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# PILGRIMS AND THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE IN MADINAH: PERCEPTIONS, BARRIERS, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigates how pilgrims perceive, experience, and engage with museums in Madinah, one of Islam's holiest cities and a major hub for religious tourism in Saudi Arabia. With millions of pilgrims visiting each year for the Hajj and Umrah, museums in Madinah offer spiritually enriching spaces for cultural education and reflection. These museums play a vital role in preserving Islamic heritage and align with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goal to diversify the economy by promoting cultural tourism. Through a quantitative online survey distributed via snowball sampling, data were collected from 100 pilgrims between June 7 and July 6, 2025. The survey collected self-reported demographic profiles, awareness levels, visitation barriers, preferred content types (e.g., prophet biography, Islamic art), and effective communication channels. The results offer insights into how museums can better engage diverse pilgrims; enhance accessibility; and support national identity, spiritual growth, and economic sustainability. This research contributes to an underexplored intersection of pilgrimage and cultural heritage, providing actionable recommendations for policymakers and museum professionals to improve visitor experiences and advance Saudi Arabia's cultural vision on a global scale.*

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

By preserving the country's cultural legacy and promoting tourism, museums in Saudi Arabia could help achieve the goals of the government's Vision 2030 programme, which seeks to develop and diversify the national economy. Madinah, one of Islam's holiest cities, welcomes millions of pilgrims annually for the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, with over 18.5 million visitors in 2024 alone, making it a global hub for religious tourism (Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, 2025). Museums in Madinah can enrich the pilgrimage experience by offering more spaces for spiritual reflection and cultural education. The origins of Madinah's first museums are relatively recent, going back to 1985, when a collection of historical artefacts was found in the Prophet's Mosque (Hijrah Podcast, 2025). The main purpose of the city's first museum was to preserve these artefacts so that people would be aware of their Islamic past, ensuring Madinah would always serve as a centre of cultural and religious significance. The museums currently located in Madinah promote greater awareness about Islamic education, culture, and religious values, which can strengthen the spiritual journey of visiting pilgrims. It is important to understand how pilgrims interact with these museums and what barriers they face in order to design innovative strategies that can develop the country's cultural landscape.

The present study focuses on the intersection of religious pilgrimage and cultural heritage. This area of research is important but underexplored in Saudi Arabia. Museums in Madinah offer immersive representations of Islamic history, especially the Prophet Muhammad's life, lessons, and legacy. In doing so, they help pilgrims connect intellectually and emotionally with the city's Islamic past, enhancing their spiritual journey. Many international pilgrims visit Madinah's museums to connect with their religious and cultural identity, find social solidarity, and take pride in their heritage, all of which strengthens Islamic awareness. Furthermore, these museums generate revenue and offer opportunities for a more sustainable economy. Studying pilgrim engagement can help build strategies to market museums and make them more accessible by eliminating barriers, such as time constraints. Such strategies include digital outreach and religious network integration. This research thus contributes to Saudi Arabia's ambition to lead in cultural tourism, ensuring museums resonate with pilgrims' spiritual and educational needs while reinforcing Madinah's sacred significance. By

exploring these dynamics, this study aims to provide insights for policymakers and museum professionals to enrich the pilgrimage experience and advance the country's cultural vision.

The following chapters discuss the relevant literature, history, and theories concerning museums in Saudi Arabia; explain the quantitative methods followed in the present study; present the main findings in relation to the four research questions; discuss those findings in light of previous studies; and offer implications for theory and practice.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter contextualises the present study by reviewing the relevant literature, including a brief history of museums in Saudi Arabia, covering early initiatives in the field, the establishment of the first local museums, the government agencies administering museums, their growing importance as the country seeks to increase tourism, and public and private museums in Madinah, the city targeted in this study. This is followed by an exploration of the theories and practices that can influence how visitors engage with museums. The chapter ends with a discussion of major pilgrimages in Saudi Arabia and how they intersect with visiting local museums.

### *A Brief History of Museums in Saudi Arabia*

Although the Arabian Peninsula has a deep and ancient history, the documented history of museums in Saudi Arabia remains limited and not widely studied. Researchers often face difficulties in understanding how museums developed and became part of cultural institutions in the country. This section presents a general introduction to the beginnings and growth of museums in Saudi Arabia, from the establishment of the state until today. In addition to giving a background for the present study, such an overview could serve as a foundation for future researchers interested in the history of museums in the region.

### **Early Museum Initiatives in Saudi Arabia**

The history of museums in Saudi Arabia is relatively recent compared to other regions, with significant development occurring in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Early museum initiatives in Saudi Arabia emerged as part of a broader effort to preserve and showcase the nation's archaeological, ethnographic, and Islamic heritage (Parvin, 2025; Rice, 1994). The museum movement in the country began with individual efforts in the early 20th century. One of the earliest examples is the private museum established by Muhammad Saleh Baeshen

in Jeddah in 1902, where he collected archaeological and heritage items from Jeddah and beyond (Alansari, 1971). These early initiatives laid the groundwork for the institutionalisation of museums in later decades.

The earliest signs of official interest in antiquities and museums in the country date back to 1945, when Saudi Arabia participated in the founding of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Ministry of Culture, 2023). This was followed by the country's accession to a cultural agreement within the framework of the Arab League, whose Article 10 emphasised the need for cooperation among Arab states in the field of antiquities in the Arab region. This official attention continued to grow through the organisation of archaeological conferences, where the topic of museums was explicitly addressed in the early sessions of the conferences held by the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO).

#### **The Establishment of the First Public Museum in Saudi Arabia**

On an educational level, the first museum of its kind in the country was established within King Saud University in 1958 (King Saud University, 2024). At the time of its founding, it showcased only a limited number of ancient artifacts, which were collected during academic field trips to archaeological sites across Saudi Arabia. The purpose of this museum is to serve as a resource for teaching and research in archaeological studies. In 1978, the museum collaborated with the College of Arts and became the learning portion of the Department of Archeology. The purpose of this affiliation was to serve as a learning resource of cultural heritage for students. After this collaboration, the museum expanded its collections by including new archaeological artifacts obtained through new studies and discoveries made by department members. In addition, the museum extends its selection through donations and acquisitions from individuals interested in museum studies. Today, the museum houses a diverse collection, particularly from Qaryat al-Faw and Al-Rabadha, both of which date back to the early Islamic period. The museum also includes old coins from the Islamic period donated to the university by Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz.

The first public museum in Saudi Arabia was established before the responsibility of museums and antiquities was assigned to any official government agency (Alansari, 1971). This initiative aimed to collect artifacts, preserve them, and make them

accessible to researchers and specialists. In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of museums were established, the most prominent of which was the Jeddah Antiques Museum. This museum was located in a hall under the Technical Department of the Ministry of Mineral Resources, later integrated into the Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals. The museum featured a variety of historical materials, including archaeological inscriptions and writings, pottery, ceramics, and coins dating back to the Islamic and pre-Islamic periods. It was officially opened in 1961. The British explorer St John Philby brought with him a large collection of artifacts, including inscribed stones, pottery remains, and coins, which he had collected during his exploratory trips in northern Saudi Arabia, particularly from the ruins of ancient Tayma and Mada'in Saleh. Philby displayed this collection in the museum so that researchers and interested parties could study it.

#### **Government Agencies Overseeing Museums in Saudi Arabia**

In January 1964, the Council of Ministers issued Resolution No. 727 approving the establishment of the Department of Antiquities under the Ministry of Education at the time (Alhusayni et al., 2023). While this marked the initial organisational step, the true launch of Saudi Arabian archaeological activity came in 1976, when the Department of Antiquities and Museums began implementing the core operations of the antiquities sector. One of its early priorities was the establishment of a national museum to display the archaeological and heritage artifacts in its possession, along with those uncovered during surveys and excavations. These efforts culminated in the opening of the National Museum, the first official museum in Riyadh, in December 1977. Initially housed within the Department of Museums, it was later relocated in 1998 to its current location at the King Abdulaziz Historical Center in Riyadh.

In 2003, a royal decree established the collaboration of the Agency for Antiquities and Museums and the Supreme Commission for Tourism (Alhusayni et al., 2023). This transition marked the formation of the General Authority for Tourism and National Heritage as the official body responsible for the oversight, development, and integration of museums within the broader framework of tourism in the country. In early 2014, the national focus on cultural heritage was further reinforced through the launch of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Program for the Care of Cultural Heritage, which dedicated an entire chapter (Chapter 7) to the advancement of museums. In 2020, a significant

structural change took place when the responsibilities related to national heritage were officially transferred to the newly established Ministry of Culture. This move followed Royal Order No. A/217 in 2018 and was intended to continue and expand upon the efforts previously initiated by the General Authority for Tourism and National Heritage, now operating as the Ministry of Tourism (Ministry of Culture, 2023).

In February 2020, the Saudi Ministry of Culture established the Museums Commission, which operates as a cultural commission (Museums Commission, 2024). Its establishment aligns with Saudi Vision 2030 and serves as a cultural centre to strengthen national identity. The Museums Commission's practical goal is to present traditions and heritage to international and national visitors and showcase the national identity. It is also responsible for the implementation of strategies and operational frameworks to enhance the museum sector and meet international standards. The commission arranges the funds for these strategies and creates job opportunities that contribute to cultural tourism across the country.

#### **Saudi Arabian Museums in the Context of Vision 2030**

Saudi Arabia's cultural, social, and economic aims are increasingly aligned with museum construction. Through Saudi Vision 2030, the country seeks to diversify its economy, reduce its oil dependence, and create a vibrant, artistic society. In this context, museums promote education, tourism, and culture. Adding to and modernising museums can attract foreign visitors and help Saudis comprehend their history and culture (Sahahiri et al., 2019). Museums foster cultural expression, scholarly curiosity, and learning across generations by connecting the past and present. UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Saudi Arabia, such as At-Turaif, showcase the country's diverse history. At-Turaif's restoration and display demonstrate how museums and other cultural institutions can support urban growth, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism (Bay et al., 2022). The government recognises that cultural heritage may inspire new ideas, improve education, and strengthen the economy. Thus, museums are increasingly valued as a means of cultural preservation and economic development.

#### ***A Brief History of Public Museums in Madinah***

##### **The Establishment of the First Public Museum in Madinah**

There is no reliable information regarding the establishment of the first public museum in Madinah

during Saudi rule, apart from the account provided by Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdulrazzaq Al-Sanea (Hijrah Podcast, 2025). Based on this source, the origins of the first public museum in the city can be traced back to the Prophet's Mosque. In 1985, Sheikh Al-Sanea recounted that the idea began when Abdullah Al-Aqla, then Director of the Prophet's Mosque Affairs, discovered several large boxes stored in the chamber attributed to Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, located within the mosque. These boxes contained a range of historical materials, including nearly one ton of oxidised silver ingots, as well as pottery, metal vessels, and coins. Recognising the cultural and historical value of these items, Al-Aqla initiated efforts to clean, classify, and display the artifacts in a secure area within the mosque. Sheikh Al-Sanea participated in documenting the collection and supervising its restoration, which was undertaken by a local silversmith, Sheikh Zain. The artifacts were eventually displayed in custom-made glass cases on the third floor of the mosque, near Bab Omar bin Al-Khattab. This space is considered a research and cultural centre, attracting visitors from various fields, such as dignitaries and scholars, including Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz and then-Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz. To finance this museum project, Prince Sultan also donated more than three million riyals to build an Austrian-made scale model of the mosque.

##### **The Hejaz Railway Museum**

The Hejaz Railway Museum is another cultural, historical, and architectural landmark that highlights the history of the city and the surrounding area. This is Madinah's second historical museum, which opened in 1998 after a systematic restoration of the Hejaz Railway Station buildings. Madinah Governor Prince Abdul Majeed bin Abdulaziz began it as one of the city's biggest cultural preservation projects. The museum has undergone various renovations, becoming one of Madinah's most famous cultural and tourist attractions for international history scholars. Unlike most museums, it preserves historic structures and has multipurpose facilities. Tourists can experience early 1900s railway life in the station buildings and a restored locomotive repair shop. There are temporary and visiting exhibition halls for changing displays and international collaborations, a lecture and multimedia presentation hall for educational and cultural programming, a traditional crafts market to showcase local talent, a museum gift shop, and a cultural café to relax and socialise. Another attraction is the Train Restaurant, composed of 12 refurbished train cars. The museum notes how

the Ottoman Empire connected Damascus and Madinah through the Hejaz Railway but also discusses Madinah's religious and social significance worldwide. It covers railway technology, economics, and culture, hosting public events, cultural fairs, and holiday festivities. All of these activities make it a dynamic venue for sharing culture and show how Saudi Arabian museums can help people connect and boost the economy.

### ***A Brief History of Private Museums in Madinah***

Badr (2004) discussed four private museums that highlight the emergence of archaeological museums in Madinah. These museums are the Dr Abdelaziz Kaki Museum (renamed the Dar Al Madinah Museum), the Abdelaziz Alkheraji Museum, the Salamah Rashdan Museum (renamed the Al Qimmah Museum), and the Ahmed Murshed Museum. Each gives valuable knowledge about the city's heritage.

#### **The Dr. Abdelaziz Kaki Museum (Later Renamed Dar Al Madinah Museum)**

Dr Abdelaziz Kaki established the Dar Al Madinah Museum to preserve the cultural values of the city of Madinah (Badr, 2004). This museum focuses on the early history of Islam and Madinah's urban and cultural development. It features various Islamic and pre-Islamic artifacts, including manuscripts and photographs. As such, its collections serve as an excellent resource for visitors to learn about the city's cultural and religious history.

#### **The Abdelaziz Alkheraji Museum**

The Abdelaziz Alkheraji Museum was established by Abdelaziz Alkheraji over the course of 16 years (Badr, 2004). Its collection includes artifacts that are 50 years old and gathered from local and international sources. The museum's specialty is traditional material culture, old maps, Islamic coins, and historical documents, spreading awareness about Islamic culture and history.

#### **The Salamah Rashdan Museum (Later Renamed Al Qimmah Museum)**

Founded in 2001, the Al Qimmah Museum began as a private collection in the founder's home and later expanded with support from the Ministry of Education's Antiquities and Museums Agency (Badr, 2004). Located in the Aziziyah district, near Qimmah Hall, the museum now spans 1,800 square metres and houses over 14,000 items. These include sections devoted to weaponry, manuscripts, traditional tools, textiles, audio devices, correspondence, rare coins,

and other significant artifacts. It includes food vessels from AD 647, an Umayyad dirham from 710, and swords dating from 1468.

#### **The Ahmed Murshed Museum**

The Ahmed Murshed Museum is famous for its visual documentation of the city's culture (Badr, 2004). It contains 7,500 black-and-white and colour photographs and documentary films related to local events. It also features manuscripts and over 100 books, which include the six-volume series *Taybah* and *Memories of Loved Ones*.

### ***Cultural Landscape of Museums in Madinah: 2022 Ministry of Culture Report***

A report by the Ministry of Culture (2022) provides a detailed description of the cultural events in Madinah. The report shows that museums and art galleries are becoming more popular places for tourists. This suggests that a cultural shift is happening in Saudi Arabia, where people are becoming more aware of the importance of cultural heritage, art, and history. People learn a lot about community by visiting museums and galleries and increase their knowledge about local and global stories. High participation rates indicate a rising appreciation for these institutions as a source of learning and cultural resources.

Although the report found positive patterns in growing public involvement, it also raised concerns about Madinah's declining number of private museums (Ministry of Culture, 2022). There were 15 private museums in the area and three public museums. Private museums are often important for preserving local history and showing off unique collections that might not be found in larger public museums. Their decline could make the cultural offerings available to the public less diverse and the cultural environment more uniform. If these private museums disappear, it could thus become more challenging to convey diverse stories that enrich the region's cultural knowledge.

### ***Theories and Practices Shaping Visitor Engagement in Museums***

Due to the application of more interactive approaches and principles, people now do more than just look at exhibits when they go to museums (Hamer, 2019; Simon, 2010). This idea of collaborative spaces reinforces a vision of museums as a place where visitors actively contribute to the co-construction of knowledge and meaning (Hamer, 2019; Lacedelli et al., 2023). Because of this collaborative approach, museums are changing from

places where visitors receive knowledge to places where they can talk, work together, and get involved in their community. In this way, the voices of people from different backgrounds in a community make the museum a dynamic institution that is continually evolving while embracing diverse perspectives (DiCindio, 2019; Simon, 2010).

Weil argued that museums should prioritise public service over the mere preservation and display of their collections (King et al., 2022; Settle, 2010). Their argument for “making museums matter” emphasises that a museum’s true value lies in its capacity to serve people meaningfully. This reframed the traditional view of museums as places that protect unique cultural heritage to places that encourage people to get involved in their communities and make a difference.

The ideas of Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and George E. Hein, who came up with constructivist learning, have also greatly improved museum education (DiCindio, 2019; Hansson & Öhman, 2022). Hooper-Greenhill pointed out that museums are not just places for tourists, as anyone can learn from museums (DiCindio, 2019). They represent a process where each person finds meaning through their own experiences and ideas. Her work suggests that museums can create deep, multifaceted settings that help people make sense of the world, both individually and as a group. They can also promote lifelong learning by using constructivist methods that see tourists as active participants in their learning. Hein connected educational theory and museum practice by showing how constructivist ideas can work well in casual learning settings where visitors can pick their way through content and build their understanding based on what they already know and what interests them (Nurhasnah et al., 2024; Pundir & Surana, 2016; Tomljenović & Vorkapić, 2020). This theoretical approach acknowledges that museums engage visitors meaningfully when they treat them as co-creators rather than passive users of information.

Studies on free-choice learning and the contextual model of learning have likewise changed the way people think about museum visits (Falk & Dierking, 2000, 2013; Kim & Lee, 2022; Rennie, 2016). Such research has shown that people who go to museums are interested in specific things and bring a lot of different things with them to the museum, such as previous knowledge, social relationships, and physical surroundings. According to the contextual model, meaningful museum learning occurs at the intersection of personal, social, and physical contexts; therefore, institutions should accommodate different

learning styles and motivations (Falk & Dierking, 2000, 2013; Kim & Lee, 2022).

Falk and Dierking (2013), Rennie (2016), and Stuedahl (2010) argued that museum engagement needs to be self-directed and flexible so that visitors can make connections that are important to them and for a range of learners and learning styles. The identity-related motivation theory states that visitors’ unique identities can be seen in how they act and how much they enjoy themselves. Thus, museums would benefit from examining the different social and psychological needs that draw people in (Cater, 2014; Lee & Lee, 2019; Zhang & Chen, 2020).

Researchers today know more about what draws people to museums than just their age and gender, exploring the psychological and social factors that affect how people connect with museums. Studies on tourists have shown that they are motivated by getting involved, talking, and co-creating their experience, as people go to museums for personal, social, and educational reasons (Xu & Wu, 2022; Yu & Xu, 2020). A visitor psychology study found that going to a museum involved making decisions about free time, remembering things, wanting to fit in with a group, and making sense of things (Tina & Hong, 2021). This whole-person perspective acknowledges that visitors’ fundamental desires for independence, skill, and connection must be considered to develop effective engagement strategies (Proctor & Roussou, 2023). Experience seekers, facilitators, explorers, and rechargers require distinct strategies to be actively involved.

Research by Lois H. Silverman shed light on the mental and social aspects of going to the museum (DiGiovanni Evans et al., 2016; Đorđević, 2022; Price & Applebaum, 2022; Silverman, 2009). She looked into how museums could help people learn, heal, and connect with each other in order to build relationships and emotional connections. These different concepts from Price and Applebaum (2022), Đorđević (2022), and Wallis and Noble (2024) were used to show how museums can improve mental health and create safe spaces that meet people’s basic needs to connect and feel like they belong.

Studies have supported the notion that museums can be a place for community support and social work, where people can use shared cultural items and experiences to feel better, make friends, and change (DiGiovanni Evans et al., 2016; Đorđević, 2022; Silverman, 2009). New neurological research has supported Silverman’s ideas, revealing that cognitive activity during art study predicts excellent mental outcomes and that museums reduce stress and concern (Dupuy et al., 2024).

To meet the needs and desires of people today, museums should use audience-centred approaches, strategic planning, and new technology (Aziz et al., 2024; Black, 2012; Dal Falco & Vassos, 2017; Moore et al., 2022; Sisak, 2024). Black (2012) claimed that museums are dynamic organisations that have to change with the times to keep up with changing technology, public needs, and demographics. His work shows how important it is for museums to always be planning ahead. They should present themselves as up-to-date cultural tools and try to guess what will happen in society (Aziz et al., 2024; Black, 2012; Dal Falco & Vassos, 2017; Sisak, 2024).

This approach to museum engagement recognises that museums must balance their historic tasks of collecting and maintaining items with their new roles of digital connection and community engagement (Aziz et al., 2024; Dal Falco & Vassos, 2017; Rodrigues et al., 2017; Sisak, 2024). Such work is needed to create better physical and virtual experiences. This approach is being used more and more through gamification, mixed reality, and other new technology to hold people's interest while teaching them (Tongpaeng et al., 2024; Yu, 2025). The studies cited above support museums that are educational, socially engaging, technologically advanced, open to everyone, and deeply connected to the communities they serve. Such an approach represents a major change from the way museums have usually worked to ones that actively help people learn, connect with each other, and build communities.

### *The Intersection of Museums and Pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia*

Saudi Arabia is home to some of Islam's holiest sites, attracting millions of visitors annually for religious pilgrimages, most notably the Hajj and Umrah. The annual Hajj pilgrimage, which occurs in the Islamic lunar month of Dhul-Hijjah, draws two to three million Muslims from over 160 countries, making it one of the largest mass gatherings in the world (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Hotez & Herricks, 2018). In 2024, 1,833,164 pilgrims performed the Hajj, with 87.9% being international visitors and the rest being domestic pilgrims (General Authority for Statistics, 2024). The Umrah pilgrimage is performed throughout the year and draws millions more to the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah. In total, more than 18.5 million pilgrims visited Mecca and Madinah in 2024 for both the Hajj and Umrah, making Saudi Arabia a global hub for religious travellers (Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, 2025).

This sustained influx of religious visitors presents a unique opportunity for cultural institutions—

particularly museums—to engage with pilgrimage in new and meaningful ways. While pilgrimage is traditionally associated with sacred religious journeys, recent scholarship has broadened the concept to include secular and cultural forms of pilgrimage (Bartley & Hancock, 2008; Ciaccia, 2021). Museums are increasingly recognised as spaces where visitors embark on personal or communal journeys that blend education, identity exploration, and spiritual reflection.

In Saudi Arabia, religious travel plays an important role in shaping national identity and tourism, and adding museums to the pilgrimage experience could be a way to get more people involved. Museums showcasing Islamic artefacts, religious heritage, or local history can be educational hubs as well as emotionally powerful places that add to and improve the traditional pilgrimage. Pilgrims may approach these museums with respect, seeing them as places to think and connect with sacred history, a perspective that can turn a visit to a museum into a kind of pilgrimage in its own right.

Through pilgrimage-like experiences, global initiatives such as the European xFORMAL project show how museums can boost travel and informal learning (Siri et al., 2024). People can use these programmes alone or with a group to look at museums as part of a bigger trip. Through the use of game-like elements and story-based exploration, such programmes feel more linked to both the thing and the place they explore. In addition, people who study material religion have stressed how the physical and sensory elements of museums can make them feel like pilgrims, blurring the line between religious contact and academic learning (Han, 2022).

For Saudi Arabian museums, this dual function—as educational institutions and sites of spiritual or cultural significance—presents opportunities and challenges. Heritage professionals must navigate how to manage and interpret sacred artifacts, accommodate diverse visitor motivations, and design inclusive, meaningful experiences (Ciaccia, 2021). Given the massive number of pilgrims visiting holy cities in Saudi Arabia each year, there is a growing potential for Saudi Arabian museums to enhance this journey, supporting spiritual, cultural, and educational dimensions that contribute to personal growth and collective identity.

How pilgrimage and museums can intersect in Saudi Arabia is a new, dynamic, and underexplored area of study. Museums in this context can be seen as sites showcasing cultural artifacts that allow pilgrims to experience a culture and gain an awareness of its history and values. This strategy involves the

integration of sacred traditions with contemporary interpretive frameworks. Its goal in the context of the present study is to increase the spiritual and cultural engagement of visitors, facilitating cultural preservation, religious tourism, and national identity in Saudi Arabia. Such a strategy is aligned with the Vision 2030 national development project by enhancing the tourism industry in order to increase cultural preservation and facilitate economic diversification.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology of the study, including its purpose, the questions it sought to answer, its quantitative design, the sampling technique and population, and data collection procedures.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to examine the behaviour of pilgrims in terms of their interaction with Saudi Arabian culture. By exploring this type of behaviour, the study also identified barriers, content preferences, and effective awareness channels. An online survey was selected as the most appropriate method for collecting data from pilgrims visiting Madinah, given its efficiency in reaching a diverse, global population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey examined pilgrims' demographic profiles, awareness of museums, barriers to visiting museums, preferred types of museum content, and preferred communication channels regarding museums, directly addressing the research questions.

#### *Research Questions*

The study sought to address the following research questions to better understand the relationship between pilgrims and Madinah's museums:

1. What is the demographic profile (age, gender, education, income) of pilgrims who are aware of and express interest in visiting Madinah's museums?
2. What are the primary barriers (logistical, cultural, informational) preventing pilgrims from engaging with museums in Madinah, and how do these barriers differ across demographic groups or levels of travel experience?
3. Which types of museum content (Islamic art, history of the holy cities, biography of the Prophet Muhammad) are most appealing to pilgrims, and how do preferences vary based on spirituality, education level, or other factors?

4. What are the most effective communication channels (digital media, religious authorities, tour operators) for raising awareness among pilgrims about Madinah's museums?

In answering these questions, the study sought to provide actionable insights for policymakers, museum professionals, and stakeholders in Saudi Arabia's cultural and tourism sectors, contributing to the pilgrimage experience and promotion of the country's rich heritage.

#### *Study Design*

This study employed a quantitative design, as such an approach would provide structured, numerical data to uncover patterns and generate generalizable findings relevant to pilgrim engagement with Madinah's museums (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative research involves a systematic approach that depends on statistical analysis; as such, it is useful for studying complex problems like how Madinah pilgrims know about museums and what keeps them from visiting. Statistical analysis was used to reduce researcher bias by ensuring objectivity, reliability, and evidence-based conclusions (Watson, 2015). This is because quantitative measures and analysis provide facts that go beyond personal views (Andrade, 2021). In a related previous study, Lim (2024) stated that this strategy could assist the Saudi Vision 2030 cultural tourism programme by examining pilgrim behaviour and identifying legal inadequacies.

Quantitative research produces statistical results that can be applied to larger groups. To be more effective, cultural tourism initiatives for pilgrims need to adapt to pilgrims' differing education, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds (Barroga, 2022). By analysing massive volumes of data, researchers can identify patterns and create helpful comparisons, such as how different ages attend events or how education impacts their decision between interactive and traditional displays (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative data were deemed the most appropriate for researching Madinah's museums, as they could assist museums in determining which tourists were most likely to visit, what they liked, and how to attract them. Policymakers, travellers, and instructors could then apply these findings. Vision 2030 prioritises culture and tourism; therefore, government interests align with this type of research. Planning to record and research traveller behaviour can help create more lasting cultural tourism models and place Saudi Arabia in the centre of worldwide religious tourism studies (Lim, 202). These methods were thus

expected to help conserve Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage, diversify the economy, and improve society.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

This research project adhered to the ethical standards set by SOAS University. Ethical approval was obtained prior to the study for all participants, and participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study, their right to anonymity, and their ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data was handled in accordance with data protection regulations.

### ***Population and Data Collection***

A quantitative survey was used to collect data with closed-ended questions designed based on age, education, and preferences according to the context of the museum (see Andrade, 2021; Barroga, 2022). The survey helped the researcher analyse the data to find the proportion of pilgrims who were aware of the museum and identify key barriers to their visiting it, such as logistical or informational challenges. This survey was deemed to be effective for the purpose of studying the diverse pilgrim groups in Saudi Arabia due to its scalability and generalisability. These qualities helped collect data that would be culturally relevant and aligned with the country's tourism goals (Lim, 2024).

Created using SurveyMonkey, the survey was conducted from 7 June to 6 July 2025. The sample size consisted of 100 pilgrims, and snowball sampling was used to collect responses. Snowball sampling is a non-random technique ideal for collecting responses from relevant participants (Miller, 2015). Following this technique, respondents in this study were asked on different social media platforms—such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter/X—to complete the survey and then share it with other pilgrims.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This chapter presents the findings of the quantitative survey used in this study, which documented pilgrims' reported behaviour during their museum visits in Madinah. In doing so, it addresses the four research questions regarding (1) the demographic profile of pilgrims, highlighting their awareness of and interest in visiting Madinah's museums; (2) different barriers they reported facing according to demographic group; (3) different preferences according to respondents' reported levels of spirituality and education; and (4) various

communication channels that could be used to increase public awareness about museums in Madinah. The chapter also describes an additional insight into the respondents' reported behaviour: a gap in knowledge that prevented them from visiting the local museums.

### ***Research Question 1: Demographic Profile of Pilgrims***

Research Question 1 asked, "What is the demographic profile (age, gender, education, income) of pilgrims who are aware of and express interest in visiting Madinah's museums?" Of the 100 respondents surveyed, 88 reported being aware of Madinah's museums, reflecting a considerable level of awareness among pilgrims. Among those who reported being aware of local museums, 56 (64%) of them expressed interest in visiting those museums, selecting either "very interested" (34 respondents, 39%) or "somewhat interested" (22 respondents, 25%). The demographic profile of these pilgrims who expressed interest in Madinah's museums was diverse.

Regarding age, the majority of the respondents were younger, with 30 respondents (54%) aged 18–29, 17 (30%) aged 30–44, seven (12%) aged 45–59, and two (4%) aged 60 and above. This suggested that younger pilgrims were more inclined to engage with museums in Madinah.

In terms of gender, respondents were more likely to be male ( $N = 36$ , 64%) than female ( $N = 20$ , 36%), indicating a gender-related skew in museum interest.

Having a higher education degree was prevalent, with 38 (68%) holding a college or university degree, nine (16%) reporting postgraduate studies or a PhD, six (10%) with mandatory or vocational education, and three (5%) with no formal education. More educated pilgrims thus showed greater interest in Madinah's museums.

Income levels varied, with 28 (50%) reporting a very low annual income (<\$1,000), 11 (20%) reporting a low income (\$1,000–\$10,000), 11 (20%) reporting a mid-level income (\$10,000–\$50,000), and six (10%) reporting a high or very high income (>\$50,000). Interest in museums was thus strong across income groups but particularly among surveyed pilgrims from a lower income bracket.

### ***Research Question 2: Barriers to Museum Visits and Demographic Variation***

Research Question 2 asked, "What are the primary barriers (logistical, cultural, informational) preventing pilgrims from engaging with museums in Madinah, and how do these barriers differ across

demographic groups or levels of travel experience?" The most frequently cited barrier to visiting Madinah's museums was "lack of time," as reported by 74% of the respondents, followed by "I didn't know about them" (20%), "cost-related concerns" (12%), "difficult to access or locate" (8%), "language barriers" (6%), "not interested" (4%), and "religious or cultural concerns" (4%). Notably, many of the respondents selected multiple barriers, reflecting complex challenges. There were also variations across demographic variables.

Regarding age, younger pilgrims (aged 18–29, 54 respondents) cited "lack of time" (80%) and "cost-related concerns" (16%) more often, while older pilgrims (aged 45–59 or 60+, 18 respondents) reported "difficult to access or locate" (17%) and "religious or cultural concerns" (11%) more frequently.

In terms of gender, women (38 respondents) were more likely to cite "cost-related concerns" (21%) and "language barriers" (13%) compared to men (62 respondents, 8% and 3%, respectively), suggesting gender-specific challenges.

Regarding education, pilgrims with no formal or mandatory education ( $N = 12$ ) cited "I didn't know about them" (33%) more than those with a college degree ( $N = 68$ , 15%), indicating lower awareness among less-educated individuals.

Not surprisingly, very low-income pilgrims (<\$1,000, 36 respondents) reported "cost-related concerns" (22%) more than high-income pilgrims (>\$50,000, 10 respondents), none of whom selected this concern.

Pilgrims with no travel experience (36 respondents) cited "I didn't know about them" (28%) more than those who had visited 4–10 countries (14 respondents, 7%), suggesting experienced travellers were better informed about local museums. These results highlight logistical (time, access) and informational (lack of awareness) barriers as primary obstacles, particularly for younger, female, less-educated, or less well-travelled pilgrims, necessitating targeted solutions like improved scheduling or awareness campaigns.

### ***Research Question 3: Content Preferences and Variation by Spirituality and Education***

Research Question 3 asked, "Which types of museum content (Islamic art, history of the holy cities, biography of the Prophet Muhammad) are most appealing to pilgrims, and how do preferences vary based on spirituality, education level, or other factors?" Pilgrims showed strong preferences for specific museum content, with "Prophet

Muhammad's (PBUH) life and legacy" selected by 90% of respondents, followed by "Islamic art and architecture" (74%), "history of the holy cities" (58%), "Quranic manuscripts and calligraphy" (54%), "cultural traditions of Muslim communities" (48%), "contemporary Islamic issues" (28%), and "children's or interactive exhibitions" (20%). Respondents often selected multiple content types, reflecting diverse interests. Variations were found based on respondents' stated spirituality and education levels.

Pilgrims who felt "very spiritual" (60 respondents) strongly preferred "Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life and legacy" (95%) and "Quranic manuscripts and calligraphy" (65%) compared to those who felt "somewhat spiritual" (28 respondents, 82% and 46%, respectively). Non-spiritual pilgrims (four respondents) favoured "cultural traditions of Muslim communities" (75%) over religious content.

College-educated pilgrims (68 respondents) showed broader interests, selecting "history of the holy cities" (68%) and "Islamic art and architecture" (79%) more frequently than those with no formal education (six respondents, 33% and 50%, respectively), who focused almost exclusively on "Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life and legacy" (100%).

Additionally, younger pilgrims (aged 18–29, 54 respondents) preferred interactive content like "children's or interactive exhibitions" (26%) more than older pilgrims (aged 45–59 or 60+, 18 respondents, 11%). These findings suggest that spiritually engaged and educated pilgrims prioritised content tied to Islamic heritage, while younger pilgrims showed more interest in interactive exhibits, an insight that could help guide curatorial decisions at Madinah's museums.

### ***Research Question 4: Effective Communication Channels for Raising Awareness***

Research Question 4 asked, "What are the most effective communication channels (digital media, religious authorities, tour operators) for raising awareness among pilgrims about Madinah's museums?" The most preferred communication channels for learning about Madinah's museums were "social media campaigns" (78% of respondents), followed by "information at religious sites (e.g., mosques)" (56%), "mobile apps or websites" (50%), "travel agencies or pilgrimage organizers" (48%), and "word of mouth from other pilgrims" (34%). Current awareness sources mirrored these preferences, with 44% learning about

museums via social media, 24% through mosques or religious groups, 10% via tour guides, six 6% via hotels, and 16% unaware of museums. Social media's dominance was consistent across demographic variables, but older pilgrims (aged 45–59 or 60+, 18 respondents) favoured "information at religious sites" (67%) more than younger pilgrims (aged 18–29, 54 respondents, 52%). These results underscore the effectiveness of digital platforms and religious networks for outreach, aligning with Vision 2030's emphasis on modern tourism infrastructure.

### ***Additional Insight into Pilgrims' Awareness about Museums***

Another notable finding was that 20% of pilgrims aware of Madinah's museums still cited "I didn't know about them" as a barrier to visiting, particularly among younger (aged 18–29, 25%) and less-educated (no formal education, 33%) pilgrims. This suggested a gap between general awareness and practical knowledge (e.g., museum locations, hours), highlighting the need for targeted campaigns to provide actionable information, such as mobile apps or mosque-based guides, to enhance engagement.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the literature and how they could help increase pilgrims' engagement with museums in Madinah. These findings include demographic patterns and cultural participation, barriers faced by respondents during museum visits, the awareness gap, preferences for museum content, and communication channels. In addition, the discussion highlights theoretical and practical implications and how the findings align with Vision 2030's goals.

### ***Demographic Patterns and Cultural Participation***

Out of the 100 respondents surveyed, 54% were aged 18–29, aligning with global museum research in which young, educated museum visitors were more common (Falk, 2016; Huo et al., 2024; Zhao & Mao, 2023). On the other hand, the high rate of male (64%) to female (36%) respondents conflicted with secular museum studies in which women were predominant (Ma et al., 2022; Mullens & Glorieux, 2019). This gap suggested that female pilgrims faced barriers to visiting museums due to social obstacles, such as traditional gender roles, religious rituals, and mobility issues (Albutti et al., 2023; Kandeel et al., 2024). In addition, Saudi travellers accounted for 51% of museum traffic, aligning with Vision 2030's promotion of cultural involvement as an important

part of national identity and tourism (Hassan et al., 2023). These findings highlight the value of creating strategies that account for visitor demographics in order to increase museum engagement.

### ***Barriers to Visiting Museums***

The survey revealed various barriers to visiting museums in Madinah. The biggest was "lack of time", reported by 74% of respondents, similar to previous studies (e.g., Bohnert et al., 2008; Çolak & Karakan, 2024; Mullens & Glorieux, 2019). This result could be due to the nature of pilgrimages, during which pilgrims are busy with religious obligations, such as prayers and rituals at the Prophet's Mosque (Shah, 2024; Yezli et al., 2021). Responses about barriers varied according to age and gender. For instance, younger pilgrims (aged 18–29) cited "lack of time" (80%) and "cost-related concerns" (16%) the most, indicating that money issues were more important to them. In addition, most women reported cost (21%) and language difficulties (13%) as barriers more often than men, indicating that financial and communication issues could hinder women especially from cultural involvement.

Another barrier was a lack of awareness, especially among less educated (33%) and younger (25%) respondents, who reported "I didn't know about" museums in Madinah, a finding that was similar to previous studies (e.g., Mullens & Glorieux, 2019). In addition, 28% of international visitors reported that they lacked information about places to visit (cf. Raj & Bozonelos, 2015). This finding suggested a gap in general awareness and actionable knowledge about local museums (e.g., location, hours). This was in keeping with information processing theory, which claims that during religious duties, pilgrims often face cognitive overload that affects their memory and limits their processing of practical details about cultural sites (Ferrato, 2025; Yi et al., 2022).

These findings extend museum communication research by highlighting the need for context-specific, accessible information delivery in religious tourism settings, such as concise guides at mosques or user-friendly mobile apps (De Ascaniis et al., 2018). Other ways to eliminate these barriers and enhance Madinah museum access include language guides and outreach initiatives.

### ***Content Preferences and Identity-Related Motivations***

The strong preference for "Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life and legacy" (90%), followed by "Islamic art and architecture" (74%) and "history of the holy

cities" (58%), reflected the centrality of religious heritage in pilgrims' cultural engagement. The variation by spirituality—"very spiritual" pilgrims favouring religious content (95% for the Prophet's life, 65% for Quranic manuscripts) compared to "somewhat spiritual" (82% and 46%) or non-spiritual (75% for cultural traditions)—supported Falk's identity-related motivation theory, where visitor preferences align with personal and spiritual identities (Falk, 2011, 2016; Wambold & Spellerberg, 2017). Educational stratification further aligned with Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, as college-educated pilgrims showed broader interests (68% for history, 79% for Islamic art) compared to those with no formal education (100% for the Prophet's life) (Dawson, 2014; Price & Applebaum, 2022). Younger pilgrims' interest in "children's or interactive exhibitions" (26%) suggested a desire for engaging, modern formats, offering curatorial opportunities to diversify exhibits (Jurèniènè, 2020). These patterns highlight the need for museums to prioritise religiously significant content while incorporating more interactive elements to attract younger visitors.

### ***Communication Channels and Digital Engagement***

The dominance of "social media campaigns" (78%) as a preferred communication channel, alongside "information at religious sites" (56%) and "mobile apps or websites" (50%), reflected the intersection of digital natives and sacred space engagement (Kidd et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2023; Xing & Sun, 2025). Social media's role as the primary awareness source among respondents (44%) aligned with global trends in museum outreach, but the preference for mosque-based information (56%), especially among older pilgrims (67%), highlighted the unique role of sacred spaces in religious tourism communication (Charitonos et al., 2011; De Ascaniis et al., 2018). This finding suggested that Madinah's museums should integrate digital platforms with traditional religious channels, leveraging the perceived credibility of religious institutions to enhance trust (Blasco-Lopez et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2017). For example, flyers could be distributed inside mosques, while similar information could be broadcast on social media. This hybrid approach would support Vision 2030's goal of digital tourism initiatives.

### ***Theoretical and Practical Implications***

This study showed the importance of cultural capital and social identity in religious tourism, particularly in Madinah museums. Pilgrims with

more education were more interested in a wider range of cultures, which shows how cultural capital changes how people use heritage. Global museum research reveals that visitors' educational backgrounds and cultural experiences strongly influence their connection to heritage places (Price & Applebaum, 2022; Recupero et al., 2019). Falk (2016) and Jurèniènè (2020) found that spiritual identity motivated people to engage with sacred heritage, indicating that tourists use museums to learn about religion. Religious tourism is male-dominated and has distinct communication preferences from secular cultural activity, exemplifying how gender and identity affect sacred cultural involvement (Hassan et al., 2023; Yang, 2022).

In addition to theoretical implications, the results offer practical insights that could be used to improve Madinah's museums. To accommodate pilgrims' time constraints, museums could stay open longer or give virtual tours. Bilingual signs at religious sites, social media involvement, and useful information like maps, admission rates, and schedules could help in the marketing of the museum's availability while bridging the knowledge gap about museums. The exhibitions could focus on the Prophet Muhammad's life, among other topics of interest to different demographic groups, and use religious networks and digital channels to increase awareness among visitors. These initiatives would enhance pilgrims' spiritual and cultural experiences and assist Saudi Arabia in achieving its Vision 2030 goals by establishing the country as a global centre for religious and cultural tourism.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study was conducted from July to August 2025 and surveyed 100 pilgrims in Madinah to explore the dynamics of museum engagement within the context of Islamic pilgrimage. It revealed various factors showing the alignment of museum heritage with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals to enhance awareness among tourists. Younger, male, and more educated pilgrims (54% aged 18–29, 64% male, 68% college educated) were the most aware (88%) and interested (64%) in visiting Madinah's museums, highlighting a key demographic for targeted outreach. The primary barrier, lack of time (74%), underscored the challenge of integrating cultural visits into time-constrained pilgrimage schedules, while the awareness gap (20% of aware pilgrims citing "I didn't know about them") pointed to a need for actionable information delivery. Pilgrims' strong preference for content on the Prophet Muhammad's life and legacy (90%) and Islamic art (74%),

particularly among more religious and educated respondents, emphasised the centrality of religious heritage, with younger pilgrims also favouring interactive exhibits (26%). Social media (78%) and religious sites (56%) emerged as the most effective communication channels, reflecting the blend of digital and sacred spaces in modern pilgrimage.

These findings suggested that Madinah's museums could enhance engagement by addressing logistical barriers through extended hours or virtual tours, providing multilingual guides to support female and international pilgrims, and prioritising religiously significant exhibits alongside interactive displays. Social media campaigns and mosque-based information distribution could bridge the awareness gap, ensuring pilgrims receive practical details about

museum offerings. By aligning with Vision 2030, these strategies could enrich the pilgrimage experience and position Madinah as a global cultural hub.

Future research could explore the awareness gap's cognitive and logistical drivers, perhaps through qualitative interviews to understand pilgrims' information-processing challenges. Studies could also investigate female pilgrims' lower engagement to address gender barriers, and longitudinal research could assess the impact of digital tools, such as mobile apps, on museum visits. Expanding the sample to include more diverse nationalities could further inform strategies for global pilgrims, enhancing Madinah's cultural tourism landscape.

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