

BEYOND DEVOTION: DETERMINANTS OF PILGRIMAGE TRAVEL, EXPERIENCE QUALITY, AND LOCAL ECONOMIC SPILLOVERS AT FORT PILAR SHRINE, ZAMBOANGA CITY

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Abstract

Pilgrimage tourism increasingly functions as a hybrid form of mobility where devotion intersects with heritage interest, service expectations, and local consumption. This study examines pilgrimage tourism at Fort Pilar Shrine, Zamboanga City, focusing on (1) determinants of pilgrimage travel, (2) perceived experience quality, and (3) local economic spillovers. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was applied: an onsite survey of 500 pilgrims generated descriptive evidence on visitor profiles, motivations, satisfaction attributes, and spending patterns; this was followed by 20 semi-structured stakeholder interviews (LGU, tourism actors, and religious/community leaders) analyzed thematically to interpret operational constraints and governance issues. Findings indicate that travel is primarily anchored in religious devotion ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.88$) and seeking blessings/spiritual healing ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.97$), while heritage appreciation ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.92$) remains a secondary yet consequential pull. Overall experience quality is high ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.78$), with strongest ratings for cleanliness and staff interaction; the most persistent service gaps are parking capacity and wayfinding/signage. For local policy relevance, expenditure estimates are reported in Philippine pesos (PHP), using BSP exchange-rate reference tables for the study period. Average daily spend is approximately ₱2,763 ($SD \approx ₱663$), implying ₱276.3M in indicative direct spending and ₱442.0M in indicative total local effects under the original volume and multiplier assumptions. Fort Pilar's dual sacred-heritage character—recognized under Presidential Decree No. 260 (1973)—strengthens the need for governance arrangements that protect sacred atmosphere while managing peak-period congestion and commercialization pressures.

Keywords: pilgrimage tourism; visitor motivations; experience quality; satisfaction; economic spillovers; destination governance; Fort Pilar; Zamboanga City

1. INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage tourism remains a major driver of visitation in many destinations, but contemporary pilgrimage is increasingly “beyond devotion.” As Collins-Kreiner (2020) argues, pilgrimage today often converges with broader tourism systems—mobility networks, destination marketing, and service expectations—so that sacred intent and experiential consumption co-produce the visitor encounter. This shift matters for destination governance: service conditions such as access, circulation, sanitation, and information design become structurally important to protecting both visitor satisfaction and site meaning.

Fort Pilar Shrine is a policy-relevant case because it embodies a dual identity. It is a living sacred site and part of a recognized heritage complex: Fort Pilar is designated a National Cultural Treasure under Presidential Decree No. 260 (1973) and hosts a National Museum regional facility. This duality implies that pilgrims may arrive with devotion-centered motives while simultaneously expecting heritage-site attributes (clear movement routes, interpretive cues, basic services, and orderly visitor management). Without integrated evidence, local responses tend to be fragmented—focused either on promotion or ad hoc enforcement—rather than governance arrangements calibrated to actual motivations, experience constraints, and spending channels.

This study therefore repackages the Fort Pilar case into an objectives-aligned journal structure that links determinants of travel to experience quality and local spillovers, while clarifying management implications through collaboration-oriented destination governance (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

1.1 Objectives and Research Questions

1.1.1 General Objective

To examine how determinants of pilgrimage travel relate to experience quality and generate local economic spillovers at Fort Pilar Shrine, Zamboanga City, as a basis for sustainable destination management.

1.1.2 Specific Objectives

1. Profile pilgrims and travel patterns (origin, demographics, timing of visits, distance/time, and access modes).
2. Identify and rank determinants of pilgrimage travel (devotional, healing/vow-related, and heritage-cultural motivations).
3. Assess experience quality across key attributes of service and place management (cleanliness, staff interaction, accessibility, parking, and wayfinding/signage).
4. Estimate indicative local economic spillovers in PHP, translating reported spending estimates and annual visitation into direct and total effects under stated assumptions.
5. Surface governance and sustainability issues from stakeholders, emphasizing peak-period pressure points and coordination needs.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What pilgrim profiles and travel patterns characterize Fort Pilar visitation?
2. Which determinants most strongly motivate pilgrimage travel to Fort Pilar Shrine?
3. How do pilgrims assess experience quality, and where are the most binding service gaps?
4. What are the indicative magnitudes of direct spending and spillover effects in PHP?
5. What governance mechanisms are implied by stakeholder accounts of externalities and constraints?

1.3 Brief Literature Review

Pilgrimage tourism scholarship increasingly emphasizes hybridity and governance. Collins-Kreiner (2020), for example, frames pilgrimage tourism as historically foundational yet currently “rejuvenated” through modern mobilities and destination systems, which explains why pilgrimage sites must address service and management issues alongside religious practice. Within this perspective, determinants of pilgrimage travel are best treated as a structured bundle—devotion and healing/vow fulfillment may dominate, but cultural meaning and destination accessibility also influence participation intensity and repeat visitation.

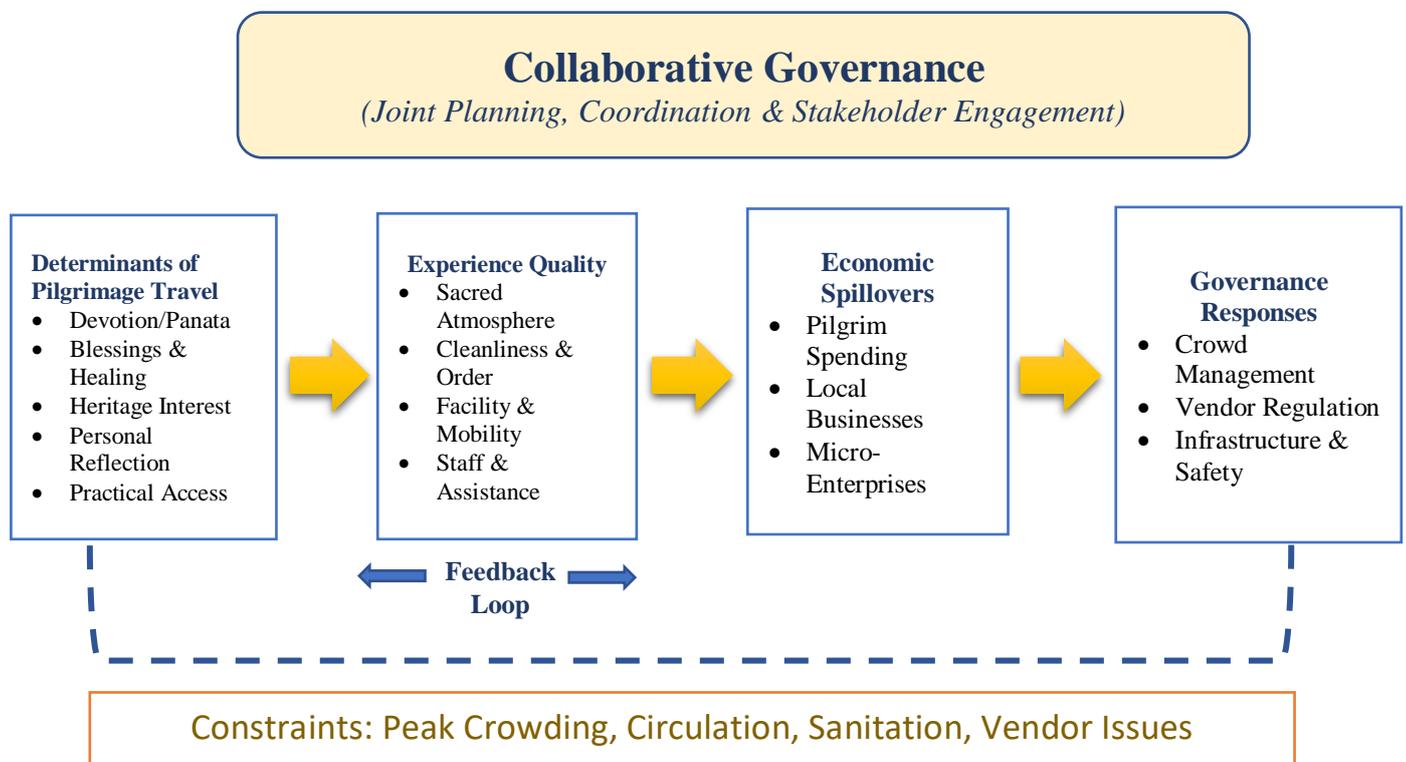
Experience quality at pilgrimage sites is also distinctive. While general tourism research often treats satisfaction as service performance, pilgrimage settings add a meaning layer: crowding, noise, and commercial intrusion can undermine sacred atmosphere even when conventional facilities are adequate. Lifecycle planning logics suggest that destinations can experience declining perceived quality when visitor growth outpaces infrastructure and management adaptation (Butler, 1980). Applied to pilgrimage sites, this implies that parking, circulation

design, signage, and sanitation are not “minor” features—they are governance levers that mediate both satisfaction and sanctity.

Finally, governance scholarship in tourism planning highlights interdependence. Jamal and Getz (1995) demonstrate that tourism development frequently requires collaboration due to multi-actor stakes and overlapping mandates. Bramwell and Sharman (1999) likewise show that collaboration in local tourism policymaking supports legitimacy and coordinated action when policy problems cut across agencies and community groups. Fort Pilar’s dual sacred–heritage identity strengthens the relevance of this literature: PD 260 heritage designation and museum functions elevate the need for structured governance that can reconcile sacred use, conservation, and local livelihoods.

4. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1
Pilgrimage Governance Framework (Tendero Model)



This study conceptualizes pilgrimage tourism at Fort Pilar Shrine as a linked pathway in which why pilgrims come shapes how they evaluate the visit, which in turn shapes how benefits diffuse to the local economy, and how governance responds to maintain sustainability.

First, determinants of pilgrimage travel represent the demand-side drivers that motivate visitation. These include devotion/panata (vow fulfillment), seeking blessings or healing, heritage interest linked to Fort Pilar’s historic character, personal reflection, and practical access factors (distance, transport convenience, and timing of visits—especially during peak periods such as Fiesta Pilar/Hermosa Festival). In local practice, these determinants manifest in activities such as prayer, candle-lighting, offering flowers, and participation in

processions, including culturally embedded traditions like the carroza/karosa during Marian festivities.

Second, these determinants translate into experience quality, defined as the pilgrim's evaluation of the shrine encounter at the attribute level. Experience quality includes the sacred atmosphere (reverence, quiet, ease of prayer), cleanliness and order, facility and mobility conditions (walkways, comfort rooms, parking, crowd circulation, and wayfinding), and staff/assistance. In a sacred site, these attributes are not merely service factors; they function as conditions that either protect or disrupt the pilgrim's ability to complete devotional intentions.

Third, experience quality contributes to economic spillovers through mechanisms such as visit duration, comfort in moving around the site, and willingness to purchase or transact. Spillovers are expressed through pilgrim spending on transport, food, offerings/devotional items, souvenirs, and adjacent services, which then support local livelihoods (small vendors, transport operators, micro-enterprises) in the shrine's surrounding area.

Finally, governance responses comprise the management actions and policies intended to preserve sacred meaning while sustaining benefits. These responses include crowd management, vendor regulation, and infrastructure and safety improvements, particularly during peak devotional periods. Governance is framed as collaborative, because the primary constraints—peak crowding, circulation bottlenecks, sanitation demands, and vendor issues—span multiple actors and cannot be effectively resolved by any single institution. This emphasis aligns with collaboration-based tourism planning and local policy coordination models (e.g., Jamal & Getz; Bramwell & Sharman), where shared authority and interdependence require joint planning and coordinated implementation.

In summary, the framework treats Fort Pilar pilgrimage tourism as a system where motivations, site management, and local economic outcomes are interdependent, and where collaborative governance is the enabling condition that stabilizes experience quality and supports sustainable local spillovers over time.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design and Setting

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed at Fort Pilar Shrine and its immediate surrounding visitor economy in Zamboanga City. The quantitative phase established patterns in profile, motivations, satisfaction, and spending; the qualitative phase then examined how stakeholders interpret externalities and management constraints in practice.

2.2 Quantitative Phase

An onsite survey was administered to $n = 500$ pilgrims. The instrument captured: demographic characteristics, origin and travel patterns, motivation ratings, satisfaction across specific site attributes, and indicative daily spending. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations), enabling a structured ranking of determinants and identification of lowest-rated service attributes.

2.3 Qualitative Phase

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with $n = 20$ stakeholders representing local government, tourism-linked sectors, and religious/community leadership. Interviews explored: peak-season management, congestion and waste pressures, perceived commercialization risks, and opportunities for coordination. Transcripts were coded thematically to contextualize quantitative patterns (e.g., why parking and wayfinding function as constraints during surge periods).

2.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the study purpose and provided consent. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality safeguards were applied.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Pilgrim Profile and Travel Patterns

The pilgrim population visiting Fort Pilar Shrine is predominantly domestic and regionally sourced, indicating that the shrine functions as a provincial pilgrimage node rather than a purely neighborhood devotional space. Respondents were largely female (62.8%) with a mean age of 42 years (SD = 8.9). A substantial share of pilgrims came from nearby provinces, especially Zamboanga del Sur (35.6%) and Basilan (21.2%), and Catholic affiliation was high (87.6%). Visitation was strongly seasonal, with 65.2% reporting visits during Holy Week, consistent with surge-demand dynamics that typically intensify crowding and service pressure (Table 1). Travel logistics reinforce the shrine’s regional accessibility. Private vehicles were the most common transport mode (47.2%), followed by public buses (31.6%) and motorcycles (12.4%). Average travel distance was 150 km (SD = 45.8), with an average travel time of 3 hours (SD = 1.2). These access patterns elevate the operational importance of arrival/departure management, parking capacity, pedestrian circulation, and peak-day staging, particularly when devotional practices and processional movement concentrate visitors in limited spaces around the shrine complex.

Table 1.
Pilgrim profile and travel patterns (n = 500)

Variable	Statistic
Sex	Female = 62.8%
Age	Mean = 42.0 years; SD = 8.9
Visitor type	Domestic (within Philippines) = 92.4%
Top origins	Zamboanga del Sur = 35.6%; Basilan = 21.2%
Religious affiliation	Catholic = 87.6%
Peak-season visitation	Holy Week visitors = 65.2%
Primary transport mode	Private vehicle = 47.2%; Public bus = 31.6%; Motorcycle = 12.4%
Travel distance	Mean = 150.0 km; SD = 45.8
Travel time	Mean = 3.0 hours; SD = 1.2

Note. Percentages may not total 100% when minor categories are not displayed.

3.2 Determinants of Pilgrimage Travel

Motivation ratings reveal a clear hierarchy anchored in devotion, but with consistent signals of place-based meaning. Religious devotion ranked highest (M = 4.32, SD = 0.88), followed by blessing/healing-seeking (M = 4.12, SD = 0.97). Cultural heritage appreciation also scored strongly (M = 3.89, SD = 0.92), and personal reflection remained meaningful (M = 3.78, SD = 0.95) (Table 2). Collectively, the pattern indicates that Fort Pilar is fundamentally a devotional destination, yet the heritage rating supports the “Beyond Devotion” framing: pilgrims are simultaneously responding to sacred value and the broader identity of Fort Pilar as a culturally significant city landmark.

Table 2.
Determinants of pilgrimage travel (5-point scale)

Determinant	Mean (SD)	Rank
Religious devotion	4.32 (0.88)	1
Blessing/healing-seeking	4.12 (0.97)	2
Cultural heritage appreciation	3.89 (0.92)	3

Personal reflection	3.78 (0.95)	4
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Note. Higher mean values indicate stronger influence on pilgrimage travel.

3.3 Experience Quality and Satisfaction

Overall satisfaction was high ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.78$), suggesting that baseline experience quality and day-to-day site conditions are generally perceived positively. The strongest-rated attributes were cleanliness ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 0.66$), staff friendliness ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.81$), and facility accessibility ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.75$) (Table 3). In a sacred setting, these attributes matter beyond “service” because cleanliness, respectful guidance, and orderly access are often interpreted by pilgrims as signals that the site’s sanctity is being protected—especially when visitors are fulfilling panata or participating in ritual practices such as prayer, candle-lighting, and offering flowers.

Table 3.
Experience quality ratings and priority gaps (5-point scale)

Experience quality indicator	Mean (SD)	Assessment
Overall satisfaction	4.56 (0.78)	High
Cleanliness	4.78 (0.66)	Strength
Staff friendliness	4.72 (0.81)	Strength
Facility accessibility	4.64 (0.75)	Strength
Directional signage/wayfinding	4.08 (0.97)	Improvement area
Parking availability	3.92 (0.89)	Priority gap

3.4 Priority Service Gaps (Operational constraints)

Despite high overall satisfaction, two constraints emerged as consistent weak points: parking availability ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.89$) and directional signage/wayfinding ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.97$) (Table 3). Stakeholder narratives indicate that these constraints become most visible during peak periods (notably Holy Week), when arrival congestion and unclear route choices intensify crowd compression and disrupt the quiet devotional atmosphere. Parking shortages increase friction at entry points and spill vehicles into adjacent streets, while weak wayfinding can disperse visitors into unintended areas, worsen bottlenecks, and reduce orderly movement for pilgrims who are trying to complete prayer routines or join processional flows. Operationally, these gaps represent “first-order” vulnerabilities because they sit at the start of the visitor journey and can cascade into perceived disorder even when core site upkeep is strong.

3.5 Pilgrim Spending and Local Economic Spillovers (PHP)

For local policy relevance, expenditure results are presented in Philippine pesos (PHP). The estimated average daily spending per pilgrim was ₱2,763 ($SD = ₱663$) (Table 4). Reported expenditures commonly covered transport, food and drinks, offerings/devotional items, and small purchases from nearby vendors and micro-enterprises. Using the study’s assumed annual pilgrimage volume of 100,000, the indicative estimate of direct spending is ₱276.3 million/year. Applying the study’s multiplier logic, indirect effects add an estimated ₱165.8 million/year, yielding an indicative total local economic effect of approximately ₱442.0 million/year (Table 4). These values should be interpreted as indicative because totals depend on the accuracy of annual volume assumptions and the fit of multiplier parameters to the local economy; however, the pattern consistently supports the conclusion that Fort Pilar pilgrimage activity sustains a surrounding ecosystem of transport services, food vending, small retail, and livelihood-linked micro-enterprises in Zamboanga City.

Table 4.
Indicative pilgrim spending and local economic spillovers (PHP)

Parameter	Estimate
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Average daily spend per pilgrim (SD)	₱2,763 (₱663)
Assumed annual pilgrim volume	100,000
Estimated direct spending/year	₱276.3 million
Estimated indirect effects/year	₱165.8 million
Estimated total local economic effect/year	₱442.0 million

Note. Figures are indicative and depend on visitation assumptions and multiplier suitability; spending typically includes transport, food, offerings/devotional items, souvenirs/recuerdos, and incidental services.

4. DISCUSSION

Three integrated insights emerge. First, determinants of travel are strongly devotional, which means the visitor economy must be managed in a way that protects sacred atmosphere rather than treating the site as a generic attraction. Second, the weakest satisfaction attributes—parking and wayfinding—function as capacity bottlenecks that translate directly into crowd stress and diminished place experience during peak days. This is precisely where sustainable management is won or lost: not through more promotions, but through circulation, information design, and peak-load protocols.

Third, economic benefits appear meaningful but governance-sensitive. Fort Pilar’s heritage status under PD 260 and its museum role indicate that management should meet a higher standard of heritage protection and visitor orderliness. The implication is collaborative governance: improvements in transport staging, vendor zoning, and sanitation enforcement require structured coordination among multiple stakeholders, consistent with the collaboration arguments of Jamal and Getz (1995) and Bramwell and Sharman (1999).

5. CONCLUSION

Fort Pilar Shrine operates as a devotion-centered pilgrimage destination with an additional heritage layer that shapes visitor expectations and experience evaluation. Pilgrims report high satisfaction overall, supported by strong cleanliness and staff-related performance; however, parking and wayfinding remain persistent service gaps that may become binding constraints during Holy Week and other peak periods. When reported in Philippine pesos using BSP reference tables, indicative spending-based estimates suggest sizeable direct and indirect local economic effects, but these benefits are contingent on governance capacity to manage congestion, externalities, and commercialization pressures. Given Fort Pilar’s heritage designation and institutional context, sustainable pilgrimage tourism development should prioritize visitor-flow design, basic infrastructure upgrades, and durable stakeholder collaboration.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Peak-period mobility and parking management: implement shuttle staging, temporary overflow lots, and arrival/departure routing during Holy Week to reduce congestion.
- Wayfinding system improvements: install coherent directional signage and visitor maps that support orderly flow while preserving visual and sacred sensibilities.
- Sacred-space and vendor zoning: delineate quiet/ritual zones and regulate vending locations to reduce commercialization encroachment.
- Scaled sanitation and waste protocols: surge-capacity waste collection and cleaning schedules during peak days, with enforceable shared responsibilities.
- Institutionalize collaboration: establish a standing multi-stakeholder site management mechanism for shared planning, monitoring, and dispute resolution (aligned with collaboration-based destination governance).

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