EXPLORING VISITOR MOTIVATIONS AT RELIGIOUS TOURISM SITES TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY ON THE REGION OF WEST THESSALY, GREECE

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Religious tourism not only addresses the satisfaction of human religious and spiritual needs, but is also related to a range of reasons, such as recreation, leisure, landscape patterns, cultural or educational reasons. The aim of this study was to investigate the profile of 502 Greek tourists visiting religious sites on the region of West Thessaly, Greece, and their motivation as well. According to the results, the respondents are in line with the model of the short visit religious tourists travelling in organised groups. Using exploratory factor analysis, the findings revealed that the religious sites of the region attracted visitors who seek to fulfill different kinds

of needs; religious and nature-seeking motivations seem to be significant factors for visiting the surveyed region. This finding suggests that it would be worthwhile for destination managers to pay more attention to tourist attractions, such as environment and religious atmosphere, in order to continue to enhance experiences and attract repeated tourists. Finally, motivational factors and activities identified in the research show that collaboration between the stakeholders, such as the Church, local authorities and tourist sector, is necessary.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and tourism are highly interconnected, since an increase in tourism coincides with an increase in spiritual travel (Attix, 2003). According to Terzidou et al. (2017), tourism and religion are not separate entities but are linked through embodied notions of godliness sensed through tourist performances. Today, more than 250 million people travel each year to satisfy their religious interests, including Christians, Muslims and Hindus (Mowforth and Munt, 2015).

Religious tourism is any trip motivated, either exclusively or partly, by religious reasons (Rinschede, 1992). For Rashid (2018), religious tourism is a type of tourism whereby travellers visit places for religious purpose while at the same time they may participate in recreation and cultural activities. Thus, religious tourism not only addresses the satisfaction of human religious and spiritual needs, but is also related to a range of reasons, such as recreation, leisure, landscape patterns, cultural or educational reasons (Abbate and Nuovo, 2013; Amaro et al., 2018; Drule et al., 2015; Fernandes et al., 2012; Geary, 2018; Hughes et al., 2013; Hyde and Harman, 2011; Kim and Kim, 2018; Musa et al., 2017; Olsen, 2013; Oviedo et al., 2014; Ramírez and Fernández, 2018; Shinde, 2007; Wang et al., 2016).

As religious tourism is growing, it is crucial to understand what motivates individuals visiting sacred sites. Qualitative studies have

investigate the experiences and benefits of religious tourism, having mainly focus on spiritual experiences and having neglected of social, educational or nature seeking experiences. This is despite the acknowledgement that all stakeholders should offer a range of experiences for visitors (Tirca and Stanciulescu, 2011). Therefore, this quantitative study can contribute to fill this gap in the scientific literature, providing information to stakeholders that may allow them to create preferred and valued products and services in the destination market.

The study attempts to identify the profile and motivation of tourists visiting the religious sites on the region of West Thessaly, Greece. Motivations to the religious sites of the aforementioned region are of particular interest given the increasing popularity of the region's environment as well as the growth of religious tourism. However, it is worth mentioning that the region of West Thessaly lacks a tourism development plan with emphasis in religious tourism. Thus, understanding the reasons for choosing a particular religious destination is a significant step towards gaining a better knowledge on the different market segments based on the wants and needs sought. Planning of a tourist destination has to begin with an investigation of tourist motivation (Bansal and Eiselt, 2004). With this knowledge, all the stakeholders may build appropriate strategies for long-term development.

The paper starts with a literature review of religious tourism, motivation theories in the tourism context and religious tourist motivation. The description of the study area follows and the methodology is described. Then, the results of the study are presented. The paper ends with a discussion of the results, the main conclusions and implications, and the directions of future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is probably one of the oldest forms of tourism in human history. As Rinschede (1992) states, religious tourism is as old as religion itself. For example, the Assyrians were travelling to worship their God in Aleppo and Hierapolis (modern Syria), while the Babylonians were travelling to holy places, such as Nippur and Namma, to pray for peace and implore God for a long life (Rinschede, 1992). These "religious tourists" were implementing pilgrimages to sacred sites, mountains and temples, showing respect to God and asking for help. In addition, Egyptians, Greeks and Jews used to express their religious devotion through religious incitement trips.

According to Al-Amin (2002), religious tourism is not only a type of tourism where a visitor seeks the experience of his/her personal identity visiting places of historical and cultural significance but is also referred to the result of a religious duty.

It is argued that all religious tourists are not the same. Many authors have discussed the distinction between "tourist" and "pilgrim". More specifically, Smith (1992) considered both pilgrims and religious tourists within a continuous classification that goes from the pious pilgrimage to strictly secular tourism, depending on the person's faith in his/her motivation and activities.

Hyde and Harman (2011) stated that the pilgrimage is not just a religious phenomenon and the old paradigm of pilgrimage no longer exists. Nowadays, the limits between pilgrimage and tourism are considered vague, due to the differentiation of the context of the pilgrimage, which is broader and more secular (Durán-Sánchez et al., 2018).

In Western cultures, pilgrims are individuals who are primarily motivated by the individual's desire for an oath or repentance. As many researchers mention (Cohen 1992; Digance 2003; Tomasi 2002; Vukonic, 1996), the pilgrimage is related to the remission of sins. Moreover, many times in Christianity, pilgrims show their gratitude to God or pray for a miracle walking the Jesus trail; a route

that winds through the towns and villages in northern Israel where Jesus and his disciples established their ministry.

However, Yeoman (2008) pointed out that the pilgrimage is not exclusively refereed to the religious destination; it is a tourist route which starts from the planning of the trip and continues to depart and travel as a whole, including after-effects, such as the spiritual benefits that accompany the traveller throughout his/her lifetime.

Authors (e.g. Rinschede, 1992; Richards and Fernades, 2007) also consider religious tourism as part of cultural tourism, since religion has been a significant part of civilization. Thus there is an overlap between religious tourism and cultural one. Religious tourists may have religious motivation during their visit to a sacred place, but in fact their motivations are of a different nature, such as the need to visit a place of interesting history or of intense cultural interest (Souza, 1988). For instance, when someone visits a church can admire the architecture and the cultural heritage, see art nearby or learn history (Richards, 2007).

In recent years, an important area of research is also referred to the relationship between religious tourism and sustainable development, and religious tourists and local community as well. More specifically, scholars have paid attention to the effects of religious tourism on economic development (Dasgupta et al., 2006), natural and cultural environment (Fang, 2001; Joseph and Kavoori, 2001; Shackley, 1999; Shinde, 2007; Wang, 2003), and perceived value to local residents (Andriotis, 2009; Terzidou et al., 2017, 2018; Uriely et al., 2000).

Thinking about regional development, tourists' motivation for visiting destinations cannot be ignored. There is a correlation between the ability of a region to attract visitors and the visitors' motivation. Tourists' motivation and needs may be crucial for the dynamics of the tourist activities of a region. A number of international organisations state that tourist activities have to be planned, managed and developed so as to be environmentally tolerable over time, ethically

and socially compatible with local communities, generate economic benefits to the locals, and preserve the natural and cultural resources. Religious tourism is a form of tourism that places emphasis on preservation, revival and development of religious, historical and natural sites for the creation of tourist flows. It brings opportunities for sustainable development by creating jobs, improving infrastructure and investment, and promoting culture, crafts and food (UNWTO, 2016).

Motivation Theories in the Tourism Context

Why do people travel? How do they choose a tourist destination? These questions are a critical topic among researchers and several surveys have conducted to study tourist motivations. According to Pearce et al. (1998), tourist motivation is a network of biological and cultural forces that gives value and direction to travel choices, behaviour and experience.

Maslow's hierarchical theory of motivation (1954) is one of the most widely-used theories of human motivation. His theory is modelled as a pyramid whose base consists of physiological needs, followed by the higher levels of safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs and self-actualization. The theory suggests that people will be motivated to fulfill the higher level needs if they firstly meet the basic ones.

According to Crompton and McKay (1997, p. 427), tourism motivation is "a dynamic process of internal psychological factors - needs and wants- that generate a state of tension or disequilibrium within individuals".

Based on Maslow's theory, Pearce (1988) argued that people, as they become more experienced travellers, tend to ascend the "travel career ladder". According to Pearce, tourist motivations are organised in a hierarchy with the relaxation needs being at the lowest level followed by safety/security needs, relationship needs, self-esteem needs and self-actualization/fulfillment needs. As tourists become

more experienced, they may progress upward through the levels of motivation.

However, later Pearce and his colleagues (Pearce and Lee, 2005) proposed the approach of "travel career pattern", according to which, tourists' motivational patterns change over their life stages. In their study, the authors identified 14 motivational patterns which drive tourists' behaviour, such as novelty, escape/relax, relationship, autonomy, seeking nature, self-development (host-site involvement), stimulation, personal development, security, self-actualization, isolation, nostalgia, romance and recognition (prestige of travelling). However, due to the complexity of such multifactor model, Pearce and Lee (2005) concluded that four of the above factors are the main incentives for travelling, namely novelty, escape/relax, relationship and self-development.

One of the most popular typology of tourist motivations is push and pull model, being firstly used by Dann (1977). Dann suggested that the choice of a destination is driven by two forces; push and pull factors. Push factors derive from people's intrinsic desires, such as ego-enhancement, prestige and social interaction, while pull factors are associated with external forces related to destination attributes or attractions.

Iso-Ahola (1982) and Yoon and Uysal (2005) suggested motivational approaches that mirror the model of Dann. For Iso-Ahola (1982, p. 261) "tourism is a dialectical process because it provides an outlet for avoiding something and for simultaneously seeking something". Iso-Ahola suggested the theory of optimal arousal which suggests that psychological benefits of recreational travel are the result of the interaction of two forces: avoidance of routine and stressful environment, and seeking recreation places for certain psychological rewards. People take a vacation to avoid over-stimulating or under-stimulating life situations. Those who attempt to escape under-stimulation (boredom) and have high arousal needs are more likely to search for activity whereas those with low arousal

needs may choose more predictable experiences during their vacation.

Yoon and Uysal (2005) proposed a model investigating the relationship among the push and pull motivations, satisfaction and destination loyalty. The authors in their research conducted in northern Cyprus found that tourist destination loyalty has causal relationships with push and pull factors, and satisfaction as well. Tourist satisfaction is an important component in the tourism industry; it greatly affects the choice of destination, the consumption of products and the decision to revisit (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000). However, satisfaction is a complex phenomenon since it could result from the expectations created before and during the trip, and the tourist's perceptions of the experience (Prebensen and Foss, 2011).

Concluding, despite the difficulty of identifying the nature of tourist motivation, some commonalities are remarkable across the different theories. Motivations such as recreation, novelty, relaxation and social contact have commonly appeared in different studies.

However, tourism motivation research has not been extended to motivation for visiting religious sites and it is not clear if tourists who visit religious sites fit with established motivation theories in the tourism context.

Motivation for Visiting Religious Sites

People travel to religious places to seek out the truth, enlightenment or an authentic experience with the divine (Petreas, 2011). Yeoman (2008) states that religious tourists are searching for answers to important religious questions, while Jafari (2000) suggests that the fulfillment of a wish or a religious obligation, such as a vow, motivate people to visit sites of religious interest.

According to Dallen (2006), religion and spirituality are two of the most powerful motivations to travel to destinations, which have been interconnected with holy people, places and events. People visit religious monuments to live a spiritual experience; thus spirituality

should be taken into account on tourist motivation research. Regarding spiritual motivation, the most important is the "spiritual gain" (Wright, 2008), which is a renewed spirit, that deepens faith, strengthens knowledge and gains significant experience that changes the individual's orientation of life.

It is worth mentioning that the motivations of religious tourism are separated from those of the pilgrimage. According to Blackwell (2010), there is limited research on pilgrims' motivation with mixed results (Fernades et al., 2012; Lopez, 2013). According to Barber (1993), the pilgrimage is a journey to a holy site resulting from religious causes, for spiritual purposes to find inner selves and identity (Giddens, 1991; Margry, 2008; Schau and Gilly, 2003). Pilgrimage tourism is an experience that requires an attitude of repentance related to the duties of the religious person, while it is common for the pilgrim to visit the sanctuary for a particular grace. The pilgrim is therefore motivated by religious reasons, while the secular religious tourist prefers to participate in conferences, festivals and rituals at sacred sites (Rinschede, 1992).

Fleischer (2000) recognises six different types of pilgrimage depending on motivation, ranging from worship to the desire for personal wandering. In addition, Fleischer, having explored the pilgrims of the Holy Land, reports that tourists who regard themselves as pilgrims have different personal characteristics and patterns of travel, with a distinction between Catholics and Protestants, who consider their visit as sacred or secular, respectively.

Dominguez (2010) investigated the pilgrimage motivation of St. Jacob's visitors to Santiago de Compostella. According to the author, motivations greatly vary among the different categories of visitors and include self exploration, prayer for satisfying personal needs, natural environment seeking, visit other pilgrimages and walking paths followed by thousands of faithful over the centuries, and cultural attraction.

Concluding, pilgrims are motivated to travel due to their strong spiritual/religious beliefs, whereas tourists are motivated by the prospect of experiencing pleasure, satisfying curiosity, engaging in relaxation, and partaking in education. For pilgrims, the push factors are expected to be more present than the pull ones.

However, many scholars (Fleischer, 2000, Smith, 1992; Weidenfeld, 2006) found that there is no apparent differentiation between "religious travellers" and ordinary "vacationers"; both are often interlinked in a shared space of learning (Gatrell, 2006) or draw on the same resources and use the same amenities (Eade, 1992).

Religious trips are frequently multifunctional journeys that include not only religious and spiritual motivation but also other forces, such as nostalgia, education (Nyaupane et al., 2015; Ramírez and Fernández, 2018; Sarris, 2004) or curiosity. Tourists also visit sacred places for social and cultural reasons (Nolan and Nolan 1992; Timothy and Boyd, 2003). Richards (2007) and Santos (2002) state that pilgrims who undertake religious journeys based on purely religious motivation are 50%, while about 20% has a mixed religious-cultural motivation.

However, it seems that even when the basic motivation of the journey is religious, religious motivation is rarely static and extends beyond narrow religious boundaries (Dubisch, 1995). According to Chesworth (2006), the experience of spirituality goes beyond the rules and norms of the traveller as an individual, and pilgrims and religious tourists tend to penetrate deeper into societies and host cultures (Jarvis, 2005).

Petreas (2011) states that forces, such as authentic experience seeking, diverse tourist product, unusual holidays seeking and diversification within a trip, alongside faith itself, motivate people to undertake religious travels. In addition, Simone-Charteris and Boyd (2011) report the following driving forces as significant for taking a trip in religious sites: (1) deep introspection, (2) intimacy with the divine, (3) nature seeking, (4) educational interest, (5) understanding

of different cultures, or ways of life, traditions, values and beliefs, (6) politics, (7) curiosity, and (8) nostalgia for authentic experiences.

Wright (2008), having adopted a more holistic approach, sums up the religious tourist motivation to: (i) spiritual, (ii) educational / cultural, (iii) physical, and (iv) emotional. Similarly, Andriotis (2009) reported five core experiential elements, such as spiritual, cultural, environmental, secular and educational, while Hyde and Harman (2011) considered spiritual, nationalistic, family pilgrimage, friendship and leisure travel as significant travel motivation. Furthermore, Shuo et al. (2009) identified three factors -social exploration, experience religion, and experience belief- for visiting Mazu religious place.

Finally, according to Wang et al. (2016), religious tourists visiting one of the most significant Buddhist destinations in China - Putuo Buddhist Mountain- are driven by religious belief and mental relaxation (push factors), and cultural enjoyment (pull factor).

In conclusion, religious trips are multipurpose trips, even when religious motivation seems to predominate. However, in modern societies, religious purposes for visiting religious sites or events seem to be less important compared to those in ancient societies (Rinschede, 1992). Travel motivations to sacred sites appear to be much more complex. Within the religious tourism context, motivations are not only constructed by external agents, but are also driven by strong, deeply held, personal beliefs and embodied performances that are related to the everyday religious self and practice (Terzidou et al., 2018).

The Research Area

Thessaly is one of the 13 administrative regions of Greece and consists of the prefectures of Larissa, Magnisia (East Thessaly), Trikala and Karditsa (West Thessaly). West Thessaly is a total area of 5,932 square kilometers. It is located on the borders of Western

Macedonia, Central Greece and Epirus, with a population of 251,177 inhabitants.

The region of West Thessaly gathers an environment with high cultural, religious and natural value. The region includes natural resources, such as mountains, rivers, artificial lakes, protected areas, landscapes of particular aesthetic beauty and coasts, which create an ecosystem of rich biodiversity (flora and fauna). Culture is also evident in a great number of sites on the Greek region, including antiquities, Byzantine and post-Byzantine monuments, neoclassical buildings, monasteries and churches, and traditional villages.

The major focus of the religious journey on the region is Meteora. Meteora are included in UNESCO's World Heritage List and are one of the most important sites of pilgrimage for Christianity. Meteora provide an outstanding example of the types of monastic construction when during the political instability of 14th century in Thessaly 24 monasteries were systematically built on the top of inaccessible sandstone peaks. Today, the remaining monasteries represent a unique artistic achievement and are one of the most powerful examples of the architectural transformation of a site into a place of meditation and prayer.

The region of West Thessaly constitutes an exceptional landscape of unique natural-cultural potential to include tourist resources of particular natural aesthetics and religious value. The geographical location of the region, stone bridges, traditional settlements, folklore museums, caves, old watermills, Byzantine monasteries and Byzantine temples, and the imposing rocks of Meteora attract tourists of all over the world to visit the region.
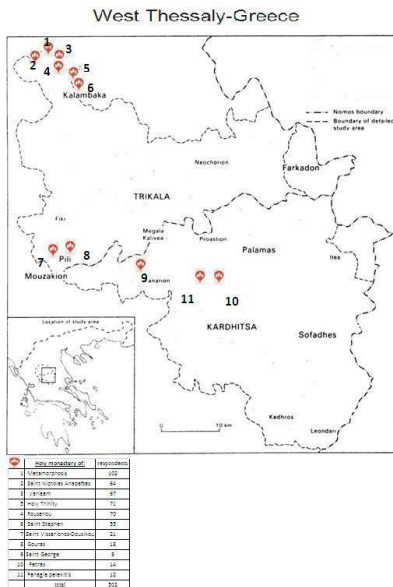
It is estimated that every year about 50,000 Greek tourists visit religious sites in the country in organised groups for purely religious reasons. It is worth mentioning that the first place of religious tourists' preference, among others, is Meteora. However, seasonality is a characteristic of the tourism on the region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subject and Procedure

This paper aims at identifying the profile and motivation of
religious tourists visiting the region of West Thessaly, Greece. For
this purpose a two-step approach was employed. Firstly, the localities
around which monasteries are available were identified. The
identification of these key resources resulted from the analysis of a
range of parameters, such as the historic significance of monasteries,
the visitor flows, the available services, the visibility of the resources
and districts. Secondly, a survey was carried out during the period of
March to May 2017. Data were collected through an interview-based
questionnaire and the settings were selected monasteries in different
areas of West Thessaly. Only adult visitors were approached as they
exited the sites and invited to complete a questionnaire. A total of 502
responses were obtained at eleven monasteries in the region of West
Thessaly.

Figure 1

	Holy monastery of:	respondents
1	Metamorphosis	102
2	Saint Nicholas Anapafsas	64
3	Varlaam	67
4	Holy Trinity	71
5	Rousanou	70
6	Saint Stephen	53
7	Saint Vissarionos-Douskou	21
8	Gouras	18
9	Saint George	9
10	Petras	14
11	Panagia pelekitis	13
	total	502

All the respondents received a verbal and written explanation of the purpose of the study and its anonymous nature. The completed data were collected after approximately 15 minutes. All the participants were of Greek nationality.

Questionnaire

Despite the fact that many previous studies on similar topics (e.g. Fernandes *et al.*, 2012; Rojo, 2007) have used qualitative methods, a quantitative methodology was chosen. This type of methodology allows the use of large samples and can generalise findings to the population at large. Quantitative methodology is able to produce repeatable data that can be trusted for forecasting and other planning purposes.

A survey questionnaire based on previous literature on tourism motivation was designed. The questionnaire consisted of four sections and included items on sociodemographic aspects, and characteristics of the visit, motivation and satisfaction.

More specifically, the first section of the questionnaire included the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, age, level of education, monthly personal income, family status, occupation and place of residence.

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of specific questions regarding the trip characteristics and the features of travel organisation of the respondents (e.g. frequency of visits, company of people for the visit, expense, information sources).

The third section of the questionnaire captured the motivation of the respondents. The respondents' motivation for visiting the specific religious sites on the region was directly assessed by the following question: How important are the following factors for you to visit the religious sites of the region?" All the respondents were reported based on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 represented "no important" and 5 "extremely important".

The fourth section concentrated on topics related to the experience of the respondents, satisfaction, and their activities during their travel. All the variables included in the fourth section were measured by a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "no/not at all" and 5 "very much". Multiple categories of satisfaction items were used measuring the satisfaction adapted to the destination, the

general satisfaction and return with the recommendation of the destination.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Exploratory Factor Analysis was also performed in order to group the factors associated with the respondents' motivation for visiting the survey region, and their activities during their travel. All the variables included in the factor analysis were measured by a 5-point Likert scale.

RESULTS
The Profile of Respondents

The majority of the respondents were females (59.4%). About 71% of the respondents were married. The respondents, on average, were 63 years old, had attended high school (41.6%), were private employees (23.7%) and had a monthly personal income ranged from €600 to €1,199 (34.1%). Thirty three per cent of the sample lived on the region of Thessaly, while the rest of it lived on other areas of Greece (58.8%) and abroad (8.2%). Most respondents (75.3%) were repeated tourists. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

		N	%	Mean	SD
Gender	Male	204	40.6		
	Female	298	59.4		
Marital status	Married	354	70.5		
	No married	93	18.5		
Educational status	Primary school	82	16.3		
	Middle school	123	24.5		
	High school	209	41.6		
	Post-secondary education	5	1.0		
	University education	75	14.9		
	Postgraduate Studies	8	1.6		
Main occupation	Working in the public sector	100	19.9		
	Working in the private sector	119	23.7		
	Freelancer	116	23.1		

	Retired	118	23.5		
	Unemployed	49	9.8		
Monthly personal income	€0-599	81	16.1		
	€600-1,199	171	34.1		
	€1200-1,799	161	32.1		
	≥€1,800	89	17.7		
Place of residence	Local	166	33.1		
	Other, Greece	295	58.8		
	Other, Abroad	41	8.2		
Repeated tourist	Yes	378	75.3		
	No	124	24.7		
Age				62.54	15.69
Total		502	100%		

Travel Organisation

Most of the respondents arrived to the area in organised groups (50.4%). The length of the respondents' stay was on average 2.5 overnight stays. Rental rooms and hotels were their favoured types of accommodation (51.2% and 34%, respectively) followed by housed of friends or relatives (14.3%). In addition, 61.4% of the respondents claimed that they intended to totally spend €250-499 compared with the 18.7% of those who would spend €500-749. Finally, 10.4% would spend €750 and above, while 9.6% less than €250.

Most of the respondents had little knowledge about the survey region (40.4%), while 37.6% was well informed and 21.9% was moderately informed on the region. Thus, before visiting the area, the respondents looked for information on the profile of the destination. Specifically, the respondents were asked: To what extent did you use the following sources to gather information on the profile of the region of West Thessaly? The responses were based on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 represented "no/not at all" and 5 "very much". The respondents used as information sources their past experience (mean=3.87, SD=1.14) followed by the Internet (mean=3.79, SD=1.16), tourist guidebooks (mean=3.77, SD=1.17), radio/television programs (mean=3.04, SD=1.39) and specialized magazines/publications (mean=3.02, SD= 1.36). Finally, word-of-mouth and Church were not particularly mentioned by the

participants (mean=2.95, SD=1.42; mean=2.95, SD=1.40, respectively).

Motivations

According to the results, when the respondents were asked about the primary purpose for their journey, 74.4% of the respondents mentioned "the holy place of Meteora", while for 25.3% visiting Meteora was a complementary reason.

The respondents mentioned that they were mainly attracted by natural environment and monasteries (mean=4.46, SD=1.15 and mean=3.83, SD=1.19, respectively), while archeological sites (mean = 3.05, SD=1.40), museums (mean = 2.97, SD=1.43) and cultural events (mean = 2.97, SD=1.41) were of less preference.

In our study, exploratory factor analysis was performed in order to group the variables that determine the respondents' decision to visit the religious survey region and the activities carried out. Resulting data were repeatedly factor analyzed with the final factor solution using principal component extraction and orthogonal varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization. The determination of the main factors' identity was supported in the variable with the higher values of factor loadings. High prices of loadings for one or more variables of factor identify this factor.

Concerning the factors contributing to the decision to visit the survey region, a six factor solution was generated and the six factors explained 38.1% of the total variance. All factors had eigenvalues greater than 1 and were the following: Participation in activities, Religiousness, Interpersonal relationship, Information, Nature and Infrastructure.

From reviewing the mean scores of the composite indicators, it was found that "nature" (M=3.99, SD=0.76) suggested a high degree of importance. On the contrary, "participation in activities" (M=3.39, SD=0.66), "information" (M=3.38, SD=0.65), and "religiousness" (M=3.34, SD=0.70) suggested a mild degree of importance in travel motivation. Finally, "infrastructure" (M=3.04, SD=0.79) and "interpersonal relationship" (M=2.94, SD=0.79) were of lower importance.

Table 2: Factor analysis on factors contributing to the decision visiting the region of West Thessaly

	Factors					
	Participation in activities	Religiousness	Interpersonal relationship	Information	Nature	Infrastructure
Participation in cultural activities	0.649					
Participation in religious activities	0.633					
Participation in sports activities	0.551					
Religious atmosphere		0.618				
Meteora monument		0.589				
Places important for Christianity		0.526				
Relaxation / escape from everyday life			0.701			
Engaging with new people			0.698			
Meeting with friends / family			0.665			
Positive recommendation from social environment				0.707		
Positive reviews from the press				0.617		
Past experience				0.568		
Browsing					0.525	
Natural environment					0.420	
Infrastructure						0.774
Easy accessibility						0.743
Nightlife / fun						0.491
Factor Interpretation (% variance explained)	6.648	6.579	6.352	6.261	6.166	6.124
Cronbach's Alpha	0.791	0.778	0.694	0.649	0.733	0.867
Mean	3.39	3.34	2.94	3.38	3.99	3.04

Concerning the activities carried out by the respondents, a four factor solution was generated and the four factors explained 50.52% of the total variance. All four factors had eigenvalues greater than 1

and are the following: Recreational activities, Cultural and religious activities, Natural activities, and Adventure and sports.

Table 3: Factor analysis on activities carried out in the region of West Thessaly

	Factors			
	Recreational activities	Cultural and religious activities	Natural activities	Adventure and sports
Participation in Festivals	0.756			
Leisure	0.605			
Visiting museums		0.729		
Religious activities		0.646		
Participation in cultural events		0.518		
Participation in agricultural activities			0.654	
Exploration of flora and fauna			0.506	
Adventure activities				0.665
Cycling and other sports				0.582
Factor Interpretation (% variance explained)	12.952	12.777	12.733	12.054
Cronbach'sAlpha	0.841	0.610	0.719	0.666
Mean	2.44	3.49	1.77	1.78

From reviewing the mean scores of the composite indicators, it was observed that "cultural and religious activities" were of moderate importance (M=3.49, SD=0.74), while "recreational activities" (M=2.44, SD=0.86), "natural activities" or "adventure and sports activities" was of less importance (M=1.77, SD=0.55 and M=1.78, SD=0.52, respectively).

DISCUSSION
The current study is a first attempt to investigate the factors associated with tourists' motivation visiting religious sites on the region of West Thessaly, Greece. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the few studies in this field, conducted in Greece (Aslan and

Andriotis, 2009; Kamenidou and Vourou, 2015; Terzidou et al., 2017, 2018). The region of West Thessaly seems to take a special place in the preferences of tourists who visit the area to see monuments of religious interest, learn about its cultural sites and combine their activities with complementary leisure and recreational activities.

In religious tourism, persons travelling alone represent the minority (Rinschede, 1992). For many tourists it is very important to travel with a group of believers who think similarly and are in the same age group. According to the results, it was found that the respondents visiting the region of West Thessaly travel in organised groups and come from the rest of Greece, staying around 2.5 days; a result that is in line with the model of the short visit religious tourists (Jackowksi and Smith, 1992). On the other hand, Zhang and Yan (2016) found that religious tourists prefer to travel with their family and friends.

Tourists visiting religious sites should not be treated as a homogenous group, because their profile and motivation differ widely. Travel motivation to sacred sites seems to be complex (Terzidou et al., 2017). Ebadi (2014) found that people may visit a sacred site having different motivation, with the same site being a religious pilgrimage or tourist destination for others. In our study, religious motivation seems to be of moderate importance. It can be seen that one of the tourists' motivation is "religious atmosphere"; a result similar to that of Raj (2012) and Zhang and Yan (2016). It was also found that tourists use to travel to West Thessaly for cultural purposes. The modern tourist visits religious destinations for cultural purposes and recreation (Olsen and Timothy, 2006; Mu et al., 2007), and is motivated by cultural incentives, such as visiting a museum or archaeological site (Keeling, 2000; Rotherham, 2007). As Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004) points out, the religious tourist seeks a deeper spiritual experience by experiencing all the historical, cultural and religious manifestations of the destination. In addition, the respondents seem to have an interest in the natural environment where religious temples are located.

Recent research focuses on the motivation and impact of religious tourism, as well as issues related to the management of sacred sites and monuments of religious interest. Thus, managers of religious sites should offer visitors a wide range of activities, both spiritual and non-spiritual, that complement each other in order to

provide an holistic visitor experience (Tirca and Stanciulescu, 2011; Weidenfeld and Ron, 2008). It is noteworthy that visitation of religious sites is increasing, both for those with a religious affiliation (Tirca and Stanciulescu, 2011) and those without (Davie, 2006).

The survey region is a multifunctional destination where different forms of tourism can be found. In our research, religious tourism is linked to other types of tourism, such as cultural and group tourism, which causes it to be linked to seasonality (Collins-Kreiner, 2018; Lois-González and Santos, 2015; Olsen and Timothy, 2006; Oviedo et al., 2014; Raj and Morpeth, 2007; Raj et al,. 2015; Rinschede, 1992; Timothy and Boyd, 2006).

The results show that it should be possible to spread the development of religious tourism to more parts of the region. According to the results, the majority of the respondents claimed that the primary purpose for their journey was "the holy place of Meteora". Taking into account this finding combined with the motivational factors and activities on the survey region, religious tourism and cultural and nature-based tourism could be combined. In fact, religious tourism includes a range of activities and in general it is appropriate for alternative tourism activity (Korstanje et al., 2018). Thus, it should be possible to use the major key resources of the region to stimulate sustainable regional development.

CONCLUSION

Religious tourism on the region of West Thessaly is related to monuments and places of religious interest, which are an integral part of Greece's heritage. This paper has attempted to investigate the profile of Greek religious tourists on the region of West Thessaly, Greece, and what motivates them to be attracted. Based on the results, religious motivations are no longer the main reason to perform the study region. The profile of the surveyed tourists is in line with the model of the short visit religious tourists who seek to combine their visit to religious monuments with spirituality and nature-seeking and cultural motivation. This finding suggests that it would be worthwhile for destination managers to pay more attention to tourist attractions,

such as environment and religious atmosphere, in order to continue to enhance experiences and attract more repeated tourists.

Given the increased tourist flows and the unique characteristics of the region, there is a need to further enhance the place branding of West Thessaly as a religious destination and activate the interested groups in this specific tourist market. The importance of networking in the future development of religious tourism is underlined. Motivational factors and activities identified in the research show that collaboration between the local authorities, the Church, the tourist sector and other interested groups is necessary.

These findings can be used by researchers and managers to study, frame and model empirical research into the area of religious tourism. Understanding the different motivation of visitors at religious tourism sites is an important step towards promoting religious tourism and hence contributes to sustainable regional development. Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) could promote tourism at religious sites with the aim of diversifying the tourism product offerings, rejuvenating failing economies and generating funding for preservation and conservation.

LIMITATION AND SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is limited to dealing with Christian religious tourism. The study was also conducted in a specific setting –the region of West Thessaly in Greece. A future study in other settings that have different destination attributes would have been useful. Future research could also be directed towards foreign religious tourists and their experiences during their vacation in Greece, offering a more complete picture in the religious tourism context.

This paper provides interesting findings which can inspire for in-depth interviews in the future. In-depth interviews can be used to deeply explore the respondents' views, thoughts and feelings conducting a more concrete quantitative survey.

As the religious tourism market becomes increasingly competitive (Weidenfeld and Ron, 2008), the promotion of a marketing plan designed to meet religious tourists' needs is essential to attract more visitors, improve visitor satisfaction and drive repeat visit. Consequently, further research is needed to explore tools for the promotion of religious tourism and the possibility of collaborating the

relevant groups of interest (i.e. enterprises, tourist organizations, tourist policy agencies, Church, visitors).

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