

Integrating Specialty Coffee into Pilgrimage Tourism: Cultural and Economic Opportunities in Makkah and Madinah

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ABSTRACT

The integration of specialty coffee in the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah offers a unique opportunity to enhance the visitor experience, drive economic growth, foster cross-cultural exchange, and promote sustainability. This qualitative study, based on interviews, site visits, and thematic analysis, explores how specialty coffee contributes to visitor satisfaction, local entrepreneurship, and cultural preservation. The findings indicate that the specialty coffee sector can promote economic diversification, generate employment, and foster business opportunities. By highlighting indigenous coffee varieties and preserving traditional practices, both cities have the potential to become recognized cultural destinations. Moreover, understanding consumer preferences can inform effective marketing strategies, helping to position Saudi specialty coffee in the global market and attract international coffee enthusiasts. The sector also supports sustainability through fair trade and environmentally responsible practices, benefiting local growers and advancing ethical standards. We conclude with recommendations for policy and business strategies that align with both local values and global tourism trends.

Keywords: Specialty coffee, Pilgrimage tourism, Urban development, Economic diversification, Cultural enrichment

ABSTRAK

Integrasi kopi spesialti di Mekah dan Madinah membuka peluang untuk meningkatkan pengalaman wisatawan, mendukung ekonomi lokal, dan melestarikan budaya. Berdasarkan wawancara, kunjungan lapangan, dan analisis tematik, studi ini menunjukkan bahwa sektor kopi spesialti mampu mendorong diversifikasi ekonomi, menciptakan lapangan kerja, dan membuka peluang usaha baru. Penonjolan varietas kopi lokal dan pelestarian praktik tradisional memperkuat potensi kedua kota sebagai destinasi budaya. Pemahaman preferensi konsumen juga dapat mendukung strategi pemasaran yang menempatkan kopi spesialti Arab Saudi di pasar global dan menarik wisatawan pecinta kopi. Selain itu, praktik perdagangan adil dan ramah lingkungan mendukung keberlanjutan serta memberikan manfaat bagi petani lokal. Secara keseluruhan, kopi spesialti berkontribusi pada pertumbuhan ekonomi, pertukaran budaya, dan penerapan standar etika yang lebih baik. Kami memberikan rekomendasi kebijakan dan strategi bisnis yang mendukung nilai lokal dan selaras tren pariwisata global.

Kata kunci: Specialty coffee, Ibadah Haji, Perkembangan Urban, Diversifikasi Ekonomi, Pengayaan Kultural

1. Introduction

In the bustling cities of Makkah and Madinah, where millions undertake sacred pilgrimage journeys, the emergence of specialty coffee presents a unique opportunity. These two holy cities, globally recognized for their spiritual significance, have experienced substantial urban development and infrastructure upgrades in recent years (Almulhim & Cobbinah, 2024; Thimm, 2023). Within this evolving landscape, the growth of the specialty coffee market offers a meaningful way to enhance the visitor experience while tapping into the sector's strong economic potential. This study aims to explore the multifaceted role of specialty coffee in Makkah and Madinah, with a focus on its contributions to visitor satisfaction, local economic development, and cross-cultural engagement.

Beyond their spiritual significance, Makkah and Madinah are also becoming sites of evolving cultural experiences, with specialty coffee emerging as a distinctive feature that enhances the overall visitor journey. As pilgrims and tourists seek moments of calm and reflection during their stay, the presence of thoughtfully designed specialty coffee shops offers a unique blend of comfort and indulgence that complements their spiritual pursuits (Gresco, 2022; Quickel, 2022). These spaces contribute not only to sensory enjoyment but also to the personalization of pilgrimage experiences, aligning with visitors' emotional and cultural expectations.

In parallel with its experiential appeal, the specialty coffee sector in these cities holds substantial economic promise. As highlighted in studies such as Maspul et al. (2023), tapping into the global demand for high-quality, ethically sourced coffee can support economic diversification, generate employment, and foster entrepreneurial activity. By investing in local specialty coffee businesses, Makkah and Madinah can simultaneously meet the refined tastes of a growing consumer base and stimulate grassroots economic growth—reinforcing their role as dynamic urban centers beyond religious tourism.

The specialty coffee sector also serves as a powerful platform for cross-cultural exchange, positioning Makkah and Madinah as emerging cultural destinations on a global scale. By promoting single-origin coffee varieties and preserving traditional preparation methods, these cities can celebrate and showcase their rich heritage to international visitors (Maspul & Almalki, 2023). In addition, gaining insight into consumer preferences and behaviors can help shape strategic marketing efforts that elevate the profile of Saudi specialty coffee globally, enhancing the image of Makkah and Madinah while attracting coffee enthusiasts from diverse backgrounds.

Equally important is the opportunity to align the growth of the specialty coffee market with broader sustainability goals. Ethical sourcing, fair trade practices, and environmentally responsible operations—such as sustainable supply chains and waste reduction initiatives—can strengthen the sector's contribution to both local and global sustainability agendas. As noted by Jaén et al. (2021), these practices not only benefit coffee growers but also appeal to socially and environmentally conscious consumers. By embedding such values, Makkah and Madinah can demonstrate a commitment to ethical consumption and sustainable tourism.

This study highlights the strategic importance of expanding the specialty coffee sector in these sacred cities, not only to enrich visitor experiences and economic vitality but also to support ethical, cultural, and environmental priorities. In doing so, Makkah and Madinah can set a compelling example of how modern lifestyle trends can be thoughtfully integrated into religious tourism contexts.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the expansion of the specialty coffee market in Makkah and Madinah. These two cities were purposively selected as the research setting due to their dual role as major religious destinations and emerging urban centers with increasing cultural and economic diversification. The focus on Makkah and Madinah also reflects the growing integration of modern consumer experiences, such as specialty coffee, within the context of pilgrimage tourism.

2.1. Participants and Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six informants, consisting of two local baristas, who provided perspectives on customer preferences and day-to-day operations; two coffee roasters, who contributed insights on supply chains, sourcing, and product quality; two coffee shop owners, who discussed business strategy, challenges, and market trends. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevant expertise and firsthand knowledge of the specialty coffee industry in the local context. All interviews were conducted in-person at the participants' respective places of work in Makkah and Madinah. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in either Arabic or English, depending on participant preference. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed for analysis. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and gave informed consent prior to participation. Identities were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

2.2. Site Visits, Observations, and Document Review

In addition to interviews, direct observations were conducted in six specialty coffee establishments across both cities. The observations focused on aspects such as shop design, menu offerings, customer demographics, service flow, and location relative to religious landmarks. Field notes were taken to document visitor behavior and the ambiance of each venue, contributing to a richer understanding of how specialty coffee fits within the broader visitor experience. To contextualize the findings, a review of secondary data sources was conducted. This included academic literature, industry reports, business case studies, and media publications on specialty coffee, tourism, urban development, and Saudi cultural policies. These sources helped establish a theoretical foundation and supported the interpretation of qualitative findings.

2.3. Data Analysis

All qualitative data—interview transcripts, field notes, and document summaries—were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Coding was conducted manually, and themes were refined iteratively to capture the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of specialty coffee in the study context.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Urban Transformation and Cultural Emergence

Makkah and Madinah, the two holiest cities in Islam, hold deep religious significance for Muslims around the world and attract millions of pilgrims annually for Hajj and Umrah (Niu, 2023; Kayal, 2023). As the scale of pilgrimage continues to grow, both cities have undergone significant urban development to accommodate the rising number of visitors. These transformations include infrastructure upgrades, modern amenities, and the emergence of new lifestyle elements—most notably, a specialty coffee culture (Alanzi, 2023; Arif & Aldosary, 2023).

The integration of specialty coffee into these sacred urban environments reflects a subtle yet meaningful shift in the visitor experience. Coffee shops now serve as welcoming spaces where pilgrims can pause, reflect, and engage in sensory enjoyment without departing from the spiritual atmosphere of their journey (Maspul, 2023). These venues offer not only physical comfort but also contribute to a modern urban identity that harmonizes with religious values.

This transformation can be interpreted through the lens of sacred tourism and place branding theories. Sacred tourism explains how the spiritual allure of religious sites shapes urban development by attracting faith-driven travelers (Christou, 2023; Jolliffe, 2016), while place branding highlights how

cities like Makkah and Madinah have deliberately positioned themselves as authentic yet modern pilgrimage destinations (Swain et al., 2023).

Although spiritual devotion remains the primary motivation for visiting these cities (Nabhan et al., 2023), the incorporation of contemporary cultural elements such as specialty coffee reflects an evolving landscape—one where tradition coexists with global consumer trends. This blending of spiritual purpose and urban modernization continues to shape the cultural, economic, and experiential dimensions of Makkah and Madinah.

3.2 Urban Development and Infrastructure

Urban development and infrastructure improvements in Makkah and Madinah have been central to accommodating the growing number of pilgrims and enhancing the overall tourism experience. Both cities have undergone substantial transformations to meet global tourism demands while ensuring visitor comfort and accessibility.

In Makkah, the expansion of the Grand Mosque (Al-Masjid al-Haram)—Islam’s holiest site—represents one of the most significant projects. This initiative added new courtyards, prayer areas, and circumambulation paths to ease congestion and support the smooth flow of worshippers, especially during peak pilgrimage seasons (Lestari, 2023; Wiryomantoro, 2023).

Another prominent feature of Makkah’s modernization is the Abraj Al Bait Clock Tower. This towering structure symbolizes the city’s embrace of modernity and offers integrated amenities such as luxury apartments, shopping centers, and prayer facilities (Maneval, 2020; El-Refai & El-Habashi, 2021), underscoring efforts to diversify services for visitors.

Madinah has followed a similar path, focusing on expanding the Prophet’s Mosque (Al-Masjid an-Nabawi) to accommodate more worshippers. New courtyards and facilities have been developed to ensure a comfortable and spiritually enriching environment for guests (Alammash et al., 2021; Waheeb, 2023).

These developments reflect a broader global trend. Cities like Dubai, Paris, London, and New York have invested heavily in iconic landmarks, transportation networks, and cultural infrastructure to enhance tourist appeal (East & Africa, 2023; Ebejer, 2021; Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak, 2020).

The initiatives in Makkah and Madinah, which centered on expanding sacred spaces and offering modern amenities, demonstrate a commitment to blending religious heritage with world-class infrastructure. These efforts position both cities among leading global destinations that prioritize visitor experience through thoughtful urban design.

3.3 The Role of Specialty Coffee in Enhancing Tourism Experience and Local Economy

The emergence of specialty coffee culture in Makkah and Madinah has added a distinctive layer to the pilgrimage experience, blending sensory pleasure with cultural refinement. Rooted in the global "fourth wave" coffee movement, this trend emphasizes high-quality beans, artisanal roasting, and skilled brewing (Bjerde, 2023; Maspul & Almalki, 2023). Local roasters such as Kiffa Coffee Roaster, Camel Step, and Brew 92 have played a key role in popularizing gourmet coffee in these cities, showcasing the craftsmanship of local growers through the use of single-origin beans and precise roasting techniques (Fischer, 2022; Pavlovic et al., 2021).

This movement reflects a broader shift toward economic localization, where local businesses retain greater value by managing the supply chain from bean to cup—unlike traditional global models. According to dependency theory (Prebisch, 1950), developing economies are often confined to raw material exports. In contrast, Makkah and Madinah’s specialty coffee scene empowers local entrepreneurs and farmers, strengthening community-based value chains.

From a tourism perspective, specialty coffee offers more than a beverage—it creates immersive, culturally rich experiences. Guided by the concept of experiential consumption, today’s visitors seek authenticity, ambiance, and sensory engagement. Specialty coffee shops deliver this through carefully designed spaces that invite rest, reflection, and emotional connection (Pine II, 2020; Derrval, 2022; Gilovich & Gallo, 2020; Maspul, 2023b).

Economically, the tourist multiplier effect highlights how such cafés contribute to local development by creating jobs, supporting regional supply chains, and increasing income. Many source beans directly from Jazan and other local regions, advancing sustainable agriculture and fair trade, while enhancing quality control and farmer livelihoods (Ibnu, 2022; Winter et al., 2020). Moreover, these establishments contribute to destination branding, reinforcing Makkah and Madinah's identity as modern, ethical, and culturally authentic pilgrimage cities (Chen et al., 2021; Seyitoğlu & Alphan, 2021). In summary, the specialty coffee movement in Makkah and Madinah enriches the visitor experience, supports sustainable and inclusive economic development, and contributes to a globally resonant, locally rooted urban identity.

3.4 Specialty Coffee and Sustainability

Beyond quality, specialty coffee in Makkah and Madinah reflects broader sustainability goals, particularly those outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Local brands prioritize ethical sourcing, fair pricing, and direct trade partnerships, especially with Jazan farmers, while advocating for environmentally friendly farming practices (Maspul, 2023a). These efforts not only enhance product integrity but also promote social responsibility and economic equity by creating local jobs and retaining value within the region.

As a result, specialty coffee outlets contribute to sustainable urban tourism, offering pilgrims and visitors a space for relaxation, reflection, and cultural appreciation. The pleasant, thoughtfully designed environments of these cafés allow guests to pause between spiritual activities, engage their senses, and enjoy moments of connection. This harmony of tradition and modernity strengthens Makkah and Madinah's image as cosmopolitan cities that celebrate both religious heritage and contemporary values.

The integration of specialty coffee culture in these cities parallels similar developments in global tourism destinations, where quality-driven coffee experiences enhance the local brand. In Makkah and Madinah, however, this movement takes on deeper significance—supporting ethical consumption, enriching the pilgrimage journey, and reinforcing sustainable tourism in two of the world's most revered locations (Chang, 2021; Maspul & Almalki, 2023a; Ratten, 2021).

3.5 Empowerment and Socio-Economic Transformation

Viewed through Amartya Sen's capability approach, the specialty coffee sector in Makkah and Madinah serves as a catalyst for empowerment and inclusive development. These businesses go beyond offering beverages—they create employment, foster entrepreneurship, and cultivate social spaces where cultural expression, personal growth, and economic participation intersect.

This empowerment dynamic is especially significant in sacred cities, where commercial activity must balance economic vitality with religious and cultural values. Specialty coffee shops successfully navigate this space, becoming community anchors that offer both opportunity and meaning within an environment of spiritual significance.

The rise of specialty coffee culture has also transformed the tourism landscape. Pilgrims and visitors increasingly engage with expertly crafted coffee as part of their journey, enriching their overall experience with moments of rest, reflection, and sensory enjoyment (Bookman, 2014; Calero & Turner, 2020; Jolliffe, 2016).

Beyond enhancing visitor satisfaction, these cafés function as hubs for social interaction and cultural exchange. The act of drinking coffee becomes a shared experience that fosters connection among diverse groups, reinforcing a sense of belonging and community. Economically, the sector contributes to empowerment by supporting local supply chains, generating jobs, and collaborating with farmers—particularly in regions such as Jazan, to promote sustainable agricultural practices. These efforts drive income growth, improve livelihoods, and build a more resilient local economy.

Additionally, specialty coffee contributes to the evolving identity of Makkah and Madinah. By embracing global trends such as single-origin beans, ethical sourcing, and artisanal craftsmanship, these cities position themselves as modern, forward-looking destinations—while maintaining their spiritual core. This cultural and economic integration strengthens their appeal and ensures continued relevance in an increasingly competitive tourism landscape.

3.6 Clustering, Cultural Capital, and Shifting Consumer Trends

The development of specialty coffee in Makkah and Madinah is not only a commercial success but also a reflection of broader urban and cultural dynamics. Michael Porter's **cluster theory** offers a useful framework to understand how the concentration of coffee roasters and cafés in key urban zones has formed a vibrant ecosystem. This clustering effect supports related sectors such as barista training, equipment supply, and tourism services, reinforcing the cities' roles as emerging economic hubs in addition to their religious centrality.

Local SMEs like Bloom Coffee Roasters, Row, and Osar contribute to this ecosystem, diversifying offerings and strengthening local entrepreneurship. The resulting synergy fosters innovation, attracts investment, and integrates the specialty coffee sector into the wider urban economy. Beyond economics, the rise of specialty coffee signals a cultural shift in consumer identity. According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (2018), lifestyle choices—such as coffee preferences—reflect deeper values and social positioning. For younger Saudis and Muslim travelers, engaging with specialty coffee represents sophistication, ethical awareness, and a connection to local authenticity.

This trend aligns with the principles of conscious consumerism (Carrington et al., 2014), where consumers increasingly prioritize quality, sustainability, and transparency. With its focus on single-origin beans, artisanal preparation, and ethical sourcing, specialty coffee resonates strongly with these evolving expectations—positioning it as both a cultural and economic force in the urban development of Makkah and Madinah.

3.7 Placemaking and Urban Tourism Experience

Specialty coffee outlets in Makkah and Madinah also contribute to placemaking, transforming public spaces into meaningful areas for social connection and cultural engagement. Many cafés incorporate Islamic design, offer tranquil atmospheres, and are strategically located near pilgrimage sites like Masjid Al Haram and Masjid Nabawi. These establishments serve as places of rest and reflection, bridging modern consumer experiences with traditional values. The concept aligns with Jane Jacobs' idea of urban vitality (1961), where diverse local businesses enhance the attractiveness and sustainability of city life. Specialty coffee thus enriches the tourism experience and strengthens the cities' cultural fabric.

3.8 Specialty Coffee and the Principles of Islamic Economics

Integrating specialty coffee into the sacred tourism landscape of Makkah and Madinah presents a unique opportunity to advance Islamic economic values. These cafés not only meet global consumer demands but also reflect local cultural heritage—positioning themselves at the intersection of tradition and modern enterprise.

A key contribution of this integration is economic empowerment. The growth of specialty coffee businesses, including cafés and roasteries, creates opportunities for local entrepreneurs and professionals. This fosters a spirit of self-sufficiency, promotes small business development, and supports long-term economic growth—all of which align with Islamic economic principles that emphasize inclusive prosperity and community well-being.

Ethical trade practices are central to this model. By engaging in fair trade and maintaining direct relationships with local and international coffee farmers, specialty coffee shops can uphold the Islamic ideals of fairness (*adl*) and justice (*ihsan*). These practices ensure equitable compensation along the supply chain and contribute to the sustainable development of farming communities.

In addition, specialty coffee offers a platform for cultural preservation. By incorporating traditional coffee rituals, local storytelling, and Saudi design aesthetics, these businesses help maintain the spiritual and historical identity of the holy cities. This enriches the pilgrimage experience while celebrating the region's cultural legacy.

Economically, the sector contributes to diversification by expanding beyond traditional industries. With unique offerings and a growing global interest in specialty coffee, Makkah and Madinah can attract international coffee enthusiasts and position themselves as emerging destinations

within the global coffee tourism market. This not only strengthens the local economy but also aligns with Islamic economics' emphasis on balanced and sustainable development.

Finally, the fusion of specialty coffee and religious tourism enhances global visibility. By promoting Saudi coffee's unique flavors, brewing traditions, and cultural significance, Makkah and Madinah can participate in international markets while fostering cross-cultural dialogue. This dual positioning—as custodians of sacred heritage and participants in ethical global trade—demonstrates how Islamic economics can remain relevant in the context of modern, values-driven tourism.

3.9 Supporting Local Wisdom in Saudi Arabia's Coffee Culture

Implementing these measures not only enhances economic growth and the visitor experience but also supports the preservation and celebration of local wisdom in Makkah and Madinah—two of the most sacred cities in Islam. Within the context of Saudi traditions, specialty coffee shops can play a vital role in promoting cultural heritage through the following approaches:

1. Incorporating Traditional Coffee Practices. Specialty coffee shops can honor Saudi traditions by showcasing the Arabic coffee ceremony, *Gahwa*, which involves serving coffee using a *Dallah* (traditional pot) and *Finjan* (small cup). This allows visitors to experience the cultural richness of Saudi coffee rituals.
2. Highlighting Local Coffee Varieties. Regions such as Al-Baha and Asir are known for cultivating high-quality beans like Al-Khawlani. Featuring these local varieties helps preserve Saudi coffee agriculture while offering guests unique regional flavor profiles.
3. Promoting Arabic Coffee Etiquette. Educating visitors about customs such as serving coffee with dates—symbols of hospitality and generosity—encourages cultural appreciation and understanding.
4. Engaging Local Coffee Specialists. Involving Saudi coffee experts, such as Q-Graders or cultural ambassadors, in workshops or tastings can deepen visitor awareness of traditional brewing methods and coffee heritage.
5. Incorporating Saudi-Inspired Design and Aesthetics. Traditional architecture, Arabic calligraphy, and local art can be reflected in café interiors, creating immersive spaces that highlight Saudi identity and craftsmanship.
6. Hosting Cultural Events and Festivals. Organizing events during religious occasions like Ramadan, or storytelling sessions and exhibitions, helps showcase Saudi cultural diversity and coffee-related traditions.
7. Collaborating with Local Suppliers. Sourcing beans, tools, and materials from local producers not only supports the economy but also preserves traditional production techniques and values.

By integrating these elements, specialty coffee shops in Makkah and Madinah can elevate the visitor experience while safeguarding the region's cultural heritage. This fusion of modern hospitality and traditional wisdom enriches both the urban identity and the spiritual journey of visitors.

3.10 Challenges and Strategic Growth Opportunities

Despite its growth, the specialty coffee movement in Makkah and Madinah faces several challenges. Maintaining quality while scaling operations, competing with global brands, and securing skilled labor are ongoing concerns. However, these challenges also present strategic opportunities. Local businesses can differentiate themselves by emphasizing consumer education, ethical sourcing, and digital outreach. Partnerships with coffee-growing regions, academic institutions, and government bodies can further solidify the sector's foundation, ensuring long-term and inclusive growth. The practical implications derived from these findings are synthesized in a roadmap for stakeholders, as illustrated in Figure 1.

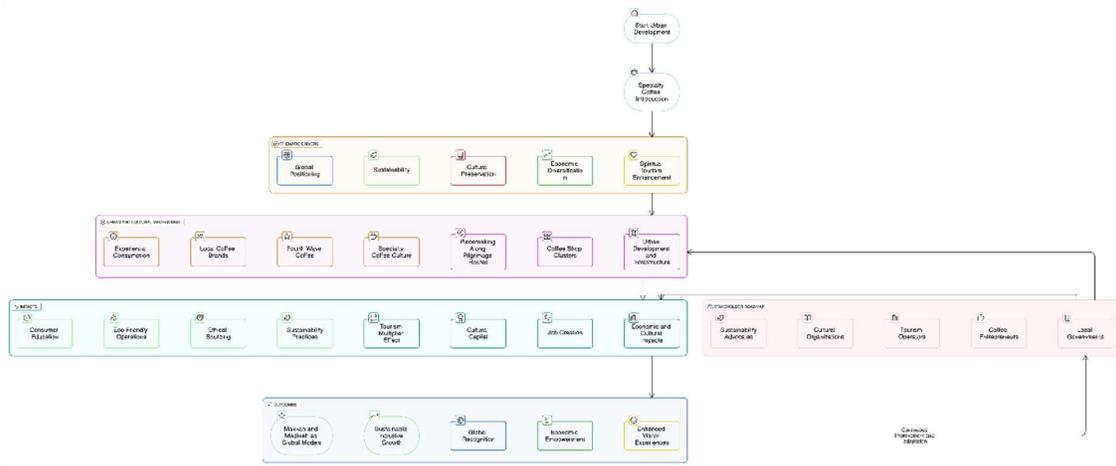


Figure 1. Roadmap for Stakeholders - Practical Implications

4. Conclusion

The ongoing urban transformation of Makkah and Madinah has positioned these sacred cities not only as global centers of pilgrimage but also as evolving hubs of cultural, economic, and social innovation. Guided by concepts such as sacred tourism and place branding, both cities have invested in infrastructure, including landmarks like the Abraj Al Bait Clock Tower and expanded mosque facilities, to meet the expectations of millions of annual visitors.

Among the most notable developments is the emergence of specialty coffee culture, which has added a new layer to the visitor experience, one that blends spiritual reflection with sensory engagement, cultural authenticity, and modern hospitality. Specialty coffee outlets now contribute to placemaking, tourism enhancement, sustainable practices, and socio-economic empowerment, all while aligning with Islamic principles of justice, fairness, and community well-being.

This integration reflects a broader shift toward economic localization and conscious consumerism. Local businesses and roasters have created ecosystems that support farmers, foster entrepreneurship, and position Makkah and Madinah as unique destinations within the global coffee landscape. At the same time, they serve as cultural spaces that preserve Saudi traditions and elevate the pilgrimage journey.

This study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a specific geographic and cultural setting. As such, findings may not be generalizable to other regions or markets. However, the depth of engagement with key stakeholders and the triangulation of multiple data sources contribute to the credibility and relevance of the findings for similar sacred or tourism-driven cities.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of specialty coffee on job creation, local identity, and economic diversification, as well as its role in sustainable urban tourism. Understanding visitor preferences, environmental implications, and international market opportunities will be key to developing policies and strategies that sustain this convergence of sacred tourism and specialty coffee.

Ultimately, the integration of specialty coffee into Makkah and Madinah's urban and cultural fabric illustrates a powerful model of how tradition and modernity can coexist. It reinforces the potential for religious destinations to embrace ethical innovation while preserving their spiritual essence, strengthening both Islamic economics and Saudi Arabia's position in global cultural tourism.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this article's research, writing, and/or publication.

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