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# Celebrity-Induced Yoga Tourism: The Case of Amritapuri Ashram, India

## Abstract

The present-day stress, societal changes, and hectic life make the quest for mental and physical well-being. The market for yoga tourism has been growing ever before. Ashrams and Gurus are vital aspects of Yoga tourism. These religious gurus are functional celebrities with millions of followers and franchises worldwide. Gurus are inextricably linked to the global popularisation of Yoga, and they have the potential to be more convincing than government initiatives since they travel to and through more nations and establish personal contact zones between multinational groups. To this end, this study examines the significance of religious gurus as celebrities in promoting Yoga tourism. This research utilized a qualitative interpretive approach by the application of Netnography. The findings emphasize the substantial role of religious gurus in tourists' motivation, behavioral intentions, destination attachment, and ashram selection. The study also connects the search for authenticity in the well-being tour with the pleasant tourism experience that Yoga ashrams offer.

**Keywords:** spiritual leaders, netnography, thematic analysis, ashrams, India

## 1. Introduction

Yoga tourism is a self-transforming experience in which physical, psychological and spiritual revitalization functionally integrates mind, body, and soul (Reisinger, 2013). It is a type of emerging special-interest tourism (SIT) positioned within the broad spiritual and wellness tourism framework. Yoga tourism research has emerged as a significant tourism concept (Cheer et al., 2017). Yoga is one of India's most significant cultural exports, celebrated as one of the nation's soft power tools (Thussu, 2013). However, the spread of Yoga, which is sacred and profoundly ingrained in Hinduism, has always entailed a deliberate detachment of the true essence from all these ancient systems to render them more comprehensible and, thus, more commercially successful. Therefore, in association with its Hindu roots, Yoga in the international arena gradually became unrecognizable.

Now, India's government promotes International Yoga Day, and several Hindu gurus and spiritual practitioners communicate their philosophies (Shukla, 2020). The Indian government and the religious Gurus have a fortuitous opportunity to promote the potential benefits of Yoga and help maintain its transcendental identity, culture, and guiding principle. Such representations and implications regarding Yoga would have to remain genuine to avoid politicizing what is inherently advantageous to all people. These rather substantial efforts in the geopolitical landscapes of tourism, with de commodification and de-westernization, are crucial for the emerging nation. Given the immense potential of Yoga to enhance India's soft power, tourism could become the most effective channel for attracting global attention to the country's other cultural assets (Nair, 2017; Thussu, 2013).

Yoga tourism is also an emerging theme in tourism research. Many of the previous studies focusing on marketing strategies (Telej & Gamble, 2019); destinations (Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Kunwar & Sharma, 2020;

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Maddox, 2015; Sutarya, 2020); tourists studies (Ali-Knight & Ensor, 2017; Sharma & Nayak, 2018, 2019a); East-West understanding (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Dilletta et al., 2019; Öznalbant & Alvarez, 2020) however, fail to address the supply side. Yoga ashrams and Gurus are one of the vital attractions for spiritual tourism. The role of gurus is inevitable for the increased popularity of Yoga across the globe. Religious gurus could be more persuasive than government efforts; they travel to and through more countries and create personal contact zones among international communities. Their speeches and ideologies attract millions of followers. This might resemble concepts of celebrity-induced travel motivation, with some overlaps, yet with a broader aspect of religious and spiritual-action levels.

For instance, Indian religious celebrities, such as Matha Amrithanandamayi, Sri Sri Ravishankar, Baba Ramdev, and Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, are prominent yoga ambassadors globally. Many of them have ashrams or dedicated yoga practice centers in India and abroad. Nevertheless, themes such as yoga tourism and celebrity influence remain unattended. Hence, this study examines the role of religious gurus and spiritual leaders as an endorsement for yoga tourism through a) positional analysis (Brown et al., 2017) of religious gurus and spiritual practitioners in Yoga tourism as a form of celebrity-induced tourism; and b) the significance of religious gurus in restoring India's heritage and culture in Yoga.

This research paper is organized as follows. The forthcoming section deals with the literature review on Yoga tourism, celebrity-induced tourism, and religious gurus in Yoga tourism. The next part deals with the research site, methodology, sampling, data collection and analysis, and findings and discussion. Finally, the findings conclude with implications, limitations, and future research suggestions.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Yoga tourism

Yoga tourism has emerged and grown with the 'journey to feeling well' trend. It attracts many foreign travelers to India for various reasons, including wellness, culture, or Yoga practice (Öznalbant, 2020). India can effectively promote Yoga-tourism compared to other countries because India possesses a competitive advantage (Kumar, 2017). Yoga's well-documented authenticity is why foreign tourists travel to India (Maddox, 2015). The significance of Yoga has been proven for ages as a means to achieve physical, emotional, and mental well-being; it makes a robust and positive impact on tourists' lives (Ambili, 2016; Antony, 2018; Choe, 2020; Dilletta et al., 2019; Lehto et al., 2006; Ponder & Holladay, 2013; Porwal et al., 2018), even helping to control diseases (Bhavanani, 2014). Yoga's significance is also recognized as advancing individual economic well-being (Prakash, 2015). The Yoga-tourism industry can influence the more significant cause of universal public health (Patwardhan, 2016). Chen et al. (2008) highlight four drivers of tourism, incentives to visit wellness destinations: relaxation, pursuing multiple activities, recreation, and enjoying Nature. Local Yoga instructors also play an essential role in attracting foreign tourists. Sharma and Nayak (2019b) indicate that to generate a favorable cognitive and practical image amongst Yoga tourists, the destination should improve tourists' emotional experiences. Sharma and Kumar (2019) observe that compared to passionate travelers, blissful travelers have an optimistic destination image and are willing to revisit the destination and spread the favorable word of mouth while visiting a Yoga-tourism destination.

### 2.2. Celebrity-induced tourism: Aspects and characteristics

Celebrity endorsers are effective in destination advertising (Roy et al., 2021). Kumari (2018) explores endorsing celebrities as an appropriate method for catching the travelers' eye. Still, one should also make sure to develop an identical approach for the advertisement. In contrast, the less attractive side of celebrity endorsement could be the overall costs of such strategies, which may worry the low-budget tourism industry. Results also emphasize celebrity features, such as appeal, acceptance, image, and significance, which impact selecting a celebrity

to make the endorsement. Van der Veen (2008) confirms that celebrity endorsement helps specifically if it is all about an annual leading holiday destination. Results also show that celebrity endorsement could impact non-celebrity endorsements when travelers decide on the annual leading holiday destination. McCartney and Pinto (2014) reveal that celebrity endorsement tactics affect visitors' perceptions and the destination decision-making process, showing that celebrity endorsement could be more purposeful in stimulating and aiming at specific traveler segments.

The paper also emphasizes the need to cautiously evaluate the helpfulness of such an expensive method within destination promotional campaigns aimed at the Chinese audience. Witte (2011) examines Buddhist celebrity as one of the essential factors in the West's positive reception of Buddhism. That paper suggests that the enduring influence of three aspects inclined the West toward a favorable perception of Buddhism from the late nineteenth century to the present: first, the mainstream cultural transmission of religious information; second, the endorsement of celebrities, especially Buddhist celebrities; and third, the modification of the Buddhist image to fit the pressing intellectual and pleasant image. Armielia (2018) concludes by using structural equation modeling (SEM) to show that celebrity adoration favorably impacts the destination image, which, in turn, positively impacts purchase intention. Therefore, one can conclude that celebrity endorsement will have a favourable impact on purchase aim. Chan et al. (2018) analyze celebrity endorsement as delivering a favorable, compelling image that positively affects travel-destination visit intention. Lee (2010) reveals that the degree of celebrity engrossment favorably affects destination awareness and travel intent. Lee et al. (2008) conducted an on-site survey in Japan to collect data on Korea's observations about Japanese engrossment with Korean celebrities. The results corroborated several hypothesized associations and presented evidence that celebrity participation impacts destination familiarity and intention to visit the place. Using structural equation modeling, Pradhan (2019) found that celebrity endorsement and credibility impact visit intention. Salamoura et al. (2020) report that celebrities will draw attention and generate interest in the destination.

This paper also highlights the most important things to consider while using celebrity endorsements: choosing the right celebrity, target-group segmentation, the connection between the celebrity and the destination, and natural communication. Syed Omar (2013) finds that destination image mediates celebrities' endorsement and visiting intentions. Moreover, the chosen celebrity can influence the destination's image, emit messages showing what is valued in the destination, and indirectly send out signals about the kind of people most welcome to visit the destination. Van der Veen and Song (2014) identify differences between advertisements that celebrities endorse and those not so endorsed and explore these differences in destination match-up between aboriginal and non-aboriginal celebrity-endorsed commercials. The results indicate that travelers' attitudes and intentions to visit places are significantly associated with celebrity endorsements, thus verifying the mediating effects of this variable.

Wong and Lai (2015) indicate that celebrity attachment is favorably associated with tourists' behavioral purposes in Taiwan. Through a survey of 382 tourists in Taiwan, Yen and Teng (2015) found that celebrity engrossment is favorably associated with behavioral intentions. Discerning value moderately intervenes in the relationship between celebrity endorsement and behavioral intentions. Wu (2016) reveals that the main factors in devotion to a destination are destination image, customers' travel experience, and destination satisfaction. Besides, the place and passenger travel perception image affect destination satisfaction.

Zhang et al. (2020) demonstrate that celebrity involvement also helps create destination loyalty and love relationships with tourists who have already visited the place and potential visitors. Still, the effect of celebrity validation on location-brand love is different among travellers who are planning to visit a place and tourists who have already visited the place. Trustworthiness and experience of celebrity endorsers have a favourable result on destination brand love for possible travellers, directly and indirectly, through parasocial interaction. Although attractiveness and trustworthiness indirectly affect parasocial interaction, brand love for visitors has

already visited the place. Kim et al. (2018) reveal that celebrity expertise is one of the features most related to brand equity and destination attachment. Glover (2009) identified celebrity involvement as influencing various aspects of the destination image.

### 2.3. Music bands as celebrities

Western celebrities can also play a significant role in promoting a site or journey. Bandyopadhyay and Nair (2019) identify foreign celebrities' role as a valuable promotional tool for promoting and recognizing a destination. Their paper also stresses that such tours by Western celebrities should be more visible and draw all visitors worldwide by offering celebrity comments and reviews of merchandise and destinations, mainly through conventional print and new Internet-based media. Similarly, Fath et al. (2017) also recognize that Western celebrity posts on social media related to their travel experience also help potential travelers and could function as a guide. Besides, various government tourism organizations and businesses must vigorously screen the posts on the celebrity endorser's social media sites to take advantage of the prospects created by the collective public-media movement. In turn, this permits them to pick up on the target buyer and tailor the assistance of the businesses accordingly.

Nevertheless, the absence of appropriate linguistic and social skills can prevent tourism businesses from understanding such a drive's benefits. Abidin et al. (2017) write that even celebrity chefs can play a crucial part in promoting a destination. Lee and Yoo (2015) highlight that a higher degree of fandom variables would generate higher destination loyalty. Johns et al. (2015) observe that celebrity endorsement is favorably connected to place image and can generate interest in the destination, specifying that celebrity endorsement by Oprah effectively positioned the Australian brand. Oprah's 'brand name' had considerable importance as a celebrity endorser with broad appeal for the Tourism Australia target market in these positions.

### 2.4. Film stars as celebrities

Yen and Croy (2016) observe that celebrity endorsement is favorably associated with the destination image. Results also suggest that to encourage film tourism, celebrity and film can act as prominent promotional tools. Chen (2018) shows that personalities appearing in a film or TV drama could help attract tourists to a travel destination, and the personality connection is favorably associated with behavioral purposes. Teng (2020) presents evidence that celebrity endorsement mediates constructivist and existential validity on place reliability. Therefore, celebrity attachment is a critical intermediary for purposeful film tourists in reality and film place selection. Ismail et al. (2017) present the considerable importance of films and TV shows inducing watchers' drive to travel. Based on statistical analysis, the effects of the '3Ps Pull Factors' on viewers' travel intentions were slightly supported. All pull factors (i.e., place, efficiency, and behavior) were significant predictors of viewers' travel intentions. Zeng et al. (2015) find a disparity in the destination mental picture between film and non-film travelers. Film travelers held a more affirmative image than non-film visitors. Ng and Chan (2020) confirm a mild association between Korean TV drama features and the behavioral purpose of visiting film destinations. Finding identified appeal, fantasy, lessening, passion, and displaced experience are the most prominent factors in promoting travel to these film places. Rajaguru (2014) analyses tourists' intention to travel to Korea, observing Korean culture and tourist fascination fuelled by visual and verbal effects stemming from Korean motion pictures. Surprisingly, the results indicate no significant impact on travelers' intentions from celebrity validations.

### 2.5. Religious gurus as celebrities

Kim and Chen (2020) reveal that the indirect effects of religious celebrity on destination-related constructs in a pilgrimage site are robust for visitors to a shrine. Religious gurus/celebrities or native teachers also enjoy trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, gravity, fame, credibility, and service or product differentiators.

Terzidou et al. (2018) review the image of Tinos, Greece, shaped by broadcast images of the sacred icon, prominent leaders, and the active spiritual gathering, which influence visitation patterns.

### 3. Research design

#### 3.1. Study site

This study reviews Amritapuri Ashram, Kerala, India. Mata Amritanandamayi (the ‘hugging saint’), one of India’s most popular spiritual gurus with multi-million followers worldwide, leads this ashram. The spiritual abode of ‘amma’ (Ashram), also called Mata Amritanandamayi Math, is located in Vallikavu, Kerala, India. As per the incredible India Campaign (2020, p. 1), “*over 3000 people live here, from both India and across the world, and have devoted themselves to self-realisation and working for the common good of all*”. Devotees spend their time on meditation, singing devotional songs (bhajans), and doing community work (Seva).” The saint Mata Amritanandamayi Devi has visited foreign countries for religious retreats (more than 30 times). Moreover, this center has more than 50 branches all over the globe and is world-famous.

**Figure 1**  
Amritanandamayi Math



Source: Keralatourism.org.

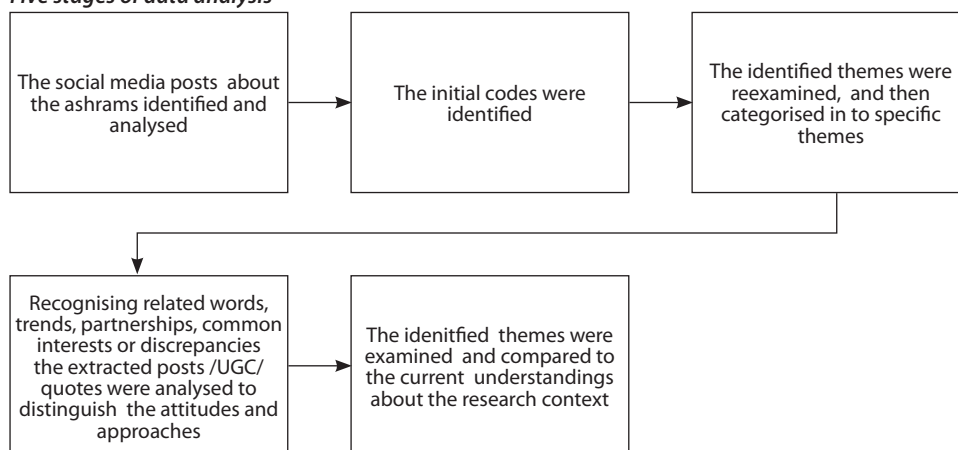
#### 3.2. Methodology

This study integrates the analytical concepts of netnographic research. Netnography is a modern approach to ethnography, extended to the Web as a digital field-research platform. The user-analysis approach is suitable because it focuses on a natural setting and provides an unobtrusive means of acquiring an insider’s perception of search engine optimization (Kozinets, 2002). As a versatile qualitative research technique (Kozinets, 2017), it optimizes ethnographic research techniques to analyze online environments and the social activities that occur within them (Ahuja & Alavi, 2018; Shao et al., 2016; Wight, 2020). Since it is digital, the researcher will explore groups most compatible with the research. The data shared on social media sites, i.e., blogs, Twitter, and Instagram, are user-generated content (UGC) (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). According to Wight (2020), Netnography appears in tourism research as part of a wider triangulated or blended methodological approach. Using such data can make information on tourists’ attributes, thoughts, activities, and interactions with religious gurus. The choice of sample site for analysis reflects the representativeness of India’s Yoga tourism (popularity, visitations, and the number of international centers to understand the influence of the guru as a celebrity).

This research used reflective thematic analysis (inductive) to analyze the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The intuitive, thematic method is an approach to qualitative data analysis that addresses general or specific research questions about individuals' experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and depictions of a specific phenomenon. In brief, the research examines what people seem to think (semantic) or tries to focus on evidence-based interpretations—that is, the viewpoints, presumptions, and notions and beliefs theorized as influencing or reporting the semantic quality of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

The data for this study were gathered between July and December 2020. Over these few months, the researcher examined a broad collection of posts on social media, via Trip Advisor and Facebook, for insights into the role of religious gurus. The data included countless reviews, to which purposive sampling was applied to collect rich and context-specific reviews. The purposive sampling criteria were that a) reviews appeared between 2018–2020, b) in English, and c) posts and reviews arose in the context of religious/spiritual/Yoga tourism. More than 15,000 were reviewed, of which the final 1237 were selected using a purposive sampling framework. Based on a preliminary assessment of the reviews, it was determined that data saturation had occurred. Data saturation was assessed based on keyword and phrase repetition and early recognition of initial codes within the review's contents. Manual data-analysis techniques sufficed since the data-collection results were of moderate size and could be structured efficiently and effectively. The research teams had a solid grasp of the research setting (Kozinets, 2018), consisting of five stages (Figure 2). Familiarisation includes going through the reviews and making notes on significant themes and problems. To begin establishing a preliminary theme framework, we compiled a look at the top 50 most often occurring terms. To ensure credibility, the principal researcher coded the raw data first and then shared it with the other author to discover and clarify any discrepancies or disputes to satisfy inter-coder reliability criteria. This data analysis procedure allowed for many iterations between authors and data (Dillette et al., 2020).

**Figure 2**  
*Five stages of data analysis*



## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1. Celebrity attachment - Guru as a motivation to visit

This study finds that the affinity toward a guru plays a significant role in selecting ashrams. This outcome agrees with the view that tourists' proclivity to retain a connection with a celebrity is measured by affinity (Wong & Lai, 2015). This idea stems from visitors' fondness for well-human brands (Rindova et al., 2006). Ashrams in India can be positioned within the boundaries of religious/spiritual/wellness/Yoga tourism since the intention to visit ashrams differs among individual tourists. Today, religious tourism applies to tourism

with clear or narrow-minded religious motivations towards pilgrimage. It involves people who perform non-pilgrimage tourism activities, such as heading to holy sites for sightseeing, cultural activities, and leisure (Božić et al., 2017). Olsen & Timothy (2006) report that the key motivations to visit holy sites are the quest for liberation or a real experience with the spiritual and a taste of/for the sublime that encourages people to frequent spiritual locations.

The current study identifies three types of tourists. The first category includes the devotees who visit the ashram frequently and whose devotion to Mata Amritanandamayi has shaped their intention. The reviews show devotees who are long-time followers of Amma as their guru. The intensity of re-visitation is high in this category. Some of the reviews follow:

Genuinely outstanding yoga instructors can only find under the supervision of Amma. February will be the first time I find my way back to the yoga retreats and all of the great Yoga I could practice. I have been practicing Yoga for over two decades, and I hold a yoga instructor degree. From my knowledge, I can assure you that this is Yoga at another stage; you will not find anything equal to this in the entire universe. It is Yoga from the heart and brain. (R28, Female, Norway)

Amrita Yoga taught me in the Holy Presence of Amma that Yoga is for the mind to calm down while the physical body is being used. This deeper level of relaxation is ideal for meditation. Our increasing understanding is not. This is my favorite location, a never-ending journey. (R 35, Male, Italy)

There is no better place for learning Amma's Yoga than Her sacred Ashram in Amritapuri! An unforgettable time and life-changing experience. This is an excellent place for spirituality for Yoga, and volunteering. Amma teaches us the value of human life. I have been visiting this place for the past two years, and I will continue this on all my vacations (R 36, Female, UK)

The second category includes tourists, influenced by the international and national appearance of Amma as a celebrity, but they are not followers. This type of tourist can be likened to celebrity-induced travelers. Lee et al. (2008, p. 609) define these as instances in which *“celebrity involvement positively affected familiarity and visitation intentions”*. The images and familiarity were positively related to visitation intentions. Most of these visitors are ‘cultural narcissists’ who search for legends (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019). In many of the reviews of this category, the tester found, ‘I was impressed by the appearance’, ‘let us see how it is going on’, ‘I believe this could be a great experience the first experience for me’. They will test the Yoga experience in the ashram; however, the international stardom of Amma as a spiritual guru motivates their selection of this particular site.

The third category includes general tourists who visit the place as part of their holiday or to gain a wellness/spiritual experience. Compared to the first and second categories, the general tourists are fewer in number. Interestingly, people in these categories change to devotees eventually.

Amrita Yoga is for both the spirit, making me dive deep, connecting my body, soul and mind. I was able to concentrate my attention on the entire idea I was practicing with, and my mind was able to rid itself of any disturbances. (R34, Female)

Amrita Yoga is a “yoga” filled with traditional theories and legends. By training, people are guided straight to an unconscious Existence long since lost, yet which is as recognizable to them as the hand belonging to themselves. When a person turns inward (inside their heart), they will sense the living miracles and holy illumination there. He noticed a profound inner calm pass through him as his mind stopped all its disturbing motions. One enters the floor with a nervous stance and anxious thoughts, yet one starts to concentrate on the air and takes consciousness into the mind and the body, and one leaves with an open-hearted and clear-headed outlook and knowledge. (R10, Male)

## 4.2. Destination attachment

Like many other studies (Bulatovic, 2020; Ćorluka et al., 2021; Telej & Gamble, 2019) that discussed celebrity-induced tourism in various spheres (film/music/drama/sports), tourism, this study also identified a close relationship between guru and destination attachment. However, the psychological connection between spiritual leaders was found to be different from other types of celebrities. There are many reasons behind it, including meeting gurus abroad, word-of-mouth publicity, personal circumstances, and motives towards spirituality. The majority of the visitors are persuaded by the guru, and genuine interest makes them visit the adobe. However, the study findings underline a category of visitors who come to the place to confirm the place and experience. This can be compared to the legitimacy seeking in film-induced tourism (Chan, 2007).

This study identified two critical sub-themes associated with destination attachment. Firstly, transformative Travel – Ashrams, and experience connecting how guru's natural ashram selection for yoga tourism. Secondly, pull towards India for Yoga and spiritual tourism related to decision-making (what, when, and how of the holidays).

### 4.2.1. Transformative travel: Ashrams and experience

The bond between spiritual leaders and their followers develops and grows. People acquire attitudes towards them, engulfing intimate connections with the person they follow. A robust attachment to a celebrity implies a probability of remaining in contact with that star. Highly devoted people in the audience often want personal interaction with the guru leads to visit their adobes.

However, there is a slight difference between foreign and domestic visitors. People of Indian origin expressed the experience more or less from a religious point of view, with a great sense of devotion. However, international visitors had mixed feelings. The majority seek a spiritual rather than a religious experience; yet, many visitors are interested in religious activities, poojas, and related aspects. Interestingly, religious festivals and celebrations fascinate the lion's share. This is an exceptional result, which makes yoga tourism different. This can be applied to other wellness tourism experiences as well. For other types of celebrity-induced tourism, destination loyalty and experiences are more or less expected. However, in this case, experience and loyalty are determined by various aspects such as intentions to visit, openness, and cultural dimensions.

In a broad context, this appears to be a motivation to explore the destination. Furthermore, the remarks and pictures shared on social networking sites can highlight a destination and encourage potential travelers after the visit. The viewer provides more knowledge from the media regarding the destination and the strength of coverage (Lee et al., 2006; Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019).

The place receives praise for its spiritual atmosphere, which is highly rated by the tourists:

Reminding one of true inner peace, happiness is a great place to relieve stress. You can learn Yoga and meditation for free, enjoy simple meals and meet and talk to Amma. Fantastic place for spiritual aspirants and those who love the Nature of the self. Beach is beautiful but not swimmable. A classical fisherman's hamlet. (R 78, Male)

Many shreds of evidence are visible in reviews to indicate that Amma's presence and the amenities make visitors happy. In a broad sense, this appears to be a motivation to travel there. The luminary religious guru is one factor that 'pulls' visitors and inspires the next visit. Also, some positive correlations with a place could justify commuting (Houliston et al., 2021). A local guide from Spain commented:

Very blissful. Fantastic atmosphere, especially when Amma is there. Relaxing and inspiring for your spiritual development. (R45, Female)



Ashrams fall within the category of religious/spiritual/wellness places. These depend upon visitor viewpoints and expectations. It may be hard to adjust to life in an ashram because of all the changes. A basic regimen consists of getting up early to see the dawn, doing Yoga and meditation, and sticking to a rigid daily diet plan that does not include any everyday distractions. This may seem like a revitalizing proposition, but there is always the chance that no one will endure this in the long term. Many ashrams throughout India accept visitors from across the world for the length of their choice to enjoy simple lives free from the demanding realities of the modern world. In this case, Amrita yoga ashram was a religious or spiritual entity where people went to seek spiritual well-being, peace of mind, and calm. Connell (2012) found a similar pattern in the case of film-related tourism. The celebrity connection is essential in establishing associations between places and personalities, thus influencing visitor views toward destinations. Negative perspectives are authentic but scarce, many of them related to the food and other services, for many reasons ranging from cultural intolerance to adaptability to such a situation.

#### 4.2.2. *The pull towards India for Yoga and spiritual tourism*

The popularity of spirituality has been expanding worldwide. Consequently, trips connected with this enthusiasm have emerged as a significant development in today's tourism industry. India presents as a land of Vedas and Temples, where the person and its infrastructure enrich and nourish faith, enabling all kinds of religions to thrive and prosper. The harmonization of human will and purpose with this part of life and the harmonious and ordered world is usually discussed as spirituality (Mukharjee et al., 2020). The ancient's wisdom and spiritual inheritance are the prime reason for selecting India, as this blog post shows:

Since ancient times, India has been known as the Hub of several religions and practices. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism are the most popular religions in India. There have been significant centers for all these religions, which are the places for communal worship and social harmony (Blog 23)

However, while most showcase an essential awareness of India's connection with Yoga and spirituality, a considerable proportion of visitors are still relatively unaware. In this category, celebrities (religious gurus and spiritual leaders) have influence. Tourists come to know about the country through these celebrities. In this sense, India's spiritual leaders function as ambassadors for India's cultural exports. Marketing spirituality is an emerging trend affecting psychological behavior.

Similarly, as the findings of this study show, attraction toward celebrities motivates making a trip (Kumar et al., 2014). Compared to other forms of celebrity-induced tourism, spirituality and cultural exports show much more significant in-depth emotional ties, mostly because fewer options are available. Standifer et al. (2010) also agree with the influence of spirituality on customers' purchase behavior. Mathras et al. (2016) mention spirituality's role as a significant factor impacting customer behavior through convictions, rituals, ideals, and collective faith that participants express and subscribe to. Reviews clarify that spiritual gurus' presence creates significant motivation for the decision-making process resulting in an ashram visit.

Spiritual gurus have several advantages compared to other forms of celebrity: multimodal channels and country visits, direct contact with devotees, social media presence, and franchising worldwide. Spiritual gurus use the newest media to keep current with their followers and influence their devotees' consumption habits (Warrier, 2003), relevant to cultural goods like Yoga and Ayurveda. The ashrams' franchise and regional centers worldwide market Yoga as the buzzword for well-being. The reviews showcase the roles of these regional centers, coordinating the activities and charting the respective countries' spiritual gurus' programs.

### 4.3. The quest for authenticity

Interestingly, this study identifies a quest for authenticity within the context of Yoga tourism. Authenticity, defined as the degree to which a place is considered authentic (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), is a unique and

critical characteristic important for yoga tourism. The pursuit of authenticity in wellness tourism contexts is directly related to financial worth and buying decisions. The perception of authenticity has a beneficial effect on tourists' involvement with places (Bryce et al., 2015). Though unlike other kinds of celebrity-induced tourism, yoga tourism is driven by the need for a genuine experience rather than verifying the legitimacy of the location. In other words, spiritual leader-induced visits may be seen as compelling the visitor to pursue authenticity in terms of product and experience. Many users express their views about seeking authentic practices. They believe India's experience, especially with a guru, will more likely provide them with the raw forms of Yoga than the cooked capsules sold internationally. This is a significant concern at this time of mushrooming Yoga centers worldwide.

This beautiful ashram stresses personal development: excellent teachers and a wealth of time they share with themselves and give you much advice. In my region, Yoga centers do not feel as authentic, so I visited Amma's ashram. (Male, 36, German)

Regarding Yoga's authenticity, many also seek the authentic and unspoiled. They might search for the authenticity of what they consider real Yoga or just their own authenticity as practitioners in a Yoga class. In this sense, it is clear that religious guru-induced yoga tourism is directed toward existential authenticity than object-based authenticity. Meaning the extent to which an individual's behaviors adhere to their ideas and goals regardless of external demands to comply. Existential authenticity is positively related to destination loyalty, and tourists who encounter existential authenticity in a particular place are more likely to demonstrate destination loyalty. Therefore, this finding approves the findings of Shen et al. (2014) and Bryce et al. (2015).

## 5. Conclusion

Yoga tourism is an emerging form of SIT within the framework of wellness tourism. The market for yoga tourism has been growing ever before. The present-day stress, societal changes, and hectic life make the quest for mental and physical well-being. In this context, this study conducted a positional analysis (Brown et al., 2017) of religious gurus and spiritual practitioners in Yoga tourism. As a form of celebrity, the significance of religious gurus in restoring India's heritage and culture in Yoga is substantial.

The findings from this study enrich the current understandings of 1) celebrity attachment, 2) behavioral intentions, 3) destination attachment, and 4) the quest for authenticity in Yoga tourism (or wellness tourism in general). These parameters are crucial for a tourist destination to develop, and spiritual leaders show substantial input in these aspects. Moreover, this study shows that religious-guru-induced tourism is more influential than other celebrities induce. One of the main reasons for this enrooted connection is the ashrams' ambiance, real-life experience, proposed feeling/experience created by the Yoga/Meditation experience, and the spiritual-wellness settings. Therefore, this study argues that these types of tourism include high rates of re-visitation. Since spirituality, Yoga, and well-being are with more psychological and mature perspectives than any other celebrity-induced tourism, this study underlines the inevitable role of gurus. The findings suggest that visitors find the prominent ashrams in India more authentic than the franchises in their own resident countries. At this juncture, the study showcases possibilities for 'branding' Indian Yoga centers. This study also reveals that religious gurus, like the ambassadors of Indian cultural exports, act the same as celebrities (e.g., film, sports) and enchant followers through their magnetism. These gurus' appurtenances and apostolic positions create a call to an authentic experience. The feel of originality attracts devotees and pulls a significant number of 'experimentalists' who visit the ashrams for a trial run.

These results indicated that celebrity attachment mediated authenticity and loyalty by integrating affection, psychological bonds, and parasocial concepts. Particularly, celebrity attachment impacted the link underlying existential authenticity and placed attachment in an ultimately induced approach. Because of this vital relationship, the role of spiritual leaders cannot be ignored in yoga tourism.

## 5.1. Managerial implications

Destination management tries to develop cost-effective methods to achieve and sustain destination loyalty in an intensively competent international market. This study recommends that destination marketers prioritize and consider the role of spiritual gurus in attracting the ever-growing wellness tourism market. Significantly, this is important for India to develop both domestic and international demands. Also, it is possible to present and marketize several associated cultural/heritage attractions through these activities. Followers tend to enjoy the stay and participate in formal events with the ashram of their guru. Thus, measures aimed at building an emotional connection, such as offering unique fanbases and legendary gatherings, may be seen as a way to reinforce followers' belongingness to the gurus

## 5.2. Research limitations and directions for future studies

While this study offers several theoretical and practical implications, it also has certain drawbacks that can be addressed in future research. Two apparent deficits are related to the data collection method and sampling. The samples were collected through online reviews; however, as an exploratory study in an under-researched theme, it is always suggested to go for in-depth data collection techniques like interviews and focus groups to generate thick descriptions to answer the research question in detail. Also, there are many popular Yoga destinations in India run by famous gurus; this study is limited to Amritapuri Ashram only, which may not explore the vast scope of Indian Yoga tourism. This study proposes exploring how religious gurus can promote India's potential as a land of spiritual and wellness tourism to guide future research.

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