arises, the pilgrim-tourists faced challenges in conserving the resources they value, which consequently affected their lives. The existential fear, xenophobic response and reduced tourism participation emerged as predominant contributors to this low sense of self-efficacy among pilgrim-tourists.

4.1.1.1. Existential fear.

As returning pilgrim-tourists become aware of virus-contracted acquaintances, friends or family members and number of casualties caused by the infection, the fragility of human existence becomes discernible to them, threatening their relationship with the world, which further escalates their apprehensions. The global pandemic situation engendered by COVID-19 casted a strong impression on the fear and anxiety levels of individuals. Scalabrin et al. (2020) believe that COVID-19 has heightened the introspective awareness of people, as the likelihood of being infected or of being a carrier and spreading the infection to friends and family members makes them experience a perpetual state of worry and apprehension. The social disruption caused by the COVID-19 emergency deeply moved pilgrim-tourists as they obtained continuous manifestations of the inadequacy of their intrinsic connection with human life, invalidating their assumptions about the future, resulting in emotional reactions materializing in the form of existential fears.

The uncertainty of human life has become very clear to me during this travel. It feels like you are not in control of your life, as it could take only one person to infect all. Imagine avoiding contact or sitting next to a person when eating, whose company you have enjoyed throughout the return travel (to stop us from leaving voluntarily). (Male 36)

Death is inevitable but I did not want to die in such a situation so far from my home. I can recall at least 4 long hauls during our return journey. First, on the Iranian side of the border; second, the Pakistani side of the border; third, the quarantine facility on our way from Taftan border town; and last, the longest quarantine stay in the city of Multan. The lengthier the journey got, the more fearful I became. I just wanted to run away to my home. Probably that’s why they had strict security throughout the return travel (to stop us from leaving voluntarily). (Male 36)

Although the continuous reminder about the fragility and vulnerability of human life are the most universal experiences, existential fears engendered at the same time deplete the most valued resources of pilgrim-tourists, i.e., emotional and physical well-being, sense of self and morale. The COR theory advocates the same by underscoring that when a cataclysmic situation, such as COVID-19, arises, the pilgrim-tourists faced challenges in conserving the resources they value, which consequently affected their lives. The existential fear, xenophobic response and reduced tourism participation emerged as predominant contributors to this low sense of self-efficacy among pilgrim-tourists.
existential fears had a strong impact on the pilgrim-tourists.

4.1.1.2. Xenophobic response. Although, xenophobia is described as a general fear of something strange or unknown (e.g., foreigners or strangers), the emergent body of scholarship on COVID-19 has contextualized xenophobia reflective of discriminatory attitudes toward potential carriers of pandemic even when it is not confirmed (e.g., Mamun & Griffiths, 2020). In a similar vein, as soon as the first COVID-19 cases in Pakistan were traced back to returning pilgrim-tourists from Iran, there was an increase in the xenophobic response towards pilgrim-tourists from Iran, questioning the rationale for their travel and holding them accountable for the spread of the novel COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan. The reason being that calamities need to have their origins and causes established in the popular mind; thus, other countries or specific groups are credited as a source of the disease (Phillips & Kilingray, 2011). This xenophobic response can substantially affect the perceptions attributed to a place considered as a source of outbreak (Hall, Scott & Gosling, 2020). For instance, Chinese tourists are believed to have faced the brunt of discriminatory practices in their post COVID-19 travel due to the popular narrative in the media blaming China as the source of COVID-19 (Wen et al., 2020). The same happened to pilgrim-tourists in their return journeys to their homeland, as they encountered this popular perception that pilgrims returning from Iran were the cause of the initial spread of COVID-19 in Pakistan. The primary source from where they discovered this popular perception during the course of their travel was social media, when they found out that their fellow countrymen took to social media avenues to blame the returning pilgrim-tourists for exposing the whole population to the virus and potentially endangering the lives (Tobid, 2020). The country having a history of sectarian strife between Shias (the pilgrim-tourists in this study) and Sunnis, the two largest factions of Muslims in Pakistan, did not help the situation, as relief initiatives and pilgrim-handling responses were being viewed from the narrow perspective of the sectarian divide in popular opinion. This further added to the psychological baggage of pilgrim-tourists by affecting their self-efficacy resources.

My friends and relatives keep on questioning why we went to Iran when there was an outbreak there. When we were travelling, there was no health warning from either Iran or Pakistan and travel was going on without restrictions. I saw on social media and people in general blaming pilgrims from Iran for spread of this virus in Pakistan. This was extremely frustrating (Female 31).

4.1.1.3. Reduced tourism participation. The pilgrim-tourists experienced a limited liberty of mobility and access to the outside world due to the strict controlled environment during their return journeys from the time they packed their bags in Iran. The positive impetus of leisure or spiritual travel is not expected to last for the entire duration of the journey but when met with the imposing situational demands of the restricted travel environment that pilgrim-tourists encountered during their return journeys, the positive energy is likely to deplete at an accelerated rate. The COR theory posits that individuals who lack adequate resources possess limited reserve capacity to regulate the increased vulnerability to negative emotions and cognitions (Hobfoll, 2012). The bounded SOP’s of travel imply that the administration overseeing the travel arrangements was uncompromising and, in some cases, perceived as authoritarian by the pilgrim-tourists, which further amplified their emotional responses regarding the reduced tourism participation.

The kind of controls which were levied on us were really frustrating. We literally had no control over our travel decision-making, add to it, the limited mobility and bounded access reduced us to mere spectators waiting for all this to finish. (Male, 36)

Another important aspect that added to the pilgrim-tourists’ woes was incomplete trip itineraries. The pilgrim trips are meticulously planned with scrupulous details to make the most of their limited time when making pilgrim visits. The pilgrim-tourists planned and expected to do so many things during their travel, and when a contrived plan goes so drastically off-target, all the expended energy in deciding, anticipating and planning the trip becomes ineffectual.

I was planning for this trip for a very long time. It is an important pillar of faith in Shiite Islam to pay homage to holy personalities but the trip goals remained unfulfilled. I don’t know when this pandemic will be over or if I will ever be able to travel again. I think there is so much uncertainty, and I heard that travel may not be possible for people over 50 years old in the near future. (Male 50)

4.1.2. Travel exhaustion

Travel provides a context against which tourists can continuously interact with the destination, and the experiences rendered in these interactions play a pivotal role in re-energizing their depleted internal resources (Chen, Petrick, & Shahvali, 2016). In the same context, travel exhaustion is marked by extensive travelling followed by low motivation for engaging in further travel. As travel ceases to be fun anymore due to the stress accumulated during the course of travelling; this is accompanied by longing for familiar environments, i.e., home. The travel exhaustion coalesced as an intertwined stress response by the pilgrim-tourists to the situational demands rendered by COVID-19.

4.1.2.1. Aggregate travel stress.

As stipulated by the COR theory, the stress becomes pronounced when individuals are not capable of adequately dealing with the situational demands (Hobfoll, 1989, 2004). During their return journeys, when negative incidents continued to build on the top of another, the pilgrim-tourists became overwhelmed with the feeling of being overextended due to an imbalance between resources and demands being made on them. The certain stressful and traumatic events in life of individuals elicit an acute stress response, which makes them vulnerable to showing signs of burnout (Mather et al., 2014). The pilgrim-tourists who were stuck in one of the worst hit countries by COVID-19 and now must make a long journey home peppered with long hauls, strict quarantine, restricted mobility, frequent health protocols and an overall highly uncertain travel environment took an extreme toll of their patience and sanity and made them more susceptible to exhibit mild to severe signs of burnout due to all the stress accumulated during the course of travel.

For most of our return journey, we were in survival-mode, which just squeezed energy out of me. (Male 41)

The trip, which commenced from energetically exploring the holy sites in various cities of Iran, concluded with waking up depleted in a quarantine centers with not much to do. It became clear that the travel situations were not conducive to the personal well-being of the pilgrim-tourists as, they were exposed to their deepest fears about life and death. The aggregate travel stress also created frictions among the pilgrim-tourists who were at the tipping point of their composure, resulting in frequent combative argumentative exchanges.

When we were in Mashhad (a city in Iran), we received several new reports about deaths of people due to infection. There was a huge disagreement within the tour group between those who wanted to return back to Pakistan and others who wanted to stay and continue the pilgrimage. We eventually stayed until we were sent back by the Iranian government. The disagreement became the bone of contention during the whole return journey, as the people who wanted to leave early kept on asserting that leaving at the right time could have saved us from all the hardships in the return journey. (Male 33)

4.1.2.2. Home sickness.

Homesickness is a psychological state of longing for a familiar home environment when individuals find the new
environmental demands difficult to cope with (Fisher, 1989). A point came in their journeys when the pilgrim-tourists started to miss their loved ones and felt nostalgic for the life lived at one place. This was the stage when travelling stops being fun and the rewarding aspects of their travel were being outweighed by the negative aspects. The complexity of the tumultuous external environment caused by the pandemic produced a grief-like reaction among the pilgrim-tourists who yearned for familiar people and surroundings. Based on the COR theory, if resources are exhausted in one domain, e.g., time, energy and emotions, it will not be possible for individuals to optimize their fabricated behavior in another domain (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). For instance, dissatisfaction with the new environment is strongly related with the feelings of homesickness (e.g., Archer et al., 1998). Therefore, it could be the strain of the situational demands of travel for the pilgrim-tourists, resulting in negative attitudes towards the current environment, rather than the separation-reaction from the old and familiar environment that manifested itself in the form of homesickness.

I just wanted to reach my home as soon as possible. I felt totally worn out by the travel experience and started badly missing the comfort of home, my room and the habitual routine-life I was used to. (Female 31)

4.1.3. Emotionally maladaptive

When emotionally intensive situations are encountered, people modulate their emotions using emotional adjustment and regulation strategies (Dixon-Gordon et al., 2015). Emotional intensity is an important context to consider when regulating one’s emotions. At high emotional intensities, people are engaged in putatively maladaptive strategies, such as disengaging from their emotions, which indicates an avoidance of the adequate cognitive appraisal that is pivotal in handling stressful situations (Koopman et al., 2000). In the case of pilgrim-tourists, the uncertainty surrounding their travel, lack of control and inadequate information about their travel itineraries all in the presence of a fatal pandemic made them adjust their inner turmoil using the modulation strategy of emotional disengagement.

4.1.3.1. Emotional disengagement

When people feel inadequate in managing their environment, they resort to self-management practices, such as emotional disengagement from their surroundings (Kim & Lee, 2005). Especially, when emotionally strenuous situations are encountered, they are least likely to acknowledge the empathetic connection with confronting aspects encompassing the issue (Battaly, 2011). The pilgrim-tourists during their return journeys become vulnerable to resource replenishment owing to psychological strains produced by harsh travel circumstances. In such a case, emotionally disengaging oneself from the severity of the situation can help moderate the relationship between stressors and burnout.

I avoided talking about the pandemic situation with my family who were travelling with me to calm their nerves. They became panicked hearing all kinds of news insinuating fears. I figured out that the best way to deal is to avoid discussing this topic (Male 38).

In the burnout literature, Bianchi et al. (2014) referred to this as a disinvestment policy that can be applied to any previously invested-in activity that did not yield the expected returns to an individual. The COR theory posits that people must invest their resources to protect against resource loss, and those with scarce resources are more susceptible to resource loss and less resource gain (Hobfoll, 2012). Navigating against the challenging situational demands of COVID-19 may quickly drain the reservoir of resources of pilgrim-tourists, which limits the extent to which their responsive resource investment could be improvised.

The 18 hours journey from Taftan to Multan quarantine was marked with uncertainty and numerous questions in my mind; am I virus positive? Have I infected anyone? Or am I infected by anyone? Will I ever get back to home? There was a visible apprehensiveness in the whole group, which continued until we got our tests cleared in quarantine. It was the time when many people came out of their shell (Male 41)

However, one significant difference noted between travel burnout and the traditional concept of burnout is that the latter refers to depersonalization as a core component of burnout that is directed towards other people, as they are treated in a detached manner and there is a lack of concern or feeling for them (Maslach & Leiter, 2006), while the former concept that emerged in this study refers to both interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of emotional disengagement. Interpersonal aspects are conceptually similar to depersonalization by showing disinterest in meeting fellow pilgrim-tourists and avoiding talking about a specific topic (i.e., COVID-19 and the vulnerability of the pilgrim-tourists to it) with the hope of suppressing the distressing emotion. The intrapersonal aspects of emotional disengagement involve withdrawing oneself from the severity of the situation to stem the depletion of one’s resource reservoir. In such cases, people evade experiencing strenuous emotions with the hope that they will subsequently discontinue to prevail (Eisenberg et al., 2004; Hill, 2015). The pilgrim-tourists envisaged a parallel reality discontinuous from the current reality, where they curtail their thoughts regarding the gravity of the situation caused by COVID-19. However, such withdrawal behavior is believed to further perpetuate one’s fears and dysfunctions and that is why suppressing their distressing emotions during the travel deprived the pilgrim-tourists of key communication tools that could have facilitated a shared emotional connection with other travelers in the journey.

4.2. Travel burnout anchors

Burnout anchors, in this research, refer to those environmental or personal factors that facilitate the preservation, retention, enrichment and protection of the resources of individuals when circumstances are beyond their control. The COR theoretical streams emphasize the motivational elements of an individual’s support system, suggesting that they will engage in behaviors that preclude resource losses since loss can have a significant negative impact on the well-being of people (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The COR theory postulates that these resources are intimately tied to one another and are highly intercorrelated (Hobfoll, 2012). The two burnout anchors identified in this study were appropriated by the pilgrim-tourists during different stages of their return journeys. Fresh off from their pilgrimage visits, internal sources such as faith played a pivotal role in the earlier part of the return journeys. The social sources encompassing family members and relatives accompanying the pilgrim-tourists helped them to manage the middle parts of their return journeys in quarantine. While towards the end of their return journeys, internal sources such as future travel cognitions became salient, as they looked to transform their future travel behaviors for better resource preservation keeping current experiences in perspective.

4.2.1. Internal sources

Although the COR theory usually refers to personal energies and positive self-perception, i.e., as internal sources (Hobfoll, 2001), among pilgrim-tourists, their religious faith emerged as a significant anchor that helped their struggle against travel burnout. Faith is a valuable internal resource, as it provides people with explanations and answers to seemingly inexplicable circumstances. Further, by providing meaning to life and death, faith equips people with strength and security during difficult times (Rasool, 2000). In addition to faith, another internal source that provided sufficient support to pilgrim-tourists was their future travel cognitions. People possess the ability to revisit the past and construct potential future scenarios, and in doing so, they anticipate the future needs and find solace in securing future survival (Suddendorf & Busby, 2005). At the time, when the pilgrim-tourists struggled to...
effectively manage themselves and the people around surrounded by a multitude of stressors, the ability to anticipate future travel needs on the basis of their projections of the current travel misgivings allowed them to preconstruct future travel situations.

4.2.1.1. Faith. Visits to religious sites aroused strong feelings of religious fervor among the pilgrims (Nyaupane et al., 2015). Within the psychology of religion, God is the most secure figure of devotion for believers who seek proximity to God for emotional support and experience companionship (Counted & Zock, 2019). Similarly, sacred religious figures are essentially believed to possess divine powers to facilitate people’s connection with God. Specifically, Shia Muslims pilgrimages, the focus of this study, predominantly pay homage to the shrines of Imams, which are holy figures that they consider divine proxies in establishing a connection with God (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019).

Faith emerged as one of the strongest avenues for pilgrim-tourists to manage their existential concerns. Drawing from their faith, the pilgrim-tourists perceived the pandemic as an instinctive warning about the uncertainty of their existence and human life on earth against the more powerful nature. It was soothing for pilgrim-tourists to draw analogies of the difficulties they encountered during their travel with the sacred personalities of Imams’ (religious guides) tragic lives and incessant struggles to preserve the identity of Islam (Musa, 2013), as they believe that the difficulties faced by them do not count even an iota of what their infallible religious guides had suffered during their times, and it was only befitting that they come across these struggles during their pilgrimage.

My faith helped me get through the whole process. The experiences I rendered in this journey have purified me spiritually. This remind me of the atrocities of the journey which our beloved Ahl-e-bait (The family of Prophet Muhammad S.A.W) must have encountered during their time (Male 47)

In Islam, difficult situations and suffering are envisioned as punitive, or a divine test or simply as God’s will, causing people to perceive stressful situations as divine interventions and embrace them unquestionably (Rasool, 2000). For the pilgrim-tourists, their faith and key constituents of faith, such as prayers and supplications, became the salvation that provided a calming influence that helped them find composure in tough circumstances.

Death is inevitable and the only reality that we must be prepared for. I kept reminding myself about this and seeking forgiveness for my sins. Even if I had contracted the virus or faced serious illness, it must be the will of Allah and His will supersedes everything else (Male 38)

4.2.1.2. Future travel behavior modifications. There is an inherent plausible connection between past travel experiences and future travel behavior modifications (Sommez & Graefe, 1998). A salient corollary of the COR theory is that when individuals lose resources, they become cautious of how to invest their resources in the future (Hobfoll, 2001). The resource loss spiral that the pilgrim-tourists encountered during the course of their travel enabled them to comprehend the probable threat intensity that was expected of this type of travel in the future. There was an apparent change in the perceptions and preferences for the future travel needs among the pilgrim-tourists, causing them to lean towards more protective travel behavior.

I will never make the same mistake again in my future travel. If a pandemic or any crisis emerges anywhere in the world, it can reach other corner in no time. The world is so interconnected that we simply cannot ignore its occurrence (Male 32)

The above comment by a pilgrim-tourist reflects a historical pattern, as earlier pandemics and tourism crises were confined to particular geographical locations and the tourism economies in other parts of the world prospered regardless of it, but this has changed with COVID-19, which has penetrated worldwide. COVID-19 in general acted as a catalyst in transforming the future travel behavior of the tourists. This is especially relevant in the destinations where COVID-19 has become naturalized among the general population, as they will be perceived as high-risk destinations with subsequent repercussions on the travel behaviors and patterns towards them (Hall et al., 2020). There needs to be extensive transformations within the tourism and hospitality sector in the post COVID-19 era to integrate and institutionalize updated protocols and operating procedures (Lew et al., 2020). In this milieu, the pilgrim-tourists kept re-experiencing the episodic memories of their return journeys, and as they project themselves back to the return journeys, the explicit representations of their future travel behavior became more eminent.

Without a proper sense of safety, I am not engaging in any kind of long term travelling, let alone pilgrimaging (Female 34).

4.2.2. Social resources

The sudden emergence of pandemics and the uncontrollability aspect associated with them has a significant impact on broader social systems. When individuals are experiencing negative events, they tend to conserve and pursue interpersonal relationships as key social resources, as healthy relational outcomes help people alleviate the unpleasantness of negative events (Osane et al., 2012). Having social support in terms of family members or friends enables pilgrim-tourists to neutralize the demands placed upon them by a challenging travel environment.

4.2.2.1. Family and friends. The pilgrim-tourists who were travelling with their immediate families and those who formed friendships during the course of their travel were able to use social support as a means to expand the depleting reservoir of resources that are contained within the self (Hobfoll et al., 1990). At the same time, the pilgrim-tourists who were travelling with children and elderly family members felt vulnerable and overextended by these additional obligations, but the feeling of being valuable to their family members facilitated a stable sense of self.

I was travelling with my family, 2 kids, my wife and mother. We took care of each other and helped get through the pressing situations during the travel (Male 40).

I came to know that elderly people are most vulnerable to this virus, with relatively low chances of survival. I became highly conscious and wary for my parent’s health during this trip, but at the same time, it was comforting that I am there to take care of them in tough situations (Male 29).

However, it could not be definitively established that the pilgrim-tourists using internal resources are more likely to use social resources and vice versa. Although, COR’s stipulation highlights the mutual dependency of resources, as resources tend to enrich other resources, and likewise, the lack of resources leads to resource depletion (Hobfoll et al., 1990), the patterns that emerged from the interviews suggested that the social support system acts as a supportive reserve that may be called upon when battling challenges that supersede the internal resource reserves. In this milieu, social resources played a vital role in anchoring the burnout effects on the pilgrim-tourists.

It was a blessing to have found highly empathetic companions during the return journey. The extremely tough situations fostered friendships that I believe are going to last forever. I don’t know how I would have travelled if I hadn’t had the company of the friends made during the travel (Male 36).

Nevertheless, social resources appear to be finite, especially in a closed travel environment marked by a pandemic crisis and limited mobility. The pilgrim-tourists travelling with their families became busy
in attending to them, while other solo travelling pilgrim-tourists with limited past social exchanges greatly relied on the extent of individual differences in their social skills to secure finite social resources to get through stressful travel circumstances. Moreover, these solo travelling pilgrim-tourists left their social support systems (e.g., families and friends) behind in their homes and now they found themselves in conditions where they were required to build their support systems from scratch. Interestingly, those people who are more reliant on social support systems are expected to become more troubled when encountering stressful situations (Hobfoll, 2001). For such pilgrim-tourists, seeking social support is likely to incur costs, as they feel vulnerable to the fears of rejection from fellow travelers, and in doing so, the spiral of internal resource depletion is initiated and burnout is more likely to settle in.

I travelled alone and as I am not very good at making social connections, there were situations during the travel that I felt alone and lost and desperately in need of some companionship. I used to call back my home and talk with family members and friends ... That helped (Male 29)

5. Conclusions

Using a qualitative grounded theory approach, a two-fold thematic framework, dichotomized to travel burnout constitutes and travel burnout anchors was derived in this study (depicted in Table 1). The travel burnout constitutes provide a multi-dimensional understanding of travel burnout concept, from COR perspective, as a negative emotional state settling in as a response to highly uncertain and demanding travel circumstances, categorized into three core dimensions, i.e., low tourist self-efficacy, travel exhaustion and emotional maladaptation. This expanded conceptualization of travel burnout encapsulates the emotional states of tourists enduring crisis situations during their journey, re-configuring their resource valuation and re-negotiating their travel goals. The second theme derived from the findings concentrated on those internal and social factors, termed as burnout anchors, which facilitated the preservation of the tourists’ resources when the travel circumstances became beyond their regulation. The emergence of burnout anchors made sense according to the COR perspective, as people are naturally inclined to preclude resource loss due to its substantial negative impact on their well-being.

The first core dimension of travel burnout identified from the responses of the pilgrim-tourists is low tourist self-efficacy. Tourists with low self-efficacy are not equipped with sufficient resources that aid them in a taxing travel environment and, consequently, help them avoid burnout, and vice versa. Furthermore, the core dimension of low tourist self-efficacy is further divided into sub-categories. For instance, as the effects of the social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 emergency on the fragility of human existence became more discernible, it gave rise to existential fears among the pilgrim-tourists. Consequently, fear of losing human life or causing loss to other people due to the contagious virus creates resource loss salience, which, as stipulated by the COR perspective, is disproportionately more noticeable than the similarly valued gains (Hobfoll, 2012), hence, depleting the efficacy resources of the pilgrim-tourists and paving the way for burnout. This coupled with the xenophobic response towards the pilgrim-tourists, promulgated on the basis of the popular perception that the pilgrims returning from Iran are responsible for spreading the COVID-19 infection in Pakistan further added to the tourists psychological baggage, thus depleting their efficacy resources. In addition to this, the strict controlled environment during the return journeys and the unfulfilled travel goals of the pilgrim-tourists engendered a sense of reduced tourism participation, which stalled their endeavors to preserve the resources they fundamentally value, i.e., having mobility and access to the world outside their immediate travel space and having liberty to have a say in travel decision-making.

The second core dimension of travel burnout is travel exhaustion; a state of high fatigue and low motivation to engage in travel related activities, and it is further subdivided to sub-categories like aggregate travel stress and home sickness. In relation to the COR theoretical premise, the imbalance between resources and travel demands creates an aggregate travel stress (Hobfoll, 2004), which does not allow the pilgrim-tourists to view travelling as fun anymore, and thus, they continuously yearn for the familiar and comfortable environment of home. The third core construct of travel burnout is referred to as emotional maladaptation, which is a negative emotional reaction to highly demanding travel situations emerged in the form of sub-category, emotional disengagement. Emotional disengagement acts as a deliberate distraction, where the tourist socially withdraws from the immediate travel environment, as well as avoids experiencing the inner turmoil caused by the travel demands by suppressing the distressing emotions. This, instead of moderating the stress response to emotionally strenuous situations, further depletes the tourists’ resource reservoir and speeds up the process of travel burnout manifestation. In short, the multi-dimensional concept of travel burnout identified through grounded theory qualitative research design in this study can be synthesized as a state of exhaustion during travel that causes tourists to emotionally disengage from their travel environment and become doubtful about their capabilities to deal with challenging situations during their travel. Travel burnout is most likely to surface when tourists are met with catastrophic external situations during a large part of their travel journeys.

The second theme, burnout anchors, concentrated on those internal and social factors that aided pilgrim-tourists in confronting travel challenges. However, compared to the traditional internal resources outlined by the proponents of COR (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), faith emerged as one of the strongest avenues for the pilgrim-tourists to manage their existential concerns, thus causing them to perceive the travel struggles as divine interventions. The planning about future travel behavior surfaced as a protective travel disposition, reflecting the apparent changes in preferences and perceptions in post pandemic travel needs. The tourists attained much solace by connecting future travel with the episodic memories of their travel done amidst COVID-19 with the resolve to respond better in future emergency travel situations. The social factors predominantly comprised of interpersonal relationships that help pilgrim-tourists use social support family members and friends to expand the pool of the depleting reservoir of resources to alleviate the unpleasantness associated the negative travel events. The healthy relational vitality furnished by social resources is reported to equip people to sustain better against stressful events, as advocated in the relevant COR scholarship (i.e., Doane et al., 2012; Hobfoll, 1990).

6. Implications

The findings draw attention to travel burnout as a relevant concept in line with the contemporary tourism environment. Although the concepts of tourism fatigue (Sun et al., 2020) and aggregate travel stress (Taylor et al., 2017) appropriately conceptualize general tourism weariness, identified to some extent by the travel exhaustion construct identified in this study, as established in this study, the former concepts are deemed

| Themes          | Categories         | Subcategories           |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Travel burnout  | Low tourist self- | Existential fears       |
| constitutes     | efficacy           | Xenophobic response     |
| Travel exhaustion| Aggregate travel   | Reduced tourism         |
|                 | stress             | participation           |
| Emotionally     | Home sickness      |                          |
| maladaptive     | Emotional          | Disengagement           |
| Internal        | Faith              |                          |
| sources         | Future travel      |                          |
| Social          | Family and friends|                          |

Table 1

Themes, categories and subcategories identified in the study.
inadequate to encapsulate the crisis situations engendered by emergency circumstances of colossal magnitude such as COVID-19. For tourism researchers, the occurrence of emergency crisis situations and the uncertainties associated with travel in the post COVID-19 period entail that trips will increasingly not go as planned. Moreover, with drastic changes in the standard operating procedures of the hospitality and tourism industry and affiliated businesses in the post COVID-19 world imply that there will be extraordinary changes in tourists’ journeys in the foreseeable future, and as advocated by the findings of this study, travel burnout is a reality that shall be accommodated in the existing theoretical streams.

For tourism researchers, travel psychology should be an important domain to further their research agendas. Travel psychology as a subdomain can help navigate the relatively unexplored territories of both the transient and enduring emotional states of tourists and emotional responses elicited in tourists by critical incidents as delineated in the current study. Based on the results of this research, travel psychology is set to emerge as an important research agenda from a plethora of hedonistic psychologically oriented tourism studies. While attempting to understand the travel burnout concept, drawing on the similarities and differences with the organizational burnout concept is inevitable. The three core constructs of travel burnout identified in this study are not expected to necessarily surface at the same time. There is a possibility of the emergence of a single construct or a combination of constructs being experienced by tourists depending upon the intensity of the travel situations people find themselves in and the extent of their resource reservoirs to deal with the situations. The general weariness aroused out of overextended travel may be marked with basic level resource valuation and could manifest itself in the form of travel exhaustion, but the resource loss and gain spiral is so tightly intertwined in individuals who it is difficult to establish the sequence that the travel burnout constitutes. The sequential manifestation of travel burnout is a topic that could interest tourism researchers to debate regarding how the occurrence and sequence of the varying combinations of the travel burnout constructs may prevail.

This research contributed to the overarching literature on the COR theory by contextualizing resources specific to tourists in a travel environment. Taking cues from the resource allocation corollary of COR (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004), travel burnout settles in when the tourists’ reservoir of resources depletes, impeding their ability to adequately respond to environmental demands. In addition to the generally considered internal resources, such as personal energy and positive self-perception (Hobfoll, 2001), this study evidenced an expanded pool of internal resources by showcasing how a person’s faith can prove to be a substantial internal resource when confronted with taxing situations. Another, novel implication of the COR theory uncovered in this study is the use of the resource perspective to plan future travel behavior. For instance, the COR perspective postulates that when people lose resources, they become cautious in investing their resources in the future (Hobfoll, 2001, 2012). Taking this resource perspective will help the tourism scholars view the future travel behavior as a function of the continuous management of tourists’ finite resources, where an adequate fit of the tourists’ resources with the travel environment is more relevant than the mere possession of an abundance of resources.

For practitioners, keeping realistic expectations of travel for tourists is very important, whether it is pilgrimage tourism or other forms of travel. Travel shall not be marketed only as a highlight reel package to tourists where stressful events are omitted from their imagination. The perception of travel being a source of psychological well-being, providing the opportunity for tourists to energize is often overplayed, unnecessarily heightening the expectation level. Therefore, keeping expectations in check will be helpful in managing the tourists’ reactions in cases of emergency situations. Much such as preflight take off briefings of airlines, it is necessary to remind tourists of what could go wrong during their travel.

Studies have hinted at customer incivility as a prevalent phenomenon in contributing to service sector employees’ burnout (Han et al., 2016). In the tourism sector, it will be truly problematic if the supply side is not well-equipped to respond to emotionally strenuous situations. Therefore, tourist authorities, tourism companies and travel agencies need to provide support systems for their employees in the case of emotional outbursts from tourists. For instance, imparting training to diffuse emotionally intensive situations and address the concerns of emotionally maladaptive tourists is important. The present study shows that the perception of being authoritative in imposing travel constraints to follow SOPs was a salient contributor in the resulting frustration felt by the tourists. Travel agencies and tour operators need to establish grievance handling systems for both tourists and employees to mitigate the growing frustration during emergency situations. For travel agencies, it is pertinent to note that tourists’ readiness to travel will be slow in the post pandemic world. This provides them with a sufficient time window and an opportunity to incorporate features such as social distancing and other health protocols deemed necessary in their service design, along with providing the necessary training to their staff. This will help alleviate increasing levels of anxiety and concerns among tourists, as existential concerns for their health and safety emerged as a major contributing factor to sustain the tourists’ positive energy during travel.

7. Limitations and future research

The findings of this study are qualified by certain limitations in the research design. First, due to social distancing protocols and quarantine prerequisites, the pilgrims were not reachable during their return travel and quarantine period. It was only after the travel that their responses were recorded. The intensity of the perceptions during their travel mode could have been higher as their positive energy was continuously eroding due to extensively challenging travel situations. However, as the data were collected within 1–2 weeks of their arrival to their homes, the respondents travel endeavors were relative fresh in their minds. Second, the average length of the trips of the tourists involved in this study was 32 days. Further exploration regarding whether travel burnout is a relevant concept for short term trips is needed, as well. Third, the focus of the study was pilgrim-tourists, and the results drawn may not hold true for general touristic behaviors and more research is needed in this regard. For instance, faith as a burnout anchor providing much needed support to the pilgrim-tourists during the course of travel may not be perceived as equally conducive for general tourists. Therefore, when an equally challenging travel environment is confronted by other tourist segments, they might possess different anchors to stem the settling of burnout. Finally, the qualitative research design assisted in uncovering the conceptual constructs of travel burnout, but the future research could employ quantitative research techniques to garner empirical support for theoretical themes and constructs identified in this study.

Impact statement

The findings draw attention to travel burnout as a relevant concept in line with the contemporary tourism environment. Although the concepts of tourism fatigue (Sun et al., 2020) and aggregate travel stress (Taylor et al., 2017) appropriately conceptualize general tourism weariness, identified to some extent by the travel exhaustion construct identified in this study, as established in this study, the former concepts are deemed inadequate to encapsulate the crisis situations engendered by emergency circumstances of colossal magnitude such as COVID-19. For tourism researchers, travel psychology should be an important domain which can help navigate the relatively unexplored territories of both the transient and enduring emotional states of tourists. Understanding travel burnout from the COR theory perspective provides valuable insights on linking the travel goals with resource valuation. For practitioners, Travel shall not be marketed only as a highlight reel package to tourists where stressful events are omitted from their imagination.
Credit author statement
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Declaration of competing interest
None.

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