THE PILGRIM'S PATH: WHO WALKS WHERE AND WHY ON THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

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ABSTRACT. The examination of why people make journeys to sites of religious significance constitutes a fundamental research question within tourism studies. This inquiry represents a central theoretical concern that intersects multiple disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, psychology, sociology, and religious studies, necessitating comprehensive analytical frameworks to understand the complex motivational structures underlying contemporary religious travel behavior. The contemporary phenomenon of pilgrimage has undergone a paradigmatic shift from traditional religious frameworks, demonstrating the influence of diverse sociocultural and individual variables. This transformation in pilgrimage conceptualization emerges from several contributing factors: evolving personal value systems and belief structures, technological innovations that improve information accessibility and interpersonal communication, and a growing interest in individualized searches for existential meaning and spiritual connectivity within an increasingly secular societal context. Whereas medieval pilgrimage practices were primarily anchored in religious conviction and penitential purposes, contemporary pilgrimage experiences exhibit significantly greater motivational diversity, reflecting the multifaceted nature of modern human complexity. The main objective of the present exploratory study is to examine factors that influence

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pilgrims' choice of route difficulty on Camino de Santiago, using 272 valid responses from 331 collected surveys. Given the limited sample size, the research adopts an exploratory approach to identify preliminary relationships and patterns for future large-scale studies. The analysis employs PLS-SEM and multigroup analysis using SmartPLS 4 software. Given the methodological constraints, the findings should be considered indicative rather than definitive. This research offers both academic and practical value, providing theoretical contributions to pilgrimage studies while providing actionable insights for diverse stakeholders involved in Camino de Santiago route management and pilgrim experience optimization.

Introduction

In an era characterized by the perpetual human quest for equilibrium, validation, and understanding, the persistence of religious practice represents a significant phenomenon worthy of academic examination. Despite unprecedented technological advancement, scientific progress, the proliferation of social media platforms, and the ubiquity of mass entertainment, religion continues to serve as a fundamental source of meaning, guidance, and solace for substantial portions of the global population. This enduring relevance stems from religion's capacity to fulfill essential human needs: providing individuals with a sense of belonging, affirming belief in transcendent purpose, and establishing comprehensive frameworks for comprehending existence, interpreting the world, and navigating moral decision-making processes. Furthermore, religious systems offer psychological comfort during periods of uncertainty and provide structured approaches to understanding life's challenges and adversities.

Given these basic human needs that religion addresses, the annual phenomenon of millions of individuals undertaking religious journeys to sacred sites around the world represents a logical manifestation of contemporary spiritual seeking. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the global tourism landscape has shown significant recovery, with an estimated 1.286 billion international tourists (overnight visitors) recorded

worldwide in 2023, representing 34% increase over 2022 and recovering 88% of pre-pandemic levels, supported by strong pent-up demand (UNWTO, 2024). Within this broader context, overtime religious tourism constituted a substantial segment, with approximately 300 to 330 million tourists visiting the world's principal religious sites annually, contributing to a total of approximately 600 million domestic and international religious journeys globally, with Europe accounting for 40% of this activity (UNWTO, 2024). These religious heritage sites function not merely as significant tourist destinations that stimulate international tourism and economic growth but also serve as crucial meeting spaces that facilitate encounters between host communities and visitors, thereby contributing substantially to the promotion of tolerance, mutual respect, and intercultural understanding across diverse cultural boundaries.

The present research focuses specifically on the case study of pilgrims who choose to embark on the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela. The main objective of this study is to investigate the pilgrims' characteristics and their path preferences in relation to the difficulty of the chosen routes. The current research framework seeks to examine this objective within the context of modern societal transformations, where secularization, individualization, and cultural shifts have potentially redefined the fundamental nature of pilgrimage experiences in the twenty-first century.

The subsequent sections of this study are structured as follows: the second section highlights the theoretical framework through examination of the relevant academic literature. The third section presents a comprehensive exposition of the research methodology and analytical framework used in this study; the fourth section systematically examines and discusses the main findings derived from the research; and the last section synthesizes the key theoretical and practical implications of these findings, offering concluding remarks that address the broader significance of this research within the field of contemporary pilgrimage studies.

Review of literature

Tourism Through the Ages: From Ancient Civilizations to Modern Religious Travel and Pilgrimage Motivational Factors

Tourism traces its origins to antiquity, when Greek and Roman civilizations traveled for recreational, therapeutic, and religious purposes. Modern tourism emerged during the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution, facilitated by the development of transportation infrastructure and middle-class formation.

Throughout its evolutionary trajectory, tourism has experienced substantial expansion both economically and socially, developing into a complex multifaceted activity with significant economic implications that intersects numerous economic sectors and disciplines (Bode, 2018).

In the current global context, tourism represents a dynamic industry that has consolidated its presence within global, national, and regional economic frameworks. The global tourism market was valued at $10.5 trillion, with analytical projections indicating that market capitalization will reach $17.1 trillion by 2032 (Future Market Insights, 2018).

According to UNWTO, 2022 recorded more than 960 million international tourist arrivals, with tourism contributing 7.6% to global GDP and generating 22 million new employment opportunities. International tourism reached 1.3 billion arrivals in 2023, a 34% increase over the previous year, while 2024 marked complete recovery with 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals globally, achieving pre-pandemic levels (UNWTO, 2023 and 2024). This evolution demonstrates tourism's substantial impact on national economies and the global economic system.

Religious tourism is recognized as one of the earliest forms of human mobility, its origins deeply embedded in the early periods of civilization. The concept of pilgrimage has existed since the inception of human civilization, and the visitation of sacred sites represents a fundamental human behavior throughout recorded history. From the first manifestations of organized pilgrimage, religiously motivated travel has been characterized by the understanding of pilgrimage destinations as spatial locations separated from the ordinary world by virtue of their sacred character. Individuals traveled to these locations to worship deities, participate in initiatory, purification, and fertility rituals, pursue educational objectives, or simply satisfy curiosity. However, pilgrimage as an institutionalized form did not achieve genuine prominence until the emergence of major historical religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Turner & Turner, 1978).

Chronologically, religious tourism emerged during the second developmental phase of the tourism industry, a period coinciding with the early and high medieval epochs and the Renaissance era. During this historical period, Christians undertook religious pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, Muslims performed pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, Buddhists traveled to Lhasa and various sanctuaries throughout India and Indochina, while Japanese pilgrims traveled to Mount Fuji (Bădulescu & Ban, 2005). This periodization demonstrates the systematic institutionalization of religious travel in diverse cultural and geographical contexts, establishing foundational patterns that continue to influence contemporary religious tourism practices.

Contemporary definitions of religious tourism encompass a broad spectrum, reflecting diverse motivational frameworks and experiential outcomes. Some academics conceptualize it as a spiritual quest that involves participation in religious events or pilgrimages to sacred locations. Others approach it from a cultural perspective, examining historical landmarks and heritage sites. Modern understanding of religious tourism recognizes the amalgamation of faith, culture, and personal fulfillment, reflecting the evolving motivations and perspectives of contemporary travelers who appear to integrate travel experiences with religious practices, personal well-being, and identity formation.

Undoubtedly, the examination of religious tourism requires faith as its fundamental point of departure (Cocean *et al.*, 2014). Religious tourism could not exist in the absence of religious belief systems, as faith-based motivations for travel would be conceptually nonexistent. Consequently, individuals who engage in travel with motivations intrinsically connected to religious conviction, whether as pilgrims or visitors to sacred sites and monastic institutions, constitute the demographic sphere of religious tourism.

The definitional parameters of religious tourism have undergone substantial evolution throughout academic discourse. Early academic perspectives concentrated predominantly on pilgrimage practices, emphasizing that religious elements constituted imperative prerequisites for engaging in this tourism typology. Contemporary academic perspectives, however, acknowledge a considerably broader spectrum of spiritual journeys. The conceptual framework has transformed from purely devotional endeavors to encompass cultural, historical, and educational dimensions, thereby recognizing the diverse motivational complexes underlying religious travel behaviors.

Several contemporary definitions illuminate the multifaceted nature of religious tourism:

➢ constitutes that category of tourism whose participants are motivated either partially or exclusively by religious considerations (Rinschede, 1992).
➢ focuses on the visitation of religious edifices with spiritual implications. The comprehension of tourist motivation has led to the development of the concept of religious tourism. The religious motivation of visitors distinguishes this tourism type from others (Bădulescu & Ban, 2005).
➢ represents a form of pilgrimage characterized by an implicit, bidirectional relationship between venerable, sacred figures and individuals who seek to travel to locations or events associated with these figures for purposes of worship and homage, or for more secular motivations such as education and recreation (Olsen & Dallen, 2022).

The examination of why individuals undertake journeys to sites of religious significance constitutes a fundamental research question within tourism studies. Regarding religious tourism specifically, motivational frameworks are characterized by their intrinsic nature, referring to authentic internal desires for spiritual fulfillment and an individual's aspiration to strengthen their connection with religious belief systems. These motivational determinants are generally contingent upon a variety of influencing factors, including temporal considerations, geographical contexts, cultural customs, social structural arrangements, personal interests, and numerous other variables (Dallen & Olsen, 2006). This multifactorial approach to understanding religious tourism motivations reflects the complex interplay between individual psychological needs and broader sociocultural determinants that shape contemporary pilgrimage and religious travel experiences.

According to UNWTO's conceptual framework, the principal motivational factors of tourists visiting religious heritage sites include: religious faith; the tourists' cultural background; the pursuit of inner peace or spiritual fulfillment; interest in cultural and historical aspects (UNWTO, 2016).

Ramirez (2018) identifies three distinct categories of religiously motivated travelers: *the pilgrim*, who seeks miraculous intervention, divine revelation at sacred locations, or responses from individuals considered holy - this category is characterized as the devout pilgrim; *the pilgrim-tourist* (or *religious tourist*) who, rather than experiencing pure devotion, encounters a sense of identity with locations of historical and cultural significance - this traveler may undergo unconscious transformation from pilgrim to tourist or vice versa; and *the secular tourist* who travels exclusively for recreational purposes.

The motivational underpinnings of religious travel are characterized by their complexity and diversity. Nevertheless, a fundamental set of motivational categories can be distinguished. Participation in pilgrimage is predicated upon personal and social identities and values, as well as individual perceptions. Olsen & Dallen (2022) identified three principal conceptual approaches to religious travel: as an expression of religious identity and beliefs; for partially religious or non-religious motivations; and for pragmatic considerations.

These theoretical approaches provide a foundational framework for understanding specific travel motivations. This value-based analytical framework enables the identification of seven categorical motivations for travel (Olsen & Dallen, 2022): pure religious and spiritual motivations; ritual-oriented motivations; familial or community customs; desire for introspection and new interpersonal relationships; desire to understand religion; vacation travel (leisure time, tourist attraction visitation); and pursuit of alternative objectives.

According to Turner & Turner (1978), pilgrims undertake journeys to obtain specific benefits, such as sin forgiveness, recovery from illness, or solutions to personal problems. Davidson & Gitlitz (2002) have identified additional benefits, including enhanced fertility, finding love, good fortune, or improved academic performance. According to these authors, the healing power and blessings associated with pilgrimage derive from increased faith during periods of spiritual intensity.

In certain cultural contexts, pilgrimage does not constitute a voluntary act but rather represents a cultural-religious obligation (Turner & Turner, 1978). While medieval pilgrims may have undertaken journeys to atone for crimes, repent for committed sins, seek miraculous cures, fulfill vows, or simply gain spiritual benefit from proximity to an apostle's tomb, contemporary pilgrims demonstrate markedly different characteristics (Norman, 2011).

In addition to religious reasons, pilgrims today travel for a variety of secular reasons (Oviedo *et al.*, 2014). Pilgrims travel from a wide range of locations in quest of a unique experience, whether for religious or spiritual purposes or simply to enjoy the holiday season (Lois-González & Santos, 2015).

The cultural dimension of pilgrimage motivation has gained considerable scholarly attention. Research indicates that there is an increase in cultural and sports motivations, although spiritual and religious motivations continue to have a strong presence (Silva *et al.*, 2023). This finding suggests that Camino has successfully evolved to accommodate diverse motivational frameworks while maintaining its spiritual significance for those seeking such experiences.

According to several recent studies, pilgrims seek out a variety of experiences, enhance their psychophysical health, have more integrated spiritual lives, build social networks, and broaden their knowledge (Klimiuk & Moriarty, 2021; Platovnjak & Zovko, 2023).

Contemporary research increasingly recognizes that pilgrim motivations exist along a continuum rather than within discrete categories. The Camino continues to be a religious place driven by inner goals, although in a more personal and spiritual way (Smith, 1992; Brumec *et al.*, 2023). This observation suggests that the traditional distinction between pilgrims and tourists may be less relevant than understanding the diverse ways individuals engage with sacred spaces and experiences.

It was revealed that pilgrims are mostly motivated by spiritual aspects, by new experiences and for the nature and sports experience (Amaro *et al.*, 2018). This finding represents a significant departure from historical pilgrimage patterns, where religious devotion constituted the primary motivational force. It was revealed that motivations differ according to several factors such as gender, nationality and the way the pilgrims undertook their journey.

Their research demonstrates the increasing complexity and individualization of pilgrim motivations in the contemporary context.

The literature reveals a fundamental transformation in Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage motivations over recent decades. While traditional religious motivations remain present, they have been supplemented and often superseded by spiritual, cultural, experiential, and psychological drivers.

The examination of the statistical data provided by the Official Pilgrim Office of Santiago de Compostela (time span 2003 - 2023) revealed a tripartite classification system for pilgrim motivations. This system, which requires certificate applicants to designate their primary motivation, encompasses the following categories: religious, religious and others, and non-religious. However, the motivational categories established by the Official Pilgrim Office of Santiago de Compostela may be considered insufficient for comprehensively capturing the complexity and diversity of pilgrim motivations, as they fail to account for the full spectrum of factors that inspire individuals to undertake this journey, potentially overlooking the comprehensive range of psychological, cultural, and personal factors that influence pilgrimage participation. However, the substantial growth in non-religious pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela - from 6.57% in 2003 to 22.69% in 2023 - represents a notable demographic shift. This ascending trajectory suggests an expanding market for secular pilgrimage experiences, characterized by participants who undertake the Santiago route for purposes not directly connected to religious purposes. It is imperative to grant particular attention to this phenomenon and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the motivational factors driving these non-religious pilgrims, as awareness of their diverse needs could present opportunities for multiple stakeholders across various sectors.

The current research represents a pioneering exploratory study into the complex decision-making processes that influence pilgrims' selection of route difficulty levels along the Camino de Santiago routes. Given the limited scholarly attention previously devoted to understanding the multifaceted factors that shape these wayfinding choices, this research addresses a significant gap in pilgrimage tourism literature. The relevance of the study's findings holds practical implications for pilgrimage route management, infrastructure development, and visitor experience optimization alongside one of Europe's most significant religious and cultural pathways.

Furthermore, the exploratory nature of this research establishes foundational knowledge that can inform future quantitative studies and theoretical framework development in pilgrimage tourism. By examining the nuanced relationship between pilgrim profiles and route difficulty preferences, this study

not only fills an existing research void but also provides essential groundwork for understanding broader patterns of recreational and spiritual travel decision-making in heritage tourism contexts.

The study's pertinence is thus both academic and applied, offering insights that can benefit academic researchers, heritage site managers, tourism planners, and the pilgrim community itself through enhanced understanding of route choice dynamics on the Camino de Santiago.

The Santiago de Compostela Pilgrimage: Historical Context and Legendary Origins

The historical narrative of the Santiago pilgrimage route is enveloped in mystique, with legendary elements constituting fundamental components of its cultural significance. The pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela maintain profound historical connections to the veneration of the sanctuary of Saint James, dating from the ninth century. According to hagiographic tradition, James, one of the twelve apostles, is believed to have been the first evangelist to traverse the Iberian Peninsula. Following his return to Jerusalem, he was martyred in 44 CE, and legend maintains that during the ninth century, the remains of Saint James were miraculously transported from Galilee to the region of Galicia (contemporary Spain) aboard a marble vessel, where they remained undiscovered until the late ninth century.

The foundational legend recounts that in 829 CE, a shepherd named Pelayo discovered the tomb of Saint James in a remote corner of Galicia, Spain. This discovery was communicated to King Alfonso II, "the Chaste", who ruled a small and isolated Christian kingdom called Asturias at that time. The monarch decided to undertake the journey to witness the tomb, and together with his royal entourage, traversed what was then the only route from Oviedo to Galicia, thus reaching the tomb of Saint James. This route is now recognized as the "Camino Primitivo" (Primitive Way) because it is considered the original pilgrimage route to Compostela. Subsequently, a church was built at the site of the tomb's discovery by order of King Alfonso II.

The precise chronology of when pilgrimages to the tomb of the Holy Apostle James began remains uncertain; however, evidence exists indicating that the first pilgrim to Santiago de Compostela was a French bishop from Le Puy named Gotescalc, who traveled to the sanctuary in 950 CE "to seek mercy and assistance from God and the Apostle James" (Davidson & Dunn, 2012). The first documented Italian pilgrim, the Armenian hermit Simeon, undertook his journey later in the tenth century (Webb, 2001).

As the veneration of Saint James intensified, the proliferation of legends and narratives surrounding him multiplied accordingly, prompting pilgrims to visit Santiago de Compostela to pay homage to his relics. The Santiago pilgrimage achieved such popularity that the Roman Catholic Church ultimately recognized through papal decree the authenticity of Saint James' remains in the twelfth century. Santiago de Compostela became the third sacred city of the Western Christian world after Rome and Jerusalem, establishing itself as one of the major pilgrimage destinations of medieval Europe (Murray, 2021). Both medieval Christians and Muslims designated it the "Christian Mecca" (Turner & Turner, 1978), underscoring its transcendent religious significance within the broader context of Abrahamic religious traditions.

While the Camino experienced centuries of neglect and consequent decline in pilgrim numbers - partly attributed to the Protestant Reformation - recent decades have witnessed a renaissance of pilgrimage along this route, particularly following Santiago de Compostela's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985.

Today, the route to Santiago constitutes a comprehensive network of terrestrial and maritime connections linking various European locations to northwestern Spain. It is essential to emphasize that the renaissance of recent decades can be attributed to the concerted efforts of diverse institutions and organizations (both religious and secular) that have contributed to the re-popularization of pilgrimage routes. These entities extensively utilize literature, art, online resources, and promotional materials to disseminate the concept of pilgrimage. Concurrently, in recent years, social media has emerged as a significant medium for promoting pilgrimage journeys. Vlogs, blogs, platforms dedicated to pilgrim connectivity, and various individuals sharing their experiences and perspectives through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook have contributed substantially to heightening awareness and generating interest in pilgrimage destinations. The accessibility of social media platforms has enabled pilgrims to connect, share advice, and seek inspiration from a diverse community of fellow travelers, thus playing an essential role in shaping contemporary pilgrimage culture. In this regard, an exemplary case would be the Facebook page "Camino de Santiago", a platform facilitating the exchange of information, experiences, and advice among pilgrims.

Material and Methods

In pursuit of the study's primary research objectives, a quantitative methodology was employed for this investigation. The primary data collection instrument consisted of an online questionnaire administered through the Facebook

group *Camino de Santiago*. To accommodate the linguistic diversity reflected in the 2023 pilgrim demographic data, the questionnaire was available in five languages: Spanish, English, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian. This multilingual approach was offered to ensure optimal participant comprehension and communication, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the gathered responses.

The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms and comprised 29 clear, precise, and non-complex questions designed to require approximately four minutes for completion. The survey targeted individuals who had completed the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage at least once. Prior to the main questionnaire, respondents were presented with an initial language selection prompt, enabling them to choose their preferred language for survey completion. The instrument incorporated multiple question types: closed-ended (multiple-choice and dichotomous), one optional open-ended item, and Likert scale questions. Data collection occurred between April 2 and May 2, 2024.

This methodological approach was selected due to several advantages: it eliminates associated costs while enabling access to a larger respondent pool without geographical or logistical constraints. Additionally, this method obviates the need for manual data collection through interviews or physical questionnaire distribution and collection. Respondents could complete the survey in the comfort and privacy of their own environment, potentially facilitating more candid expression of opinions and experiences. Furthermore, the anonymity provided by online questionnaires may reduce the influence of response bias factors.
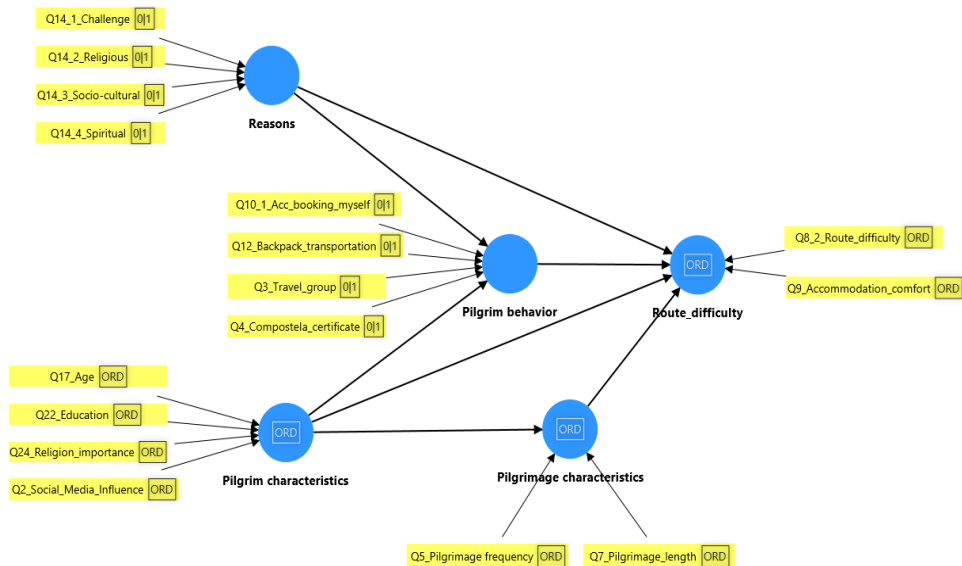
Figure 1. Proposed model
Source: Authors' owns processing

Using this approach, 331 answers were collected. Unfortunately, not all the answers were complete, thus some of the answers were eliminated from the sample (i.e. the answers which didn't provide details about the pilgrimage frequency, the route chosen, the type of accommodation chosen during the pilgrimage, or the answers where respondents didn't provide exact details about their level of education), in the analysis being taken into consideration 272 answers. Since the volume of the sample represents a limitation, the focus of this paper is an exploratory one, with the goal to identify potential relationships, patterns, and group differences that may inform future, larger-scale investigations. Using SmartPLS 4 software, the study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and multigroup analysis (MGA) with a sample size below conventional thresholds for statistical significance, reason why the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive.

The *Route_difficulty* represents the dependent variable, while the other four latent variables (*Reasons, Pilgrim characteristics, Pilgrim behavior and Pilgrimage characteristics*) were constructed and used as independent variables. The table below describes the variables used in the model.

Table 1. Description of variables used in the model

Variable	Median	Definition
Route_difficulty		The perception of difficulty level in the case of Camino route chosen by the pilgrim
Q8_2_Route _difficulty (Ordinal variable)	1.0	The difficulty of route assessed by https://followthecamino.com/, 1 = Easy Challenge, 2 = Moderate Challenge, 3 = Moderate Plus Challenge
Q9_Accommodation _comfort (Ordinal variable)	1.0	The comfort of accommodation used along the pilgrimage is assessed in correspondence with the type of accommodation used: 1= low level of comfort (albergues (pilgrim hostels) and camping), 2 = medium level of comfort (hostels and rural houses) and 3 = high level of comfort (hotels).
Pilgrimage characteristics		The characteristics of the last pilgrimage performed on the Camino
Q5_Pilgrimage frequency (Ordinal variable)	1.0	How often was performed the Camino: 1 = one time, 2 = 2-3 times, and 3 = at least 4 times
Q7_Pilgrimage_ length (Ordinal variable)	2.0	The length of the last pilgrimage: 1 = less than 7 days, 2 = 7-14 days, and 3 = more than 14 days
Pilgrim characteristics		
Q17_Age (Ordinal variable)	3.0	The age category of pilgrim: 1 = less than 45 years, 2 = 45-54 years, 3 = 55-64 years, and 4 = 65 and over years
Q22_Education (Ordinal variable)	2.0	The highest education level achieved by the pilgrim: 1 = High school diploma or equivalent, 2 = Bachelor's degree, 3 = Master's degree, and 4 = Doctorate or professional degree

Variable	Median	Definition
Q24_Religion_ importance (Ordinal variable)	3.0	The religion's level of significance for the pilgrim: 1 = Not at all significant, 2 = Slightly significant, 3 = Moderately significant, 4 = Very significant, and 5 = Extremely significant
Q2_Social_media_ influence (Ordinal variable)	1.0	How strong is the pilgrim influenced by social media in its decision to undertake the Camino: 1 = Not at all, 2 = Slightly, 3 = Moderately, 4 = Very, and 5 = Extremely
Pilgrim behavior		The pilgrim's behavior in the case of the last Camino
Q10_1Acc_booking_ myself (dummy variable)	1.0	Did the pilgrim or not book by himself the accommodation during the pilgrimage: 1 = Yes, 0 = No
Q12_Backpack_ transportation (binary variable)	2.0	Did the pilgrim opt for a backpack transportation service to the next accommodation? 1 = Yes, 2 = No
Q3_Travel_group (binary variable)	2.0	Did the pilgrim travel alone or with companions: 1 = Alone, 2 = with companions
Q4_Compostela_ certificate (binary variable)	1.0	Did the pilgrim apply and receive a Compostela certificate upon the completion of the last pilgrimage? 1 = Yes, 2 = No
Reasons		The pilgrim's reasons to undertake the Camino
Q14_1_Challenge (dummy variable)	0.0	The main reason to undertake the pilgrimage to Santago de Compostela was to embrace the challenge: 1 = Yes, 0 – No
Q14_2_Religious (dummy variable)	0.0	The main reason to undertake the pilgrimage to Santago de Compostela was religious: 1 = Yes, 0 – No
Q14_3_Socio-cultural (dummy variable)	0.0	The main reason to undertake the pilgrimage to Santago de Compostela was socio-cultural: 1 = Yes, 0 – No
Q14_4_Spiritual (dummy variable)	0.0	The main reason to undertake the pilgrimage to Santago de Compostela was spiritual: 1 = Yes, 0 – No

Source: Authors compilation

The MGA analysis was performed taking into account the feelings of pilgrim after the Camino (spiritual fulfillment vs inner peace), the pilgrims' discovery source of Camino (word of mouth vs other sources), the pilgrims' nationality (Latino vs other), gender (male vs female), income (below 2000 euro/month vs over 2000 euro/months), marital status (married vs single) and religious affiliation (declared vs no affiliation or not declared).

## Results and Discussions

Findings regarding the sample

The sample used for the analysis consists of 272 valid answers (out of 331 answers received). Looking to the characteristics of the sample, it can be noticed that 42.6% pilgrims answered to the questionnaire in Spanish, 29.4%

in English, 19.1% in Portuguese, 5.5% in Romanian and 3.3% in Italian. This linguistic distribution aligns with established demographic patterns, reflecting the substantial representation of Spanish pilgrims who constitute more than half of annual Santiago de Compostela visitors.

Word-of-mouth communication emerged as the primary information source, with 62.5% of respondents reporting discovery of the Santiago pilgrimage through personal recommendations from social networks including friends, colleagues, and family members. Secondary information sources comprised various additional channels. Regarding this additional category, Spanish participants specifically identified the Compostela pilgrimage as constituting a significant cultural tradition.
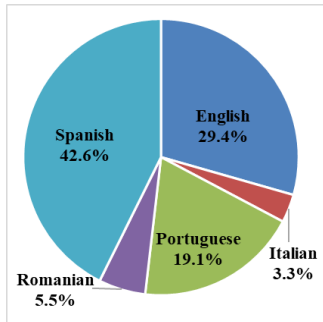
Figure 2 a. Language used to fill in the questionnaire
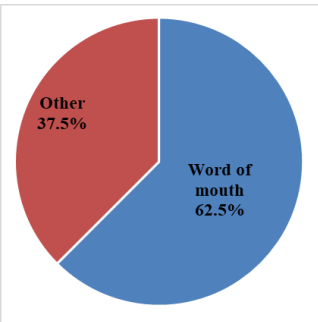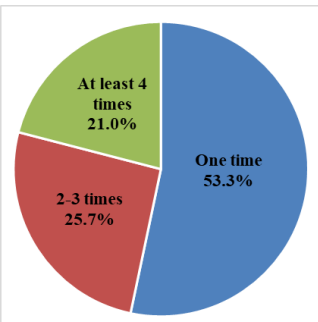
Figure 2 b. Camino discovery source
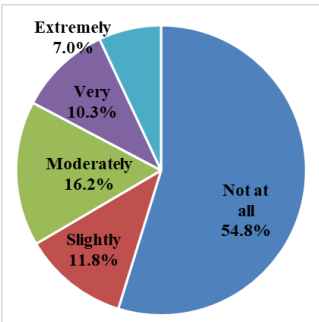
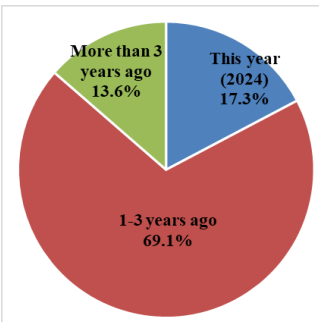**Figure 2 c.** Social media influence

Source: Authors' owns elaboration based on collected data
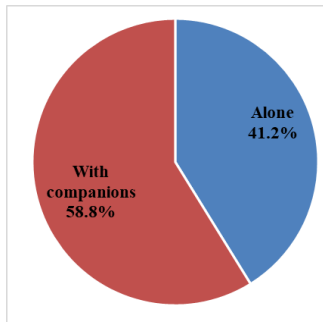
Figure 3 a. Size of the travel group

**Figure 3 b.** Pilgrimage frequency

Figure 3 c. Time of the last pilgrimage

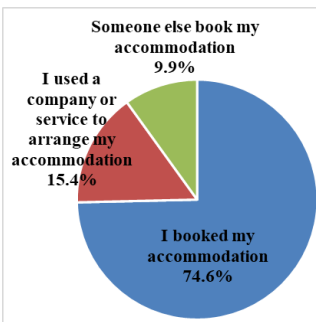*Source:* Authors' owns elaboration based on collected data

Another inquiry investigated social media's influence on pilgrimage decision-making within our contemporary digital landscape, where social media platforms maintain ubiquitous presence and demonstrate substantial capacity to shape individual behavioral patterns and decisional processes. Findings indicate that 54.8% of respondents experienced no social media influence, with an additional 11.8% reporting minimal impact. Moderate influence was acknowledged by 16.2% of participants, while 10.3% identified significant influence. Extreme social media influence was reported by merely 7% of respondents. In terms of travel companion preferences, approximative 58.8% of participants favored accompanied travel, compared to the rest of them who selected solitary journeys. Such preferences likely reflect multifactorial influences including individual personality characteristics, personal pilgrimage motivations, and prior travel experiences. Pilgrimage frequency data reveal that 53.3% of respondents had completed a single journey, followed by approximately one-quarter who had undertaken it twice or three times. A substantial proportion had completed the pilgrimage four or more times. Analysis of these data demonstrates a general tendency among pilgrims to repeat their journey to Santiago de Compostela. Regarding the temporal distribution analysis of pilgrimage participation, most participants (69.1%) reported completing their pilgrimage within the previous 1-3 years, suggesting sustained interest in this practice during the recent period. Additionally, a considerable proportion who undertook the pilgrimage in the current year indicates continued commitment and active participation in the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage.

Data analysis revealed that an overwhelming majority of respondents (96%) chose to walk when undertaking the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Only a small minority of participants (4%) opted for bicycle transportation during their journey. These findings can be attributed to various motivations, such as the desire to experience the journey at a slower pace, to connect with nature, and authentic pilgrimage experience.
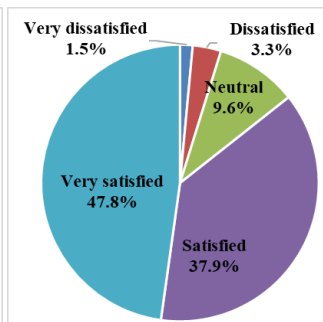
Accommodation preference analysis reveals "albergues" (traditional pilgrim hostels) as the predominant choice among nearly two-thirds of respondents. Hotels constituted the secondary preference among a moderate participant segment, followed by conventional hostels selected by a smaller cohort. Most respondents expressed high satisfaction related to their accommodation experience, with nearly half of all participants indicating they were very satisfied with it. Additionally, more than one-third reported being satisfied, while approximately one-tenth declared neutral satisfaction levels. Lower proportions were recorded for dissatisfaction categories, with minimal percentages expressing dissatisfaction or extreme dissatisfaction. This understanding may prove valuable for accommodation service providers and local authorities in improving and managing tourism infrastructure within pilgrimage areas.
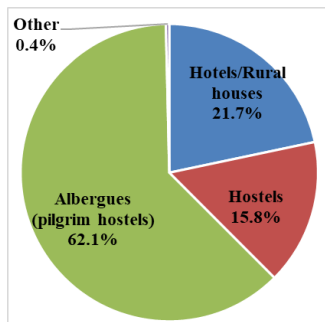
**Figure 4 a.** Type of accommodation   **Figure 4 b.** Accommodation booking   **Figure 4 c.** Satisfaction regarding the accommodation
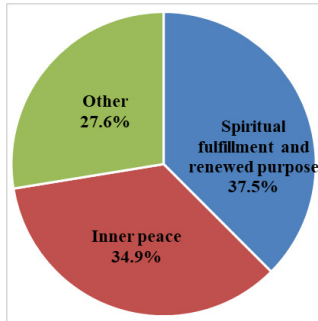
Source: Authors' owns elaboration based on collected data

An analysis is undoubtedly essential for understanding the dynamics and transformations in contemporary pilgrim behavior. This analysis concerns the primary motivation for pilgrimage and provides valuable insight into the priorities and motivations underlying modern pilgrimages, while analysis of these motivations illuminates shifts in contemporary pilgrimage dynamics and priorities. Firstly, the findings indicate that 28.7% of participants are motivated by spiritual seeking and connection with spiritual dimensions of life. This significant proportion underscores that pilgrimage remains a profoundly spiritual act for many contemporary travelers who seek understanding and enlightenment during their journey. Furthermore, the socio-cultural experience emerges as another important pilgrimage motivation, highlighted by 25.7% of participants. This indicates growing interest in exploring and understanding other cultures and traditions, suggesting that pilgrimage encompasses not only religious aspects but also discovery and connection with human diversity. Additionally, 23.2% of participants are motivated by the desire to escape daily routine, seeking to experience new adventures and challenges during their journey. This motivation emphasizes that pilgrimage may be perceived as a means of escaping the stress and monotony of everyday life, like a challenge. In contrast, religious motives are the primary reason by 9.9% of participants, indicating that for some, pilgrimage remains an expression of faith and religious commitment. Finally, 12.5% of participants have other reasons, like the desire for social interaction and forming connections with other pilgrims or residents.
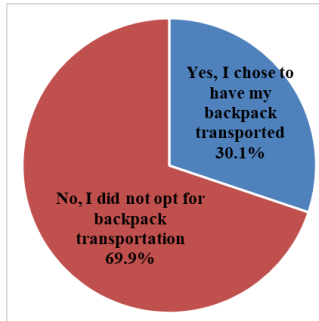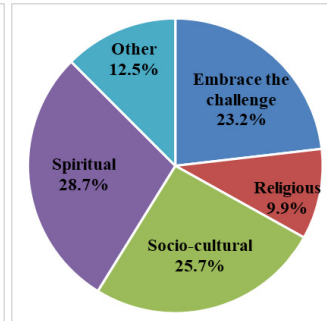
Figure 5 a. Backpack transportation services

**Figure 5 b.** Feelings after the pilgrimage

Figure 5 c. Pilgrimage main reason

Source: Authors' owns elaboration based on collected data

Age distribution analysis reveals a pronounced demographic concentration among mature adult participants (55-64 years old), with the highest representation occurring within the later middle-aged cohort, followed by earlier middle-aged participants (45-54 years old). Senior participants and younger middle-aged adults demonstrate substantial but secondary representation levels. Conversely, young adult and youth participation remains markedly limited. This age distribution indicates that the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage predominantly attracts mature adults and seniors, with a notable concentration of participants in the older adult demographic. This trend may reflect the fact that mature adults and seniors possess both the motivation and necessary resources to undertake such a pilgrimage, given that this demographic group may have greater availability of leisure time and financial stability. The relative absence of younger demographic segments may indicate structural barriers including time constraints, competing priorities, or economic limitations inherent to earlier career and life development phases.
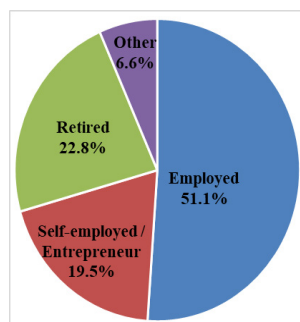
The occupational distribution of respondents demonstrates considerable diversity, with employed individuals representing the largest segment, constituting nearly half of all participants. Retirees form another substantial group, representing approximately one-quarter of all respondents. Entrepreneurs constitute a modest proportion of respondents, indicating moderate participation in pilgrimage among individuals who own and operate their own businesses. Unemployed individuals and students are represented to a lesser extent, demonstrating reduced participation from these demographic categories.
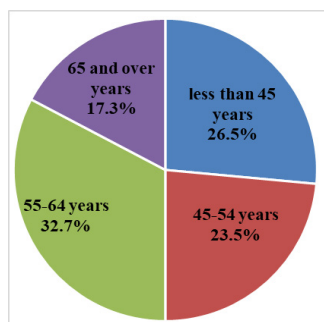
Figure 6 a. Age distribution of respondents
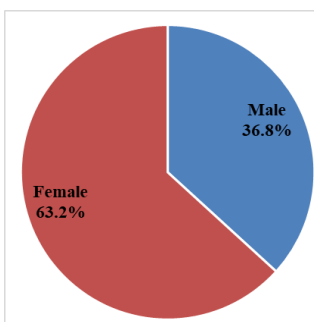
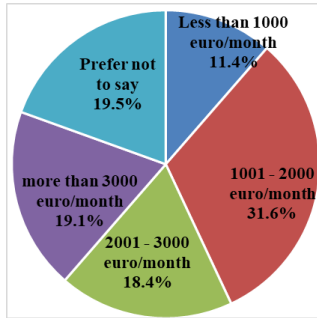**Figure 6 b.** Gender distribution of respondents

Figure 6 c. Occupation distribution of respondents

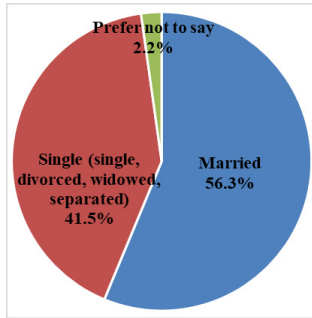*Source:* Authors' owns elaboration based on collected data

      The data reveals remarkably high educational attainment among participants, with the vast majority holding higher education qualifications. Master's degree holders represent the largest group, followed by bachelor's degree recipients and a notable proportion with doctoral credentials. This highly educated demographic profile suggests that pilgrimage participation may correlate with advanced educational achievement and associated socioeconomic factors.

      Among Santiago de Compostela pilgrims, significant diversity in religious affiliation is evident. The largest proportion consists of Catholics, reflecting the historical connection of the pilgrimage with Catholic tradition. Simultaneously, a substantial segment does not identify with any specific religion, indicating spiritual motivation independent of organized religious institutions. Additionally, Orthodox pilgrims, Protestants, and those with other religious affiliations complete the diverse religious landscape of the Santiago de Compostela pilgrim community.

      The study findings also indicate a predominantly positive evaluation of the pilgrims' experience. A very small percentage, less than 1%, had a disappointing experience. A larger but still reduced percentage of 6.06% had a neutral experience. In contrast, most respondents had positive experiences, with 25.15% affirming that their experiences met their expectations and an impressive 67.81% declaring that their experiences exceeded expectations.

Figure 7 a. Income distribution of respondents

Figure 7 b. Marital status distribution of respondents
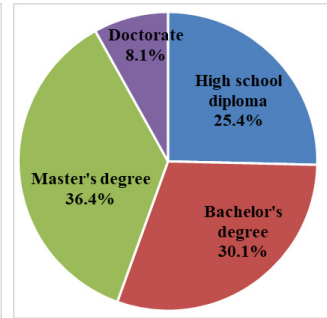
Figure 7 c. Education level distribution of respondents

Source: Authors' owns elaboration based on collected data

These findings are significant for understanding the impact of the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage on participants. Despite the diversity of motivations driving individuals to undertake this journey, the overwhelming majority report positive experiences. This suggests that, irrespective of the personal motives that bring pilgrims to the Camino, Santiago de Compostela consistently delivers a satisfactory experience that often surpasses initial anticipations. The data demonstrates a clear pattern of positive outcomes, with over 90% of participants reporting experiences that either met or exceeded their expectations. This high level of satisfaction across diverse participant demographics and motivational profiles indicates the robust capacity of the pilgrimage experience to fulfill varied individual needs and aspirations.
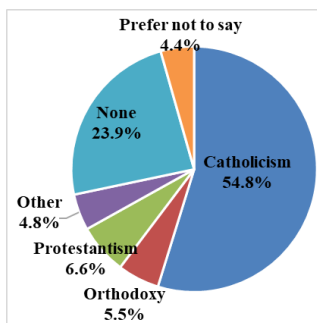
Figure 8 a. Religious affiliation of respondents
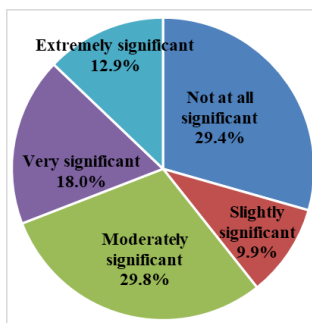
Figure 8 b. Religion importance for respondents
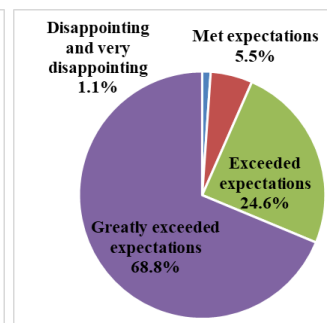
Figure 8 c. Satisfaction level of respondents

Source: Authors' owns elaboration based on collected data

Model results

Implementing the model, the following results were obtained:
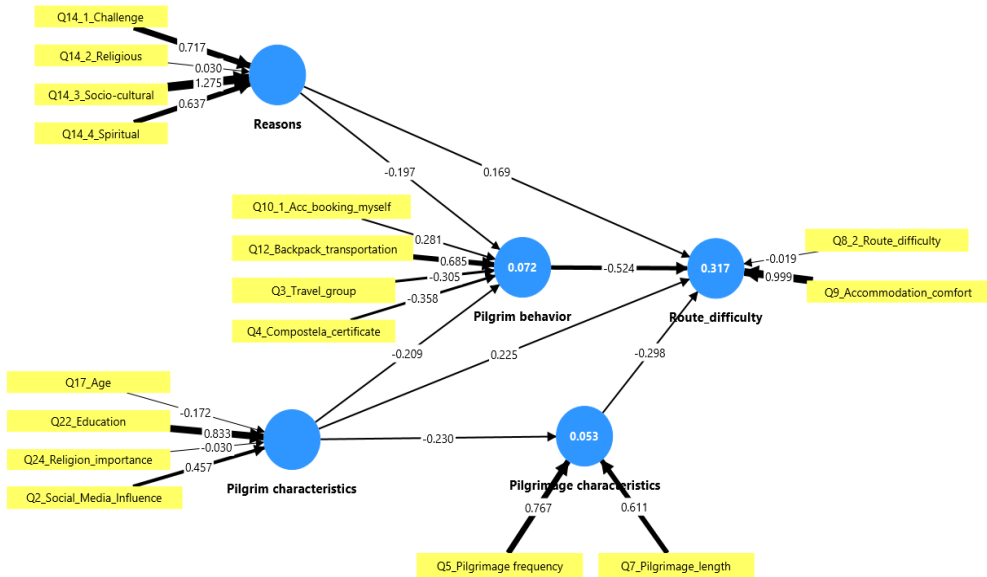
Figure 9. Complete model
Source: Authors' calculation

The model explains 31.7% out of the variability of the *Route difficulty* a pilgrim is willing to undertake, which represents a moderate level of explanatory power. However, looking at the outer weights value, it can be observed that the results are statistically significant only in the case of some variables (the lines in *italic*, where the p values are below 0.05). These may be the result of the sample volume limitation, acknowledged previously. Since, from the theoretical point of view, the indicators are relevant for the purpose of the paper, together with the fact that there was no multicollinearity effect identified between variables (all the VIF values are relevant, below 3.3 (Kock, 2015); see below), it was decided to keep all the variables in the model.

Table 2. Outer weights values

Outer weights	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
Q10_1_Acc_booking_myself -> Pilgrim behavior	*0.281*	*0.275*	*0.122*	*2.303*	*0.021*
Q12_Backpack_transportation -> Pilgrim behavior	*0.685*	*0.673*	*0.137*	*5.002*	*0.000*
Q14_1_Challenge -> Reasons	0.717	0.244	0.687	1.044	0.297
Q14_2_Religious -> Reasons	0.03	0.125	0.288	0.104	0.917
Q14_3_Socio-cultural -> Reasons	1.275	0.321	1.109	1.149	0.250
Q14_4_Spiritual -> Reasons	0.637	0.236	0.645	0.988	0.323
Q17_Age -> Pilgrim characteristics	-0.172	-0.039	0.448	0.385	0.700
Q22_Education -> Pilgrim characteristics	0.833	0.572	0.427	1.951	0.051
Q24_Religion_importance -> Pilgrim characteristics	-0.03	-0.019	0.232	0.129	0.898
Q2_Social_Media_Influence -> Pilgrim characteristics	0.457	0.309	0.293	1.556	0.120
Q3_Travel_group -> Pilgrim behavior	*-0.305*	*-0.279*	*0.133*	*2.286*	*0.022*
Q4_Compostela_certificate -> Pilgrim behavior	*-0.358*	*-0.337*	*0.125*	*2.873*	*0.004*
Q5_Pilgrimage frequency -> Pilgrimage characteristics	*0.767*	*0.626*	*0.289*	*2.648*	*0.008*
Q7_Pilgrimage_length -> Pilgrimage characteristics	0.611	0.568	0.415	1.473	0.141
Q8_2_Route_difficulty -> Route_difficulty	-0.019	-0.026	0.161	0.117	0.907
Q9_Accommodation_comfort -> Route_difficulty	*0.999*	*0.973*	*0.14*	*7.131*	*0.000*

Source: authors' calculation using SMART PLS 4

Table 3. Outer VIF Values

Variables	VIF	Variables	VIF
Q10_1_Acc_booking_myself	1.174	Q24_Religion_importance	1.009
Q12_Backpack_transportation	1.131	Q2_Social_Media_Influence	1.02
Q14_1_Challenge	2.192	Q3_Travel_group	1.057
Q14_2_Religious	1.616	Q4_Compostela_certificate	1.049
Q14_3_Socio-cultural	2.272	Q5_Pilgrimage frequency	1.002
Q14_4_Spiritual	2.349	Q7_Pilgrimage_length	1.002
Q17_Age	1.014	Q8_2_Route_difficulty	1.003
Q22_Education	1.019	Q9_Accommodation_comfort	1.003

Source: authors' calculation using SMART PLS 4

Table 4. Inner VIF Values

Inner model	VIF
Pilgrim behavior -> Route_difficulty	1.128
Pilgrim characteristics -> Pilgrim behavior	1.020
Pilgrim characteristics -> Pilgrimage characteristics	1.000
Pilgrim characteristics -> Route_difficulty	1.099
Pilgrimage characteristics -> Route_difficulty	1.105
Reasons -> Pilgrim behavior	1.020
Reasons -> Route_difficulty	1.055

Source: authors' calculation using SMART PLS 4

The strongest direct predictor of the difficulty of the chosen route is the latent variable describing the *Pilgrim behavior* during the pilgrimage. The effect is moderately positive, since for each additional standard deviation unit, route difficulty will decrease by 0.524 standard deviation units (when keeping all other independent constructs constant). Thus, the pilgrims who didn't opt for backpack transportation tend to choose an easier route and more comfortable accommodation – this could represent a strategy for fatigue management, to ensure the achievement of the goal (completing the journey). Also, an easier route tends to be chosen by the pilgrims traveling with companions or who didn't apply to receive the Compostela certificate. Group traveling usually is supposed to select the routes which suit all the group members from the point of physical capacity, or that allow for more social interaction rather than intense physical exertion. The Compostela certification represents formal religious recognition, so pilgrims motivated by other reasons (like leisure, cultural exploration, or personal reflection) may be determined to choose less demanding routes.

The characteristics of the last pilgrimage had also an impact on the chosen level of difficulty. The effect is moderately negative, since a one standard deviation increase in the pilgrimage characteristics was associated with a 0.298 standard deviation decrease in route difficulty, controlling for other variables in the model. This suggests that higher levels of *Pilgrimage characteristics* are systematically linked to lower levels of *Route difficulty*. As a result, the pilgrims who plan to perform a longer pilgrimage or who previously did other Camino routes tend to choose a less difficult route compared to the rest of the pilgrims. Longer pilgrimages require sustained physical and mental effort, so pilgrims may balance total challenge by selecting routes with lower technical or physical difficulty - reducing route difficulty can help maintaining endurance and enjoyment

over time (fatigue management). On the other side, the pilgrims who have completed other Camino routes may prioritize variety, cultural exposure, or spiritual aspects over physical challenge.

The *Pilgrims' characteristics* have a small-to-moderate positive impact on the route difficulty chosen by the pilgrims (a one standard deviation increase in *Pilgrim Characteristics* was associated with a 0.225 standard deviation increase in *Route Difficulty*, keeping all other independent constructs constant). The variables *level of education* and *social media influence* impact the most the decision regarding route difficulty, a higher level of education and a higher declared impact from social media being associated with performing a pilgrimage on a more difficult route. The more educated pilgrims could be more confident in their planning skills, could have a higher tolerance for complexity, or a preference for routes perceived as more "authentic" or rewarding. Similarly, the pilgrims who were more influenced by social media in their decision could be exposed to curated, aspirational content that portrays challenging routes as more prestigious, adventurous, or spiritually meaningful. On the other hand, a higher value for *age* and higher *importance of religion* in the pilgrims' life are associated with lower levels of routes difficulty. A higher category of age could be associated with physical limitations, risk aversion, or a preference for comfort and accessibility, while a greater importance on religion may indicate that the spiritual or devotional aspects of the pilgrimage outweigh the appeal of physical challenge, leading pilgrims to select routes that are more accessible and allow greater focus on religious practices.

The *Reasons* latent construct has the lowest impact on the *Route difficulty* chosen by pilgrims: a one standard deviation increase in *Reasons* was associated with a 0.169 standard deviation increase in *Route Difficulty*, keeping all other independent constructs constant. Analyzing the factor loadings, it was concluded that *socio-cultural motivation* has the most significant positive impact on route difficulty. Pilgrims motivated by socio-cultural reasons may be interested in immerging in local culture, which may determine them to travel to more authentic places, seeking novelty and adventure, places which could be harder to reach or could take longer trips. Also, completing a challenging route can carry prestige, making it a story worth sharing with peers or on social media. On the other hand, *religious* motivation has a negative indirect effect on route difficulty. Pilgrims who focus on practicing their religion (praying or practicing some religious rituals) may be interested in conserving energy for these activities than testing physical limits. Furthermore, these pilgrims may be interested in minimizing distractions, the physical exhaustion from a difficult route could detract them from the contemplative or devotional state they seek.

To test if the model's measurement and structural components hold consistently across groups, the permutation multigroup analysis was implemented. The method allowed us to identify the groups where the conclusions of the model differ significantly. The focus was on the groups that resulted from the following criteria: gender, the source of Camino discovery, pilgrims' income level, marital status, nationality, the feeling after pilgrimage completion and religious affiliation. The results show no significant difference in terms of gender, source of discovery, religious affiliation and income level, while in the case of the other criteria the following differences were identified.
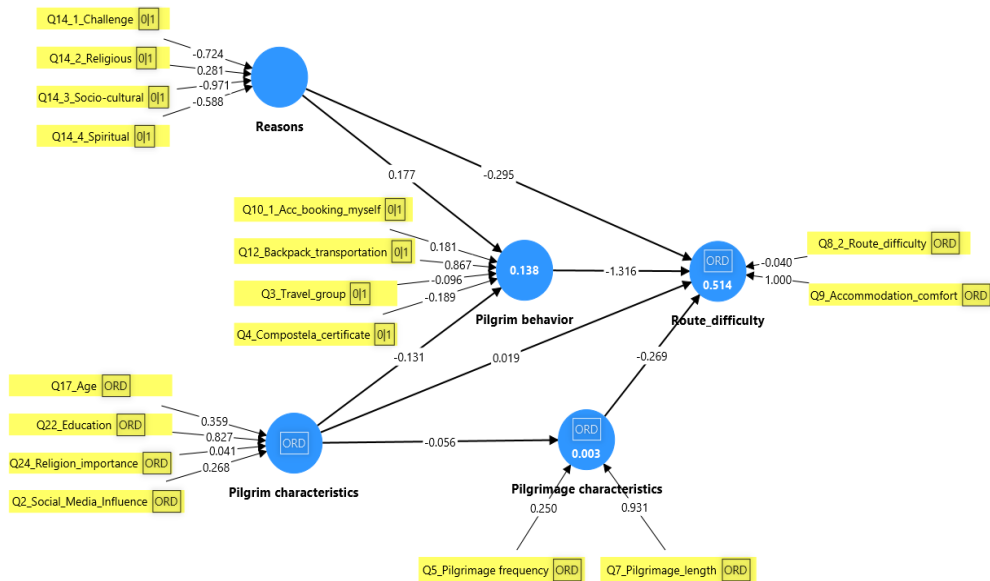
The model explains better the impact of being non married pilgrim in the case of route difficulty, the original difference between R square values for the route difficulty being statistically relevant (p-value = 0.013). This difference arises mainly from the impact of *Pilgrim behavior* construct, the differences between groups for the *backpack transportation* (p-value = 0.016) and the *size of group* (p-value = 0.033) being statistically relevant. The choice of route difficulty in the case of single (not married) pilgrims is more strongly influenced by whether they use backpack transport. As a result, for singles, the decision to carry their own load or outsource is a more decisive factor in selecting route difficulty than in the case of married pilgrims. In the case of married pilgrims, since most probably they are traveling with their spouse, the travel group indicator has a stronger impact on route difficulty than in the case of single pilgrims, this aspect even allowing them to choose a little more difficult route knowing that they have companions to rely on.
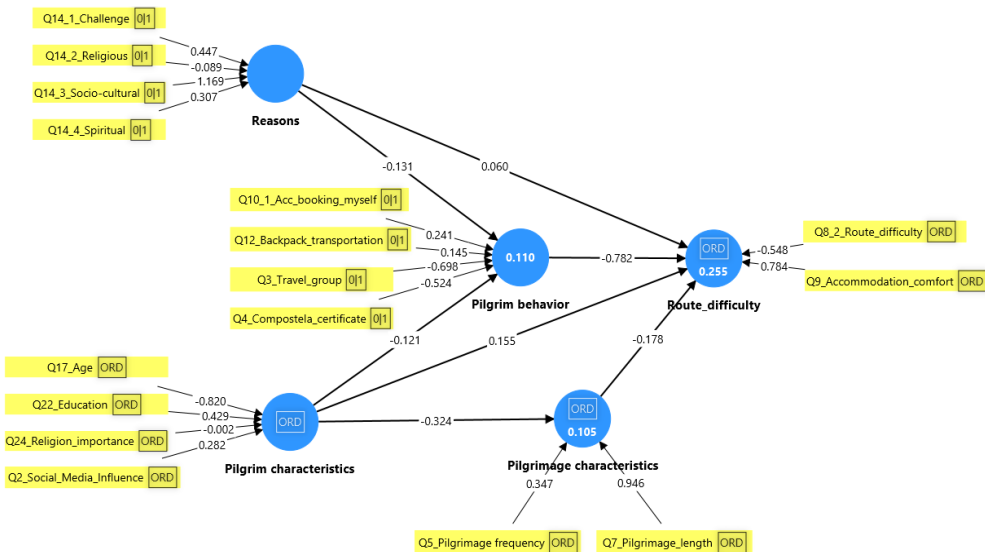
Figure 10. Model in the case of married pilgrims
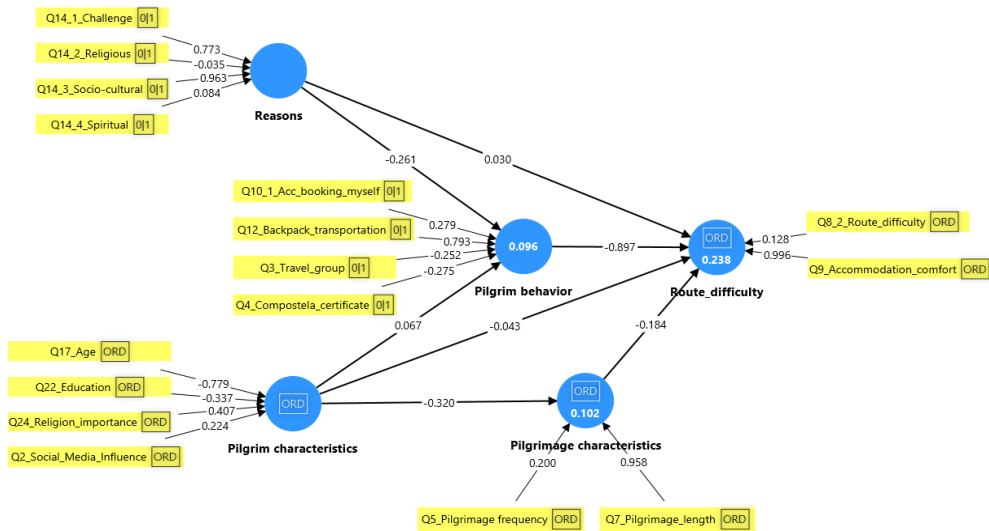*Source:* Authors' calculation

Thus, single pilgrims show a stronger behavioral–difficulty link, their route choices being more sensitive to practical decisions like backpack transport and group composition. These results have important practical implications related to the way that route planning, service offerings, and marketing could be tailored. For singles, the offers should emphasize the challenge options, gear transport services, and flexible group arrangements, while in the case of married pilgrims the focus should be on comfort, shared experiences, and routes that accommodate joint decision-making.

Figure 11. Model in the case of single (not married) pilgrims
Source: Authors' calculation

The model explains better the factors influencing the route difficulty in the case of other nationality pilgrims than in the case of pilgrims having a Latino nationality, the original difference between R square values for the route difficulty being statistically relevant (-0.243, p-value = 0.031). Comparing the models, it seems that the difference between groups is determined by the impact the *Reasons* construct has on the choice of route difficulty (even if the difference is not statistically significant).
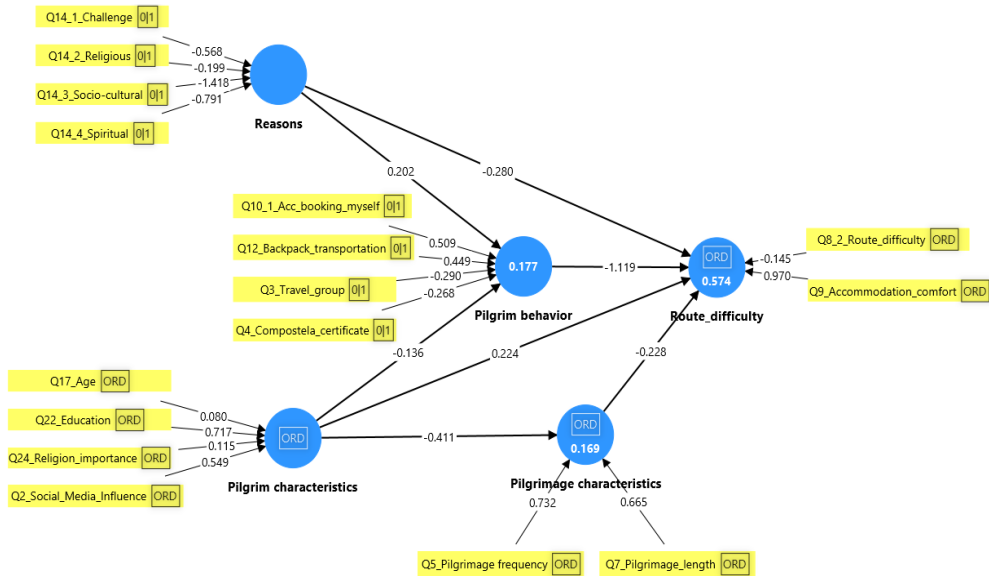
Figure 12. Model in the case of Latino pilgrims
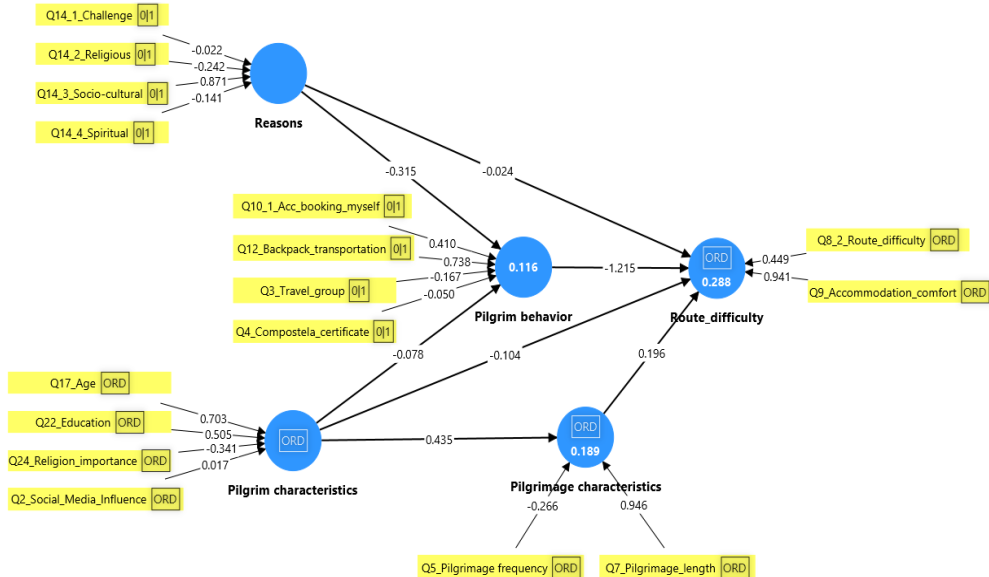*Source:* Authors' calculation
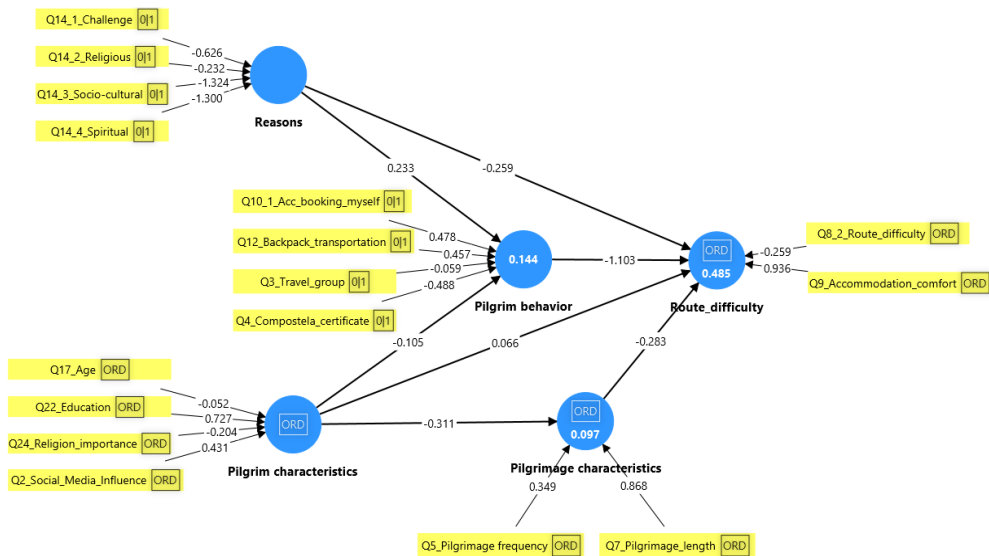
Figure 13. Model in the case of other nationalities (non-Latino) pilgrims
Source: Authors' calculation

More precisely, in line with other studies from the literature, spiritual motivation might push non-Latino pilgrims more strongly toward choosing a more difficult pilgrimage route than it does for Latino pilgrims. Non-Latino pilgrims, especially those from secularized Western or Northern European countries, often approach pilgrimage as a personal quest for transformation rather than as a continuation of a long-standing communal tradition (Brumec *et al.*, 2023; Kim *et al.*, 2019). In these contexts, spirituality is frequently expressed through self-challenge and testing personal limits, so a harder route is similar with spiritual depth — the harder the path, the greater the perceived inner growth. By contrast, Latino pilgrims often come from cultures where pilgrimage is deeply embedded in religious and communal life. The spiritual value is tied more to devotion, ritual participation, and shared faith identity than to the physical hardship itself (Amaro *et al.*, 2018). In this case, the route's difficulty may be secondary to the act of fulfilling a promise, honoring a saint, or participating in a collective tradition.

The model explains better the factors influencing the route difficulty in the case of pilgrims who felt inner peace at the end of pilgrimage than in the case of pilgrims who felt spiritual fulfillment, the original difference between R square values for the *Route difficulty* being statistically relevant (0.297, p-value = 0.029). Comparing the models, it seems that the difference between groups results from the different profiles of pilgrims. Analyzing the *Pilgrim characteristics* construct, it can be observed that the pilgrims declaring they felt inner peace tend to have higher educational attainment, which may shape how they process and integrate the pilgrimage experience into personal growth and reflection. Also, they are more likely to be influenced by social media in their decision to undertake the pilgrimage, perhaps valuing shared experiences, visual storytelling, and community validation. So, these pilgrims may approach the journey as a mindful retreat or personal reset, shaped by education and modern communication channels. They might be more reflective, open to diverse influences, and less bound by traditional religious motivations. On the other hand, the pilgrims who declared they felt spiritual fulfillment at the end of pilgrimage have a very strong link between their age and the pilgrim characteristics, possibly due to life stage, accumulated religious practice, or long-held devotional goals. Education still matters, but less than their age. They are less influenced by social media, suggesting motivations rooted in tradition, personal vows, or community heritage. They may see the journey as a sacred duty or culmination of a spiritual path, often shaped by age, life experience, and a deeper connection to heritage or faith traditions — even if they don't self-report religion as "important" in a conventional sense.

Figure 14. Model in the case of pilgrims who achieved inner peace at the end of pilgrimage
Source: Authors' calculation

Figure 15. Model in the case of pilgrims who achieved spiritual fulfillment
at the end of pilgrimage
Source: Authors' calculation

Thus, the inner peace group tend to be younger, more educated, digitally connected, seeking personal clarity, while the spiritual fulfillment group tend to be older, less influenced by digital culture, seeking transcendence or sacred completion.

The difference between the path coefficients in the case of the relationship between *Pilgrim characteristics* and the level of the difficulty chosen route is statistically relevant (0.328, p-value = 0.023), the pilgrims who felt inner peace (as a result of their level of education and social media exposure) choosing to follow a more difficult route (these results are in line with the results obtained previously for the general model) than the pilgrims searching and achieving spiritual fulfillment. Additionally, there is a significant statistical difference between the two groups in the case of the impact the pilgrim characteristics have on the pilgrimage characteristics (-0.846, p-value = 0.010): the inner peace pilgrims tend to perform shorter and less frequent pilgrimages than the group pursuing spiritual fulfillment. This conclusion is validated also by the statistically significative difference between groups in the case of the relationship between the *Pilgrimage characteristics* and *Route difficulty* (-0.424, p-value = 0.037).

Conclusions

Far from constituting merely a journey through northern Spain, the Camino has evolved into a symbol of the quest for authenticity and personal transformation, attracting pilgrims from across the globe in pursuit of a life-altering experience. Through each step taken along this centuries-old route, pilgrims discover not only the beauty of the landscapes but also the opportunity for self-rediscovery and reconnection with human essence. Consequently, the Camino de Santiago has emerged as one of the world's most emblematic and transformative journeys, representing an amalgamation of adventure, introspection, and spirituality for those who venture to traverse it.

The present study's findings should be interpreted considering its limited sample size, which falls below conventional thresholds for statistical significance. While PLS-SEM and MGA are well suited for small, prediction-oriented datasets, the reduced statistical power increases the likelihood of sampling variability and restricts the generalizability of the results. The analyses were therefore conducted with an explicitly exploratory aim, focusing on the identification of potential relationships and group-level patterns that may inform future research.

Consequently, all interpretations should be regarded as provisional, with replication in larger, more representative samples needed to substantiate the trends observed.

The behavioral patterns reflecting greater comfort orientation or social travel are linked to the selection of less physically demanding routes. Specifically, pilgrims who did not use backpack transportation services, opted for more comfortable accommodation, travelled with companions, or did not apply for the Compostela certificate were more likely to choose easier routes. These results suggest that route difficulty preferences are shaped not only by prior experience but also by in-situ behavioral tendencies and motivations.

Pilgrims planning longer journeys or with prior experience on other Camino routes tended to opt for routes of lower technical or physical difficulty. This pattern suggests that experienced or long-distance pilgrims may strategically balance total journey demands by moderating route difficulty, potentially prioritizing endurance, cultural engagement, or spiritual objectives over physical challenge.

Pilgrim characteristics is a multidimensional construct whose overall positive effect on *Route difficulty* is driven primarily by education level and social media influence, which pushes route choice toward greater difficulty. However, age and religious importance exert counterbalancing influences, pulling route choice toward lower difficulty.

This finding helps distinguish between different categories of pilgrims: novice challenge-seekers and experienced endurance pilgrims, or challenge-oriented pilgrims and comfort/social-oriented pilgrims. Understanding these tendencies enables organizers, tourism boards, and service providers to tailor route recommendations, accommodation options, and support services to match the comfort, social, and motivational profiles of different pilgrim segments.

Pilgrims driven by socio-cultural motivations tend to select more demanding routes, seeking immersive, authentic experiences that offer cultural richness, adventure, and personal achievement. In contrast, those with stronger religious motivations are inclined toward less difficult paths, prioritizing accessibility to sacred sites and conserving energy for prayer, reflection, and ritual. This divergence reflects differing priorities: socio-cultural pilgrims embrace physical challenge as part of the journey's value, while religious pilgrims focus on the spiritual purpose, minimizing physical strain to enhance devotion. The embracing challenge and spiritual motivations have a negligible impact on the choice of route difficulty.

The analysis reveals that marital status moderates the relationship between pilgrim behavior and route difficulty, with the model explaining route choice significantly better for single pilgrims than for married ones. For singles,

practical decisions such as whether to use backpack transport and the size of the travel group exert a stronger influence on the difficulty of the chosen route. This pattern suggests that single pilgrims may approach the pilgrimage with greater flexibility, adjusting their physical challenge level in response to logistical considerations or the dynamics of temporary travel companions. In contrast, married pilgrims appear less sensitive to these specific behavioral factors, possibly because their travel arrangements are more stable—often centered on a spouse or fixed group—leading to route choices shaped by shared comfort preferences rather than situational adjustments. These findings indicate that route selection is not solely a function of physical capacity or motivation, but also of the social and logistical context in which the pilgrimage is undertaken, with single pilgrims displaying a more adaptive, context-responsive decision-making style.

The factors influencing route difficulty are better explained for pilgrims who experienced inner peace than for those who achieved spiritual fulfillment. Inner peace pilgrims, typically younger, more educated, and socially media-influenced, tend to choose more difficult routes but undertake shorter, less frequent pilgrimages. Their approach reflects a search for personal growth and reflective retreat. In contrast, spiritual fulfillment pilgrims are generally older, less digitally engaged, and guided by tradition, life stage, and deep-rooted spiritual goals. They prefer less challenging routes but longer, more frequent journeys. As a practical implication, the travel agents can tailor routes, marketing channels, and on-route experiences to match these motivations, balancing modern reflective approaches with the preservation of traditional, heritage-based pilgrimage values.

Based on these exploratory findings, several future research hypotheses could be formulated for testing with larger, more representative samples:

H1: *Higher education and stronger social media influence are positively associated with route difficulty.*
H2: *Older age and higher religious importance are negatively associated with route difficulty.*
H3: *Prior Camino experience and longer planned journeys are associated with lower route difficulty.*
H4: *Marital status moderates the behavior–difficulty relationship, with stronger effects for single pilgrims.*
H5: *Inner peace seekers choose more difficult but shorter routes; spiritual fulfillment seekers choose easier but longer routes.*

The importance of this continued research is underlined by the fact that pilgrimage generates substantial economic and cultural benefits for host communities, serving as a catalyst for tourism development while simultaneously fostering cultural diversity and facilitating intercultural dialogue. Consequently, despite the diminishing dominance of the religious component, contemporary pilgrimage remains a phenomenon of extraordinary relevance and significance. Given its multifaceted and positive impact across multiple domains, the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage warrants sustained academic attention and rigorous scholarly investigation to comprehensively elucidate the dynamics and evolutionary trajectory of this phenomenon within the contemporary socio-cultural context.

The findings of this study substantiate the hypothesis that pilgrims' motivations for undertaking the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage have undergone significant transformation over recent decades. While religious motivations have historically constituted the predominant driving force throughout the pilgrimage's historical trajectory, contemporary evidence indicates a marked decline in their prevalence. Concurrently, alternative motivational factors—including spiritual exploration, cultural immersion, escapism from quotidian routines, and intellectual curiosity—have emerged as increasingly salient determinants of pilgrimage participation. These evolving motivational paradigms present substantial implications for the religious and cultural tourism industry. Pilgrimage destinations must therefore demonstrate strategic adaptability to accommodate emerging trends and provide comprehensive experiential offerings and services that effectively address the diverse needs and interests of contemporary pilgrims. This necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of traditional service provision models to ensure alignment with the multifaceted expectations of modern pilgrimage participants.

A significant limitation of this study derives from the exclusive utilization of Facebook as the primary communication and distribution channel for the questionnaire. This approach may prove restrictive regarding sample representativeness, as not all nationalities and demographic groups utilize this social and informational platform equally or at all, with younger populations, for instance, employing this platform with decreasing frequency. Another limitation of this study emerges from the decision to request participants to refer to their most recent pilgrimage to Santiago when completing the questionnaire. Despite recognizing that some participants may have undertaken multiple pilgrimages previously, this data collection methodology may not fully capture the diversity and specificity of motivations associated with each individual pilgrimage. A final limitation of this study derives from the fact that the questionnaire was not translated into German and French, two languages of considerable importance for Santiago de Compostela pilgrims. This decision may have adversely affected

the participation and representativeness of pilgrims from Germany and France in the received responses, considering that Germans constituted the fourth most numerous nationalities at Compostela in 2023, while the French represented the sixth largest group. Consequently, it is possible that the perspectives and motivations of these pilgrim groups may not be comprehensively reflected in this analysis.

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