To pray and to play: Post-postmodern pilgrimage at Lourdes

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the factors that religious pilgrims draw upon when constructing a personal meaning of their visit to Lourdes. Through an ethnographic examination of twenty-five individuals it finds that their experiences may be characterized by the common themes that comprise ‘lived connections’, unexpected ‘encounters’, ‘visual’ and ‘curative’ content.

These themes parallel those that feature in the seminal account of Bernadette Soubirous’ vision of the Virgin Mary in 1858, which we collectively term ‘Echoes of Bernadette’. Those who successfully navigate the apparently contested spaces and interact in meaningful encounters are partaking of a pilgrimage that is rooted in the religious and the historic.

The study provides a contribution to the theory of pilgrimage by declaring that it may be enacted in a post-postmodern duality that accepts the freedom of the individual but recognizes their need for experiences that are grounded in a sociohistorical ‘truth’.

1. Introduction

Both the practice and the research of pilgrimage have undergone considerable change in the last few decades. The concept of pilgrimage has been extended from one of religious or spiritual inspiration to include many other quasi- and secular forms of tourism (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Shuo, Ryan, & Liu, 2009), including inter-faith (Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015), literary (Robertson & Radford, 2009), death and war (Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2011; Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Hyde & Harman, 2011; MacConville, 2006), slavery (Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015) and sports centered activities (Gibson, Willmng, & Holdnkn, 2003; Ritchie & Adair, 2004). Falling attendance at traditional, localised places of worship across all the major faiths (~31% attendance at Catholic Churches between 1990 and 2003 in the UK for example - Faithsurvey, 2017) has been mirrored by a rise in less traditional, individualistic engagement in postmodern touristic-pilgrimage activities to more distant locations (Andriotis, 2011; Badone & Roseman, 2004; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Damari & Mansfeld, 2016; Palmer & Gallagher, 2007; Reader, 2007). Timothy and Olsen (2006) recognized this transference and noted that contemporary spirituality can now be characterized by experimentation and hybridisation. While religious and spiritual pilgrimage has long been a topic of academic study the shift in practice has been mirrored by a shift in research that has undergone a refocusing from the physical aspects of pilgrimage, and the intended structuration of the experiences of many, to the study of the qualia of the individual pilgrim (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). However, it is argued that this has resulted in an ironic ixation upon the ‘tourist’ and a dismissal of the ‘pilgrim’ and that there is a need to return to attempting to understand the pilgrim’s religious identity (Damari & Mansfeld, 2016; Feldman, 2017).

This study recognizes this shift in practice and research focus, and attempts to further our understanding of the factors that individuals draw upon when constructing a personal meaning of their pilgrimage through a micro-ethnographic examination of the ‘lived experiences’ of twenty-four visitors to Lourdes.

It finds that a sense of communitas is formed around a common respect for the preservation and authenticity of Lourdes, and in navigating its spiritual and secular spaces, meaningful experiences are gained by both religious and touristic pilgrims. While the ‘actual meanings’ that individual visitors derive from their visit are as multidudinous and heterogeneous as the number of visitors themselves, there are several themes that pervade the stories that are frequently told and retold, and thereby indicate the types of content that they draw upon when constructing their account of the meaning of their travels. These themes comprise deeply ‘lived connections’ that the narrators have with the
subject of the story, unexpected ‘encounters’ whereby events unfolded that were outside the pre-visit expectations of the pilgrim, considerable visual content that may even include supernatural visions, and a degree of curative or healing and supportive content.

These themes are more than mere descriptions/characteristics of their told and retold lived experiences, they are hermeneutic reflections of the site of Lourdes and the appariation of the Virgin Mary. Thus, modern day pilgrims appear to re-experience the events that are said to have surrounded the appearance of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. It is these ‘Echoes of Bernadette’ that afford liminal experiences that are unfettered by the topological boundaries of the site and offer the pilgrim deep-rooted, authentic attachment to the religious and the historic. We proffer that the postmodern concept of pilgrimage as an individual’s quest for meaning is incomplete and that contemporary pilgrimage may be conceived of as a post-postmodern search for spiritual meaning that is individually derived but is also rooted in an authentic past.

2. Pilgrimage

The early seminal literature in the study of pilgrimage and religious tourism places emphasis upon the objectivity (external and generalised) of the pilgrimage experience. Turner and Turner (1978) present pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon, reflecting earlier interpretations by van Gennep (1960) the French ethnographer and folklorist that view “the overall sociological features of the community undergoing a liminal process, or, the sites themselves (location, characteristics and meaning)” (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, p.7). The objectivity of early pilgrimage research presents a view of the activity, whether religious or touristic, that centralises the site as the object of significance. The work of Nolan and Nolan (1989) is perhaps the most obvious example that examines pilgrimage through a structured, external, objective and generalised lens.

Their study presents the systematic inventory of some 6150 pilgrimage shrines in Western Europe, providing the reader with statistical evidence of the growth patterns and wider communal implications of pilgrimage as both a homogenous activity and as a phenomenon that is dependent upon location.

The intermediate literature is punctuated by the work of Smith (1992), Stoddard (1996), Santos (2003) and the positions of Marnham (1980), Sallnow (1981), Eade and Sallnow (1991), Eade (1991 & 1992) (competing discourses) and Reader and Walter (1993) (pilgrimage and popular culture) that are opposed to the Turnerian view that communalism is a central and unifying element of the process of pilgrimage. Maryham (1980), Cohen (1972 & 1974 & 1979), Urry (1990) and latterly the work of Badone and Roseman (2004) were part of an academic movement that advocated the ‘Similarity Theory’ between pilgrims and tourists. This view is supported by Stoddard (1996) who presents the notion that the tourist was experiencing a parallel process with the pilgrim. He claims that both are ‘metaphorically’ taking part in a sacred journey that is about self-transformation, knowledge and status (Graburn, 1983). Eade’s (1991) study claims that pilgrimage sites, in reality, are places of order, structure, power and conflict. Eade (1991), and the other proponents of anti-communitas, while not totally dismissive of the Turner and Turner (1978) thesis, support a position that places religious communities as but one dimension of the pilgrimage experience. Smith’s (1992) conceptual framework places tourists and pilgrims at opposing ends of a continuum of ‘individual’ motive and meaning on which one is able to ‘artificially’ delineate the pilgrim and tourist based upon measurable, conditioned and controlled points. He recognizes that the pilgrim/tourist continuum, potentially at least, offers innumerable possibilities for sacred-secular combinations. This view is supported by Stoddard (1996) who puts forward a revised framework that creates a central ‘intermediate’ ground termed ‘religious tourist’. The intermediate position is, according to Stoddard (1996), the result of two separated phenomena, tourism and pilgrimage, brought together in a central ‘interacting’ ground. It is this central ground, according to Santos (2003), where most pilgrims/tourists are situated.

2.1. Toward personal pilgrimage

The shift in practice of pilgrimage and realization of the importance of the individual in the construction of its meaning has been recognized (Reader, 2007; Timothy & Olsen, 2006), and some headway has been made in addressing the need to study the phenomena of individualistic pilgrimage. della Dora (2012) for instance makes an interesting study of pilgrimage-tourists to Mount Athos and Meteora, garnering information primarily through the use of semi-structured interviews and open questionnaires, supplemented by visitors’ books, travel blogs and photographs. The study attempts to “gain insight into ‘lived experiences’” (p959) focusing specifically upon how the real and imaginary boundaries in the landscape of the region preserve the sacred or let it be “contaminated… by technological intrusions from the world” (p971). The geography thus serves to differentiate and separate pilgrims, and their areas of pilgrimage, from tourists, and their areas of tourism. Andriotis (2011) examines the authenticity of pilgrimage to Mount Athos, employing participant observation and fieldnotes, noting how commercialization and mass tourism are seen to erode the religious authenticity of the location. Importantly, and citing Collins-Kreiner (2010), he also recognizes the importance of the individual in the perception of authenticity, that it is dependent upon their own unique and subjective perceptions. Later, Willson, McIntosh, and Zahra (2013) undertake a phenomenological study of a single spiritual-tourist’s experiences of travelling to Peru (from a sample of several such tourists to various destinations). The approach, in allowing the individual to offer evidence that enables them to enunciate their thoughts and feelings, is found useful in revealing fascinating insight into the effect of the individual’s wider life in their construction of positive and negative meaning from a journey, or from an event within a journey. Recently, Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohli and Manual-Navarette (2014) conduct focus groups with Kumbh Mela pilgrims in order to understand their motivations, actions and experiences. In contrast with the majority of prior studies they find no touristic motivation among pilgrims and suggest that pilgrims motives are driven by deeply spiritual devotions and a need to gain spiritual knowledge from religious elders and leaders. Also in contrast to the extant literature, especially in light of the presence of a “pronounced level of social stratification” (p15), there is a high degree of communities, although discord seems to have been suspended rather than annihilated. Higgins and Hamilton (2016) contemporary ethnographic work at Lourdes epitomises the importance of the individuals’ pilgrimage experience when highlighting the “mini-miracles” that may have a greater impact upon them than the officially recognized miracles of the Church. They identify the physical, social and peaceful forms that these events may take and the significance of the word-of-mouth sharing of these experiences between individuals that act as a driver for further pilgrimages.

These studies are most valuable in furthering our understanding of individuals, the interconnectedness of their lives and journeys (whether spiritual or touristic), the uniquely subjective nature of the meaning of travel, along with the value of adopting methods of study that elicit the necessary insight into those individuals. However, there is a need to take heed of contemporary literature that points out that much of the postmodern research has lost sight of the pilgrim. Willson et al. (2013)
remind us that the spiritual dimension of tourism still remains under researched and has in fact tended to fetishize and reify the touristic dimension of pilgrimage to the detriment of the spiritual to such a degree that the ‘pilgrim’ in pilgrimage-tourism research is “rarely mentioned” (Feldman, 2017). Inspired by these works, and in order to address Collins-Kreiner's (2010) observations of the gap in the current literature, this study aims to focus its epistemological gaze toward exploring the experiences that individuals draw upon when constructing personal meaning of their visit to Lourdes.

3. Methodology

In support of choosing Lourdes as a suitable research landscape for this study it is significant that it is one of the few Marian sites to be authenticated by the Catholic Church (sites that have developed in response to miraculous apparitions of the Virgin Mary). The site developed as a pilgrimage centre in response to eighteen apparitions of the Virgin Mary to a local peasant girl named Bernadette Soubirous between February 11th and July 16th 1858. It is now the most visited (Lourdes, 2016) and probably the most important of the Marian shrines for the European and indeed the international Catholic pilgrim community. There are an estimated 155 million visitors to pilgrimage sites around the world per annum (Arcworld, 2017) and around 4 to 6 million of these visit Lourdes each year (Sacredsites, 2017). The site has seen significant growth in the last twenty years as the Catholic Church actively promotes it as a pilgrimage centre and not just a shrine as a means of restating the Catholic Church’s authority in a secularising age (Reader, 2007, p219). It is a notable place of division, contradictions and complexity as pilgrims and secular tourists come together with multi-layered and multifaceted motivations for visiting (Gesler, 1996). Lourdes' historic, religious, social and economic significance as a pilgrimage site, as well as being the context for several seminal research studies (Eade, 1991, 1992), validates it as an appropriate research topography capable of advancing empirical understandings in the pursuit of generating new theories of the pilgrim.

3.1. Data capture

This study adopts a micro-ethnographic approach (Fetterman, 2010) eliciting both ‘in the moment’ and reflective biographical data from visitors’ ‘lived experiences’ participating at Lourdes (Blumer, 1969; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Crotty (1998) suggests that empirical data unearthed in this way should display a culturally derived historically situated interpretation of the ‘social life-world’ from which accurate theoretical concepts can inductively emerge. Therefore, individual meanings and values captured through a lived experience becomes the foundation theoretical concepts can inductively emerge. Therefore, individual meanings of lived experiences captured via convenience sampling (Jennings, 2001) and reflects their experiences and interactions with other visitors to Lourdes. Consequently, the analysis is made upon their actions and reactions toward a variety of interactions and experiences, as well as the stories and experiences of the pilgrims unfolded.

Discussions, utterances and observations were recorded, as they occurred, in a series of fieldnotes (Paolasso & Hames, 2010), a method that has been used in similar studies such as Andriotis (2011), and longer discussions were recorded on a dictaphone. The fieldnotes were used to inform the reflexive development of further lines of enquiry (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006; Lynch, 2000; Schwartz et al., 1955) and were a rich source of data that were drawn upon during the analysis. While the focus of the study is the Diocesan group, the data were captured via convenience sampling (Jennings, 2001) and reflects their experiences and interactions with other visitors to Lourdes. Consequently, the analysis is made upon their actions and reactions toward a variety of interactions and experiences, as well as the stories and experiences of the pilgrims unfolded.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lourdes diary of activities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friday – 8.30am MASS celebrated in the Chapel Notre Dame de Doulours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday – 10.30am MASS of welcome celebrated in St Bernadette's Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday – 8.30am Sunday MASS celebrated for all the Archdiocesan pilgrims in the Grotto. 5.00pm Eucharistic Procession and Adoration. 9.00pm A service of Reconciliation celebrated in St Bernadette’s Church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday – 2.30pm MASS celebrated in the Rosary Basilica. 5.00pm Eucharistic Procession and Adoration. 9.00pm Torchlight Marian Procession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday – 10.30am MASS celebrated in St Bernadette's Church. 2.30pm Stations of the Cross.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday – 9.30am The International MASS celebrated in St Pius X Basilica. 3.30pm MASS celebrated at Batres. 9.00pm A Holy Hour with Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament celebrated at St Pius X Basilica.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday – 10.00am MASS of Anointing of the sick celebrated at St Pius X Basilica. 3.00pm A farewell service celebrated at the Esplanade Altar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday – 9.30am MASS celebrated at St Joseph’s Chapel. In addition, every day there is Eucharistic Procession and Adoration at 5.00pm and a Torchlight Marian Procession at 9.00pm.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of those with whom the Diocesan group interacted (participant demographics and locations are identified throughout the analyses). The immersive approach enabled conversations to incrementally evolve, becoming more varied and deeper as the researcher became increasingly closer and intimate with the group (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1988). This paper is subsequently built upon empirical data that captured the lived experiences of Lourdes pilgrims and transformed them into ‘textual expressions’ (van Manen, 1990, p36).

Maintaining reliability and validity within interpretive research is a subject of much discussion (Miles, 1979). Some argue that it is achieved through adherence to declared-in-advance process (Gronhaug & Olson, 1999; Whittmore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001) while others note the rise in the use of reflective assessment (Finlay, 2002; Maton, 2003). By detailing the research landscape, approach and spiritual position of the study we endeavor to imbue this work with a degree of ‘recoverability’ that ‘will help to justify the generalisation and transferability’ (Checkland & Holwell, 1998, p17).

The data were thematically analysed (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) to identify dominant and emergent topics in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phase approach comprising, (1) data familiarisation, (2) initial interpretation, (3) identification of themes, (4) collectively reviewing and agreeing themes, (5) defining and naming those dominant themes and (6) construction of the narrative of the analysis. In phase 1 the fieldnotes and recordings of interviews were transcribed by the lead researcher in order to minimize misinterpretation (Opdenakker, 2006) before being independently reviewed by each member of the research team: salient points (phase 2) and dominant themes (phase 3) were manually colour coded.

Table 2 details the thematic codings that were identified by each researcher, then cross-compared, before the final interpretations were independently reviewed by each member of the research team: salient points (phase 2) and dominant themes (phase 3) were manually colour coded.

Table 2: Summary of coding process and thematic development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes (Phase 2)</th>
<th>Researcher A</th>
<th>Researcher B</th>
<th>Researcher C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Liminal gateway,</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Surmise,</td>
<td>Hallucinations,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liminal gateway,</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Visions,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to God</td>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td></td>
<td>Miracles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…you know this is a channel to God</td>
<td>Rather</td>
<td>Do you know</td>
<td>Gradually the face of the Devil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…you know this is a channel to God</td>
<td>Rather</td>
<td>Do you know</td>
<td>faded and the face of Our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>she came back</td>
<td>Lady shone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>through him.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Pilgrimage Journey’ becoming the first section of the analyses and which examines the events of the pilgrimage to Lourdes, along with the analytical themes of ‘lived connections’, ‘encounters’, ‘visual’ and ‘curative’ that structure the analysis of the told and retold stories of the pilgrims.

The research team comprise theistic and atheistic individuals, and this facilitated both the contextually nuanced interpretation of the research landscape and the dispassionate analysis of primary data. The findings and themes are thereby directly built from hermeneutical representations of the structural experiences (Damari & Mansfeld, 2016; van Manen, 1990) and the social contexts of the participants’ world (Blumer, 1969). Verbatim statements are used throughout the analysis in order to offer an unfiltered substantiation of pertinent findings and are accompanied by summary characteristics of the respondent including age and gender.

Ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality is a foundation of ethical research (Duclos, 2017). This study employed fully informed consent whereby each participant in the Diocesan group was provided with a ‘statement of intent’ that detailed how and why the study was being conducted: gaining informed consent in ethnography can be par.
particularly problematic since the range of interactions and individuals that can become involved are innumerable (Burgess, 2007; Li, 2008; Thorne, 1980). Verbal consent was obtained from participants that were not part of the Diocesan group when they were interviewed directly. In all instances, pseudonyms have been used in order to retain anonymity (Van den Hoonard, 2003). Permission was granted to identify the pilgrim group’s Diocese but the researchers have chosen not to reveal this in order to ensure confidentiality.

4. Findings and analysis

4.1. Meta-theme: The pilgrimage journey

“If you truly believe in it and you have faith...this is not sacred...why would you come here?

[Christopher, 40+, Priest, Interview]

...but there will be Catholics who are skeptics and you don’t have to believe in Lourdes to be a Catholic,

[Alice, 50+, Tourist]

Diocesan groups surge back and forth through the crowds as they attempt to keep pace with their ambitious itineraries. Solitary men sit in the Pari Mutuel Urbains, their eyes fixed upon the horses racing on the screens, hoping that their bet will finish first, while outside, the weak and the feeble slowly navigate the tide of people hoping that their race is not yet run.

Yet, while picturing these visitors as occupying some position along a pilgrim-tourist divide is conceptually useful, to arrange them according to rigid types would be incorrect. Their motivations and expectations, in contrast to Buzinde et al.’s (2014) findings that pilgrims have no need to fulfill tourist desires, are not just varied (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Smith, 1992; Shou Ryan and Lui, 2009) but they are also varying, comprising touristic dimensions and religious dimensions in degrees that differ over the course of a day as well as over the course of their duration of stay. These observations reflect Eade’s (1992) suggestion that the meanings that visitors to Lourdes construct are deeply personal and rooted in their very own heterogeneity. One of a group of returning university students that had formerly been assistants at the site captured the multifaceted nature of pilgrimage when he said,

Why do we come to Lourdes, that is simple, to pray and to play.

[Lee, 20+, Returning pilgrim, Interview]

The expectation that one should ‘take part’ when visiting Lourdes provides a template that would seem to encourage a Turner and Turner (1978) communitas. Throughout the event the pilgrims mentioned the role of the Church as the owner and creator of the formal pilgrimage experience. It was seen as the dominant and controlling body, shaping what place and rituals should be observed, and how they should be interpreted,

There are social aspects but there are religious observances some people may not like.

...but you are expected to take part in it...

...and quite frankly some people cannot stand it...

[Derek, 50+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim, Interview]

However, contrary to what a less immersive study may conclude, many of the pilgrims expressed this as merely an element of their personal religious duty, albeit an occasionally exhausting one,

If you kind of go on the occasional Sunday you are now talking about a six or seven day stint which is a lot of devotion.

[Derek, 50+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim, Interview]

Several members of our group pictured the itinerary almost as if it were a recipe for achieving their personal goals and hopes. It comprised only a fraction of their sphere of activities and did not appear to have any significant negative effect upon their overall perceptions of the experiences. In their eyes, the events could be selected and attended almost at will, providing it promised to satisfy some personal desire or need and, often more importantly, it was within the means of one’s physical and mental capabilities,

...and I just say to people that is part of it, and if you are not up for it? Then...
Some even emphasized that Lourdes itself, its apparitions and claimed curative powers, was not a necessary part of their Catholic faith,

"it's not a doctrine, it's an optional extra."

You can’t be thrown out of the Catholic church for saying I do not believe that Mary appeared at Lourdes.

[Dale, 40+, Priest, Interview]

This observation reflects much of the current research on pilgrimage that identifies that although the church is still a key feature of the collective pilgrimage landscape it is no longer the critical influencer of individuals’ perceptions. Rather, it is the pilgrimage that subjectively marks the site and its events that are both beyond the immediate gaze and beyond the Church's control (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Higgins & Hamilton, 2016; Poria et al., 2003).

However, there is also an indication that the sociohistorical 'truth' of the site, that has undoubtedly been maintained through the Church's controlling influence, is a key part of many pilgrims' experiences. Even though the itinerary may be something of a 'pick and mix' of activities it appears that the authenticity of those activities and where they are enacted is very important,

"on balance yes I do believe Mary appeared at Lourdes...I have thought about it lots and now I have been here I am satisfied that Bernadette did see her, that she did speak, so yes I do believe in the story."

[Frank, 50+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim, Interview]

The authenticity of the activities is also underpinned, for some, by the presence of someone whom is perceived to be a spiritually authoritative or knowledgeable figure. These differ from the brancardier (literally a ‘stretcher-bearer’, but generally an assistant) that are formally employed by the Church to assist within the inner sanctum,

"It is a prescriptive church with certain rituals, people who are very much in charge and want you to know who they are."

[Grant, 50+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim, Grotto]

Instead, they are seen as enablers of personal pilgrimage that remain truthful to the purpose of the site. This resembles Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohl and Manual-Navarette’s (2014) observation of the ‘need’ for spiritual leaders and elders, and as Damari and Mansfeld (2016, p205) also noted ‘keeping the pilgrimage within the bounds of the sacred domain requires the path is drawn by religious people’. This was echoed among the conversations at Lourdes,

"...picking up the threads for everyday life...pulling it all together...that is what a good pilgrimage director will do...that is what we are taught to do...that is what a tour operator cannot do...not the same as a Priest."

[Harry, 40+, Priest, Interview]

What the itinerary in Table 1 does not depict is the ‘free time’ that is cordially enjoyed by everyone after the events of the day. It is also a time where a great deal of self- and group-reflection take place and the rigors of the itinerary are considered alongside the spiritual enrichment of the experiences. It is during these instances that these knowledgeable figures play an important role,

"...the helpful thing that will happen normally is groups again that meet will have post-mortems."

[Ian, 50+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim]

Evidence of communitas can be seen at Lourdes; both at the Grotto where pilgrims interact on a spiritual level and in the bars where pilgrims, tourists and local residents interact in a temporal and transitory existence. It is at this juncture where, not only do tourists and pilgrims come into close contact in shared places, but many pilgrims become tourists, or at least more tourist-like and exhibit greater similarities than differences (Graburn, 1977; Santos, 2003; Stoddard, 1996). Thus, the contestation of space, albeit imperfect, becomes minimized as the various visitors share in a more common purpose and a wider sense of communitas is fostered,

"...there is actually a lot of inter-mixing, tourists there perhaps with no religious belief."

[Frank, 50+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim, Interview]

With some non-religious visitors even appearing to defend the sanctity of the area on behalf of the pious,

"If you truly believe in it and you have the faith it shouldn't be commercialised and hyped up and money made out of it like it is...there's nothing sacred or special anymore..."

[Clare, 50+, Tourist]

Almost all of these encounters were punctuated with the telling of stories, and the evenings especially became grand orations as events, old and new, were shared. Pilgrims and tourists alike, remark upon the spectacle of such an enormous event and the emotional effect that it has had upon them,

"I remember the first time, going up toward St Peters and seeing the people, and you are now part of this massive outfit."

[Jim, 50+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim]}

You get a tremendous boost now of not being this very quiet minority... saying ‘well I go to church’ and you are actually able to walk about...it’s quite energising.

[Jim, 50+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim]

Some tourists are dismayed at the commercialization of the area but still return,

"It stuns me every time I come here...It is like Blackpool with Crucifixes."

[Diane, 40+, Tourist]

Meanwhile, the pilgrims are drawn by something deeper,

"...why do people still come to Lourdes...because Mary asks them to, because we trust in Mary, because of the pull of Mary."

[Andrew, 40+, Priest & Diocesan Leader, Interview]

There is perhaps a sense within the contemporary literature that postmodern pilgrimage has witnessed, or at least a focused upon, the movement of ‘the pilgrim’ toward ‘the tourist’ to occupy a middle-ground (Santos, 2003; Stoddard, 1996). However, our findings suggest that there is an equal but opposite movement of ‘the tourist’ toward ‘the pilgrim’ whereupon non-religious visitors display concern for the spiritual integrity of the pilgrimage site. Collectively, they both appear to share a common respect for the preservation and authenticity of Lourdes and thereby a sense of communitas is engendered.
4.2. Analytical themes

After the excitement and turmoil of the trip passed and the objectivity of desk research held sway once more, the startling similarities between many of the observed accounts became apparent. Each contained, to some degree, characteristics that we have identified as ‘Lived Connections’, ‘Encounters’, ‘Visual’ and ‘Curative’.

4.2.1. ‘Lived connections’

Many of the stories and experiences that were relayed to us comprised accounts of interactions with other individuals that centre upon, but are not limited to, the physical space of Lourdes. These had often occurred that very day, the chronological, physical and personal proximity of the encounter (the accounts usually include the first names of individuals) seeming to add credence to the event. It may also be significant that many stories centre upon the experiences of non-religious individuals and their liminal awakenings.

For instance, one member of the group who had made numerous pilgrimages to Lourdes told his story of Pedr Clarke many times, to many different people, during our stay. His account tells of his friend Kevin who witnessed a miraculous event,

My friend Kevin was in the same hotel, the Astoria, as Pedr Clarke and apparently he was singing in his wheelchair the night before.

Pedr Clarke went to his room and his feet started shaking, twitching.

The following morning he walked down to the Grotto.

[Harold, 70+, Diocesan Group Member]

Interestingly, this account resembles several others that were heard being told, and retold, among the Lourdes visitors throughout the duration of the fieldwork. Often the names were changed and some details were subtly altered, but the basic event remained the same: a surprising and miraculous event takes place upon someone that is personally, or closely known to the narrator.

One non-religious visitor, Jason 60+, who had only been encouraged to visit Lourdes by his religious wife, experienced a spiritual catharsis upon a chance meeting with a mother and her child that also contained an important physical element. After being approached by the mother who was loudly exclaiming that her daughter had been healed by her visit to the grotto that day,

I knelt down in front of this little girl and said “can I shake your hand?” and so she put her hand out. So I shook her hand and put my other hand on her head.

[Jason, 60+, Non-religious visitor, Interview]

Even more profound perhaps is the experience of the man who happened to befriend the Duchess of Kent during one of his visits to Lourdes following the death of his wife. The highly personal nature of the encounter, as Wilson et al. (2013) work suggests is important in the development of meaningful memory, is exhibited by the physical proximity of the narrator to the Duchess of Kent throughout the story, and in the way that the Duchess remembers and uses the narrator’s first name many years after their first meeting,

This lady all dressed in white...no earrings, no make-up on, just plain... she turned around and I remember her distinctly saying and pointing to the seat beside me.

Do you know she came back two years later. I got myself sat where she could see me and she walked over and almost missed me and then spotted me and said “Keith, is it you”.

[Keith, 80+, Diocesan Group Member]

4.2.2. ‘Encounters’

The accounts of both Pilgrims and visitors also include strong elements of surprise and astonishment within the encounters they had. Our male, 60+, non-religious visitor initially conveyed surprise that he is actually at Lourdes, having been encouraged, he may have even said coerced, into visiting by his religious spouse. He is also startled by the actual encounter itself, the woman and child suddenly appeared before him claiming a miracle had happened while he was merely walking about the town, and also stunned at the effect that this had upon his spirituality,

I know this may seem like a silly thing to say but I said “God bless you” – and then instantly I realised he already had.

[Jason, 60+, Non-religious visitor, Interview]

He appeared visibly shaken by the event as he conveyed his experience to our group, and then to others in the hotel, and was seen to spend less time by himself over the remainder of the stay.

While the story of Pedr Clarke tells of his amazement at his own physical transformation that had taken place to him during his stay, for “[He] kept stopping and looking at himself in shop windows not believing that it was him walking”, it is the reactions of some of the Diocesan group members and the storyteller that are equally notable. The narrator was animated in his rendition of the story and several people that had not heard it before nodded appreciatively. However, several returning pilgrims had heard the story many times previously and they interjected to reaffirm key points. Whereas the disparity in the details of these accounts could be interpreted to undermine their authenticity, instead, their multiple origins seemed to substantiate them. An elderly member of the Diocese even commented,

I know this story, it’s true.

I heard it many years ago...but it wasn’t about Pedr Clarke. If my memory serves me right it was a lady who experienced the miracle and was amazed to be walking again...

[Nancy, 80+, Diocesan Group Member]

The narrative of the Pilgrim whom met the Duchess of Kent is also startling in many ways. Not only did he meet her after travelling in the wild hope of seeing her, but a very personal exchange took place,

She turned around and said “get closer to me” – well I was trembling with fear.

[Keith, 80+, Diocesan Group Member]

Further to this they continued their correspondence over many years,

She threw her arms around me and she made me promise faithfully that I would continue to write to her, and she gave me her address...and I wrote to her.

[Keith, 80+, Diocesan Group Member]

Their chance meeting many years later at Tarbes-Lourdes airport also seems to act as some form of consolidation of the interpretation that the events were not merely coincidence but were in some way ordained.

4.2.3. ‘Visual’

All of the stories that were told and retold also contained some powerful and moving imagery.

Many emphasized the importance (for them) of seeing the physical elements of the site,

You are going to get a lot of visitors from the Catholic world visiting Catholic sites maybe because they may see a Catholic Bishop or whatever.

[Keith, 80+, Diocesan Group Member]
The ceremonial aspects of Lourdes are seen by many to be the most instantly significant and memorable part of their visit,

*There is the torchlight in the evening, the big procession which is magnificent.*

[Len, 60+, Diocesan Group Member]

However, for others, the physical trappings of the Catholic Church can be a problem to see,

*I just can't understand it here, it all seems to be big candles, big processions.*

[Mark, 30 + Tourist]

Many of the topics of discussion among pilgrims and tourists incorporated some aspect of infirmity and cure. For instance, the encounter between the non-religious Visitor and the mother and daughter begins with him,

...watching the wheelchairs being taken down by the youth into St Joseph's Chapel.

[Jason, 60+, Non-religious visitor, Interview]

This is a significant feature for both the religious pilgrims and the tourists and one that frequently arises during discussions. One returning tourist remarked,

*You do see a lot of tourists in Lourdes and for some of them it is a shock to see very severely handicapped people.*

[Sid, 40+, Tourist]

This is an evocative scene that resonates with the historical and spiritual importance of Lourdes as a site for healing. In a similar manner, the recounting of the appearance of the Duchess of Kent as "all dressed in white, no earrings, no makeup, just plain" resembles an avatar of the Virgin Mary that had been seen by Bernadette in 1858.

It is however the story of Pedr Clarke that contains the most startling supernatural and visual content and resembles the mini-miracles that Lourdes has become most famous for (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016). During the night when his "feet started shaking, twitching",

*There was a picture or a photograph of Our Lady or Bernadette that started to light up.*

I saw the face of the Devil and it was terrible, horrible...and I also saw the face of Our Lady...and gradually the face of the Devil faded and the face of Our Lady shone through him.

[Harold, 70+, Diocesan Group Member]

While the day to day sights of Lourdes are clearly important hallmarks of an authentic pilgrimage for many, it is, once again, the visual content of stories that are told and retold that resurface as the key marks of an authentic pilgrimage for many, it is, once again, the visual historical authenticity of the site. Through their own experiences, the pilgrims, collectively they point towards the importance of the sociohistorical authenticitly of the site. Through their own experiences, and through the stories of others, modern day pilgrims appear to re-experience the events that are said to have surrounded the appearance of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. Subjectively substantiating and perpetuating the Marian message is the common connection that appears essential among these pilgrims in what we term ‘Echoes of Bernadette’.

5. Authenticity: echoes of bernadette

While each of the four analytical themes identified above are of interest in isolation by marking those experiences that are meaningful to the pilgrims, collectively they point towards the importance of the sociohistorical authenticity of the site. Through their own experiences, and through the stories of others, modern day pilgrims appear to re-experience the events that are said to have surrounded the appearance of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. Subjectively substantiating and perpetuating the Marian message is the common connection that appears essential among these pilgrims in what we term 'Echoes of Bernadette'.
We draw upon the Church’s historical account of Bernadette in order to highlight the parallels with many of the modern stories that were encountered. Firstly, the Virgin Mary made herself known only to Bernadette, for she appeared to no other person nor could be seen by those that were with her at the time. This, coupled with repeated visits over a period of five months, gives rise to an intensely personal experience for Bernadette. In many of our discussions the experiences are characterized by deeply personal, physical encounters. For example, the male, 60+, non-religious visitor’s spiritual catharsis that occurs between himself and the girl while he places his hand upon her. Other stories emphasise the temporal nature of the encounter, such as Pedr Clark’s nightmares that extend over the duration of his visit, while the bereaved Pilgrim’s contact spans several years.

Bernadette’s obvious surprise at the apparition was mirrored by the townsfolk and the Church’s astonishment and disbelief upon hearing her claims. Our pilgrims and other visitors experienced similar surprise at their own encounters, and they also relate the surprise of those around them. For instance, a lady at Pedr Clark’s hotel rushed in excitedly and exclaimed “there’s been a miracle”, as was Kevin’s own surprise when he was later handed a newspaper clipping about the incident that “by the time I got it, it had been photocopied and photocopied and photocopied”. The visual manifestation of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette is also vivid and dramatic, for ‘there came a dazzling light and a white figure’. Most obviously, this is again once reflected in Pedr Clark’s “photograph of Our Lady or Bernadette that started to light up”, but perhaps most startlingly in the bereaved Pilgrim’s image of the Duchess of Kent “all dressed in white...no earrings, no make-up on, just plain”.

The curative dimension of the storytellers’ accounts is, as we have previously iterated, not surprising, but is in fact only loosely grounded in the historical details of Bernadette’s own story. The Virgin Mary did not explicitly state that the spring water would cure the sick, however, she did command that the waters be taken (as well as a herb be eaten). A friend of Bernadette’s was later said to have cured her dislocated arm by plunging it into the water after Bernadette had made them run clear by placing the mud in her mouth. Despite this, the spring remains a fundamental aspect of the site, to the degree that it features as a liminal gateway that is not necessarily concerned with healing. Some perceive of it giving hope and succor,

If there is a God that answers prayer, then now is the time, to grant a healing, but quite often to give peace of mind, or of a sense of direction or consolation to someone.

[Dale, 40+, Priest, Interview]

In fact, it may be considered, at least by some, to be more important as a tangible connection with their faith, or ‘something deistic’ (Higgins & Hamilton, 2016, p29), than it is as a curative device,

The fact that, that spring was discovered at the direction of Bernadette through the vision, makes it an integral element of the healing, whereas there are plenty of shrines, even in Wales, where a well is said to have healing properties, but, there are not many places where a well has been discovered in the context of a message from God pointing out where the water is.

[Dale, 40+, Priest, Interview]

When you go into the waters, for me, it is more the uplift, it’s more the mystical appearance of your faith.

[Vernon, 60+, Regular church attendee and experienced pilgrim]

Previously, emphasis has been put upon the Church’s management of the spiritual geography of pilgrimage to Lourdes, that is, the inner sanctum etc. Undoubtedly, for some, a liminoid experience occurs in this inner sanctum, particularly if a miracle is witnessed or happens upon the individual. However, the liminoid space appears not to be constrained by the historically determined and claimed space that comprise the spring and the surrounding area and basilica, but extends beyond the sacred space and into the secular space of the tourist and casual visitor. Our research advances Buzinde et al.’s. (2014) findings that pilgrims’ motives for participation are directly related to events that take place on site and suggests that such transformative experiences can occur in any place, at any time and to anyone in a place that they deem is connected with their activity of ‘visiting Lourdes’. In keeping with Willson, MacIntosh and Zahar’s (2013) findings, these events that occur within the journey are significant in the construction of the individual’s meaning of their pilgrimage, through a process of self- and group-reflection (Bosangit, Hibbert, and McCabe (2015). What appears important for many pilgrims is that these transformative experiences are rooted in their quest to attain spiritual knowledge (Buzinde et al., 2014) and, similar to Higgins and Hamilton (2016) recognition of the importance of word-of-mouth storytelling, they are carried through the narratives and experiences of others, which in this study are found to contain repeated references to the sociohistorical ‘authenticity’ of the site and its connection with St Bernadette and the Virgin Mary. It is by this means that the liminal capabilities of the site are carried within and without the inner sanctum and afford meaningful pilgrimage to those that are unable to partake in the physical act of taking the waters, and even to those that were not deliberately seeking to make a spiritual pilgrimage.

Can it therefore be said that when visitors to Lourdes are constructing their own meaning of pilgrimage that they are drawing heavily upon the experiences of others who are contemporary avatars of Bernadette?

6. Conclusion

Pilgrimage is a constantly evolving term and practice, moving from purely religious origins to include secular pastimes and activities (Badone & Roseman, 2004). The early work of van Gennep (1960) and Turner and Turner (1978) for example, considered pilgrimage as a liminoid and transformative experience of the many. In this era, it was the nature of the activity that placed the physical site as the object of pilgrimage and differentiated the sacred from secular tourism. It is the work of Salinnow (1981), Eade (1991 & 1992), Smith (1992) among others, that begins to deconstruct the notion of pilgrimage as a singular sequence of events that results in commonly-acquired experience. This postmodern phase of pilgrimage research recognizes the blurred boundaries between religious and secular tourism and questions the significance of rigid, ritualized pilgrimage in the construction of personal meaning of the experience. Accompanying this shift there has been a concomitant change in the focus and methods of research that have been employed. Nolan and Nolan’s (1989) large-scale survey of pilgrim experiences for example has given way to the more contextually rich examinations of Dunkley et al. (2011), Hyde and Harman (2011), Andriotis (2011), Buzinde et al. (2014), della Dora (2012), Hughes, Bond, and Ballantyne (2013), Willson et al. (2013) and Higgins and Hamilton (2016).

This paper endeavors to contribute to the emerging need for research that focuses upon the qualia of the individual in the performance of their pilgrimage since we have ‘lost sight of the Pilgrim’ in pilgrimage-tourism research (Feldman, 2017; Damari & Mansfeld, 2016; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). In responding to this we expected to advance the postmodernist viewpoint that rejects collective order and instead seeks individual, serendipitous experiences. However, while our encounters have taken place with many and varied travelers to Lourdes, who have many different reasons for being there, our findings suggest that they are bonded by an anchor to a common historical and spiritual past that is told and retold through their stories.
These ‘Echoes of Bernadette’, that are characterized by their themes that comprise ‘lived connections’, ‘encounters’, ‘visual’ imagery and ‘curative’ content, reverberate through the years, across spiritual and touristic divides, to bring together a wide array of pilgrims. Collectively they provide an authentic link to a common ‘truth’, or a believed truth, that moves the act of pilgrimage beyond the postmodernistic pursuit of the individual and legitimizes itself in the acknowledgement of the classical spiritual message of the Church.

In contrast to the Turnerian viewpoint, this study finds that the issues of contested space and Church control seldom feature as a problematic issue in the utterances of spiritual or secular visitors to Lourdes. The rigors of the formal itinerary are recognized, but they are either endured or shunned, according to the needs and capabilities of the individual. Consequently, they do not appear to be ‘landmarks of meaning’ but instead should perhaps be considered to be ‘hallmarks of authenticity’ that underpin the sociohistorical ‘truth’ of the site. Those who successfully navigate the contested spaces, and witness or interact in encounters that thematically characterize the events that surrounded St Bernadette, appear to be partaking of a pilgrimage that culminates in an authentic liminoid experience. In crossing this threshold, they assume new roles and become storytellers themselves and thereby perpetuate the telling and retelling of meaningful experiences (Damaris & Mansfeld, 2016). Thus, we proffer a contribution to the theory of pilgrimage and a consequent neoteric perspective for religious tourism research by declaring that it must recognize that it may be enacted in a post-postmodern duality that accepts the freedom of the individual but recognizes their need for experiences that are grounded in a sociohistorical ‘truth’.

It is difficult, if not entirely improper, to consider the Church’s control of Lourdes as a form of touristic management but, like della Dora (2012), this research also points to the importance of the social spaces that permit the telling and retelling of deeply meaningful experiences that, in turn, become the trappings of meaningful visits for others. Those that manage the physical space in order to protect its spiritual integrity may only be envisaging one dimension of the liminoid effect of Lourdes. In spite of the ‘plastic figureines’ (see Swanson & Timothy, 2012), liminoid experiences can and do occur within the seemingly, but not necessarily, contested spaces and places that surround the spiritual epicenter of Lourdes. This poses a dilemma that has been broached at other religious sites that also have touristic attraction (see for example Ballantyne, Hughes, & Bond, 2016; Hughes et al., 2013).

Just as the extant literature has recognized the movement of ‘the pilgrim’ toward ‘the tourist’, our research has also pointed out that ‘the tourist’ may also move toward ‘the pilgrim’. Therefore, just as pilgrims and tourists are found to be sensitive to one another’s needs, so should the providers of religious pilgrimages and tourism services recognize that their potential roles and functions may overlap considerably. For example, this could manifest in the provision of spaces where the telling and retelling of stories may be actively invited. A better understanding of how pilgrims, in their many guises, navigate these spaces and places would provide the spiritual guardians and tourist managers of Lourdes with valuable information about how to best serve their needs. Information about the location and movement of those embarking upon pilgrimages could enable local tourism service providers to maximize the utilization of their resources in response to cyclic and sporadic demands.

While Bosangit et al. (2015) found that social media facilitates the capture and sharing of meaningful experiences, our work proffers that messages that are imbued with a deep sense of the sociohistorical authenticity of the site will resonate more deeply with its audience. This comprises dimensions such as the ‘Echoes of Bernadette’ that we have identified and the ‘mini-miracles’ that are also found to be important in constructing individual meaning of pilgrimage (Bosangit, Higgins and McCabe, 2015). While the production of such social media materials is largely undertaken by visiting individuals and therefore outside the control of any organization, the providers of religious pilgrimages and tourism services could utilize such elements of those materials that represent the individualistic experiences but are rooted in the authentic history of the site in their own media and representations.

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the research is bound by the physical and metaphysical limits of Lourdes. While this does permit the investigation of religious and secular visitors, the conclusions are not necessarily generalizable to other pilgrimage or tourist destinations. Secondly, the research methods employed, while providing rich data that are not readily available through techniques that draw upon larger samples of the population, are inherently capable of reinterpretation. Although every effort has been made to confirm the findings, and they do in part resemble the findings of other studies (see for example Bosangit et al., 2015), the conclusions may be confirmed by examining more accounts of Lourdes visitors.

Future research should acknowledge the insight that a post-postmodern perspective is capable of bringing to our understanding of religious pilgrimage, and indeed, non-religious pilgrimage. Similar work should be undertaken to explore the significance of ‘authenticity’ among religious pilgrims’ construction of meaning at other significant sites and among targeted pilgrim demographics. By extension, similar examinations could be made of more touristic destinations. In particular, useful insight could be gained into consumption practices through exploring the importance of ‘authenticity’ and through analysis of ‘big data’ and geolocation data about pilgrimage movement and consumption patterns.

Contributions of authors

This study is based upon Dr Simon Thomas’ research. Simon conducted the fieldwork, core literature review and data analysis. Dr Anthony Samuel undertook the development of the Methodological aspects of this study and contributed to development of the literature review and the thematic analysis of transcripts. Dr Gareth White undertook the authoring of the paper and contributed to development of the literature review and the thematic analysis of transcripts.

Author list

As stated.

Data sets

Where practicable, significant data sets, in the form of pilgrims’ testimonies, have been incorporated in the submitted paper.

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Guidelines

We trust that these statements meet your expectations.

References

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