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## COVID-19: Impacts and perspectives for religious tourism events. The case of Lourdes Pilgrimages

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### ABSTRACT

The breakout of COVID-19 has massively impacted the event industry. Focusing on Lourdes Pilgrimages, the results of the study reveal that the online delivery of the event, has not negatively impacted on the traditional dimension of the pilgrimage; nor on the satisfaction of attendees. Instead, it has potentially offered some opportunities to the Sanctuary, and surrounding areas. As a result, crisis either internal or external to an industry should not be perceived only as negative. A Janusian thinking approach is required to perceive the opportunities related to crisis, and an ambidextrous management approach needed to exploit them.

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## Introduction

The breakout of COVID-19 has massively impacted event tourism (Jamal & Budke, 2020; Séraphin, 2020). Most academic articles are focusing on tourism, almost overlooking events (Rowen, 2020; Shipway & Miles, 2020), despite the fact the pandemic has put both sectors under serious threats (Winship, 2020 [Online]). Because of social distancing measures to mitigate the transmission of the virus, a destination such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which hosts “highly visibly international religious gatherings” (Yezli & Khan, 2020, p. 1) had to cancel or postpone some of them. The pandemic has also offered the event sector (and related sectors) an opportunity to reinvent itself (Gosling, Scott, & Hall, 2021; Lapointe, 2020; Prideaux, Thompson, & Pabel, 2020; Renaud, 2020). That was what Lourdes Pilgrimages, one of the world major religious tourism events (Thomas, White, & Samuel, 2018) did, with the online version of the pilgrimage that took place on July 16<sup>th</sup> 2020 (La-Croix, 2020 [Online]).

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Religious events, and more generally speaking, festivals and cultural events are deeply rooted into culture and heritage (O'Toole, 2011; Raj, Walters, & Rashid, 2017; Trauer, 2006). However, despite the importance of authenticity for their long-term survival, it is important for events to introduce new elements in order to remain attractive (Laing & Frost, 2014). As a result, Lourdes Pilgrimages is used as a case study to investigate the simultaneous implementation of authenticity and innovation into an event. Adopting a deductive approach, defined by Hammond and Wellington (2013, p. 40) as “drawing valid conclusions from initial premises”, the objective of this paper is to investigate the extent to which Davies (2020) Propositions 3 (P3) applies to Lourdes:

P1 – Small-medium events are at risk of disappearing

P2 – Some events will survive if supported by the government

P3 – Small groups of real or virtual communities or networks around the world are going to support the event sector.

This research is motivated by five main reasons: First, the need for further research regarding the future (post COVID-19) of the event industry (Davies, 2020). Second, the research offers an opportunity to investigate the resilience of the industry, knowing that resilience is one of the key criteria for survival after a crisis (Shipway & Miles, 2020). This is all the more relevant and important in this study as religious “faith may promote resilience especially during crisis” (Pirutinsky, Cherniak, & Rosmarin, 2020, p. 2288). Third, this study illustrates the response an event organizer (the Sanctuary) provided to a major crisis; and explores the reaction of attendees. This (responses) is one of the stages of crisis management strategies (Cornelissen, 2014). Fourth, out of all the research on COVID-19 and tourism (and cognate sectors) published as of 26.05.20, a very limited number of them are based on case studies (Appendix 1). Indeed, a significant number of publications are opinion papers (Appendix 1), in other words, not based on solid evidence. It is therefore very important to address these gaps, which can be done using case studies, as they offer in-depth exploration of a particular context and phenomenon (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). Finally, the COVID-19 context offers an opportunity to review grounded theories in event studies (Séraphin, 2020).

In line with the objective of the study, the following research question is going to be addressed: How is the online delivery of the Lourdes pilgrimage (because of COVID-19) challenging and/or supporting the future of the event? To address this research question, the first part of the paper (“Literature review: overview” and “Contextual framework”) is based on secondary data, while the second part is based on primary data (“Methodology” and “Results and discussion”) which has been analyzed

using the Motivation, Opportunity Ability (MOA) framework developed by Jepson, Clarke, and Ragsdell (2013).

## **Literature review: Overview**

### ***Covid-19 and crisis management***

Crisis management relates to the development of actions to better consider, analyze, understand, and then control incidents (Becker, 2006) in order to lay down strategies to limit their negative impacts, as they can damage the image of a destination (Ritchie, 2004, 2008; Seabra & Paiva, 2021). Equally important, the purpose of crisis management strategies is to “contribute to a faster and more efficient recovery for any destination after a crisis” (Young & Montgomery, 1997, p. 3) Two steps are to be included in dynamic crisis management strategies. First, a crisis assessment, which involves the collection of information in order to determine the risk. This stage is also referred as environment scanning for risk or issue identification and analysis (Cornelissen, 2014). Second, a crisis response, which is about the development of adequate operational responses to tackle the impacts of the risks identified during the assessment stage. This stage includes a post-crisis marketing strategy to reclaim the image of the destination. Lesson learnt is an important part of this stage, that will then feed into the overall crisis management strategy. This stage is also referred as issue or risk specific response strategies (Cornelissen, 2014). A third stage called “evaluation” is added by Cornelissen (2014). This stage involves an evaluation of success of the strategy put in place, alongside the evaluation of how the risk has morphed, and how the opinion of stakeholders involved have changed (Cornelissen, 2014). For all three stages, a strong relationship amongst stakeholders is needed (Cornelissen, 2014; Seabra & Paiva, 2021). As the tourism industry is a vulnerable and volatile industry (Page, 2019; Santana, 2004), proactive and dynamic crisis management plans are of high importance (Walser, 2018). That said, it is important to highlight the fact that crisis management strategies even when well-planned are still uncertain in terms of outcomes due to the fact that the nature of the future (which is unpredictable) makes long-term planning unreliable (Bowie, Buttle, Brookes, & Mariussen, 2017; Page, 2019). However, the level of resilience of the tourism industry for a destination, including the level of support of residents, play a significant role in the ability of the destination to bounce back (Shipway & Miles, 2020; Thyne, Woosnam, Watkins, & Ribeiro, 2020).

As a pandemic, COVID-19 falls under the category of crisis and disaster (Davies, 2020; Jamal & Budke, 2020; Lagadec, 2007; Santana, 2004), alongside natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes; but also terrorism

(Lagadec, 2007; Santana, 2004); overtourism (Dodds & Butler, 2020; Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2019; Santana, 2004); etc.

As for this study, which is focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 on religious tourism events, it is providing an overview of the crisis in the literature review; followed with a presentation of the strategy put in place by the Sanctuary to tackle the issue in the contextual framework (stage 1 and 2 of the crisis management strategy). The methodology, and results/discussion, are providing information regarding the attitude and opinion of attendees (stage 3 of the crisis management strategy).

### ***Events and societies***

Events are to be assimilated to human needs and wants, and as such, they are an integral part of every society (Bowdin, Allen, O'Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2012; Getz & Page, 2020). They have evolved with the society, as a result, throughout the centuries, the number of events has increased (Laing & Frost, 2014). Four key elements have been identified for the long term sustainability of events: First, there is a need for the preservation of their authenticity; second, innovation is needed; third, the need for an opening to external influences; and finally, the incorporation of rituals into those events (Laing & Frost, 2014). Amongst the most important types of events, are to be mentioned community events, which are the ones that contribute the most to the development of social capital within local communities, but also between locals and visitors (Raj et al., 2017; Séraphin, Gowreesunkar, Zaman, & Bourliataux, 2019). This is due to the fact that events have the ability to foster development of positive feelings, and a sense of belonging with particular places and group of individuals (Taks, Chalip, & Green, 2015). In this line of thoughts, Bladen, Kennell, Abson, and Wilde (2012, p. 379), added that events “provide the means to achieve a diverse range of social outcomes, including community cohesion, educational development, support for families and regional development.” Beyond the positive social impacts of events, are also to be mentioned the economic impacts of the sector (related to tourism), on which many destinations are reliant upon (Getz, 2012; Getz & Page, 2020; Raj et al., 2017). Religious tourism (a special interest form of tourism) is indeed, a powerful pull factor (Laing & Frost, 2014; Trauer, 2006).

### ***Heritage or intergeneration continuum***

Heritage, and more generally culture, is transmitted from one generation to another, either through the inner family circle, when members of this family are strong believers and enforcers or some cultural artifacts such as

religion, language, food, etc. (Huang, Ramshaw, & Norman, 2016; Hung, Xiao, & Yang, 2013), or outside the family circle, which could be through community engagement; brotherhood; societies; heritage camps, etc. (Bruneau, 2006; Murdoch, 2017; Williams, 2001). If the inner and outer family circles contribute to maintain the connection with a heritage or culture, an intrinsic motivation (active proactive involvement of individuals) is also part of the requisite (Huang et al., 2016). There is a correlation between the active involvement with something, and the development of a strong connection with this thing (Hung et al., 2013). The benefits of this intergenerational transmission are varied. Among these are: the development of social capital, which includes sense of belonging; the development of loyalty; networking; and equally important, a continuum from one generation to another, that is evidenced by the authenticity of some practices (Huang et al., 2016; Minto-Coy & Séraphin, 2016). Beyond the social dimension, intergenerational transmission has some economic impacts since the loyalty to a product, service, destination, organization, event, etc. is part of the heritage package (Bruwer & Kelley, 2015; Davidson & Sahli, 2015; Minto-Coy & Séraphin, 2016). Transmission of heritage or culture could be considered as a social and economic sustainability tool. This tool is all the more important for activities that are dependent on this transmission. This is for instance the case for the tourism industry in destinations suffering from a negative image (Minto-Coy & Séraphin, 2016; Newland & Taylor, 2010; Wab, 2013).

### ***Creative destruction***

The destruction of a community and its heritage can occur as a result of tourism development (commodification). This particular case is referred by Mitchell (1998) as creative destruction, in other words, a process in which the destruction of something is necessary, and/or contributes to the creation of something as good or even better. Taking overtourism as an example, Séraphin et al. (2019) and Séraphin, Ivanov, Dosquet, and Bourliataux-Lajoinie (2020), explain that this phenomenon which is the result of poor destination management, has contributed to negative environmental, economic, and social issues. It has also led locals to realize how important their cultural heritage is, while contributing to the development of social capital amongst them to combat a common enemy, namely the tourists.

As a sanitary crisis, COVID-19 could also be considered to be falling under the creative destruction framework due to the fact that this pandemic has pretty much put an end to the tourism industry, and limited the delivery of some rituals, which are an important part of human life,

heritage and culture (Séraphin, 2020), while offering the world an opportunity to reinvent itself (Gossling et al., 2021; Jamal & Budke, 2020; Séraphin, 2020). The concept of creative destruction is therefore to be related to ambidextrous management.

### ***Ambidextrous theoretical framework***

This study is built upon contradictory thoughts: On the one hand, cultural heritage is presenting as epitomizing, authenticity, construction and transmission of values, belief, tradition, etc. for the economic and social long-term sustainability of a society. On the other hand, changes that sometimes happen through (creative) destruction is presented as a necessary evil for the long term economic and social sustainability and improvement of a society. This study could be said to be ambidextrous by nature. Indeed, ambidextrous management is a management process that consists in combining and utilizing opposites or contradictory thoughts, strategies, etc. simultaneously, such as exploitation and exploration (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2016); past and present; present and future; theory and practice (Séraphin, 2020); construction and destruction (Mitchell, 1998); perception of a negative context such as the lockdown (as a result of the pandemic), as a positive thing (Rowen, 2020); etc. This approach is also associated with the term Janusian thinking in reference to Janus, the Roman god with two faces, who looked into opposite directions simultaneously, and whom has been pivotal in the creation of the world (Rothenberg, 1996). In tourism, ambidextrous management approach has been associated with sustainability; innovation; improvement of performance; development of motivation; increase of social capital value creation; and last but not least, with customer loyalty (Vo-Thanh, Séraphin, Okumus, & Koseoglu, 2020). It is also essential to mention the fact that the tourism industry and related sectors are ambidextrous by nature (Sanchez & Adams, 2008; Séraphin, 2020).

### **Contextual framework**

#### ***Lourdes pilgrimage: Brief historical background***

Lourdes is well known all over the world for the apparitions of the Virgin Mary that took place in 1858. It was the first of 18 apparitions that took place between 11 February and 16 July of the same year (Thomas et al., 2018). As a result, between 1962 and 1988, three basilicas and two churches were built, which subsequently led thousands of believers to visit Lourdes (Explore France, 2012). Additionally, in 1873, Lourdes railway station registered 216 chartered trains, equating to 140,000 pilgrims (Barrère, 2020; Nolan, 1992). The pilgrimage stopped during World War I, and resumed



afterward in 1919. Recent figures from Insee (2018), indicate that Lourdes accounts for some 2.2 million overnight stays, including 63% of international visitors (Insee, 2019). It is also worth highlighting the fact that hotel overnight stays in Lourdes represent 75% of the overall stays in the county, which is a performance above the national average (Pélieu, 2019).

Rites and rituals, which are patterned forms of behaviors within the occurrence of events (Getz, 2012), are deeply imbedded within events celebrated by individuals and communities (Bowdin et al., 2012). For most, the pilgrimage is to be associated with terms, such as: sense of community; preservation and authenticity; spiritual and secular spaces; meaningful experiences; lived connections; unexpected encounters; supernatural visions; and healing (Thomas et al., 2018). One of the most popular rituals include: the immersion in water (Lourdes Sanctuary, 2020); drink the water from the fountains; touch the rock where Virgin Mary appeared; light a candle; attend masses; etc. The latter are delivered in many different languages.

### ***Covid-19 and its impacts on Lourdes (delivery of pilgrimage/development), surrounding destinations (economic)***

The COVID-19 outbreak is considered as “the first real global health emergency experienced by many members of today’s society” (Jamal & Budke, 2020, p. 2). As a result of the pandemic, traveling and gathering have been banned (Jamal & Budke, 2020; Yang, Zhang, & Chen, 2020), which subsequently impacted negatively on local economies; mental health of tourists; perception of some destinations; the performance of the tourism industry and cognate sectors (Séraphin, 2020). Some positives also came out of the pandemic such as more in-depth discussions around the relationship of tourism with capitalism; the sustainability strategies chosen by tourism organizations; models in place to evaluate the impacts of tourism; etc. (Séraphin, 2020). Some (sample of excerpts from the media) of the specific impacts of COVID-19 on Lourdes Pilgrimage are as follow:

-Financial – *Le Figaro* (French newspaper) announced 8-million-euro loss for the Sanctuary (Le Figaro [Online]).

-Experience – Because of the changes in the delivery, a limited number of people (Maximum 5000 at a time) were allowed within the Sanctuary.

-Communication strategy – Before the pandemic, the Sanctuary only had one Facebook page, but for the “Lourdes United” virtual pilgrimage, they created four more Facebook pages, which are in English, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese (Sanctuary, 2020). Social media platforms are increasingly used for communication, promotion and also to encourage participation (Abramson, Keefe, & Chou, 2015). The strategy adopted by the Sanctuary is also in line with Fenish et al. (2014), who argued that event managers need to ascertain a mix of attendees by national origin. 80 million people attended online the Lourdes United Pilgrimage on 16 July (Le

Figaro [Online]) and the Sanctuary's YouTube channel on its own registered a 193K subscribers (YouTube [Online]).

-Potential growth for the future – The Sanctuary of Notre Dame of Lourdes went from 4 to 6 million visitors every year (Thomas et al., 2018), to a cumulative audience (of all online platforms) of 80 million viewers for the e-pilgrimage of 16 July, 2020 (Le Figaro [Online]; Le Nouvel Obs, 2020). Those online attendees may turn in the future (after COVID-19) into actual visitors. When customers engage online with a brand, it leads to trust, and then to e-word-of-mouth (Islam & Rahman, 2016). Data from the analytics of one of the Facebook pages of the Sanctuary reveals that in some cases the number of new followers outnumber existing followers.

The first part of the study (literature review and contextual framework) reveals that the breakout of COVID-19 has forced the Sanctuary to be ambidextrous in its approach, that is to say, rooted in both tradition/history, and modernity. This is in line with Thomas et al. (2018, p. 413), who argued that “contemporary pilgrimage may be conceived of as a post-post-modern search for spiritual meaning that is individually derived but is also rooted in an authentic past.”

## **Methodology**

### ***Positionality***

Positionality is about how a study is affected by researchers' particular background, beliefs and values (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). One of the two authors of this study is a practitioner. She is working for the Lourdes Tourist Office (LTO) as a Marketing Director. As a result, some of the information included in this section (and previous sections) are not referenced, as based on her knowledge and expertise; direct access to data collected by the LTO; and close working relationship with the Sanctuary. This research is therefore in line with Hammond and Wellington (2013, p. 119) who argued that: “many practitioner researchers take advantage of their positions to inform their research.” Because of the positionality of the authors, this study is adopting an interpretivist approach, meaning that the context, researchers, and the research can't be separated (Fox, Gouthro, Morakabati, & Brackstone, 2014). The interpretivist also believes that “knowledge about reality should be created as you go” (Brunt, Horner, & Semley, 2017).

### ***Methodological foundation***

In order to address the research question from an attendee perspective, this study is adopting a qualitative analysis, in other words, a method which deals with non-numeric data (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). More

specifically, this part of the study is based on a netnographic approach, a study of consumers' behavior based on data collected online (Silver, Stevens, Wrenn, & Loudon, 2013). In line with Mkono and Hughes (2020), the approach of this study is taking advantage of discursive exchanges in social media platforms, in response to topical events and stories. As engagement is to be understood as how to involve people with the planning and development of their community; and community is to be understood as a group of people sharing a particular way of life with emphasis on particular space and time (Jepson et al., 2013), the Motivation Opportunity Ability (MOA) model, a framework developed to analyze engagement of members of a community, and highlights factors which either support or inhibit engagement and participation of individuals with their community (Jepson et al., 2013) is used to discuss the results of the study.

### ***Data collection***

The social media platform, Facebook has been used to collect data (Table 2). It is worth highlighting the fact that Facebook (FB) and Instagram are the most powerful event promotions platforms (The Pulse Report [Online]). Facebook is “one of the most popular social networking sites on which various brands have created their communities” (Islam & Rahman, 2016, p. 41). It is also an open space for self-expression, and promotion of awareness (Abramson et al., 2015). Last but not least, Facebook allows extensive posts compared to some other social media (Mkono & Hughes, 2020). Many recent research in tourism and related fields have used this approach (Table 1).

Five FB pages have been used: (1) The French version of the FB pages is a long existing page (2) then, four other pages (English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian) created especially for the 16 July 2020 event.

For each FB page, all the verbatim related to the online delivery of the event with regards to COVID-19 are collected. The English version of the FB has the most relevant verbatim, followed by the Portuguese and Spanish page. In forth position can be found the Italian one. As for the French page, it barely had any relevant verbatim (Table 2). The verbatim used in this study has not been translated and/or edited for grammatical errors to preserve their raw authenticity, and avoid translation issues (Brunt et al., 2017; Mkono & Hughes, 2020). It is worth highlighting the fact that the level engagement of users with the five FB pages, in other words, their interaction with the page (Islam & Rahman, 2016), is very low. Additionally, barely any comments on the FB pages of the Sanctuary are about COVID-19, and or the online delivery of the event (which is reflected in the types of verbatim collected). It is also worth highlighting

**Table 1.** The use of Facebook in Research.

Authors and year	Source	Title article	How Facebook was used
Mkono, M., & Hughes, K. (2020)	<i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i>	Eco-guilt and eco-shame in tourism consumption contexts: Understanding the triggers and responses	Reviews of posts on Facebook stories regarding Greta Thunberg attendance to the U.N. Climate Action Summit in August 2019.
Möllera, C., Wang, J., & Nguyen, H.T. (2018)	<i>Tourism Management</i>	#StrongerthanWinston: Tourism and crisis communication through Facebook following tropical cyclones in Fiji	Facebook posts have been used to communicate with customers. Both, the communication strategy and reaction of customers have been analyzed.
Villamediana, J., Küster, I., & Vila, N. (2019)	<i>Annals of Tourism Research</i>	Destination engagement on Facebook: Time and seasonality	Engagement of customers following posts on Facebook is analyzed
Marder, B., Archer-Brown, C., Colliander, J., & Lamber, A. (2018)	<i>Journal of Travel Research</i>	Vacation Posts on Facebook: A Model for Incidental Vicarious Travel Consumption	Holiday makers Facebook posts are analyzed to identify their consumption behavior

Source: The authors.

the fact that comments from users have been deleted from the different pages. The following message can be read on the FB pages: “*Most Relevant is selected, so some comments may have been filtered out.*” As reviews on social media impact on the image of an organization (Hudson & Hudson, 2017; Martin-Fuentes, Mateu, & Fernandez, 2020); influenced customers decision-making (Lee, Jai, & Li, 2016; Martin-Fuentes et al., 2020); and also because service quality and safety play an important role in religious tourism satisfaction (Verma & Sarangi, 2019), it is not farfetched to assume that the deleted comments were negative, and/or not appropriate.

### **Coding and data analysis**

A coding system is compiled, guided by Pirutinsky et al. (2020) description of self-reported impacts of COVID-19 on various life domain of Orthodox Jews in the USA. From the twelve thematic categories (self-reported impacts), two of them are relevant to the data collected namely “faith in God” and “strong emotions.” To offer a higher degree of specificity to the study, both relevant themes are unpacked into more specific themes: “thanking God for all his blessings” and “request for all kinds of help” (for “faith in God”); “interjections” and “complaints” (for “strong emotions”). As for “COVID-19 and online delivery of the event,” it was chosen to highlight the number of verbatim relevant to the study, but also to justify the low number of verbatim selected for the study.

NVIVO (Table 3) is used to code the verbatim. As a software, NVIVO supports qualitative data analysis, as well as thematic analysis (Brunt et al., 2017), via data coding (Brunt et al., 2017), which fleshes out meaningful information (Fan, Zhang, Jenkins, and Tavitiyaman (2017).

To analyze and discuss the results of the netnographic approach used in the second part of this study, the *Motivation Opportunity Ability (MOA) model* is applied. *Motivation* is what pushes someone to do something, and this motivation is in general triggered by the benefits this person or the community as a whole expect (Jepson et al., 2013). *Opportunity* is about what is put in place to facilitate the involvement or participation in something. This requires a supportive framework by leaders of the community (Jepson et al., 2013). Last but not least, *ability*, which includes awareness, experience, knowledge, skills and accessibility to either the information, or the finance (Jepson et al., 2013). Initially designed by MacInnis and Jaworski, (1989), within the context of information processing, the MOA model has mainly been used in Human Resources Management (Cornett, 2020). It has also been applied in academia (Lai, Hsiao, & Hsieh, 2018), and in tourism research (Hung & Petrick, 2012).

## Results and discussion

Despite the fact that FB is an open space for self-expression (Abramson et al., 2015), that allows extensive posts (Mkono & Hughes, 2020), the results of this study can't be generalized. Indeed, "a study becomes relatable when there is enough background detail" (Hammond & Wellington, 2013, p. 82). As pointed out in Table 2, and in "Data collection," only a limited number of relevant verbatim were available. It is also worth highlighting that the verbatim are from all five FB pages.

### Application of the MOA model

#### Motivation

The online attendees who did not manage to attend the event as they would usually do, are genuinely missing the event. Among the posts/verbatim ((Italian version of the FB page) that can be read, are:

- I miss the cave so much ... I'll be back soon
- I would love a rosary crown from Lourdes, but I can't come to the Sanctuary
- I haven't been wondering if I'll ever get back there. The sense of peace I felt when I walked through the gate door at that moment I felt my soul, mind and heart rejoicing and regained the serenity and joy of the whole created a unique feeling
- I had the feeling of Getting into heaven thank you Madonnina for giving me this emotion that after 37 years I still remember and will never forget

The perception of the online attendees is in line with the Sanctuary, as in an interview, a senior member of the Sanctuary confirmed that the e-pilgrimage is not, and will not be a substitute for the usual way the event is

**Table 2.** Data collection sources.

Facebook page	Language	Nb. of Followers	Nb. of Likes	<sup>1</sup> Nb. people checked in Lourdes	Nb. of comments Analyzed (from July/August posts)
<a href="https://www.facebook.com/ndlourdes">https://www.facebook.com/ndlourdes</a>	French	815774	727730	171082	5 (barely any comments on the page is about COVID-19 or Online delivery of ceremonies)
<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Santuarionostrasignoradilourdes">https://www.facebook.com/Santuarionostrasignoradilourdes</a>	Italian	1354	1324	96	15 (barely any comments on the page is about COVID-19 or Online delivery of ceremonies)
<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Santuarionuestrasenoradelourdes">https://www.facebook.com/Santuarionuestrasenoradelourdes</a>	Spanish	1266	1227	1	20 (barely any comments on the page is about COVID-19 or Online delivery of ceremonies)
<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Santuariodenossasenhoradelourdes">https://www.facebook.com/Santuariodenossasenhoradelourdes</a>	Portuguese	669	651	10	20 (barely any comments on the page is about COVID-19 or Online delivery of ceremonies)
<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Sanctuaryofourladyoflourdes">https://www.facebook.com/Sanctuaryofourladyoflourdes</a>	English	211	135	0	50 (barely any comments on the page is about COVID-19 or Online delivery of ceremonies)

Source: The authors (data collected on 11.10.20)

<sup>1</sup>Facebook Check-Ins provide all the information a potential customer would look for – your location, ratings, and a link to your Facebook page for more details. More importantly, Facebook Check-Ins serve as a personal referral from one friend to another. By checking in, a Facebook user is endorsing a business. Facebook check-ins are typically seen by at least 200 friends of the person checking in (causely.com [Online]).

delivered (CNews, 2020). The findings of this study are also in line with Séraphin (2020, p. 27), New Future Proposition 1 (NFP1):

NFP1: Planned, live events, both personal and societal in scale and meaning, will always be prominent feature of civilization, in all societies and cultures. However, in time of pandemics or other crisis, live events might be perturbed, before a staggered returned to normal under certain conditions, and strict controls.

The fact that 80 million attended the event online (Le Figaro [Online]; Le Nouvel Obs, 2020), shows that faith, purpose and gateway are still major motives for attending the event. Before COVID-19, they were the main motives (Thomas et al., 2018).

### **Opportunity**

The analysis of the data revealed that online attendees were fully satisfied with the online delivery of the event but are missing the live traditional version of the event (as per preceded and further coming quotes).

Based on the fact the online event attracted more people than the usual live event, it could be argued that some of those new “followers” will potentially attend the live event in the future, what would be good for the economy of the entire area. This view is supported by the fact that when customers wants and needs are satisfied, due to positive emotions having

**Table 3.** NVIVO coding.

Thematic categories	Frequency
Request for all kinds of help	39
COVID-19 and online delivery of the event	30
Thanking God for all his blessings	13
Interjections	12
Complaints	4

Source: The authors.

been conveyed, it leads to repeat re-patronage behaviors, and positive (e)word of mouth (Drewery & McCarville, 2017).

Additionally, from an etymological point of view, it is worth highlighting the fact that a pilgrimage as a religious event is characterized by at least three main features: (1) a holy place for pilgrims to go (2) a journey carried out individually or as a group in order to reach this holy place (3) a goal, which is the encounter with God and/or potential healing (Frégosi, 2011). Being part of a group is an important part of the journey (Turner, 1969). The pilgrim must therefore join a group either just for the sake of the journey, or forever. This group is referred as “*communitas*” (Bernadou & Guinle-Lorinet, 2016; Schmitt, 1979). The online communities on social media are different from the “*communitas*” discussed by Turner (1969), Bernadou and Guinle-Lorinet (2016), and Schmitt (1979). COVID-19 has therefore offered the Sanctuary an opportunity to create a second “*communitas*,” and therefore, an opportunity to tap into two markets. The pandemic can consequently be seen as an opportunity (Gossling et al., 2021; Prideaux et al., 2020). This claim is substantiated with a quote from someone from Italy who attended the event online:

Virtual prayer is one thing but coming here is invaluable. It is a very powerful place of devotion, a place of absolute peace (Guénois, 2020a, 2020b).

It is also important to highlight that even though the event has been delivered online, it has not detracted believers to have faith in the ability of Lourdes to heal. Most of the self-expressions are requests for all kinds of help including healing:

-Holy Mary of Lourdes thank you so much for your guidance and give protection and all so to your Blessing. Holy Mary Heal the Crises of COVID virus. Amen  
(English version of the FB page)

### **Ability**

Thanks to the development of social media platform, a large number of people managed to attend the event online and were fully satisfied with the experience. Online participants appreciated the efforts put in place as discussed in *Motivation* and *Opportunity*, and as per their self-expressions:

I follow you every day! Great father Nicola!

(Italian version of the FB page)

In a nutshell, technology (social media) seems to have enabled the Sanctuary to deliver quite a memorable experience to attendees. For Powell (2012a, 2012b), memorable experiences are key for the success of an event.

All that said, even before the outbreak of COVID-19, the Sanctuary was using new technologies. Its first website was developed in 1996, and was one of the first one put in place by the Catholic Church (Bernadou & Guinle-Lorinet, 2016). Two years later, it was available in English, then in Spanish in 2000 (Bernadou & Guinle-Lorinet, 2016). As a result, Lourdes was described as a modern pilgrimage, by Patrick Marnham, in its eponymous book about Lourdes (Marnham, 1982). The current crisis has evidenced how important it is for long existing religious events (such as Lourdes), to embrace modern technology (Bernadou & Guinle-Lorinet, 2016; CNews, 2020). The pandemic has been a major accelerator (Sauvaget, 2020).

## Conclusion

### Key findings

Whether or not in a COVID-19 context, the premise that Lourdes pilgrimage “may be enacted in a postmodern duality that accepts the freedom of the individual but recognizes their need for experiences that are grounded in a sociohistorical truth” (Thomas et al., 2018, p. 412) is accurate. This study has indeed pointed out: (1) the dualistic nature of the event, as it can be delivered online and offline; (2) how important live events are for individuals. Live events will always be prominent. As for virtual events, they will be in addition to, and not a substitute for, live event experiences (Getz, 2012). This study has also provided evidence that external factors do not impact on the fundamentals of religious events. The pandemic has not impacted on the secular dimension of the pilgrimage as rituals remained untouched. As for the experiential dimension of the Pilgrimage, it has been mitigated with the use of online resources. As rites and rituals remained, the delivery of the event could therefore still be considered as traditional, but with a touch of modernity. Additionally, the faith and interest of believers are persistent, which are good for the Sanctuary, from a *Motivation* and *Opportunity* point view. The pilgrims’ engagement, involvement, and trust have remained the same thanks to the Sanctuary’s *Ability* to adapt to unforeseen, unpredictable and external factors. Research conducted by Pirutinsky et al. (2020, p. 2288), has also highlighted the fact that “positive religious coping, intrinsic religiosity and trust in God strongly



correlated with less stress and more positive impacts, while negative religious coping and mistrust in God correlated with the inverse.” The Proposition (P3) of Davies (2020) is accurate as the success of the e-pilgrimage was due to the high volume of online attendees. Cornelissen (2014), and Seabra and Paiva (2021), are also accurate when they argue that a strong relationship amongst stakeholders is needed in time of crisis.

### ***Conceptual contributions***

The online delivery of the event has not negatively impacted on the secular dimension of the pilgrimage; instead, it has proven that even such a big popular event could be delivered and enjoyed online by attendees. As a result, crisis either internal or external to an industry should not be perceived exclusively as negative. A Janusian thinking approach (which is to be related to ambidextrous management approach) is to be adopted in order to be able to perceive the opportunities brought by the (unpredictable) context. The results of this study are reminders of the importance of ambidextrous management, not only in the event industry, but also in related sectors. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach, by looking at the performance of the Sanctuary on the long term to see how accurate the oracular statements of this study have been. This study has also contributed to reduce the paucity of research on religious tourism (Verma & Sarangi, 2019). Equally important, the results are giving ground to this study to formulate the following future propositions (FPs):

FP1: Long existing religious event whether delivered online or offline will always be a prominent feature of civilization, in all societies and cultures.

FP2: If live religious events collapse, not only virtual religious events will offer believers an open space for self-expression, and self-actualisation, but will also help live events recover.

### ***Limitations of the study***

No matter the rigor of (peer-reviewed) publications, Hammond and Wellington (2013) are arguing that every research has some limitations. Taking the example of Getz (2012) Future Propositions regarding the event industry, Séraphin (2020) identified the context as a potential limitation for some of the propositions. In the same line of thoughts, Page (2019) argued that any research involving forecasting presents some limitations. As for this study, the main limitation is the validity. As expert sampling provides enhanced validity to research (Fox et al., 2014), it is therefore suggested here that qualitative interviews (on top of the already adopted method) would contribute toward this, as they quite often offer oracular evidence (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). Indeed, triangulation is a form of mixed methods, that

enables the investigation of a topic from different perspectives, and subsequently leading to a reasoned conclusion (Brunt et al., 2017).

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**Appendix 1.** Systematic literature review COVID-19/tourism and cognate sectors

Author(s)	Year	Title article	Journal	<sup>1</sup> OP	<sup>2</sup> RN	<sup>3</sup> FP	Key points
Baum & Hai	2020	Hospitality, tourism, human rights and the impact of COVID-19	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management			X	Impacts of COVID-19 on peacetime
Wen, Kozak, Yang & Liu	2020	COVID-19: potential effects on Chinese citizens' lifestyle and travel	Tourism Review			X	Impacts of COVID-19 on the future of the tourism industry
S�raphin & Dosquet	2020	Mountain tourism and second home tourism as post COVID-19 lockdown placebo?	Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes		X		In the post-COVID-19 lockdown context, second home tourism and mountain tourism could play the role of placebo.
Gossling, Scott & Hall	2020	Pandemics, tourism and global change: A rapid assessment of COVID-19	Journal of Sustainable Tourism			X	Impact of COVID-19 on the different sector of the tourism industry / strategy for the future
Higgins-Desbiolles	2020	Socialising tourism for social and ecological justice after COVID-19	Tourism Geographies			X	COVID-19 offers the tourism industry an opportunity to reinvent itself
Lapointe	2020	Reconnecting tourism after COVID-19: the paradox of alterity in tourism areas	Tourism Geographies	X			These changes points to a relinking of tourism to the needs of the host communities as part of a survival strategy in a time when there are no tourists, and could become, in the long run, a resilience strategy.
Zeng, Chen & Lew	2020	From high-touch to high-tech: COVID-19 drives robotics adoption	Tourism Geographies	X			Robotics, artificial intelligence, and human-robot interactions have gained an increased presence to help manage the spread of COVID-19 in hospitals, airports, transportation systems, recreation and scenic areas, hotels, restaurants, and communities in general.
Carr	2020	COVID-19, indigenous peoples and tourism: a view from New Zealand	Tourism Geographies	X			The COVID-19 pandemic's impact is predicted to be long-lasting with intergenerational impacts for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.
Ioannides & Gyimothy	2020	The COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to escape the unsustainable global tourism path	Tourism Geographies	X			The COVID-19 pandemic has halted mobility globally on an unprecedented scale, causing the neoliberal market mechanisms of global tourism to be severely disrupted.
Cheer	2020	Human flourishing, tourism transformation and COVID-19: a conceptual touchstone	Tourism Geographies	X			The concept of 'human flourishing' offers merits as an alternative touchstone for evaluating the impacts of tourism on host communities. Human flourishing has the potential to offer more nuanced sets of approaches by which the impact of

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## Appendix 1. Continued.

Author(s)	Year	Title article	Journal	<sup>1</sup> OP	<sup>2</sup> RN	<sup>3</sup> FP	Key points
							tourism on host communities might be measured. The challenge remaining is how to develop robust indices to calibrate human flourishing policy successes.
Prideaux, Thompson & Pabel	2020	Lessons from COVID-19 can prepare global tourism for the economic transformation needed to combat climate change	Tourism Geographies	X			Many of the lessons that emerged from the pandemic can be applied to strategies to deal with climate change.
Brouder	2020	Reset redux: possible evolutionary pathways toward the transformation of tourism in a COVID-19 world	Tourism Geographies	X			COVID-19 presents a once in a generation opportunity where the institutional pump is primed for transformation.
Everingham & Chassagne	2020	Post COVID-19 ecological and social reset: moving away from capitalist growth models toward tourism as Buen Vivir	Tourism Geographies			X	In relation to tourism, the pandemic provides an opportunity for reimagining tourism otherwise, away from exploitative models that disregard people, places, and the natural environment, and toward a tourism that has positive impacts.
Haywood	2020	A post-COVID future: tourism community re-imagined and enabled	Tourism Geographies			X	Such undertakings represent a 'coming together' of all stakeholders, a role that academicians are urged to embrace, especially through action research, curriculum change and creation of 'daring classrooms'.
Galvani, Lew & Perez	2020	COVID-19 is expanding global consciousness and the sustainability of travel and tourism	Tourism Geographies	X			The pandemic will stimulate growing numbers of people, businesses and governments to adopt new ways of thinking, behaving and operating that are more closely aligned with the goals of sustainable development.
Rowen	2020	The transformational festival as a subversive toolbox for a transformed tourism: lessons from Burning Man for a COVID-19 world	Tourism Geographies	X			As borders reopen and mobility and recreation recommence, the capacity of transformational festivals both within and beyond their highly porous time-spaces to transform their participants offer lessons for the blurring, if not the outright obliteration of the demarcation between guests and hosts.
Renaud	2020	Reconsidering global mobility – distancing from mass cruise tourism in the	Tourism Geographies	X			Host territories, relying on national and regional governance, should gradually ban or restrict the arrival of mega-cruise ships, implement

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**Appendix 1. Continued.**

Author(s)	Year	Title article	Journal	<sup>1</sup> OP	<sup>2</sup> RN	<sup>3</sup> FP	Key points
		aftermath of COVID-19					policies that promote the development of a niche cruise tourism industry (NCTI) with small ships and develop a fleet controlled by local actors.
Crossley	2020	Ecological grief generates desire for environmental healing in tourism after COVID-19	Tourism Geographies	X			In this context, animal reclamation of urban spaces can be identified as a motif of environmental hope that symbolizes life, regeneration and resilience, the understanding of which may contribute to the project of hopeful tourism in the post-COVID-19 era.
Niewiadomski	2020	COVID-19: from temporary de-globalisation to a re-discovery of tourism?	Tourism Geographies	X			The path of re-development and transformation which the global tourism production system will follow once the COVID-19 crisis has been resolved is yet to be determined.
Brouder, Teoh, Salazar,		Mostafanezhad, Pung, Lapointe, Higgins-Desbiolles, Haywood, Hall & Clausen	2020				Reflections and discussions: tourism matters in the new normal post COVID-19
Tourism Romagosa	2020	The COVID-19 crisis: Opportunities for sustainable and proximity tourism	Tourism Geographies	X	X	No	abstract provided No abstract provided
Nepal	2020	Travel and tourism after COVID-19 – business as usual or opportunity to reset?	Tourism Geographies	X			No abstract provided
Tremblay-Huet	2020	COVID-19 leads to a new context for the “right to tourism”: a reset of tourists’ perspectives on space appropriation is needed	Tourism Geographies				No abstract provided
Hall, Scott & Gossling	2020	Pandemics, transformations and tourism: be careful what you wish for	Tourism Geographies			X	It is concluded that the selective nature of the effects of COVID-19 and the measures to contain it may lead to reorientation of tourism in some cases, but in others will contribute to policies reflecting the selfish nationalism of some countries.
Edelheim	2020	How should tourism education values be transformed after 2020?	Tourism Geographies	X			Values and axiology are necessary components for successful and meaningful tourism education and research. They especially need to be revisited in considering the future of

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## Appendix 1. Continued.

Author(s)	Year	Title article	Journal	<sup>1</sup> OP	<sup>2</sup> RN	<sup>3</sup> FP	Key points
Cooper & Alderman	2020	Cancelling March Madness exposes opportunities for a more sustainable sports tourism economy	Tourism Geographies	X			higher education in a COVID-19 world. COVID-19 offers an opportunity to bring about an alternative, more sustainable sports tourism economy.
Cave & Dredge	2020	Regenerative tourism needs diverse economic practices	Tourism Geographies	X			Calls for a new relationship between tourism and capitalism have intensified as a result of COVID-19.
Stankov, Filimonau & Vujcic	2020	A mindful shift: an opportunity for mindfulness-driven tourism in a post-pandemic world	Tourism Geographies	X			Many see the COVID-19 pandemic as a turning point for tourism, a chance to reflect on the pressing environmental and socio-economic concerns of the industry, and an opportunity to pinpoint a more desirable direction.
Benjamin, Dilette & Alderman	2020	We can't return to normal": committing to tourism equity in the post-pandemic age	Tourism Geographies	X			A resilient post-pandemic tourism must be more equitable and just, in terms of how it operates, its effects on people and place, and how we as scholars teach, study and publicly engage the travel industry particularly in preparing its current and future leaders.
Pernecky	2020	Critical tourism scholars: brokers of hope	Tourism Geographies	X			The hope driving post COVID-19 visions of tourism is argued to lie in more thoughtful and responsible engagement with tourism, and in our ability to positively transform it.
Tomassini & Cavagnaro	2020	The novel spaces and power-geometries in tourism and hospitality after 2020 will belong to the 'local'	Tourism Geographies	X			This crisis has spread novel uncertainties and fears about the future of our world, but at the same time, it has also set the ground to rethink the future scenario of tourism and hospitality to bring about a potentially positive transformation after 2020.
Ateljevic	2020	Transforming the (tourism) world for good and (re)generating the potential 'new normal'	Tourism Geographies	X			With or without the global COVID-19 pandemic to promote and envision a meaningful and positive transformation of the planet in general, and tourism specifically, a wake-up call is long overdue.
Yang, Zhang & Chen	2020	Coronavirus pandemic and tourism: Dynamic stochastic general equilibrium modeling of infectious disease outbreak	Annals of Tourism Research		X		Model to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry

X

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## Appendix 1. Continued.

Author(s)	Year	Title article	Journal	<sup>1</sup> OP	<sup>2</sup> RN	<sup>3</sup> FP	Key points
Nanni & Ulqinaku		Mortality threats and technology effects on tourism	Annals of Tourism Research				It opens the door to future research on what tourism can do to help people when they are faced by mortality salience due to a series of events: pandemics, terrorist attacks, or natural disasters
Yu, Li, Yu & Zhou	2020	Communication related health crisis on social media: A case of COVID-19	Current issues in Tourism		X		Impacts of COVID-19 on customers' perception of tourism products and services
Chen, Huang & Li	2020	A content analysis of Chinese news coverage on COVID-19 and tourism	Current issues in Tourism			X	News coverage plays a significant role in the tourism industry. 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has severely affected the tourism-related businesses and has been featured in Chinese news coverage.
McCartney	2020	The impact of the coronavirus outbreak on Macao. From tourism lockdown to tourism recovery	Current Issue in Tourism			X	The economic consequences to the casino industry, which supplies 85% of the government's total tax revenues, have been dramatic, as casino revenues continue to spiral downwards by over 80% in both February and March.
Zheng, Goh & Wen	2020	The effects misleading media reports about COVID-19 on Chinese tourists' mental health: a perspective article	Anatolia		X		COVID-19 and its impacts on Chinese tourists' mental health + stigmatization of individual Chinese
Wen, Wang & Kozak	2020	Post-COVID-19 Chinese domestic tourism market recovery: potential influence of traditional Chinese medicine on tourist behavior	Anatolia		X		Tourism industry recovery is important to discuss amidst COVID-19. Findings can provide insight and possible solutions for stakeholders in various destinations.
Naumov,		Varadzhakova & Naydenov	2020				Sanitation and hygiene as factors for choosing a place to stay: perceptions of the Bulgarian tourists
Anatolia	X						How the tourism industry has been hit by the tourism industry
Rivera	2020	Hitting the reset button for hospitality research in times of crisis: COVID19 and beyond	International Journal of Hospitality Management		X		Opportunities for academic research tourism/COVID-19
Parnell, Widdop, Bond & Wilson	2020	COVID-19, networks and sport	Managing Sport and Leisure			X	Impact of COVID-19 on events
Hammami, Harrabi, Mohr & Krustrup	2020	Physical activity and Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Specific	Managing Sport and Leisure			X	COVID-19 and impacts on physical activities

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**Appendix 1. Continued.**

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Wen, Wang, Kozak, Liu & Hou	2020	recommendations for home-based physical training Many brains are better than one: the importance of interdisciplinary studies on COVID-19 in and beyond tourism	Tourism Recreation Research		X		Promotion multidisciplinary research into global health problems as a way to enhance social welfare.

Source: Séraphin (2020).

Date: Data collected on 26.05.20.

<sup>1</sup>Opinion paper.

<sup>2</sup>Research note.

<sup>3</sup>Full paper.