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Gill, Chelsea; Packer, Jan; Ballantyne, Roy

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SPIRITUAL RETREATS AS A RESTORATIVE DESTINATION: Design factors facilitating restorative outcomes

ABSTRACT

Spiritual retreats provide an opportunity for restoration, transformation and personal development. This study utilizes Attention Restoration Theory to explore the specific environmental attributes, activities and experiences of spiritual retreats that lead to restorative outcomes. Data collected from 268 attendees across 17 spiritual retreats in Australia demonstrated that although there were different predictors for immediate and continuing restorative outcomes, three factors (being away, participating in spiritual activities and disconnecting from information technology) were important for both. Spending time in relaxation and reflection predicted immediate restorative outcomes, while social activities predicted continuing restorative outcomes. The practical implications of the findings for retreat managers concerned with providing restorative experiences for visitors are discussed.

Keywords: spiritual retreats; religious tourism; attention restoration theory; design principles; retreat experiences

1. INTRODUCTION

According to McKercher's (2017) taxonomy of tourism products, spiritual retreats are positioned within religious tourism which falls under the Personal Quest needs category. Spiritual retreats are common within most Eastern (e.g., Buddhist and Hindu) and Western (e.g., Christian) religious traditions, as well as being adopted as a secular approach to wellness tourism (e.g. spa and health retreats). Although retreats vary in length and purpose, they follow a similar overall format in that participants travel away from their usual environment to a retreat venue; spend time in private contemplation; may attend group sessions; have simple healthy meals provided; and may have some minimal interaction with other retreatants (Norman & Pokorny, 2017;). A retreat is "a place for quiet reflection and rejuvenation, an opportunity to regain good health, and/or it can mean a time for spiritual reassessment and renewal, either alone, in silence or in a group" (Retreats Online, 2007 as cited in Kelly, 2010, p.109). "Spiritual retreats can be non-religious or religious, but always include meditation in their various forms and focus on spiritual development or enlightenment" (Voigt, Brown, & Howat, 2010, p.547).

Engaging in activities that encourage reflection on life is considered important to maintaining wellbeing (Newman, Tay & Diener, 2014). The simplicity and quietness of a retreat fosters reflective activity and thus enhances wellbeing (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). Because retreats are usually held in a quiet setting away from normal routine and responsibilities, they provide opportunities for eudemonic leisure (Smith & Diekman, 2017), learning, training and reflection (Norman & Pokorny, 2017), personal transformation and development (Heintzman, 2013; Schutte & Dreyer, 2006) as well as restoration (Ouellette et al., 2005).

Previous research has explored the characteristics of retreat houses (O'Gorman & Lynch, 2008; Shackley, 2004) and retreat operators (Kelly, 2010), the benefits sought by visitors to spiritual retreats and the resulting outcomes (Ouellette, Kaplan & Kaplan, 2005; Voigt, Brown, & Howat, 2011). However, there has been no academic attention

given to the principles of spiritual retreat design. This current study addresses this gap in the literature by exploring the environmental attributes, activities and experiences of spiritual retreats that lead to restorative outcomes.

This study is informed by, and contributes to research literature in five areas: religious and spiritual tourism; tourism and wellbeing; Attention Restoration Theory; the Activity, Setting, Experience Benefit (ASEB) framework; and vacation fade-out effects.

1.1 Religious and spiritual tourism

Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism (Rinschede, 1992) and encompasses spiritual sites visited for religious or secular reasons (Raj, Griffin & Blackwell, 2015) as well as religious traditions and more modern spiritual movements (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). The term spiritual tourism is increasingly being used within tourism discourse and although there is no universally accepted definition, it arguably “comprises of travel where participants seek a range of desirable outcomes, religious and non-religious, and where the motive for action is generally underlined by the yearning for challenging, visceral, intellectual, transcendent and at times life changing or life affirming experiences” (Cheer, Belhassen & Kujawa, 2017, p.187). Spiritual tourism includes a broad spectrum of perspectives from religious to secular, as illustrated in Moufakkir and Selmi’s (2018) research of spiritual tourists in the Sahara desert who sought God or one’s inner self, solitude, self-development, psychological or physical wellbeing, physical emptiness or internal refreshment. Spiritual retreats are also provided from a variety of religious and secular perspectives (Voigt et al., 2010) and often include notions of health and wellbeing as a by-product if not the main purpose. Understandably, spiritual, religious and wellness tourism are often considered intertwined (Heintzman, 2013).

1.2 Tourism and wellbeing

Tourism not only provides the opportunity to switch off, escape from everyday routine and participate in hedonistic experiences, it is increasingly being considered as an intervention to promote wellbeing, health and happiness (Smith & Kelly, 2006; Smith & Puczko, 2009). “New forms of tourism that focus on health, rejuvenation and a sense of discovery and purpose for the self” are becoming widespread (Kelly, 2010, p.108) as destinations, resorts and retreat centres develop new wellness products to cater for consumer demand (Bushell & Sheldon, 2009).

In today’s fast-paced society, an important part of wellbeing is the opportunity for physical and cognitive restoration. “The term ‘restoration’ covers processes through which people recover resources that they have diminished in their efforts to meet the demands of everyday life” (Hartig et al., 2011, p.148). These include physiological, psychological and social resources. Providing a safe peaceful haven away from normal concerns and fostering a sense of community and bonding are recognized as important aspects of a retreat by both attendees and wellness retreat operators (Kelly, 2010). Literature has consistently demonstrated that restoration is most likely to occur in natural environments, and includes benefits such as increased ability to focus attention and engage in reflection (Herzog et al., 2003; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), improved mood and general affect (Hartig et al., 1991) and greater self-insight (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983).

1.3 Attention Restoration Theory

Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) has been used by tourism scholars to explore restoration within various settings such as vacations (Lehto, 2012), museums (Packer & Bond, 2010) and religious sites (Bond, Packer & Ballantyne, 2015; Herzog et al., 2010; Ouellette, Kaplan & Kaplan, 2005). It provides a useful theoretical framework for exploring the types of experiences and environments that lead to recovery from mental fatigue and thus facilitate restorative outcomes (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Attention Restoration Theory was used to illustrate the restorative outcomes evident at three types of spiritual retreats in Australia: educational retreats, non-silent reflective retreats and silent reflective retreats [author reference deleted]. Retreat attendees considered restorative and social benefits to be more valuable than spiritual or cognitive benefits. Because of its previous application within religious tourism literature, Attention Restoration Theory offers a valuable theoretical framework to investigate the environmental attributes, activities and experiences of spiritual retreats that lead to restorative outcomes.

According to Attention Restoration Theory, prolonged mental effort that is part of everyday life and work often results in a diminished capacity to focus attention, with consequences such as being unable to make decisions, solve problems, maintain healthy perspective and perform appropriately (Kaplan, 1995). Spending time in a restorative environment enables an individual to rest and recover as the mind is effortlessly engaged and thus not required to direct attention (Berto, 2005). Within such an environment, there needs to be physical, social and temporal characteristics that promote restoration (Kaplan, Kaplan & Ryan, 1998) while simultaneously “eliminating physical, social and temporal conditions that impose unwanted demands” (Hartig, 2003, p.103).

There are four qualities of a restorative environment (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989):

- *Being away* – being psychologically, and often geographically, removed from normal routines and distractions.
- *Fascination* - the environment effortlessly attracts and holds an individual’s attention.
- *Extent* - the content and structure of the environment and whether it is of sufficient scope to occupy the mind.
- *Compatibility* - there is resonance or alignment between the individual’s needs and what the environment offers.

Natural settings are often considered to be the most restorative environments as they contain all four dimensions (Berto, 2005; Kaplan, 2001). Intuitively, tourist activities would seem to provide an important context within which these four qualities are likely to be present. However, there has been little research into the restorative qualities of a vacation experience. One exception is Lehto’s (2012) pioneering study that applied Attention Restoration Theory to explore how various destination settings, environmental attributes and characteristics may contribute to restorative outcomes. Lehto (2012) created a scale to study the perceived restorative qualities of vacation destinations. The Perceived Destination Restorative Quality (PDRQ) scale was found to have a six-factor structure: the dimensions of *compatibility*, *extent* and *fascination* were confirmed; *being away* was represented by two separate factors (mentally away and physically away); and a new factor, *discord*, was identified. Further, these restorative environmental attributes were associated with tourists’ overall satisfaction with a destination and were more likely to be present in nature-based vacations than in city/urban vacations. A recent cross-cultural validation of the scale in a Chinese context

confirmed the construct dimensionality but found that urban rather than natural environments were more restorative for this population group (Lehto et al., 2017).

This current study builds on and extends Lehto's work by exploring how spiritual retreats can function as a restorative destination. As well as considering environmental attributes, it also explores how the activities participated in during retreat, and the subjective responses experienced by attendees, contribute to restorative outcomes. Previous research in religious settings (Bond et al., 2015) and heritage tourism (Beeho & Prentice, 1997) has considered these elements using the Activity, Setting, Experience and Benefit (ASEB) framework. Further work is needed to explore these concepts in relation to spiritual retreats, and thus inform the design of spiritual retreats that are effective in facilitating restorative outcomes.

1.4 The Activity, Setting, Experience and Benefit (ASEB) framework

Although religious tourism is predominantly an experiential product, research examining what visitors actually experience at religious sites is rare (Bond et al., 2015). In a study of visitors to three religious heritage sites in the UK, Bond et al. (2015) applied the ASEB framework to understand and explore the benefits of a visit. Their findings demonstrated that visitors rated the experience of 'relaxing and finding peace' more highly than other experiences, and considered restorative benefits to be more important than spiritual, cognitive and social benefits. Consequently, Bond et al. (2015) posited that while visits to religious heritage sites can be emotionally, cognitively and spiritually rewarding, the primary experience and subsequent benefit visitors seek is actually restoration.

Drawing from the above literature, as well as the environmental attributes proposed by Attention Restoration Theory, the current study examines the religious retreat activities, settings and experiences that are associated with restorative benefits for attendees.

1.5 Vacation fade-out effects

Although vacations often provide restorative experiences, some researchers have observed that the restorative benefits gained from a vacation rapidly vanish on return to the routine demands of life and work (de Bloom et al., 2013). Westman and Eden (1997) found that the beneficial impacts of a vacation subsided within a few days and were nonexistent within three weeks. Job demands once back at work contributed to the fade-out effect and eliminated the benefits of the vacation within one month. More recent investigation of the vacation cycle undertaken by Kirrilova and Lehto (2015) found that fade-out effects are highly individualized, being impacted by personal dispositions and one's level of existential authenticity and anxiety before, during and after a vacation. The current study will contribute to this literature by examining the extent to which re-immersion in a high stress environment after the retreat diminishes the maintenance of restorative benefits.

2. RESEARCH AIMS

The research reported here applies both Attention Restoration Theory and the ASEB framework to investigate the factors that lead to restorative outcomes for attendees at spiritual retreats. It aims to:

- 1) Identify the environmental attributes, activities and experiences that lead to immediate restorative outcomes during the retreat

- 2) Identify whether the same environmental attributes, activities and experiences predict continuing effects two weeks after the retreat
- 3) Explore the impact of post-retreat level of stress on the persistence of restorative outcomes

3. METHOD

3.1 Research context

Spiritual retreats are provided annually as part of the clergy support structure within many Christian religious traditions. These retreats usually provide an opportunity for respite, spiritual renewal and interaction with peers away from the workplace. The clergy retreat context thus offers an apt opportunity to investigate the factors that support restorative outcomes. Seventeen clergy retreats offered by four Christian denominations in Queensland, Australia agreed to participate in the research (see Table 1 below). In this study, the term ‘clergy’ meaning “a body of ordained ministers in a Christian church” (The Encyclopaedia Britannica) includes those serving in a role as priest, deacon, pastor or reverend (different terminology is used in each denomination). The duration of the retreats ranged from two to five nights, and the number of attendees ranged from 7 to 52. All retreats were held in purpose-built facilities such as retreat or conference centers or resorts located in natural countryside or beach settings. Previous research reported on the restorative benefits of these retreats [author reference deleted] and this current study builds upon that research to provide insight into the factors that lead to restoration.

Table 1: Clergy Retreats offered by the four denominations

	Anglican	Lutheran	Roman Catholic	Uniting Church
Number of retreats	7	1	6	3
Number of participating clergy	138	22	67	41
Type of retreat	educational non-silent reflective silent reflective	educational	non-silent reflective silent reflective	educational

3.2 Procedures and participants

The research employed an explanatory mixed-methods design, with qualitative data being used to enrich and explain quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Retreat attendees were approached by email one week before the retreat and invited to participate in the research. Participants were asked to rate their baseline levels of relaxation and stress before the commencement of the retreat. At the conclusion of each retreat, participants were invited to complete a hard-copy questionnaire about their retreat experiences. This yielded a total of 268 completed questionnaires with the majority of participants being male (67%) and aged over 50 (58%). Two weeks after the retreat, participants were invited to complete an online follow-up questionnaire that resulted in 181 responses (response rate = 67% of those who completed the on-site questionnaire). A two-week period was chosen as previous research suggests that the

beneficial impacts of a vacation usually fade out somewhere between a few days and three weeks after the vacation (Westman & Eden, 1997).

3.3 Instruments

The pre-visit questionnaire measured baseline levels of relaxation and stress. The on-site questionnaire measured restorative environmental attributes, retreat activities and retreat experiences, as well as immediate restorative outcomes. This questionnaire also included open-ended questions about experiences and restorative outcomes such as: what aspects most helped you feel refreshed and at peace; and did anything spoil your experience? The post-visit questionnaire measured the continuing restorative outcomes of the retreat. It also included questions about stressors encountered since the retreat, and open-ended questions about the benefits gained from retreat. One measure (Relaxed Mental State) was completed on all three occasions. Previously validated scales were used where possible to measure the six variable sets: Environmental attributes; Retreat activities; Retreat experiences; Immediate restorative outcomes; Continuing restorative outcomes; and Post-retreat levels of stress.

3.3.1 Restorative Environmental Attributes

The Perceived Destination Restorative Quality scale (Lehto, 2012) consisting of 30 items was modified slightly to fit the spiritual retreat context and included in the onsite questionnaire. A 7-point rating scale (1 = not at all, 7 = completely) was used, as in the original research. The sub-scale structure used in Lehto's research was retained, and each sub-scale was tested for internal consistency using factor analysis and scale reliability. The item "everything belongs here" was removed from the analysis due to very low communality (within the compatibility factor). It was confirmed that each subscale represented a single factor, with almost all factor loadings > .50. (There were four exceptions with factor loadings ranging from .388 to .464 but these items were retained in order to maintain consistency with Lehto's research.) Cronbach alphas for the six subscales were .799 for fascination, .684 for extent, .834 for mentally away, .722 for physically away, .683 for discord, .847 for compatibility.

3.3.2 Retreat Activities

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each of 13 activity types formed the focus of their retreat experience, using a 7-point rating scale (1 = didn't do this; 7 = the main activity). The activities were: physical activities, social activities, spiritual activities, mental activities, solitary activities, relaxation, entertainment, spending time in nature, personal development activities, spending time in reflection, work activities, non-work responsibilities and information technology.

3.3.3 Retreat Experiences

A shortened version of the Visitor Experience Checklist (Packer, Ballantyne & Bond, 2018) was included in the on-site questionnaire. This instrument was originally designed to capture dimensions of the visitor experience in visitor attractions such as museums, zoos and science centres. Eight dimensions relevant to spiritual retreats (peacefulness; togetherness; spiritual engagement; attention; reflective engagement; personal growth; excitement; and tension) were selected from the original 15 dimensions, with three words or phrases used to represent each dimension. Participants indicated which of the 24 words or phrases best represented what they had experienced in each of eight retreat contexts (teaching sessions, worship sessions, venue surroundings, bedroom-bathroom

facilities, meal times, spending time with colleagues, free time day one, free time day two). This yielded 64 different experience variables, each rated from 0-3.

3.3.4 Immediate restorative outcomes

Three aspects of the immediate restorative outcomes of the retreat were measured based on previous studies (Staats et al., 2003; Packer & Bond, 2010): Relaxation (the extent to which participants felt physically and mentally relaxed), Recovery (the extent to which the retreat environment had helped participants to rest and recover their cognitive capacity) and Reflection (the extent to which the retreat environment had helped participants to thoughtfully consider and make plans regarding their personal issues). These were measured using the Relaxed Mental State and Attention Recovery and Reflection Scales (described below). Although factor analysis demonstrated that these three constructs were conceptually distinct, the three variables were found to be highly inter-correlated ($r=.584, .666, .741$) and were thus combined into a single composite measure by taking an average of the three scores. This composite measure was used as the dependent variable in all analyses associated with Aim 1. The composite variable had a mean of 4.94 on the 7-point scale ($SD=0.794$), indicating that immediate restorative outcomes were rated above the mid-point of the scale and could be considered of a moderate level.

Relaxed Mental State (RMS) scale. An adapted and extended Restored Mental State scale (Packer & Bond, 2010) was used in the baseline, on-site and post-visit questionnaires. There were six items in the original scale: feeling refreshed, calm, thoughtful, tranquil, alert and positive. Three additional items (feeling exhausted, uninterested and tired) from the Swedish Occupational Fatigue Inventory (Ashberg, Garnberale & Kjellberg, 1997) were included to measure mental fatigue. A 7-point rating scale (1 = not at all and 7 = completely) was used for all nine items. Factor analysis confirmed the nine items yielded a single factor, with the three fatigue items loading negatively. A composite variable was created with fatigue items reverse scored.

Attention Recovery and Reflection scale. The on-site questionnaire included 13 items from the Attention Recovery and Reflection Scale (Staats et al., 2003), each rated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = completely) as in the original research.

3.3.5 Continuing restorative outcomes

Continuing restorative outcomes experienced two weeks after the retreat were measured using the Relaxed Mental State scale. The composite variable (post-visit RMS) was used as the dependent variable in analyses associated with Aims 2 and 3.

3.3.6 Post-retreat levels of stress

The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983) was included in the post-visit questionnaire. It contained 14 items relating to stressors experienced during the two weeks since the retreat (e.g., “In the last two weeks, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?”), each rated on a 5-point scale (1= never; 5=very often). A composite variable was formed (Cronbach alpha =.829) and the sample was divided into a high stress group (scores ≥ 3) and a low-stress group (scores < 3).

3.4 Data analysis

Regression analyses were used to determine the environmental attributes, activities and experiences that predict immediate restorative outcomes (Aim 1) and more continuing

effects (Aim 2). The three sets of predictor variables were entered into separate regression analyses to determine the best predictors in each set. The best predictors from each set were then entered in combination to determine the best predictors overall. A repeated measures ANOVA was used to assess the extent to which the level of post-retreat stress (high vs low) impacted on restorative outcomes (Aim 3). Responses to the open-ended questions helped to explain and interpret the quantitative findings for each of the research aims (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

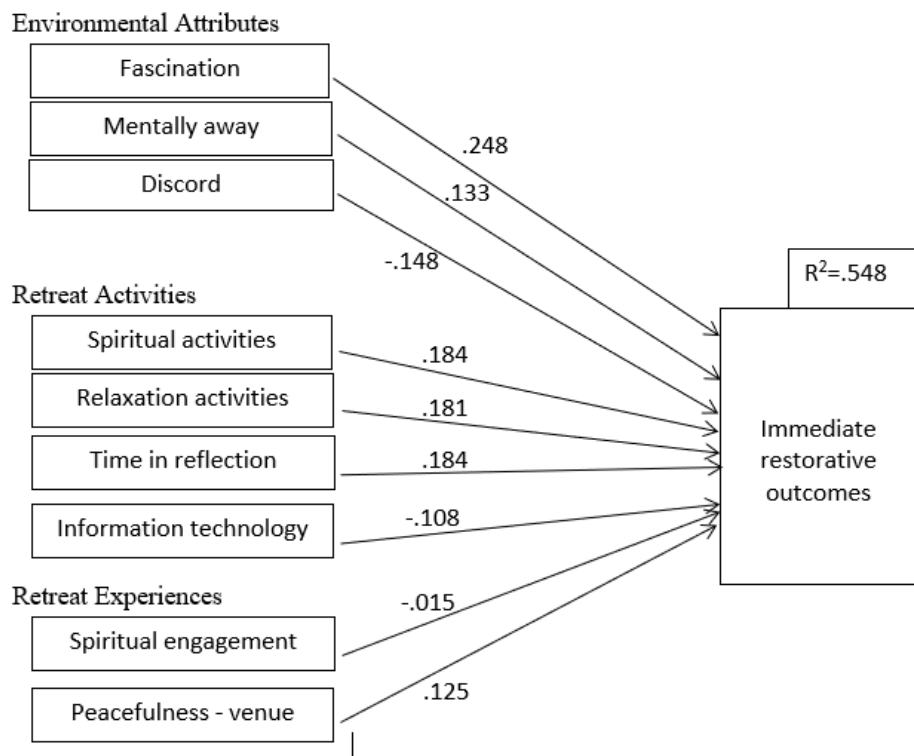
4. RESULTS

Quantitative results for the first two research aims are presented first, followed by the associated qualitative data. The quantitative and qualitative data are then presented for the third research aim.

4.1 Research Aim 1: Identify the factors that lead to immediate restorative outcomes

Three environmental attributes (fascination, lack of discord and being mentally away) were found to be significant predictors of immediate restorative outcomes. Four retreat activities (spiritual activities, spending time in reflection, relaxation and not spending time with information technology) and two retreat experiences (peacefulness in the context of the venue and spiritual engagement in the context of worship) were also identified. These ten variables were entered into a regression analysis with the composite measure of immediate restorative outcomes as the dependent variable (adjusted $R^2=.548$, $F=28.131$, $df=9$, $p=.000$). All remained significant predictors of immediate restorative outcomes, except for spiritual engagement in the worship context (Figure 1 below). The strongest predictors were the environmental attribute Fascination and engagement in Spiritual, Reflective and Relaxation activities.

Figure 1: Regression analysis for immediate restorative outcomes



4.2 Research Aim 2: Identify whether the same factors predict continuing effects two weeks after retreat

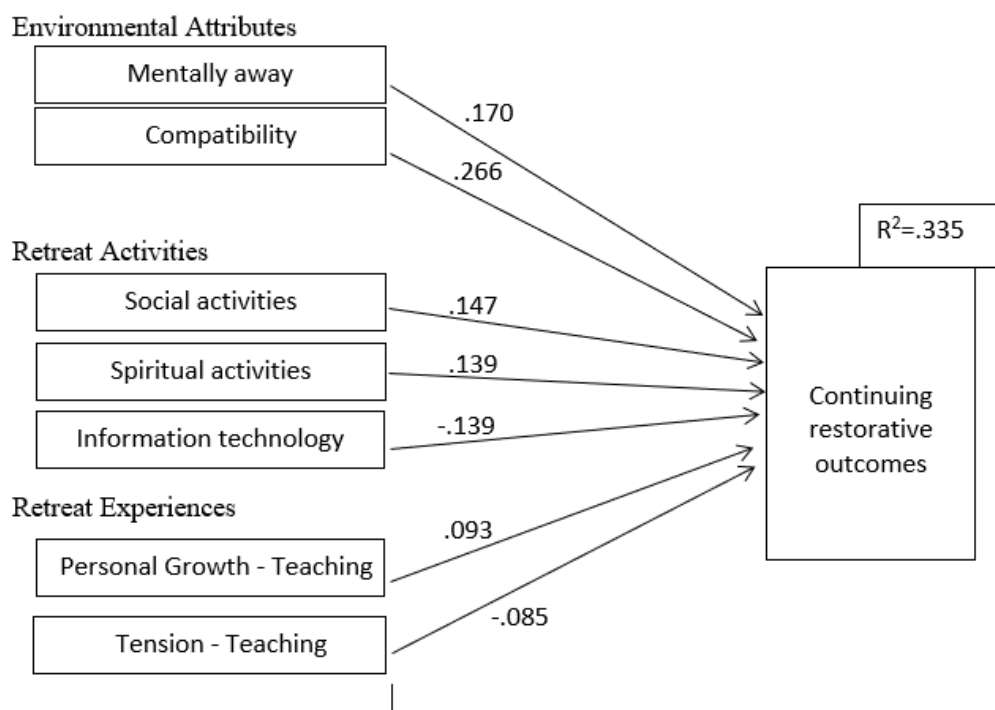
Participants who completed the post-visit questionnaire registered an overall decrease in their RMS scores from the on-site measurement, to the postretreat measurement two weeks later (Table 2). Repeated Measures ANOVA indicated that this was a significant reduction, $F(1, 166) = 9.603, p = .002, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .055$, with a small to medium effect size. Mean RMS levels had, however, remained higher than the baseline level, $F(1, 161) = 33.655, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .173$, with a medium-large effect size. Thus the restorative effects of the retreat had, on average, been largely but not fully maintained.

Table 2. Changes in mean RMS over time

Baseline RMS	On-site RMS	Post-retreat RMS
4.36	5.07	4.86
$F(1, 166) = 9.603, p = .002, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .055$		
$F(1, 161) = 33.655, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .173$		

In order to explore the factors associated with more continuing restorative outcomes, the same analyses used in Research Aim 1 were repeated for Aim 2, with post-visit RMS as the dependent variable. The independent variables entered into the overall regression analysis were two environmental attributes (mentally away and compatibility), three activities (spiritual, social and information technology), and two experiences (personal growth and tension, both in the context of teaching, see Figure 2 below). The environmental attributes compatibility and mentally away, and social activities were the strongest predictors of continuing restorative outcomes (adjusted $R^2 = .335, F = 6.848, df = 7, p < .001$).

Figure 2: Regression analysis for continuing restorative outcomes



Being mentally away, participating in spiritual activities and not engaging with information technology were predictive of both immediate and continuing restorative outcomes. While fascination was the strongest predictor of immediate restoration, compatibility was the strongest predictor of continuing restorative outcomes. Spending time in relaxation and reflection predicted immediate restorative outcomes, while social activities predicted continuing restorative outcomes. Peacefulness in the context of venue was predictive of immediate restorative outcomes, while personal growth as a result of the teaching contributed to continuing restorative outcomes. Participants' responses to the open-ended questions provide insights to help explain these findings. These are presented below according to the three categories of independent variables (environmental attributes, retreat activities and retreat experiences).

4.3 Research Aims 1 and 2: Qualitative analysis

4.3.1 Environmental attributes

According to the quantitative analyses, **fascination**, **being mentally away** and **discord** were the strongest predictors of immediate restorative outcomes (the latter having a negative relationship with restorative outcomes). Fascination was evidenced by the physical retreat setting in the natural environment which stimulated participants' senses and enabled restorative outcomes to transpire. As their attention was captivated by the environment, they began to feel refreshed:

'The location – hearing the waves and walking on the beach is a great start to feeling refreshed and at peace';

'The environment refreshed me'.

The spaciousness of the physical environment was particularly appreciated by participants and assisted in their restoration - *'The spaciousness of place and people'* and *'lots of space with not many people'*. While the physical setting was important, the act of being mentally away on retreat, *'getting away from routine and busy schedules'* and the *'freedom from responsibilities'* was also crucial and created the time and space for restorative outcomes to unfold.

The attribute of discord was mentioned by a few participants in relation to the program sessions and social interactions with other retreat attendees. At some retreats, the program sessions seemed fragmented as participants noted *'a lack of program information clarity'*; the *'sessions were disconnected and I had no sense of spiritual direction'*, while another identified the sessions as *'disjointed and [it was] hard to see the journey we were on'*. Such discord had a negative impact, whereas participants felt more restored and at peace when the sessions had an *'integrated theme, presentation and activities'* and were *'easy to understand and assimilate'*. Discord was also mentioned in relation to social interactions, e.g., *'some participants were too noisy and offensive'*; *'relating with people who don't share the same viewpoints'* and *'occasional conversations with particular clergy were a little affronting'*. These incidents of dissonance negatively impacted on restorative outcomes. *'A few people socialized too much, disturbing other's reflection and silence'*. Consequently, some participants responded intentionally to avoid further disharmony - *'two rude men who are also priests – but I tried to stay away from them'*. The negative relationship between discord and restorative outcomes could also be interpreted as a positive relationship between a sense of harmony and restorative outcomes as participants frequently espoused notions of *'connection'* *'support'* and *'community'* as contributing to restoration.

Compatibility was the strongest quantitative predictor of continuing restorative outcomes. Some participants were aware of what they needed or wanted from the retreat even before it began, and the ensuing retreat experiences met their expectations. For instance, one participant needed quietness and time to reflect:

'I was in great need of a time of quiet and reflection when I went on retreat. I believe I had that experience. It certainly helped me cope with what was a fairly daunting workload on my return'.

In contrast, another participant sought mental and spiritual stimulation:

'I enjoy retreats most when they have items that stimulate me intellectually and spiritually. There were items in the program which did both for me'.

A number of participants mentioned that the retreat experiences had fulfilled their needs, despite participants' differing requirements and expectations. In order to accomplish this, the program needs to be flexible, well-organized and balanced, as noted by the following participants:

'I found there was sufficient flexibility within the retreat experience to meet my requirements';

'It was a well-organized retreat with very little pressure or intruding expectations and I was well satisfied with it'.

Compatibility between the retreat environment or program, and participants' perceived needs, allows participants to feel comfortable, relax, and gain the greatest benefits from the retreat experience:

'There was very little that I would want to change about the structure of the retreat: I really appreciated the freedom that we had to set our own timetable for the majority of each day.'

When participants feel that the retreat is not meeting their needs, or that unwanted aspects of the program have been forced on them, they are less likely to achieve lasting benefits from their time at the retreat:

'I find the current trend [for the retreat] to be inadequate, providing no benefits for my ministry. I go only because I am compelled to; I go elsewhere at my own expense in order to gain what I need';

'It was too busy, even the 'free time' was structured and set and didn't allow personal options.'

4.3.2 Retreat Activities

Engaging in **spiritual and reflective activities** were the strongest predictors of immediate restorative outcomes. Spiritual activities, in particular the teaching and worship sessions and quiet times, helped participants to feel refreshed and at peace. A variety of positive responses were evoked from these spiritual activities. Some found the teaching and worship sessions *'positive and encouraging'*, *'inspiring'* and *'challenging'*, while others felt *'good and uplifted by speakers'*. The spiritual activities afforded participants the *'opportunity for quiet space'* and *'time to ponder and reflect'*. They greatly appreciated not only *'the easy pace'* but also the *'time alone'* and *'space to myself'*. It seems that personal space is fundamental to reflection and restoration. Having *'the space for self-reflection and rest'* and *'quiet times of reflection and with no agenda'* were perceived as essential. Indeed, the themes of space and time were often associated with quietness and reflection. Such reflective opportunities enabled a *'remembering [of] positive experiences'*, and one participant noted that it gave *'the opportunity to reassess priorities in relation to tasks that confront me in my daily work'*. At times, the opportunity for deep reflection resulted in feeling challenged:

*'I could go a little deeper into myself and could see what kind of person I am – I realized that I need changes';
'reflection about my need to present as being 'busy' – and the direction to deal with that reflection'.*

Thus, even though reflection was at times challenging, it provided a *'great opportunity for self-discovery'*.

Interestingly, **social activities** predicted continuing, rather than immediate, restorative outcomes. This is particularly noteworthy given the social context of restoration has not been previously well researched (Staats et al., 2003). Participants' comments suggested that the connections and relationships developed during the retreat fueled and encouraged ongoing social support after the retreat and led to continuing restorative outcomes. Lighthearted things like *'laughter'* and *'the social occasions'* were helpful to participants, as they *'enjoyed being with others'* and even *'the smiles on the faces I met made me feel good'*. Talking with peers enabled participants to feel encouraged and connected. Having *'a chance to talk about things that are happening for me and them'*, being *'encouraged by others'*, and feeling a *'greater connection to colleagues'* fostered restorative outcomes. The sense of comradeship and connection developed through such interactions was very important for participants, and not only resulted in *'a strong bond with other attendees'*, but also acceptance of the true self: *'the acceptance of my peers - the space to be however and whoever I am'*. At a deeper level, *'sharing a common journey with peers'* and the notion that someone else understands the situation seems to be a profound longing expressed and valued by participants. It was *'good to connect with colleagues and discover (again) we are all going through similar things/challenges'*, as there was *'agreeance in struggles/overload from daily work'*. Recognition of the similar experiences shared within this vocation gave participants *'some useful insights from conversations with colleagues'* as well as *'a sense of belonging to something bigger than myself'*.

Although **disconnecting from information technology (e.g. phones and computers) and work responsibilities** facilitated restorative outcomes, some found the magnetism of work demands too much to resist. For instance, the *'message I received from email'* and *'having to attend to outside calls on my time'* required a conscious decision to permit or at the very least entertain the interruptions, rather than completely disconnect. Within this vocation, often the interruptions are not trivial, but actually matters of life and death, making it very challenging for clergy to disconnect:

'I fielded calls every day for funerals the next week – I didn't switch off from the parish'.

Another participant noted

'having to still organize a funeral – didn't spoil but interrupted [the retreat experience]'.

Merely thinking about the work that would require attention once the retreat was over also interrupted the onsite experience:

'being so tired from lack of sleep – knowing there was so much work which needed to be caught up when I leave because of various work deadlines'.

Thus not being able to disconnect from work responsibilities limited the full realization of restorative outcomes.

4.3.3 Retreat Experiences

Experiencing peacefulness, particularly as a result of the venue and spacious physical environment, resulted in immediate restorative outcomes as well as a variety of other positive feelings. For example, some found the **peacefulness of the venue** led to a sense of comfort and reassurance:

‘the centre is a place of peace and harmony and beauty that is both reassuring and comforting’;

‘the surroundings and the arrangements made me more comfortable’.

Others noted feeling ‘good being in a relaxed and serene place’ and ‘a sense of privilege to be in such a peaceful environment’. Thus, the physical retreat setting elicited a variety of deep positive feelings and emotions,

‘it is such a beautiful part of the world, which contributed significantly to me feeling loved’.

Experiencing **personal growth as a result of the teaching sessions** predicted continuing restorative outcomes. The sessions, being ‘encouraging and confronting at the same time’, coupled with the retreat director’s ‘care’ and ‘encouragement’ resulted in increased self-acceptance and confidence as it ‘boosted my confidence’, and ‘helped me be more accepting of myself’. The new insights and knowledge that participants gained could be implemented into their work context after the retreat and when these related to maintaining wellbeing, were able to contribute to continuing restorative outcomes. For instance,

‘the session on clergy well-being was very informative and helpful – hopefully will be beneficial in future ministry’;

‘the theme of the retreat and the presentation of the preacher were useful for improving my spiritual life – I did get some insights’.

The teaching sessions not only ‘encouraged and challenged’, they were also ‘thought-provoking and down-to-earth’. This meant that participants ‘could relate to the talks given’, and gain ‘new insights from the learning activities’ as well as fresh ‘insight into my present role’. Because ‘the sessions are easy to understand and assimilate’, it inspired longer term application and personal growth and ‘gave me hope for the future’.

4.4 Research Aim 3: Explore the impact of post-retreat level of stress on the persistence of restorative outcomes

4.4.1 Quantitative analysis

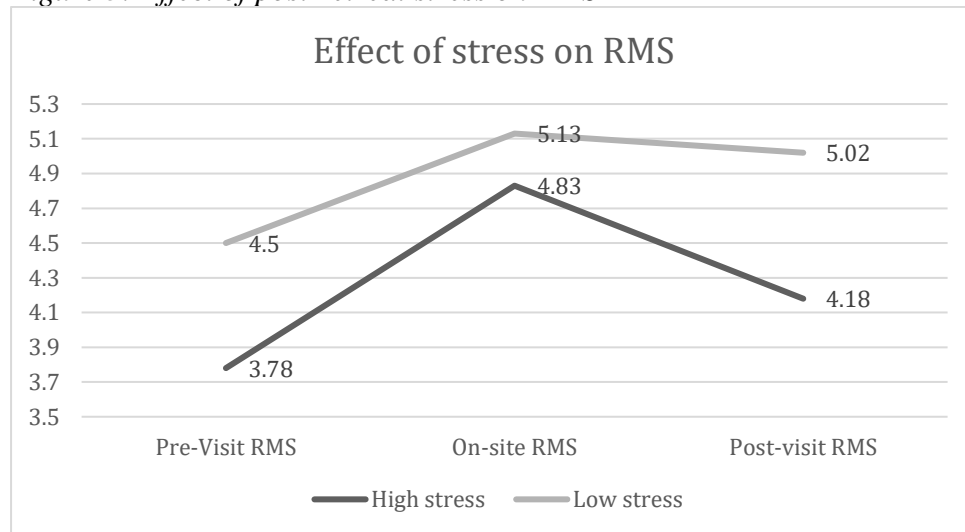
The sample was divided into a high stress group (n=31) and a low stress group (n=132). A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted with time as the within-subjects factor (RMS measured onsite and post-visit) and high vs low stress as the between-subjects variable. There was a significant main effect of time on RMS, a significant main effect of stress (.), and a significant interaction effect (Table 3). These effects, and the relevant mean scores, are illustrated in Figure 3. Under conditions of low post-visit stress, there was only a minor decrease in RMS between on-site and post-visit measures. Under conditions of high post-visit stress, there was a much larger decrease in RMS, from on-site to post-visit. Interestingly, those in the high post-visit stress group reported a lower RMS both on-site (immediately after the retreat) and pre-visit (before the retreat commenced) than those in the low post-stress group, suggesting that these stressors may have been active in influencing the participants’ mental state before and during the retreat, as well as after the retreat. (The pre-visit means have been added to Figure 3 to aid interpretation.) The repeated-measures ANOVA was re-calculated with pre-visit

RMS as a covariate, and both the main effect of stress and the interaction effect remained significant.

Table 3. Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA

Source	F (df), Sig.	partial η^2
Within-subjects effect of TIME	F[1, 161] = 20.029, $p < .001$.111
Between-subjects main effect of STRESS	F[1, 161] = 14.679, $p < .001$.084
Interaction effect TIME x STRESS	F[1, 161] = 10.337, $p = .002$.060

Figure 3: Effect of post-retreat stress on RMS



4.4.2 Qualitative analysis

In the follow-up questionnaire, participants were asked if there were any significant stressors in their personal or work life since retreat that had impacted on the benefits gained at retreat. Although a few major stressors were mentioned such as conflict at work and health or family issues, work demands were the most prevalent and far outweighed the other themes. Some participants felt the benefits from retreat enabled them to cope better upon return to their usual work environment, while others provided a contrasting perspective. While they all acknowledged stressors and work demands, it was their responses to such stressors that differed. (Participants' comments below are identified as associated with the low or high stress groups.)

The restorative effects of the retreat enabled some participants to cope more effectively with stressors and additional work demands:

'initially I returned to two very busy weeks, but felt that the refreshment I gained on retreat helped me through them and I now feel confident about the more usual level of responsibilities that I now face' (low stress);
'I have had two particularly stressful work days since retreat, and have been knocked emotionally and physically by them, but I believe that I have bounced back from them more quickly and completely than before retreat' (low stress).

It is not that the stressors had no negative impact, but rather the recovery from stressors was faster and more complete. Perhaps such resilience was developed through a strengthening of self-identity while at retreat, as noted by other participants who felt the sense of purpose gained during retreat enabled a better handling of stressors:

'I came back to a very busy and difficult time at work, so this was a challenge. However, the main benefit of retreat for me was not so much relaxing as regaining a sense of purpose, so this has helped me to face the challenges without too much anxiety' (low stress);

'stressors have come along on the journey post retreat, however the sense of identity and purpose I received from the retreat have strengthened me' (low stress).

Some participants, however, did not find the retreat helped them cope better with work demands. Instead, their comments focused on the extra stress that was added to their already busy lives due to attending the retreat. One participant (low stress) remarked that *'I now have 200 unanswered emails and other stuff I'm still trying to catch up with'*, while another (high stress) noted that *'a change in routine has meant a temporary increase in work load, which has increased stress'*.

Returning to excessive work demands reduced the effectiveness of the retreat, as there was minimal time to practice or maintain what they had learned at retreat, despite the best of intentions:

'constant demands on my time...there is very little time for yourself and your personal spiritual development as was obviously available on the retreat' (high stress);

'[the] busy work and family life that's restricted my ability to put the disciplines I learned into practice' (low stress).

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT OF SPIRITUAL RETREATS

The aims of this study were to identify the environmental attributes, activities and experiences provided by spiritual retreats that lead to immediate and continuing restorative outcomes, and to ascertain whether a high level of stress after the retreat impacts on the persistence of the restorative outcomes. The findings are discussed under five themes: the physical environment; identity-building; belonging to a social world; spiritual engagement; and fade-out effects.

5.1 The physical environment

The study has shown that the physical setting of the retreat is crucial for restoration. In particular, being mentally away and in an environment where the mind is effortlessly engaged is vital to the restorative process. If daily routines and tasks are accessible while being away, simply traveling to a new environment is not restorative (Kaplan, 1995). Having a peaceful and spacious venue in a natural setting is a key factor. This is consistent with the notion of natural environments being restorative and quality green and blue spaces positively impacting on psychological restoration (Wyles et al., 2017). The findings also align with Moufakkir and Selmi's (2018) observation that being in a natural setting provides the context and catalyst for a variety of positive outcomes including a sense of peace, wholeness and connection to something greater. In contrast to engagement with the usual vocational demands and responsibilities, the attendees' engagement with nature, relaxation and reflection all contributed to restoration. Thus, the external environment facilitated "reflective contemplation for psychological and spiritual replenishment" (Thwaites, Helleur & Simkins, 2005, p.529).

5.2 Identity-building

Participants on retreat are removed from their everyday routine and have time to reflect and develop deep insight. Consequently, Norman and Pokorny (2017, p.205) propose that “retreats are symbols of transformation”. This may be the case particularly for those retreat participants who feel strengthened in their personal identity and purpose which subsequently enables them to respond more positively to, and recover more quickly from, stressors once back at work. Voigt et al. (2010) also found that spiritual retreat attendees reported learning a lot about themselves, constructing their identity, and finding their ‘true self’ (p.552). The qualitative data indicated that those participants who identified what they needed from the retreat experience prior to attending felt fulfilled and enriched from their time away. It is thus understandable that compatibility was the strongest predictor of continuing restorative outcomes, because participants felt alignment with the retreat philosophy and routine.

5.3 Belonging to a social world

In the present study, social activities were found to predict continuing (but not immediate) restorative outcomes, despite Staats and Hartig’s (2004) finding that being alone is more beneficial to restoration than being in the company of others and Voigt et al.’s (2010) finding that belonging to a social world was rarely mentioned by spiritual retreat attendees in describing their experience. The qualitative data suggest that conversations with peers, development of deeper connections, social acceptance and acknowledgment of similar struggles were beneficial aspects of the retreat experience. The sharing of narratives at retreat can facilitate an interpretation and understanding of life amongst participants and remind them that they are not alone but part of a community (Schutte & Dreyer, 2006). Being with like-minded people in a collective setting not only resulted in new insights for some participants but also imparted a greater sense of belonging. Research into the value of peer clergy support groups has produced mixed results, with some clergy benefiting greatly and others having neutral or negative experiences (Miles & Proeschold-Bell., 2013). When retreatants are free to choose how much and with whom they interact, the retreat setting is able to offer a more effective support network for clergy than imposed peer support group structures. After the retreat, attendees arguably still feel the benefits of having been understood by peers and have an enlarged and strengthened support network with whom they can connect longer-term. Further research is required to explore these inferences.

5.4 Spiritual engagement

Participation in spiritual activities and experiencing spiritual engagement during the retreat were further predictors of restorative outcomes. This provides support for the research findings of Ouellette et al. (2005) who noted the spiritual dimension may be complementary to the environmental focus of Attention Restoration Theory and assist cognitive processes. Meditation, for example, can serve a restorative role. It is not surprising that meditation is becoming increasingly common in workplace wellbeing strategies as it can be a viable cost-effective intervention to enhance mental health and work-related wellbeing (Shonin et al., 2014). The findings endorse the claim that “spirituality is an essential aspect of professional development” within the clergy vocation (Puchalski & Guenther, 2012, p.257). This is further evidenced by the participants who highlighted that being reaffirmed in their spiritual life while on retreat helped them to move forward.

5.5 Fade-out effects

The findings of this study confirmed that those participants who experienced low stress after the retreat demonstrated greater maintenance of restorative outcomes, while those with high stress showed a greater decline in the restorative outcomes two weeks after retreat. The most frequently reported stressor was work-related issues. Similarly, Kuhnel and Sonnentag (2011) found that the benefits of a vacation faded out within one month and job demands contributed significantly to the fade-out effect. They recommended that to prolong the benefits of a vacation, job demands should be reduced upon return to work as well as encouraging relaxation outside of work. Kirillova and Lehto (2015) suggest that the fade-out effect is triggered by reintroduction to everyday routines, and the need for vacationers to re-situate themselves within their continuing social roles. Including educational sessions within the retreat that are specifically designed to equip participants to manage stress and negotiate a successful return to everyday routines may thus help to mitigate fade-out effects.

6. LIMITATIONS

As the research sample consisted solely of clergy from four Christian denominations within Australia, further research is needed to explore the extent to which the findings from this context are applicable for other religious, non-religious, professional and recreational groups, and whether different types of retreats provide varying experiences of transformation. As the data in this study were collected using questionnaires, it may be subject to self-report biases. Further confirmation using a range of physiological and cognitive measures is required to confirm the validity of the self-report measures. As the follow-up questionnaire was conducted two weeks after the retreat, the continuing restorative outcomes were only measured once and did not provide insight into whether the outcomes faded out gradually or immediately after the retreat. Further research could explore the fade-out effects of restorative outcomes using multiple measurements in a longitudinal study.

7. CONCLUSION

This research has contributed to the literature in religious and spiritual tourism; tourism and wellbeing; Attention Restoration Theory; the Activity, Setting, Experience, Benefit (ASEB) framework; and vacation fade-out effects. There are two main theoretical contributions. Firstly, this research has demonstrated how a spiritual retreat's environmental attributes, activities and experiences combine to provide a restorative destination. Being mentally away, engaging in spiritual activities and disconnecting from information technology contributed to both immediate and continuing restorative outcomes. Secondly, this research has identified work stressors as a major contributor to the fade-out of restorative effects after the retreat.

Retreats provide an opportunity for meaningful encounters such as relationships with others, being in nature and participating in spiritual activities as well as the time and space for reflection, personal growth and identity-building. Although other tourism experiences offer similar meaningful experiences (Packer & Gill, 2016), the structured and intentional nature of the retreat allows facilitators and managers to ensure that appropriate design components are included, thus enabling visitors' need of restoration to be satisfied.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that, in order to maximize the restorative potential of spiritual and other retreats, the following components should be included in the retreat:

- Ensure the retreat centre is situated within a scenic, quiet, natural setting
- Prior to the retreat, ask attendees to reflect on what they want and need from the retreat experience
- Encourage attendees to disconnect from information technology and work responsibilities while on retreat
- Create opportunities for at least three hours of relaxation and reflection each day of the retreat
- Do not provide too much input or content that requires attendees' focused attention
- Build flexibility into the program so that attendees have some level of choice in the activities in which they participate
- Offer retreats for like-minded attendees or those in similar professional roles
- Encourage attendees to implement strategies to reduce excessive work demands immediately after the retreat in order to maintain restorative outcomes
- Provide attendees with strategies for managing work stressors that cannot be avoided
- Provide educational resources to assist successful re-entry to life and work after retreat

The research-based, theoretically informed recommendations for designing retreats to promote restorative outcomes and enhance mental wellbeing are applicable to other professional contexts, especially those that experience high stress and isolation from peers. Spiritual retreats could thus function as an annual restorative intervention with both immediate and continuing positive outcomes.

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