



Article

Social Institutions and Media Strategies in the Context of Religious Tourism Development

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Abstract

This study analyzes key aspects of pilgrimage tourism as a significant factor in the development of domestic tourism. Special attention is given to the role of social institutions and the use of media strategies and digital technologies in optimizing religious tourism. The study explores major pilgrimage routes, such as those to Jerusalem and Athos, highlighting their impact on social groups and the tourism industry. Religious tourism is classified into pilgrimage, religious-cultural, and special pilgrimage types. The research emphasizes the need to rethink modern tourism practices and identifies systemic trends that contribute to the regeneration of sustainable religious tourism, including institutional support and strategic unification at local and regional levels. Methodological prerequisites for further development are discussed, along with the influence of digital solutions and information technologies on the growth of sacred tourism. A set of determining factors influencing sustainability is examined, leading to recommendations for the balanced development of destinations. Finally, the study affirms the importance of religious tourism as a historical and cultural phenomenon that significantly contributes to cultural development.

Keywords: digitalization, holy places, pilgrimage, religion, spiritual centers, tourism, tourist destinations

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Introduction

Today's Tourism has an important influence on regional, national, and global economic development. The intensification of international tourist flows and the formation of new trends in the development of the industry are accompanied by increased attention of the international community to religious tourism. The latter includes excursions, pilgrimages, visits to sacred sites, holy places, springs, monasteries, notable temples, religious festivals, and ceremonies. At the same time, art museums are also involved. Holiday tours and religious-themed trips are becoming particularly popular.

Tour operators are increasingly developing targeted religious itineraries to meet the needs and interests of pilgrims. It is obvious that each type of tourist activity has its own specific features. These specific features can serve as a determining factor in regional development and contribute to establishing relations between representatives of different cultures and religions, the development of cross-cultural communication and tolerance, and understanding history and human values. Religious tourism, in general, contributes to society's humanization and cultural growth and the establishment of effective international cooperation.

Since religious tourism is closely linked to other types of tourism, it is advisable to use this fact to increase the religious motivation of modern tourists. Jerusalem, a holy place for followers of three religions, and Mount Athos (Greece), one of the key shrines of the Orthodox world, occupy a prominent place among global religious centers.

Sacred sites of global significance have a powerful informational influence on the development of religious tourism. Modern digital communication and media space give sacred tourism a whole new potential, which is especially relevant in society's current era of moral and spiritual decline. At the same time, international religious routes are seen as an effective tool for the development of religious tourism, which requires the active involvement of modern social institutions and media strategies in the process. This determines the relevance of the chosen topic.

Literature review

A number of contemporary authors, in particular, some prominent representatives of the scientific community (Kostopoulou, 2022; Kuz et al., 2021), reveal the conceptual foundations for the revival of religious tourism against the backdrop of the challenges of global socio-economic development. Scientists have

substantiated promising directions for the regeneration of sacred tourism as an integral part of the general sphere of tourism.

Publications by individual researchers (Abbas et al., 2021; Panchenko et al., 2023a; 2023b) are devoted to identifying the specifics of activities in the field of religious tourism, taking into account the dynamics of socio-economic and social transformations during periods of geopolitical crises and the decline in the overall moral and spiritual level of social development. The results of research by Bakhov et al. (2022) suggest a major overhaul of the supporting infrastructure and marketing approaches to boost religious tourism. At the same time, Evans (2023) looks at how sacred tourism could really take off with the right institutional support.

Kim et al. (2020) study specific types of tourism and note that religious tourism not only stimulates the development of international tourism and corresponding economic growth but also serves as a platform for encounters between visitors and host communities. According to Collins-Kreiner (2020a; 2020b), religious tourism makes a significant contribution to the formation of mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect in a cross-cultural context.

Lin et al. (2021) conducted a descriptive analysis of cases in religious tourism and concluded that interest in this topic has increased over the last decade. Mróz (2021) argues that religious tourism has evolved from an alternative form of tourism to a current and distinctive global trend.

Some scholars (Bayev et al., 2022) analyze the impact of uncertainty and crisis conditions on demand in sacred tourism and describe the relationship between the life cycle of tourism and social, political, and economic consequences. At the same time, there are a number of gaps in the definition of essential aspects of the development of pilgrimage tourism, institutional social support for the process, and, in particular, the impact of modern digital and information and communication technologies on the potential for the development of religious tourism and destinations.

This article aims to analyze key aspects of pilgrimage tourism to sacred sites as an influential factor in the development of the domestic tourism system.

Methodology

The study primarily involved systematically and comprehensively analyzing scientific publications and research papers. Relevant primary sources from publications indexed in leading databases (Scopus, Web of Science) were used in this study. The works taken into account were mostly published between 2020 and 2025. The criteria for inclusion and exclusion of publications were spatial and temporal indicators and the level of reliability of information. Special attention was paid to

contemporary developments highlighting social institutions' role in religious tourism development. The keywords "religion, pilgrimage, tourism, tourist destinations, spiritual centers, holy places" were used for the search. Data found on the websites of the World Tourism Organization, Oficina del Peregrino, the European Association of Vie Francigene, Eurostat, INSETE, and others were also used.

The research methodology consists of a number of general scientific methods, including analysis and synthesis, comparison, systematization, generalization, and abstraction. The methodology is based on descriptive statistics of visits to holy sites. Various types of analysis were used to identify the factors influencing the development of the object under study, its key functional elements, and its potential for transformation in line with modern management strategies. The generalization method was used at the stage of forming priority directions for optimizing the tourism management paradigm, using the possibilities of probabilistic modeling in conditions of uncertainty and crisis phenomena. A retrospective analysis of the use of media strategies and social institutions was carried out.

For statistical processing of data, the most significant locations of religious tourism in different countries of the world were used, which allows for achieving representativeness and persuasiveness in scientific discourse. This approach made it possible to cover the variability of socio-political prerequisites for the development of religious tourism, including the crisis phenomena of military actions, to assess the potential for the development of the industry in the realities of geopolitical tension, and to form directions for the optimization of interaction between social institutions and tourism entities. The study's limitations are due to the complexity of experimental verification of theoretical conclusions.

Results

Religious tourism has been gaining popularity in recent decades. It is considered a targeted visit to religious shrines and destinations to satisfy the spiritual needs of tourists. In general, religious travel is now an integral part of modern tourism. The main destinations for religious tours are temples, monasteries, cathedrals, and spiritual centers. Since ancient times, the main places of pilgrimage have been Mount Athos, Constantinople, and the Holy Land.

The phenomenon of pilgrimage is considered a targeted trip to worship holy places. Pilgrims are usually deeply religious people with a deep awareness of religious values. Religion has a significant influence on the formation of self-awareness. Therefore, pilgrims, to achieve their moral and spiritual goals, often sacrifice their

established way of life, changing their habits, environment, and circle of communication.

The primary destinations of pilgrimage are “holy places.” Pilgrimages may be undertaken in honor of a particular holiday or in honor of a consecrated temple or monastery. The purpose of religious tourism may be to visit a specific sacred destination, pray before a miraculous icon, confess in a place of spiritual power, perform pious work, or receive grace (Robina Ramírez & Fernández Portillo, 2020).

In general, the world distinguishes the following major macro-regions of pilgrimage:

1. Orthodox Christian Europe (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria);
2. Western Asia – Islam with enclaves of Christianity and Judaism;
3. Central Asia – Buddhism (Lamaism) and Islam;
4. South Asia – Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as centers of Christianity, Sikhism, Islam, and Jainism;
5. Southeast Asia – Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity;
6. North America – Christianity and numerous other religions;
7. Latin America – Christianity and local traditional religions;
8. North Africa – Islam;
9. West and East Africa – Islam, centers of Christianity and traditional religions.

Each of these macro-regions is characterized by its own well-known pilgrimage centers and religious sites of national and regional significance. Tours can be pilgrimage or sightseeing in nature. Tourists can also visit religious sites during combined trips. When developing a tourist route to sacred places, a number of factors must be taken into account: rationality, the main purpose of the route and current goals studying the potential of the tourist market and the availability of related infrastructure, detailing the route, and inventorying assets. Religious tourism is directly related to scientific tourism. This direction is only developing, but it is very promising.

The number of religious trips is not significant at present. At the same time, religious tourism contributes to discovering new destinations and developing local socio-economic systems. This allows us to predict steady growth in the industry’s potential in the coming years (Figure 1).

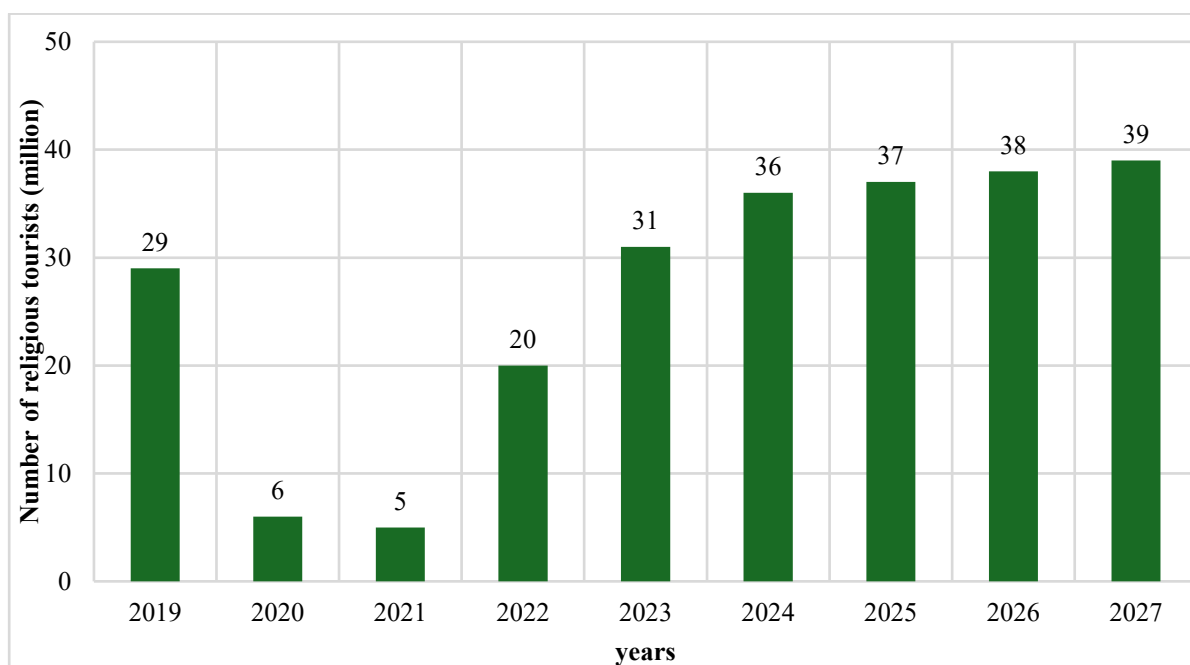


Figure 1. Development of religious tourism on a global scale (in millions)

Source: Rizun et al. (2022)

Currently, Ukraine is experiencing an intense revival of pilgrimage traditions facilitated by the crisis of wartime. In search of moral and spiritual support, religious tourists are discovering new destinations and sacred places for the general public. Special pilgrimage services are emerging, particularly at monasteries and temples. The main obstacles to the development of sacred tourism are considered to be the lack of information about religious routes, the shortage of qualified guides, and the low level of interaction between the authorities, religious centers, and tourist organizations (Rosak-Szyrocka et al., 2023).

The online resource of the Pilgrimage Center of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church presents the main pilgrimage centers: Jerusalem (Israel, Middle East); Athos (Greece); Pochaiv (Ternopil region); Hoshiv (Ivano-Frankivsk region) (Figure 2).



A



B



C



D

Figure 2. Major pilgrimage centers: A – The Spring (Bath) of St. Righteous Anna, Pochaiv village; B – Yardenit, Jerusalem; C – The Spring of St. Athanasius, Athos; D – The Holy Spring of the Hoshiv Monastery, Hoshiv village

Source: Kostopoulou (2022), Kuz et al. (2021)

Jerusalem is a world-famous religious pilgrimage site, the “capital of three religions” – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In the center of Jerusalem is the Old City, home to the holiest site in Christianity, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Athos is a mountain and peninsula in Greek Macedonia in northern Eastern Greece, where there are many monasteries, but only one contains the holy spring of St. Athanasius, founded in the 10th century. Although women are not allowed to climb the mountain, the number of pilgrims is constantly growing (Figure 3).

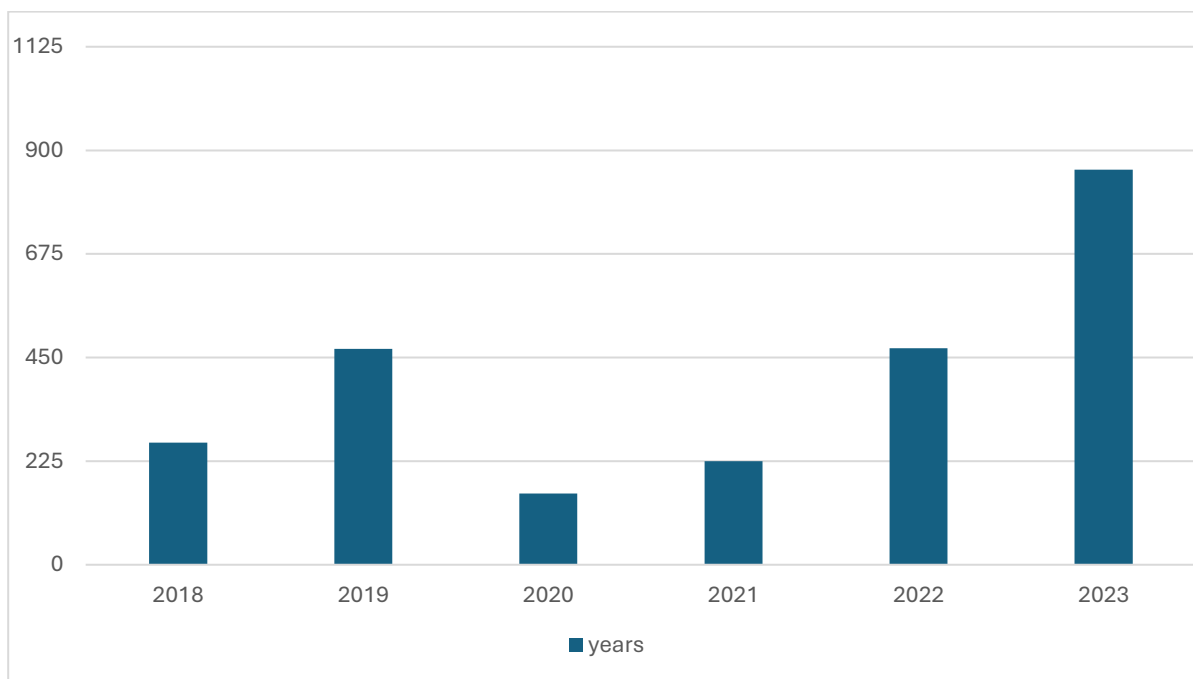


Figure 3. Dynamics of the number of religious tourists in Greece, 2018–2023

Source: INSETE (2022)

In the last 5-6 years, pilgrimage and religious tourism have rapidly grown in other pilgrimage centers (Figure 4). At the same time, the threats of war in Ukraine and Israel are destructive factors.

Indeed, in 2020, there was a 70% drop in visitor numbers due to the pandemic. In 2022, it was possible to achieve the exact figures as in 2019, before the pandemic. In the future, the number of pilgrims is expected to double. At the same time, the situation is quite complicated in countries where there is war.

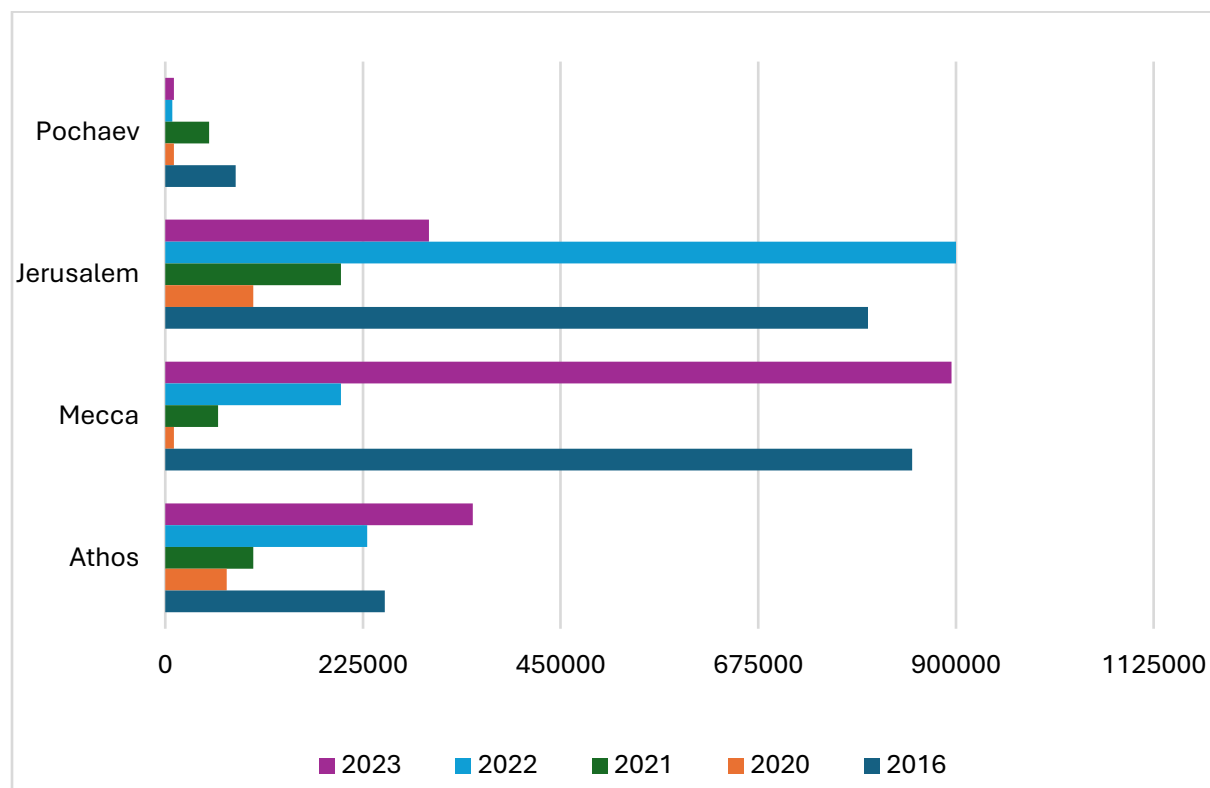


Figure 4. Dynamics of the number of religious tourists, 2018–2023

Source: ANA-MPA (2020), Alrefaei et al. (2022), Evans (2023), Galicia Regional Administration (2020)

In the context of Ukraine, religious tourism focuses on Christian shrines, such as Pochaiv and Zarvanytsia, Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and Univ Lavra, and other holy places. Zarvanytsia is recognized as the spiritual center of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine. (Ternopil region). This sacred place, in terms of its religious and historical significance, ranks alongside the Kyiv-Pechersk, Pochaiv, and Svyatogorsk Lavras. The city of Uman (Cherkasy region) has become a place of pilgrimage for Jews who profess one of the branches of Judaism, Hasidism. They consider it their duty to visit the tomb of Tzadik Nachman at least once in their lifetime. Every year, Catholics worldwide make a pilgrimage to Berdychiv (Zhytomyr region), which has become famous among pilgrims thanks to the icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In addition to material resources, spiritual resources should also be included in religious resources, such as miracles that occur in certain places, strengthening believers, as well as the grace that believers feel when they are in a holy place (for example, the St. Nicholas Church in the village of Kulevcha, Odessa region).

Monuments of church history and culture affirm national consciousness and self-awareness, recreating historical memory, fostering patriotism, and developing aesthetic and artistic tastes. At the same time, modern tourists demand more

comfortable conditions, which creates the prerequisites for the sustainable development of the tourism industry in Ukraine as a whole.

The target audience of modern religious tourism is positioned as broader, involving the younger generation and active social strata. Within the target audience, the following can be distinguished: pilgrims who travel specifically for religious reasons; tourists interested in the historical and cultural aspects of the phenomenon of religion; as well as tourists seeking emotional and spiritual experiences in religious sites, including for contemplation and relaxation.

The implementation of modern digital media strategies for tourism development requires a comprehensive approach: creating a personalized destination website with expanded information content, SEO optimization, targeted digital marketing, and the use of artificial intelligence for big data analysis. Digital information channels are becoming essential for continuous communication with the customer audience while developing tourism strategies. These include Google Analytics tools, engaging influencers, targeting advertising messages on social platforms, integrating QR codes, personalizing advertising based on behavioral pattern analysis, and improving online booking systems in the hospitality industry.

Social networks play a special role, allowing tourism operators to customize messages in real-time.

It should be noted that religious tourism goes beyond “niche tourism” and is becoming more independent and dynamic, which creates special competitive advantages. History has shown that pilgrimage tourism can survive and develop even under difficult circumstances.

Discussions

The development of the religious branch of the tourism industry, the methodology for managing the development of destinations, and the possibilities for state regulation in the field of tourism are among the scientific interests of several contemporary scholars. Mubarak and Zin (2020) explore the practical aspects of managing the quality of tourism services and infrastructure development. The authors define tourism as an activity aimed at pilgrimage to religious centers and holy places. The researchers argue that its modern form is more related to tourism than spiritual activity.

The publications by Luz (2020) and Mittal and Sinha (2022) are devoted to the peculiarities of regional tourism development in times of crisis and instability. The scholars propose upgrading the organizational and management mechanisms of the industry to promote the development of domestic and inbound tourism. The

researchers emphasize that military operations and the coronavirus have significantly affected the number of pilgrims to holy sites.

Continuing this line of thought, Niziaieva et al. (2022), Robina Ramírez and Fernández Portillo (2020) focus on institutional support for tourism entities and emphasize the digital transformation of the industry, which provides new opportunities for expanding the audience of religious tourism destinations. The researchers analyze the current possibilities for automating marketing processes, consumer behavior analytics, and targeting, which allow for expanding the target audience and responding quickly to the dynamics of its needs.

Griffin et al. (2020) highlight the potential of mobile applications for developing marketing support for religious tourism, where the promotion strategy should focus on consumer trust and stability of supply. It is evident that global social dynamics are causing changes in the tourism industry. The impact of digital innovations on tourism development is a hot topic in the modern scientific community. Romanelli et al. (2021) analyzes the potential for improving the information field of tourism companies through algorithmization and automation.

An analysis of recent publications indicates an upgrade in approaches to developing religious destinations in the modern social environment, while the opportunities and role of state support in this area require further analysis.

Conclusions

Religious tourism is an effective source of economic development, as it ensures an influx of foreign tourists and contributes to the development of infrastructure, creates competitive advantages, and improves the standard of living of the local population. Religious tourism is differentiated into pilgrimage, religious and cultural tourism, and special pilgrimage. At the same time, modern tourism practices require a rethinking of approaches to its implementation, involving social institutions and digital opportunities.

An analysis of visits to sacred sites in Ukraine and abroad, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, and military actions on visits to sacred sites has made it possible to forecast an increase in the number of religious tourists by 2030. Interaction between social institutions and tourism organizations should be aimed at resolving issues of interregional, cross-border, and interregional tourism cooperation and justifying priorities for improving interaction between tourism businesses; creating and locating tourist information centers with the most optimal organizational and legal forms, outlining priority tasks and sources of funding for their activities;

stimulating industry investment; involving specialized educational institutions and public organizations in the development of religious tourism destinations.

Empirical research on the dynamics of the number of religious tourists has revealed a rapid growth in tourist interest in pilgrimage and religious tourism over the past 5-6 years. Obstacles include military operations in certain countries where important pilgrimage centers are located (Israel, Ukraine).

There is currently a need to resolve a number of methodological prerequisites for determining promising areas for the further development of religious tourism, where a special role should be given to modern digital solutions in information and communication technologies. Religious tourism should be viewed in the context of a significant historical and cultural phenomenon, which will allow for a deeper understanding of its importance as an important stimulus for the cultural development of society and a way to solve the problem of preserving traditional values and cultural and natural heritage.

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Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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