

Johnmeyer, Connie; Xu, Shuangyu; Wilhelm Stanis, Sonja; Morgan, Mark

Article

The meaningful elements of the Camino: Toward understanding pilgrims' transformative experience

Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights

Provided in Cooperation with:

Elsevier

Suggested Citation: Johnmeyer, Connie; Xu, Shuangyu; Wilhelm Stanis, Sonja; Morgan, Mark (2025) : The meaningful elements of the Camino: Toward understanding pilgrims' transformative experience, Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights, ISSN 2666-9579, Elsevier, Amsterdam, Vol. 6, Iss. 2, pp. 1-10,
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2025.100201>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/337857>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

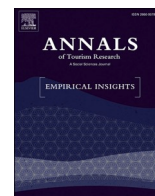
Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>



The meaningful elements of the Camino: Toward understanding pilgrims' transformative experience

Connie Johnmeyer, Shuangyu Xu^{*,1}, Sonja Wilhelm Stanis², Mark Morgan³

School of Natural Resources, University of Missouri, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Editor: Ksenia Kirillova

Keywords:

Camino
Transformative experience
Meaningful experience
Pilgrimage tourism
Pilgrims

ABSTRACT

Despite growing research on pilgrimage tourism, a comprehensive understanding of factors driving transformation remains limited. This study used a qualitative approach to identify meaningful elements of the Camino that facilitate pilgrims' transformative experience. Employing a data triangulation strategy, a content analysis was conducted on Camino pilgrims' social media posts and their responses to an open-ended survey questionnaire distributed to 1505 American pilgrims. Results revealed eight elements: religion/spirituality, long-distance walking, community, challenge, simplicity, nature, art/history/culture, and multiculturalism. These align well with Self-Determination Theory and help explain positive personal changes. This research deepens understanding of pilgrims' transformative experiences and the meaningful factors that foster them on the Camino.

1. Introduction

Pilgrimages, widely acknowledged as the oldest form of religious tourism (Iliev, 2020), have grown in popularity during the past few decades, attracting rising numbers of tourists worldwide (e.g., Buddha's Footprint Pilgrimage in Thailand, Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, Johnmeyer & Xu, 2022a), even in areas with declining religiosity (e.g., Western Europe, Inglehart, Miller, Dennis, Jwo, & Rosta, 2021). While there is no consensus on how to define pilgrimage or distinguish between pilgrims and tourists (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, 2020), previous discussions often center on pilgrims' motivation, their modes of transportation, and nature of the destination (Kim, Kim, & King, 2016). Since motivation may shift over time, multiple motivations co-exist, and religion itself lacks a clear definition, many scholars categorize all visitors to pilgrimage sites as pilgrims (e.g., Doi, 2011). In this article, pilgrimage is defined as a multi-day journey by foot, horseback, or bicycle to a sacred site.

Existing research on pilgrimages often explores pilgrims' inner experiences, particularly their personal outcomes (e.g., restoration, religiosity, and emotional connection, Gill, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2018). Among these outcomes, transformation – a substantive, lasting, positive

personal change (Sheldon, 2020) – emerges as a recurring theme, as many pilgrims reported psychological and physical shifts after their journeys (Brumec, Lavrič, & Naterer, 2023; Luik, 2012).

Indeed, abundant previous research has noted the transformative nature of tourism experiences in general, focusing on understanding the dimensions and process of how transformation works among tourists (e.g., Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017a; Tasci & Godovykh, 2021; Teoh, Wang, & Kwek, 2021). Many studies have also examined transformative experiences in specific tourism niches (e.g., volunteer tourism, study abroad, wellness tourism, Fu, Tanyatanaboon, & Lehto, 2015; Xu, LaPan, Lewis, Holladay, & Dixon, 2024), which suggests that elements that contribute to tourist transformation vary by context (Tasci & Godovykh, 2021). However, research is lacking regarding the components of the pilgrimage experiences that promote transformation (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). Among pilgrimages, the Camino de Santiago (Camino) – a web of trails leading to Santiago de Compostela in Spain – is one of the oldest and most well-known in the Western world (Escudero Gómez, Lopez, Piñeiro Antelo, & Lois Genzález, 2021). Celebrated for both religious and cultural significance, the Camino has been widely studied (Greenia, 2014).

This study aimed to identify and solidify meaningful elements of the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Cjj6n5@mail.missouri.edu (C. Johnmeyer), sxu@missouri.edu (S. Xu), sonjaws@missouri.edu (S. Wilhelm Stanis), MarkMorgan@missouri.edu (M. Morgan).

¹ 203-J Anheuser Busch Natural Resources Bldg., Columbia, MO 65211.

² 124 Anheuser Busch Natural Resources Bldg., Columbia, MO 65211.

³ 105 Anheuser Busch Natural Resources Bldg., Columbia, MO 65211.

Camino that foster pilgrims' transformative experiences, using triangulated data including a large sample of survey responses, introduced within a broad and well-established psychological theory of need satisfaction. Findings could help pilgrims approach their journeys more intentionally, guide local stakeholders in enhancing services, and offer insights applicable to other pilgrimage trails.

2. Literature review

2.1. Pilgrimage tourism & camino experience

Pilgrimage is a ritual journey tied to religion, often linked to major faiths (e.g., Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, Jongmeewasin, 2016). Previous studies have examined the impacts of pilgrimage tourism on local communities, tourists' motivations, behaviors, benefits, and sustainability (Liro, 2021; Prozano, 2018; Senbeto, 2024; Van Iwaarden & Nawijn, 2024). As a component of pilgrimage tourism, the Camino has been studied primarily focusing on pilgrims' motivations (Farias et al., 2019), values (Kim et al., 2016), and virtue outcomes (Escudero Gómez et al., 2021), and mostly with a qualitative approach. Only a few studies have focused on key destination-related aspects of the Camino pilgrimage experience, which may sometimes overlap with individual (pilgrim) factors (e.g., reconciliation). For example, Frey's (1998) ethnographic study of pilgrim stories highlighted bodily movement, solitude, friendship, connection to past pilgrims, and coping with pain, while Lopez (2013) emphasized social encounters, fatigue, nature, and climate after analyzing pilgrims' travel diaries. Brumec et al. (2023) identified nine transformative experiences for Camino pilgrims, including interconnectedness, insight, reconciliation, and spirituality. Sørensen and Høgh-Olesen (2023) also outlined six themes of pilgrimages: authenticity, nature, self-transformation, community, simplicity, and spirituality.

Limited quantitative research has also examined factors central to pilgrimage experiences with site-specific results. For example, contact between sick and healthy people was the most critical factor for pilgrims to Lourdes, a pilgrimage that people intentionally undertook for healing (Liutikas, 2012), whereas pilgrims in Taiwan to Dajia Mazu (a sea goddess in the local belief system) reported the criticality of the pilgrimage as a family tradition (Chang, Li, & Vincent, 2020). Considering that the pilgrimage tourism sites in both studies were unique (focusing on a specific segment of pilgrims who sought healing or following regional tradition), their findings may not apply to the Camino's broader context.

2.2. Transformation via tourism

Transformative tourism involves travel experiences congruent with an engaged inner journey (Soulard, McGehee, Stern, & Lamoureux, 2021) that awaken consciousness, foster self-awareness, encourage reflection on the purpose of life, and inspire higher values and greater contributions to others (Sheldon, 2020). The transformative nature of tourism experiences is well-documented in the literature, with much research exploring the dimensions and process of how transformation occurs for tourism experiences in general. For example, Kirillova et al. (2017a), drawing on existential philosophy, suggested that transformative experiences could be viewed as extended and enhanced 'peak' experiences, triggered by contextual environments (e.g., nature, novel cultures, and connections with others) that become meaningful through tourists' reflection and interpretation. Teoh et al. (2021) identified three dimensions of transformative tourism experiences (i.e., experience, experience-facilitator, experience-consumer) based on a systematic narrative review of 125 tourism studies. Through a mixed-methods approach, Tasci and Godovykh (2021) developed an empirical model outlining the transformation process through cognitive and affective stimulation, self-change, and behavioral change.

Many scholars highlighted the linkage between the meaningfulness

of tourism experiences and transformation. Reisinger (2013) noted that people find meaning through transformative experiences, while Pugh (2011) argued that transformation occurs when individuals experience the world in a new, meaningful way. Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai (2017b) suggested that the perceived meaningfulness of tourist experiences significantly affects their existential authenticity and anxiety, changes of which are conceptualized as transformation. Duerden et al. (2018) took a step further, proposing a continuum of the three types (memorable, meaningful, transformational) of extraordinary experiences that are fluid and likely to evolve over time. As such, transformation begins with an emotionally impactful experience that becomes memorable; if reflection on that memory leads to intra- and/or extra- learning, it may become a meaningful experience; and when it prompts individuals to make personal changes in perception and behavior, the experience becomes transformational (Duerden et al., 2018).

Other studies have also examined the transformative experience of specific tourism niches. For example, Bandyopadhyay and Nair (2019) investigated features of wellness tourism (e.g., use of spiritual practices such as yoga, calm atmosphere, herbal treatments) that brought about transformative changes to tourists. Neuhofer, Egger, Yu, and Celuch (2021) analyzed attendees' experience at the Burning Man festival through Instagram data to identify clusters (e.g., positive emotions, social engagement, *communitas*, insights, and care about humanity) that have a long-lasting, transformative impact. Magrizos, Kostopoulos, and Powers (2021) found that authenticity and immersiveness influenced the transformation of volunteer tourists, while developing a multi-national frame of reference was central to transformative change for travelers focusing on culture immersion (e.g., study abroad, Xu et al., 2024). For backpacker tourists, extended travel experience and an away-from-home environment are more likely to lead to transformation (Brown & Novak-Leonard, 2013).

As such, it is evident that transformative tourism experiences are context-specific and complex. Despite the Camino's cultural and religious importance, there still lacks clarity regarding what destination elements drive pilgrims' transformative experiences.

2.3. Self-determination theory

Tourism transformation research has been guided by four main theories, including: 1) Liminal theory - long adopted in pilgrimage studies to describe three successive stages of passage (i.e., pre-liminal/separation, liminal/transition, and post-liminal/incorporation, Turner, Abrahams, & Harris, 1969); 2) Transformative learning theory - explains how disorienting tourism experiences prompt reflection, leading individuals to reassess and adopt new assumptions (Pung, Gnoth, & Del Chiappa, 2020); 3) Existential theory - explores tourism as a search for meaning and a state of "existential authenticity" in which one's true self is achieved (Kirillova et al., 2017b); and 4) Self-Determination Theory - the most recent framework used to understand how tourism facilitates transformation, which asserts that people pursue tourism as a way to meet basic psychological needs (Buzinde, 2020; Nunes, Rosário, & Núñez, 2023).

Self-Determination Theory was selected as the most relevant for this study, which focuses on key Camino elements that pilgrims find meaningful and may potentiate transformative experiences. Rooted in positive psychology (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which emphasizes the tendency for individuals to 'become' - to reach toward growth (transformation) - SDT posits that humans have three basic psychological needs—*autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*—that must be adequately met to achieve optimal well-being (Gagne et al., 2022). Need fulfillment is most effective in environments that are non-controlling, offer challenges and opportunities for skill-building, and foster open social interaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The Camino provides such an environment. Pilgrims voluntarily choose their routes, pace, accommodation, with whom to socialize, and whether to engage in activities available along the way (e.g., mass).

Nature, simplicity, and freedom from responsibilities while on the Camino support *autonomy*. Autonomy-supportive environments (e.g., being on the Camino) act as gatekeepers that lead to *competence* and *relatedness* (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Physical challenges like long-distance walking and problem-solving (e.g., navigating language barriers, enduring discomfort) have high potential to fulfill *competence* needs. *Relatedness* is supported through the communal nature of the Camino, where participants often engage in meaningful conversations about personal and existential issues.

Factors facilitating transformative experiences can be broadly divided into personal and destination factors, with the preponderance of research focusing on the personal factors (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023). Few studies have examined the specific environmental (i.e., destination) elements that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study addresses that gap by focusing on what aspects of the Camino environment/destination facilitate transformative experiences, instead of relying exclusively on pilgrims' internal processes and motivations. The breadth of Self-Determination Theory is important because it includes the rationale for environmental/destination factors that support transformation.

3. Method

This study took a qualitative approach to tap into pilgrims' rich, *lived* experience on the Camino, and to identify meaningful elements of the Camino that may foster their transformative experience. The manuscript is shaped by the researchers' distinct and diverse experiences and backgrounds. The first author is a repeat Camino pilgrim with a background in psychology, which allowed her to take both an insider perspective in this qualitative approach (e.g., familiarity with Camino culture, jargon, social media forums, and connection to the American Pilgrim Association) and an outsider perspective in analyzing the data. The second author, seasoned in qualitative research and familiar with Camino literature, has extensive international travel and transformative tourism experience.

To reinforce validity, we employed a data triangulation strategy involving two types of data (i.e., social media forum posts and responses to an open-ended online survey question) and, thus, two studies (Table 1). Combining these sources enhanced our ability to better understand pilgrims' perceptions of their Camino experiences. Detailed posts of social media groups/forums were chosen over random social

Table 1
Overview of the study design.*

Study	Data type	Data collection	Question	Date	Response
1	Detailed social media posts	AP Facebook*	Why do we walk the Camino? What is it about the Camino or about us that makes us do the Camino?	April 2021	33
		Camino Forum	What does the Camino mean to you?	December 2014	25
		Camino Forum	What does 'the spirit of the Camino' mean to you?	October 2020	39
2	Open-ended survey question	Online survey	Please describe up to three things about the Camino that were/are most meaningful for you	August – November 2022	1505 surveys, 4278 entries

* AP Facebook refers to American Pilgrims on the Camino Facebook group.

media snippets, as they offered deeper, more reflective accounts of pilgrims' experiences.

3.1. Study 1: Social media data

Drawing on the first author's experience as a Camino veteran, two social media sites popular among Camino enthusiasts were included: 1) a private Facebook group for American Pilgrims on the Camino; and 2) a public Camino de Santiago forum (Camino Forum). Participants in both groups show strong engagement with Camino-related topics. After searching both sites for the posts containing "meaning," "transformation," and "motivation," three relevant discussion threads were identified – one from American Pilgrims on the Camino Facebook (33 responses to "Why do we walk the Camino? What is it about the Camino or about us that makes us do the Camino?", posted in April 2021); and two from Camino forum (25 responses to "What does the Camino mean to you?", posted in December 2014, and another 39 responses to "What does 'the spirit of the Camino' mean to you?", posted in October 2020), and included in the analysis.

As a pre-study effort, eight elements were previously identified by the authors (Johnmeyer & Xu, 2022b; Johnmeyer, 2023) with the potential to facilitate transformation on the Camino (i.e., long-distance walking, being in nature, community, religion/spirituality, simplicity, challenge, multiculturalism, and art, history, & culture) by reviewing a total of 311 related journal articles (2010–2021) from Scopus database, in addition to other Camino related readings (e.g., biographical books, blogs, and social media). For the coding process, we followed a directed content analysis approach. This approach is appropriate when there is a priori theory or model (e.g., the eight elements previously identified and detailed in our previous study, Johnmeyer & Xu, 2022a, Johnmeyer & Xu, 2024) that may be incomplete, and it looks for the presence and absence of the existing elements while allowing for new elements to emerge (Soulard, Lundin, & Zou, 2024). As such, existing research can be used to identify key concepts/variables as initial coding categories supporting and extending prior research (Zielinski, Kim, Botero, & Yanes, 2020). Compared to other content analysis approaches (e.g., thematic analysis), this approach provides a more structured and focused process for analysis (Berkovic, 2023).

The directed content analysis followed the four steps recommended by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). First, operational definitions were discussed between the two co-authors and created for each of the eight elements. Secondly, all responses were read without attempting to code, but highlighting groups of words with a coherent message and noting observations. The third step was to read each response carefully, coding all highlighted passages using the predetermined codes. The two co-authors coded independently and then compared their coding and negotiated any differences of opinion with each other to ensure agreement. The Kappa score of 0.786 indicated substantial agreement (reliability) between coders performing the analysis (Cole, 2023). Theoretical saturation occurred after the 25th response, with additional responses confirming reliability (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; LaPan & Xu, 2024; Rahimi, 2024).

3.2. Study 2: Open-ended online survey question responses

As part of a larger study, an online Qualtrics survey questionnaire was designed and distributed among pilgrims to gather information on various topics (e.g., motivations, personality, pro-environmental behavior) along the Camino. Survey data was collected with the assistance of the American Pilgrims Association, through which the survey link was sent through their mailing list of around 12,000 members from August to November 2022. Only those who had walked or biked the Camino were eligible to participate in this study. Altogether, 2121 surveys were collected, of which 1588 responses were valid. Among these valid responses, 1505 participants responded to an open-ended survey question, "Please describe up to *three* things about the Camino

that were/are most meaningful for you,” providing at least one answer ($n = 1505$). Of the 1505 respondents, the majority also provided a second answer ($n = 1404$). Altogether, 1369 respondents answered the questions in full by providing a third answer to this question, resulting in 4278 entries entirely (that were included in the analysis). It is worth noting that right before this open-ended question, respondents were asked Camino transformation-related questions, i.e., to rate different *changes* in their life that they believe are related to the Camino, and the aspect of the Camino that contributed to the changes (and to what extent), hence priming them to connect the concepts of meaningfulness and transformation.

Based on demographic data collected in the quantitative survey (1588 valid responses), most respondents were U.S. citizens (97.9 %), White (85.8 %), Christian (68.1 %, of which 53.1 % were Catholic), at least 60 years old (65.5 %), women (56.1 %), retired (52.3 %), with at least a Bachelor's degree (88.5 %, of which, 63.0 % held an advanced degree) and an annual income of \$100,000 or more (62.1 %). Almost all (98.2 %) had *walked* (rather than biked) the Camino. Most respondents did not have previous experience with the Camino (57.2 %). Respondents averaged spending 24 days on the Camino. Most respondents preferred to be called as pilgrims (89.8 %) over other terms (e.g., walker/biker, tourist) and confirmed that “The Camino was transformational for me” (85.9 %).

A plethora of responses to the open-ended survey question led to a large quantity of data. To ensure trustworthiness, two co-authors of this manuscript followed [Lincoln and Guba \(1985\)](#) principles and participated in the coding process as a team (confirmability). Specifically, the two co-authors took part in reflexivity (dependability), kept journals regarding the analysis processes, and met multiple times during the coding and writing stages (credibility) to discuss the coding and preliminary models for theorizing about the data. Other efforts toward thematic validation include the use of both primary and secondary data (to reinforce validity and generalizability), purposive sampling (transferability), and theoretical saturation and peer review ([Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2023](#)) of themes by two other co-authors experienced in qualitative research. In addition, thick descriptions and direct quotes were also included to support conclusions and increase the credibility of the study.

4. Results

4.1. Study 1: Social media data

4.1.1. Long-distance walking (*walking*)

Walking was mentioned frequently in social media posts, which made pilgrims feel “freedom to just BE, now, just the way I am” and “to find my own pace.” Walking alone allowed pilgrims to take a break from “regular daily life” and to be meditative (“I would spend hours with not a thought going through my head”) and mindful (“to delight in being present in each moment ... being here now”). Oftentimes, Walking was intertwined with other elements, such as Nature (“I never feel more alive and connected with the earth than when I am walking in the peace and quiet, but yet hearing the birds sing and the ground beneath my feet”) and Religion/Spirituality (“We have time to slow down, be quiet, allow the silent rhythmic mantra prayer of walking to open us up to her continual presence”). One post noted that, “Happily for me while tramping along and alone I often sensed that special moment when everything ‘clicked’ realizing that this was, indeed, MY way and that all was and would be good.”

4.1.2. Being in nature (*nature*)

Nature was mentioned less often than most other aspects in social media posts, but with rich descriptions (e.g., specifying birdsong, sunlight, wildflowers, full moons). One post said, “I know the dirt, the stones, the flowers, the cows, the grass ... the smell of morning before light reveals the reality of place.” Like *Walking*, *Nature* was frequently

mentioned with *Religion/Spirituality* and affective expressions (“feeling alive,” “love,” “happiness”).

4.1.3. Community

Community was mentioned frequently in social media posts, underscoring how close relationships quickly and easily formed on the Camino (e.g., “I have never met so many people who were so easy to become acquainted and friends with ...”). Most comments were about the kindness of others (e.g., carrying another's weight, redirecting them when lost, listening to their struggles) and how it inspired them to become more loving and empathetic:

The Camino was a great opportunity to listen, encourage, learn, support, and get the same in return. I remember one lady we encountered on the trail ... who was clearly in pain and struggling. We talked to her, shared our supplies, and got her a cab to take her the last few miles ... As she left, she thanked us and called us her “Camino angels.” Never been called an angel before, but it demonstrated to me that we have the opportunity to be just that to the people we encounter every day.

One post explained how community begets transformation: “The compassion, both given and received, cracks your heart wide open and makes it impossible to not be unequivocally changed by the experience of being human - by the experience of being a pilgrim.”

4.1.4. Religion/spirituality

Drawing from social media posts, *Religion* (“The Spirit of the Camino is the Spirit of God”, “I did not start out to find Jesus, ... Jesus found me.”) was critical to the Camino experience of some pilgrims, yet more commented on *Spirituality*. One touched on the transcendent (“The Camino is one of those places where heaven and earth meet, where you realize that everything is spiritual, and nothing is not sacred”), while another reflected on the purpose of self-improvement, stating that the Camino is “a time for self-confrontation and contemplation” when one is “just trying to be a better person.” Others specified increases in virtues (e.g., “being more open-minded,” “less judgmental,” “more tolerant,” and “forgiving”). Some pilgrims were searching for purpose and meaning (“a time to reflect on what I want out of life”), while others found healing (“My Camino walks were a very healing experience for me during several very difficult years. I was able to grieve and come to terms with some past losses and look to the present with different eyes”). One post elaborated, “I've heard that our soul always was and always will be. I think when we walk, we become more aware of that soul, and we are in the presence of something greater that is comforting us.” The emotions/feelings of love, peace, humility, gratefulness, and joy were dominant in association with *Religion/Spirituality*.

4.1.5. Simplicity

Most social media posts on *Simplicity* noted the lack of regular life responsibilities and the basic life of the Camino, allowing for clarity of mind and feelings of contentment. Only simple choices were left when pre-Camino responsibilities were absent (e.g., “I love that nothing is ‘demanded’ of me, except putting one foot in front of the other”). While on the Camino, “you walk, you eat, you laugh, you sleep, you repeat,” which allows me to be able to clear my mind and focus on what needs to be my focus.” One post echoed the aforementioned, “For me, it's the simplicity of the Camino life. That it can be as easy as wake up, walk, clean up, eat, sleep, repeat. No demands, no complications, thus enabling you to really stay with your thoughts, or not...” Many learned lessons from *Simplicity* - “You see the spirit of the Camino in the way it gives so much and requires so little (in fact, if we bring too much, it encourages us to reduce what we are carrying).” Some even extended this meaning, commenting, “It was an opportunity to put some of my spoken beliefs of simplicity to the test.”

4.1.6. Challenge

In social media posts, pilgrims noted that they had physical (e.g., “shin splints, tendinitis, blisters, rain, and hail”) and psychological (e.g.,

“overcoming my own fear and self-doubt”) *Challenges*, and overcoming these was a big achievement and a precursor to personal growth (e.g., “the growing strength and appreciation of our capabilities and endurance”, “to prove to myself that we’re all only as old or limited or out of shape as we let ourselves believe”). One post compared the experience to being “in the zone,” which also denotes a connection with *Spirituality*:

.... Perhaps such secular transcendence felt while walking might be akin to what runners call “the zone.” Your body can handle the task while your spirit glows with the effort. Neither easy nor impossible; all simply is ... thus, thankfully, you continue.

4.1.7. *Multiculturalism*

Although *Multiculturalism* yielded the fewest social media posts, pilgrims noted “sharing this space [the Camino] with others who came from every walk of life,” which may lead to positive outcomes (e.g., “being at peace with the world,” “understanding the brotherhood of man,” “if we could get the leaders of the world to walk the Camino together, the world would be a better place”). One pilgrim stated,

I got an image in my mind of Obama, Putin, Kim Jong Un, and a few others walking along, having deep discussions about blisters, sore muscles, and how better to share this world we live in, and then kicking back with a cerveza at the end of the day.

4.1.8. *Art, history, and culture*

Although *Art, History, and Culture* was mentioned less often in social media posts, its appreciation was expressed at cathedral cities (“Burgos, Leon, and Santiago”), “the land, the architecture,” and “pretty much everything about Spain.” Among those, food and drink (“*Rioja* [wine],” “the huge glasses of brandy they serve you at the bar,” and “the delicious food”), as an important part of cultural heritage, garnered the most accolades. One respondent explained the long-lasting effect the Camino had on him,

“The walls of my study have mementos from all my Camino walks, the library shelves double-stacked with books concerning the Camino and medieval European history, art, and architecture - subjects I had never studied or was even aware of their existence prior to Santiago.”

Another described a moment of insight that led to learning, “That first hit me when I saw the ruins of a 12th-century pilgrim ‘complex’ That gave me a new perspective in understanding that the story unfolding before us on Camino includes not only the history of the towns and regions we pass through, but the history of the actual Camino itself.”

4.2. *Study 2: Open-ended online survey responses*

Due to the brevity of many responses to the open-ended survey question and the relatively large number of responses ($n = 4278$) overall, data were analyzed numerically as well as by theme. In total, 20 codes emerged from the data, which led to the development of eight major themes for the Camino experience (Table 3), consistent with the findings from Study 1 based on social media data (Table 2).

4.2.1. *Community*

Pilgrims regarded *Community* as the most meaningful aspect of the Camino experience (1044 comments; 23.7 % of total responses). Similarly to the social media responses, pilgrims also expressed different aspects of what they meant by *Community*, including “hearing others’ stories,” “sharing meals,” “making lasting friendships,” and having “intimate, honest, and vulnerable conversations.” Contrary to social media posts, surveyed pilgrims were more specific regarding what they meant by *Community*, which consisted of family members, friends, and locals. Family members (e.g., children, siblings) were mentioned the most, followed by their spouses/significant others. Friends were mentioned much less, as were “Camino family” (i.e., groups of pilgrims, initially strangers but developed a sense of family by walking together). Many also commented on the value of helping behavior, of which being helped by others (local people) was mentioned more frequently than helping others. Comments on *Community* were often associated with other elements (i.e., *Religion/Spirituality, Art, History, and Culture, Walking, Multiculturalism, and Nature*).

4.2.2. *Religion/spirituality*

Religion/Spirituality was the second most frequently mentioned meaningful aspect of the Camino in survey responses (854 responses, 19.4 %). Like social media posts, more pilgrims used the single word *Spirituality* (108 mentions) than *Religion* (13 mentions). Comments related to *Religion* referenced themes such as indulgences, the soul, spirituality, and the devil, while those on *Spirituality* emphasized transformation, growth, rejuvenation, transcendence, timely help, meditation, freedom, living fully, challenge, meaning, solitude and well-being. Most comments coded under *Religion/Spirituality* reflected an inward focus on reflection, contemplation, or introspection – often occurring in solitude, during prayer, or while processing life issues. Pilgrims also prescribed self-enhancements (decision-making, healing, gaining new perspectives), growth in virtues (peace, gratitude, humility, acceptance, forgiveness, trust, nonjudgment) and lessons learned about

Table 2
Frequency of major theme from Study 1.

Major theme	Count			Total	Percent age	Examples
	AP Facebook* ($n = 33$)	Camino Forum 1 ($n = 25$)	Camino Forum 2 ($n = 39$)			
Religion/ Spirituality	17	16	23	56	32.2 %	“It’s God. How else do you explain the caring angels that pop up in the hour of need.” “For me the Camino was spiritual in that I felt connected to pilgrims from generations past who made the journey out of penance or dedication.”
Long-Distance Walking	9	10	8	27	15.5 %	“The pull for me is freedom of movement, the delight in being present [mindfulness] in each moment while walking.” “The Camino makes you family; everything you have you must be willing to share. You share your last Comepad [sic, bandage for blisters], your wine, your burdens, your humor, your thoughts. ...”
Community	8	7	10	25	14.4 %	“It [the Camino] tests your limits of physical and emotional pain.”
Challenge	5	10	5	20	11.5 %	“Simplicity. And for me, there was also a realization about how little ‘stuff’ I needed to feel happy and contented.”
Simplicity	5	3	8	16	9.2 %	The pull for me is ..., ..., the delicious food, the land, the architecture ...”
Art, History, and Culture	4	2	5	11	6.3 %	“... beneath the vast dome of an immense sky. The only sound was ... and perhaps distant birdsong.”
Being in Nature	3	2	6	11	6.3 %	“I love getting to connect on a deep level with people from all over the world.”
Multi-culturalism	2	3	8	8	4.6 %	

* AP Facebook refers to American Pilgrims on the Camino Facebook group.

Table 3
Major theme and open codes from Study 2.

	Major theme	Count*	Percentage	Open codes (n = 20)
1	Community	1044	23.7 %	Connections: meeting camaraderie, making friends, sharing; Bonding: with family, spouses, friends, "Camino family" Being helped and helping others
2	Religion/Spirituality	854	19.4 %	Specific religion elements: spiritual, prayer, faith, God, divine; Knowing self, improving self, learning specific life lessons Institutional (religion, Catholic, church, mass, holy figures, rituals)
3	Walking	663	15.1 %	Solitude/being alone; Meditation/mindfulness/being in the present; Exercise/getting fit/losing weight
4	Challenge	456	10.4 %	Gained confidence, persistence/endurance, resilience; "I did it" – finished the Camino primarily
5	Art, History, and Culture	453	10.3 %	Specific features (food, old towns, water, signage, health care, cafes, <i>albergues</i> [hostel for pilgrims]); Specific places (Spain, Santiago, Galicia)
6	Nature	384	8.7 %	Scenery, beautiful scenery, or beauty; Specific qualities (silent, peaceful) and features (mountains, sunrise) of nature
7	Simplicity	375	8.5 %	Minimalism; Disconnect/escape from responsibility, daily life, outside world; Routine/structured daily life, slow pace
8	Multi-culturalism	173	3.9 %	Meet people from all over the world/cultures; Connect/interact: with internationals, all walks of life, all ages

* Though the total number of responses to the survey question is 4278, 124 of these responses could fit and were therefore placed under more than one element, yielding a total count of 4402 here.

what truly matters and trusting in Providence.

Another major group of comments focused on God ("developing a closer relationship," "gratitude toward," or "spending time" with God); prayer (sometimes linked to meditation or church settings), faith, and the divine. Shorter, more objective mentions referred to religious figures (St. James, Jesus), rituals (mass, Eucharist, Cruz de Ferro, rosary, pilgrim blessings), and belief systems (Catholic faith, miracles, confession). Religion/Spirituality was most often mentioned alongside *Walking*, *Community*, and *Nature* elements.

4.2.3. Long-distance walking (walking)

Walking emerged as the third most highly endorsed meaningful Camino aspect on the survey responses (663 comments, 15.1 % of all responses). Many pilgrims simply listed *Walking* in their open-ended survey responses without further comment or used alternative forms (e.g., hiking, exercise), or just noted walking alone or in solitude. Similar to social media posts, meditation (e.g., "walking in meditation", "the meditative nature of walking") and mindfulness and being in the moment ("mindful walking", "acceptance that the route would reveal itself/being in the moment") were often associated with *Walking* in survey responses. In addition, freedom and silence were often mentioned together with *Walking* (e.g., "the freedom of walking where I want and carrying what I need," "walking in silence for long periods"). *Walking* comments were frequently brought up with every other

element, but most often with *Religion/Spirituality*, *Nature*, and *Art, History, and Culture*.

4.2.4. Challenges

Challenges (456 responses, 10.4 % of all responses) were the fourth most highly endorsed element in the survey responses. Compared to social media posts, surveyed pilgrims reported more physical *Challenges* (e.g., injuries, pain) than psychological ones (e.g., dealing with themselves, fear), and often expressed *Challenges* as achieving the completion goal (e.g., "I did it", "completing a difficult task"), acquiring/strengthening certain traits (e.g., perseverance, determination, inner strength, discipline), and more about pilgrims themselves (e.g., "learning I have power and can work out difficulties myself (like getting lost, going hungry, etc.)", "growing out of my fears of doing hard things", "learned I had more limitations than I had previously believed") through the *challenges*. *Challenge* comments were mostly brought up with *Walking*, followed by *Religion/Spirituality*.

4.2.5. Art, history and culture

Art, History, and Culture was the fifth most frequently endorsed element in the survey responses (453 responses, 10.3 % responses). Among all survey responses related to *Art, History, and Culture*, *Culture* was discussed most often, followed by *History*, and then *Art* at a much lower level. In terms of *Culture*, pilgrims endorsed "learning Portuguese and Basque culture" and appreciated "experiencing the culture of different regions of Spain." Many pilgrims also found it meaningful to be on a historic trail and to feel a connection to those who had traversed the Camino previously (e.g., "contemplation of past pilgrims who did the same", "walking in the footsteps of so many from the past millennium"). Comments on *Art* were often about "the beauty of the architecture (esp. the churches)."

Like social media posts, surveyed pilgrims noted the significance of specific places (e.g., Spain, Santiago de Compostela, Galicia) and features (e.g., food, language, music, signage, festivals) on the Camino. Pilgrims also reflected on lessons learned from exposure to *Art, History, and Culture* (e.g., "reflection on history and all the people who have walked the same or similar paths over many years that have come and gone and to then recognize how short our lives are", "embody the Camino culture of loving the locals and those seeking nourishment in the Camino"). *Art, History, and Culture* was commonly brought up together with *Walking*, *Religion/Spirituality*, *Nature*, and *Community*.

4.2.6. Being in nature (nature)

Similar to social media posts, Nature was less frequently mentioned than other themes in survey responses (the 6th most highly endorsed, representing 384/8.7 % of the responses), and features/elements of it (e.g., mountains, sunrises, open spaces, birds, weather) were specified in their descriptions. Although many pilgrims responded to the survey with one word or as 'being in', appreciating or enjoying nature, a few remarked on having an immersive sensory experience in/with *Nature*. In addition, *Nature*, as with walking but to a proportionally lesser extent, was sometimes combined with silence/quiet, solitude/being alone, meditation/being in the moment, and feeling free/alive. Furthermore, nature was paired with tranquility, peacefulness, and simplicity. *Nature* was often brought up together with *Walking*, followed by *Art, History, and Culture* and *Religion/Spirituality* comments.

4.2.7. Simplicity

As the seventh most highly endorsed element (375 comments, 8.5 % of all responses), three themes emerged from survey responses, each of them also described in the social media posts: 1) endorsing the meaningfulness of having fewer material belongings (i.e., minimalism) and the related sense of freedom when "reduced to basics"; 2) escaping/disconnecting from the stressful, usual life (e.g., "technology", "the rat race", "distractions", "the outside world"), with fewer obligations on the Camino; and 3) the routine nature of the Camino travel (i.e., slow and

repetitive) to be able to “focus on the day” with “mental clarity.” Like social media posts, surveyed pilgrims acknowledged the lessons they learned (e.g., “how little you need to live,” “to conserve and live simply,” “how VERY little one needs to be happy”) from a simple lifestyle. *Simplicity* comments were most brought up together with *Walking* element.

4.2.8. Multiculturalism

Like social media posts, *Multiculturalism* was less mentioned than other elements in survey responses (173 responses, 3.9 % of all responses). The most common response was “meeting people from all over the world” (e.g., finding common ground, camaraderie, making friends, and having deep and intimate conversations with international pilgrims). Pilgrims also talked about the impacts of *multiculturalism*, often expressed as lessons learned (e.g., “it is a big world,” “[people from different cultures are] the same all over,” “we are all one”). Pilgrims acknowledged that people’s lives are “personally affected by international events,” and “seeing the world through other people’s eyes” allowed them to “gain an international perspective on Americans,” “appreciate diversity,” and “restore my faith in humanity.” The only element frequently combined with *Multiculturalism* was *Community*.

4.3. Comparison of study 1 & study 2 results

Comparing results from study 1 and study 2 (Fig. 1), it is evident that *Community*, *Religion/Spirituality*, and *Long-Distance Walking* were the most important elements to Camino pilgrims. *Community* and *Religion/Spirituality* likely distinguish the Camino and other pilgrimages from secular long-distance hikes (e.g., the Appalachian Trail in the U.S.), while *long-distance walking* likely differentiates the Camino from other site-based religious pilgrimages (e.g., Lourdes, France; Bodh Gaya, India). Notably, several additional elements were also considered important: *Challenge* ranked 4th and was noted by 10–11 % of responses in both studies, closely followed by *Art, History, and Culture*, *Simplicity*, and *Nature*. Only *Multiculturalism* was mentioned by fewer than 5 % responses in both studies; this is still noteworthy given its specificity and its potential overlap with *Community*.

4.4. Relevance with self-determination theory

The foci of Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) can be seen clearly through elements on the Camino.

Walking provides space for freedom and structure to focus on that freedom, while *Nature* provides calm and relief from daily stress. *Community* deepens bonds with family and friends and fosters new relationships. *Religion/Spirituality* and personal reflection encourage growth and meaning-making. Overcoming *Challenges* builds confidence and resilience. *Simplicity* supports autonomy by freeing time and attention, while also reinforcing competence through goal completion. *Art, History, and Culture* and *Multicultural* encounters broaden perspectives and deepen connections with humanity.

The eight elements identified in this study provide a noncontrolling, challenging/skill-building, and positive interactive community where autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be increased, resulting in increased well-being. These eight elements help clarify what it is about the Camino that pilgrims believe led to transformative changes and align well with the Self-Determination Theory, suggesting that walking the Camino may reflect higher degrees of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, leading to higher levels of well-being. The data addresses outcomes through pilgrim quotes consistent with having one’s autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs met. For example, regarding autonomy, pilgrims learned that “removal of normal stress/noise/distraction” allowed one “to gain perspective and peace,” a feeling of being “more alive,” and that “time to reflect” led to the realization that “time is limited, so do what matters.” Regarding competence, pilgrims learned to “be resourceful,” that “I have the power and can work out difficulties myself,” that “the human body is capable of more than we normally think,” and that they are stronger and more capable, resilient, and courageous than they had previously thought. Regarding relatedness, pilgrims learned “it is a big world with people just like me,” “good” and “mostly good” people who “restored my faith in humanity.” Other lessons learned were to “feel deeper compassion for myself and others” and “accept people for who they are.”

5. Discussion

Analysis of social media posts and survey responses revealed eight meaningful elements well-suited to facilitate transformation, all supported by previous studies on the Camino experience. For example, *Community* (Brumec et al., 2023; Frey, 1998; Lopez, 2013; Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023) and *Nature* (Brumec et al., 2023; Escudero Gómez et al., 2021; Frey, 1998; Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023) each appeared in four studies while *Religion* and/or *Spirituality* was noted in three (Brumec et al., 2023; Frey, 1998; Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023).

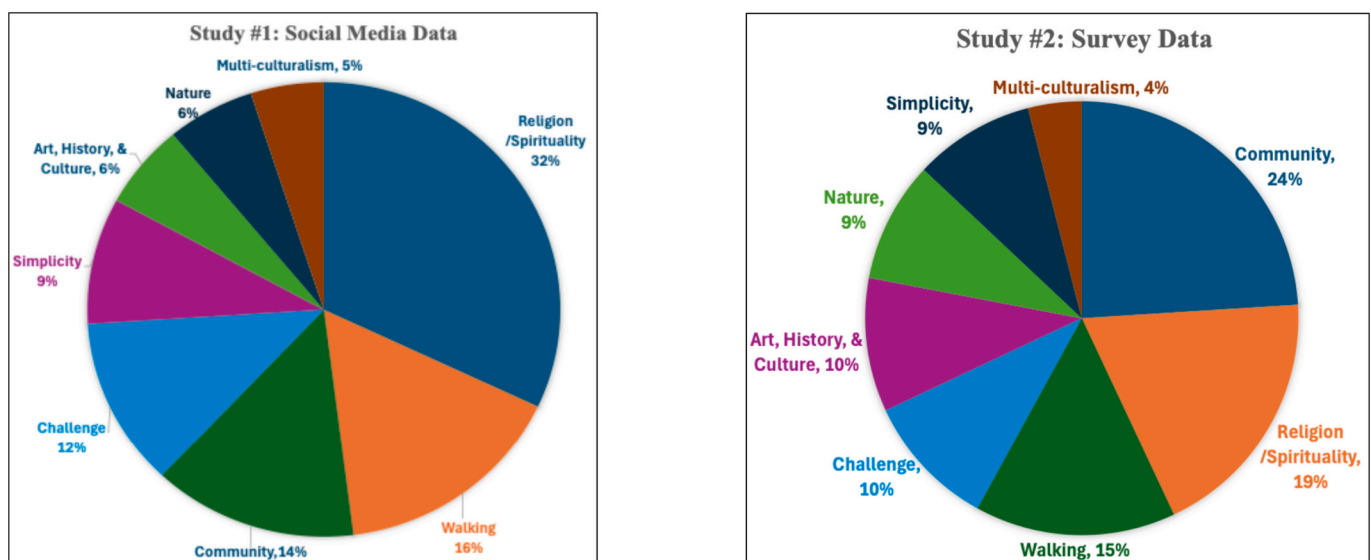


Fig. 1. Comparison of Study 1 & Study 2 results.

Walking (Frey, 1998; Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023) and *Challenges* (Frey, 1998; Lopez, 2013) each were identified in two studies. Among those, *Community*, *Religion/Spirituality*, and *Walking* are most often emphasized as central to transformation (Frey, 1998; Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023). Other potentially transformative elements include *Simplicity* (Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023) and *Art, History, and Culture* (Gomes et al., 2019). Finally, the opportunity to meet people from other countries was notable and necessary for self-growth/development on the Camino (Lopez, 2013).

The potential of the meaningful elements found in this study to support transformation by Camino experience is corroborated by studies both on the Camino and completely unrelated to tourism and pilgrimage. The *Walking* journey itself is central to the Camino (Olsen, Trono, & Fidgeon, 2018), typically lasting 5–33 days with pilgrims averaging 14 miles daily (Brierley, 2020). *Walking* is linked to improved physical health (Harris & Wolf, 2013) and exposure to *Nature*, which enhances well-being (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). Pilgrims frequently interact along the trail and in hostels, and such *Community* experiences provide social support and mental health benefits (Bian, Zhang, & Gao, 2020). Although rooted in Christianity, most pilgrims are motivated by *Spiritual* rather than strictly religious reasons (Farias et al., 2019), reflecting the broader benefits of *religiosity* and *spirituality*, such as resilience and well-being (Garssen, Visser, & Pool, 2020). Pilgrims also report finding joy in *Simplicity*, which enhances life satisfaction and feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Rich, Hanna, & Wright, 2017).

Oftentimes, pilgrims noted *Challenges* (e.g., pains/injuries, physical exhaustion) in their biographies, a topic well-documented for the associated benefits, including enjoyment (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012) and flow experience (e.g., greater competence, Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The Camino, after all, “is about reflection, gradual change, and the necessarily painfully slow movement towards a better self.” (Luik, 2012, p.32). Given that the Camino welcomed 499,176 pilgrims from 200 nations in 2024 (Oficina de acogida al peregrino [Pilgrim's Reception Center], 2025), pilgrims regularly interact with people from diverse cultures. *Multicultural* exposure adds further transformative potential, fostering empathy and reducing prejudice (Sparkman & Hamer, 2020). The Camino's quaint villages, ancient monasteries, and grand cathedrals are filled with *Art*, that reflect the rich *History*, and *Culture* of the route/surrounding area. *Art* is widely acknowledged for providing diverse benefits (e.g., enhanced understanding of individuals themselves and of ideas/culture, and making sense of the world, Lomas, 2016).

The study also clarified how pilgrims organized their experiences within these elements, especially for *Religion/Spirituality*, which were grouped because of their overlapping nature, known for being difficult to differentiate (Harris, Howell, & Spurgeon, 2018). For instance, the finding that *Spirituality* was mentioned more frequently than *Religion* aligns with broader trends in pilgrimage and religious tourism research (Amaro, Antunes, & Henriques, 2018; Farias et al., 2019).

Importantly, pilgrims perceived the eight elements as interconnected. *Walking* in the countryside for hours in tough terrain carrying all needed belongings integrates *Nature*, *Simplicity*, and *Challenge*. Many of the human interactions (*Community*), including meeting people from different countries (*Multiculturalism*) also occur while *Walking*, as does the opportunity to reflect on significant issues (*Religion/Spirituality*). Finally, the landscapes themselves reflect the *Art, History, and Culture* of those who once inhabited them.

In essence, the Camino is a big tent of potentially transformative elements within a structure that is safe, acceptable, and affordable for many. As noted by Frey (1998), “Part of the Camino's enormous appeal as a symbol is its flexibility to accommodate various interpretations of its spaces and encounters yet still retain its basic structure.” (p. 220).

Compared to previous studies that examined transformative tourism experiences in general (e.g., Pung, Khoo, Del Chiappa, & Lee, 2024; Tasci & Godovykh, 2021), this study found several commonalities despite differences in terminology—particularly in the cultural (e.g.,

multiculturalism, appreciation of heritage and culture, cultural engagement, cross-cultural understanding) and social (e.g., sense of community, meeting new people) dimensions. It is further suggested that the Camino's unique combination of elements (e.g., religion/spirituality, long-distance walking, physical challenge, simplicity, and immersion in nature) helps facilitate additional components identified in broader tourism transformation research (e.g., changed worldviews, self-reflection, and transformative learning; Pung et al., 2024). Although this study applied Self-Determination Theory to explain key elements of the Camino that facilitate pilgrims' transformative experiences, other frameworks—such as existential theory—also align with and enhance the understanding of Self-Determination Theory components. For instance, existential authenticity, defined as being true to one's values (Kirillova et al., 2017b) relates to autonomy, as pilgrims often gain perspective and relieve everyday stress through immersion in nature and walking the Camino.

Results from this study offer several practical implications. For example, local destination marketing organizations may consider emphasizing the Camino's transformative nature—particularly its *Community* and *Spiritual* elements—in marketing campaigns targeting potential solo travelers unfamiliar with the route. The destination marketing organizations could also invest in initiatives that engage local communities (Holladay et al., 2018, 2020) in activities fostering these elements, helping pilgrims plan journeys that maximize personal growth. Tourism businesses, such as hostels, can enhance their services (e.g., offering massages or yoga classes) to ease the physical challenges of long-distance walking and support transformative experiences.

Beyond practical insights, this study strengthens the literature on pilgrimage and transformative tourism by providing large-scale empirical evidence of the meaningful Camino elements that facilitate transformation, thereby replicating many of the findings from the prior small-sample studies. Interpreting these elements through the lens of Self-Determination Theory further explains why people undertake pilgrimages (to satisfy psychological needs) and highlights the environmental conditions—volitional, skill-building, and relational—that enable those needs to be met.

5.1. Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. Regarding social media posts, researchers had no control over the demographics of individuals who unwittingly participated. Given that these are English-language forums, participants likely over-represent U.S. citizens who speak English and enjoy social media discussions. However, this could be mitigated by rigorous data triangulation (including both primary and secondary data in the analysis) and the large survey sample size of this study, a recommended approach in tourism research to ensure the validity and reliability of research findings (Hung, Lee, Wang, & Petrick, 2020). The selected social media data sources (i.e., Facebook, Camino forum) were chosen due to the first author's familiarity as a Camino veteran. Facebook was chosen over other social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok), considering the consistent demographic characteristics of Camino pilgrims (i.e., retirees, Basil, 2025) from previous studies (Hellemaans, Willems, & Brengman, 2021).

Our survey data were sourced from pilgrims who reported personal changes (transformation). However, for social media posts, although we used transformation as the keyword, the selected questions were related to the meaning of the Camino. This is because a lot of the responses that talked about transformation fell under the Camino meaning questions. There is no specific question in the forums at the time of our study that had specifically asked about transformation and had replies addressed Camino elements related to transformation, which suggests that maybe Camino pilgrims prefer to use meaningfulness over transformation when describing their experiences. This also corroborates the connection and fluidity between meaningful experience and transformative experiences, suggested by previous studies (Kirillova et al., 2017b; Pugh, 2011;

Reisinger, 2013).

This study purposefully chose a U.S. sample, given that American Camino pilgrims were second in number only to Spaniards in 2023 (*Oficina de acogida al peregrino*, n.d.). Study results are consistent with recent Camino research on pilgrims' demographic and trip characteristics (e.g., repeated visits, highly educated, majority Christian group, walking 20–30 days; Amaro et al., 2018). Future research should consider examining pilgrims from other markets/countries (e.g., South Korea) and those to Christian pilgrimages in other regions/cultural contexts or even pilgrimages of other religions to allow comparison of the principal elements of pilgrimage.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Connie Johnmeyer: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Shuangyu Xu:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Sonja Wilhelm Stanis:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Mark Morgan:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References

- Abuhamdeh, S., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2012). The importance of challenge for the enjoyment of intrinsically motivated, goal-directed activities. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(3), 317–330. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167211427147>
- Amaro, S., Antunes, A., & Henriques, C. (2018). A closer look at Santiago de Compostela's pilgrims through the lens of motivations. *Tourism Management*, 64, 271–280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.09.007>
- Bandyopadhyay, R., & Nair, B. B. (2019). Marketing Kerala in India as god's own country! For tourists' spiritual transformation, rejuvenation and well-being. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 14, Article 100369. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100369>
- Basil, M. (2025). Motivations and meanings for Camino pilgrims. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 50(2), 297–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2023.2274156>
- Berkovic, D. (2023). Content analysis. In D. Ayton (Ed.), *Tsindos, T. (Eds.), & Berkovic, D. (Eds.) qualitative research—a practical guide for health and social care researchers and practitioners* (1st ed.). Monash University https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/qualitative-research/chapter/_unknown_-21/.
- Bian, Y., Zhang, L., & Gao, Y. (2020). Social bonding and subjective well-being: Findings from the 2017 ISSP module. *International Journal of Sociology*, 50(1), 26–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2019.1701320>
- Brierley, J. (2020). *Camino Portuguese: Maps, Camino Guides*.
- Brown, A. S., & Novak-Leonard, J. L. (2013). Measuring the intrinsic impacts of arts attendance. *Cultural Trends*, 22(3–4), 223–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2013.817654>
- Brumec, S., Lavrič, M., & Naterer, A. (2023). Exceptional human experiences among pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago: A typology of experiences and transformative aftereffects. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 15(4), 605–617. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000456>
- Buzinde, C. N. (2020). Theoretical linkages between well-being and tourism: The case of self-determination theory and spiritual tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 83, Article 102920. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102920>
- Chang, A. Y., Li, M., & Vincent, T. (2020). Development and validation of an experience scale for pilgrimage tourists. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 15, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100400>
- Cole, R. (2023). Inter-rater reliability methods in qualitative case study research. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124123115156>
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2010). Researching pilgrimage: Continuity and transformations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37(2), 440–456. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016>
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2020). A review of research into religion and tourism: Launching the annals of tourism research curated collection on religion and tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 82, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102892>
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper Collins.
- Doi, K. (2011). Onto emerging ground: Anticlimactic movement on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. *Tourism*, 59(3), 271–285.
- Duerden, M. D., Lundberg, N. R., Ward, P., Taniguchi, S. T., Hill, B., Widmer, M. A., & Zabriskie, R. (2018). From ordinary to extraordinary: A framework of experience types. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 49(3–5), 196–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2018.1528779>
- Escudero Gómez, L. A., Lopez, L., Piñeiro Antelo, M.Á., & Lois Genzález, R. C. (2021). The timeline of the way of St. James: Motivations and impacts of the pilgrimage on personal lives. In D. Liutikas (Ed.), *Pilgrims: Values and identities* (pp. 72–82). CABL.
- Farias, M., Coleman, T. J., III, Bartlett, J. E., Oviedo, L., Soares, P., Santos, P., ... Bas, M. D. (2019). Atheists on the Santiago way: Examining motivations to go on pilgrimage. *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*, 80(1), 28–44. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sry019>
- Frey, N. L. (1998). *Pilgrim stories on and off the road to Santiago: Journeys along an ancient way in modern Spain*. University of California Press.
- Fu, X., Tanyatanaboon, M., & Lehto, X. (2015). Conceptualizing transformative guest experience at retreat centers. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 49, 83–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2015.06.004>
- Gagne, M., Parker, S. K., Griffin, M. A., Dunlop, P. D., Knight, C., Klonek, F. E., & Parent-Rocheleau, X. (2022). Understanding and shaping the future of work with self-determination theory. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1(7), 378–392. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00056-w>
- Garsen, B., Visser, A., & Pool, G. (2020). Does spirituality or religion positively affect mental health? Meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 31(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2020.1729570>
- Gill, C., Packer, J., & Ballantyne, R. (2018). Exploring the restorative benefits of spiritual retreats: The case of clergy retreats in Australia. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 43(2), 235–249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2017.1410972>
- Gomes, C., Losada, N., & Pereiro, X. (2019). Motivations of pilgrims on the Portuguese Inner Way to Santiago de Compostela. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 7(2), 5. <https://doi.org/10.21427/h30h-ff78>
- Greenia, G. (2014). What is pilgrimage? In L. D. Harman's (Ed.), *A sociology of pilgrimage: Embodiment, identity, transformation* (pp. 8–27). Ursus Press.
- Harris, K. A., Howell, D. S., & Spurgeon, D. W. (2018). Faith concepts in psychology: Three 30-year definitional content analyses. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 10(1), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000134>
- Harris, M. B., & Wolf, M. R. (2013). Cardiovascular disease risk following a 758 km pilgrimage. *International Journal of Sports Medicine*, 34(8), 727–731. <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-0032-1331172>
- Hellems, J., Willems, K., & Brengman, M. (2021, May). The new adult on the block: Daily active users of TikTok compared to Facebook, Twitter. In *Advances in digital marketing and eCommerce: Second international conference* (p. 95).
- Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine*, 292, Article 114523.
- Holladay, P., Dixon, A. W., Nguyen, M. C., Nguyen, B. L., Xu, S., & Price-Howard, K. (2018). Stakeholder perceptions of tourism assets and sustainable tourism development in Da Nang, Vietnam. *Enlightening Tourism A Pathmaking Journal*, 8(2), 74–97.
- Holladay, P., Dixon, A. W., Nguyen, M. C., Nguyen, B. L., Xu, S., & Price-Howard, K. (2020). Stakeholder perceptions of Da Nang, Vietnam as a tourism gateway city. *Journal of Tourism Insights*, 10(1), 8. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2328-0824.1089>
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Hung, K., Lee, J. S., Wang, S., & Petrick, J. F. (2020). Constraints to cruising across cultures and time. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 89, Article 102576. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102576>
- Iliev, D. (2020). The evolution of religious tourism: Concept, segmentation and development of new identities. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 45, 131–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2020.07.012>
- Inglehart, R., Miller, J., Dennis, M., Jwo, S., & Rosta, G. (2021, February 26). *Religion's sudden decline, revisited*. Institute for Social Research, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan. <https://cps.isr.umich.edu/news/religions-sudden-decline-revisited/>.
- Johnmeyer, C., & Xu, S. (2024). Identifying elements that facilitate pilgrims' transformative experience. In *2024 Travel and Tourism Research International Conference*. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/54974>.
- Johnmeyer, C., & Xu, S. (2022a). Pilgrimage trails. In D. Buhalis (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of tourism management and marketing*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Johnmeyer, C., & Xu, S. (2022b). Proposing a conceptual model for understanding the transformative experiences of pilgrimage tourists. *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*, 40. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/49407>.
- Johnmeyer, C. J. (2023). What Camino elements facilitate transformative experience: insights from pilgrims (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/98830>.
- Jongmeewasin, S. (2016). Religious tourism, pilgrimage and cultural tourism. In *6th national and international graduate study conference: Creative multi-disciplinary studies for sustainable development & the 1st national and international conference on creative multi-disciplinary studies for sustainable development (NCMSD & ICMSD 2016)* (pp. 394–395).
- Kim, B., Kim, S. S., & King, B. E. M. (2016). Analysis of pilgrimage travelers' value orientation using means-end chain theory along the Camino de Santiago. *Tourism Management*, 56, 142–155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.04.003>
- Kirilova, K., Lehto, X., & Cai, L. (2017a). What triggers transformative tourism experiences? *Tourism Recreation Research*, 42(4), 498–511. <https://doi.org/10.1030/02508281.2017.1342349>
- Kirilova, K., Lehto, X. Y., & Cai, L. (2017b). Existential authenticity and anxiety as outcomes: The tourist in the experience economy. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 19(1), 13–26.

- LaPan, C., & Xu, S. (2024). Pluralities of agritourism: Exploring political values and social judgements. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 111, Article 103395.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Liro, J. (2021). Visitors' motivations and behaviours at pilgrimage centres: Push and pull perspectives. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 16(1), 79–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2020.1761820>
- Liutikas, D. (2012). Experiences of valuistic journeys: Motivation and behavior. In R. Sharpley, & P. R. Stone (Eds.), *Contemporary tourist experience: Concepts and consequences* (pp. 38–56). Routledge.
- Lomas, T. (2016). Positive art: Artistic expression and appreciation as an exemplary vehicle for flourishing. *Review of General Psychology*, 20(2), 171–182. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000073>
- Lopez, L. (2013). How long does the pilgrimage tourism experience to Santiago de Compostela last? *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 1, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.21427/D7C133>
- Luiik, E. (2012). Meaningful pain, suffering and the narrative construction of pilgrimage experience on the Camino de Santiago. *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, 37(2), 24–43.
- Magrizos, S., Kostopoulos, I., & Powers, L. (2021). Volunteer tourism as a transformational experience: A mixed methods empirical study. *Journal of Travel Research*, 60(4), 878–895. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287520913630>
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
- Neuhofer, B., Egger, R., Yu, J., & Celuch, K. (2021). Designing experiences in the age of human transformation: An analysis of burning man. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 91, Article 103310. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103310>
- Nunes, A. R., Rosário, P., & Núñez, J. C. (2023). 'It is the journey not the finish line': Predictors of grit in the way of St. James pilgrimage. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 11(1), 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.21427/5Y6G-SS83>
- Oficina de acogida al peregrino [Pilgrim's Reception Center]. (2025). Pilgrim's Office. Retrieved April 6, 2021, from <https://oficinadelperegrino.com/en/>.
- Olsen, D. H., Trono, A., & Fidgeon, P. R. (2018). *Pilgrimage trails and routes: The journey from the past to the present*. In *Religious pilgrimage routes and trails: Sustainable development and management* (pp. 1–13). CABI.
- Progano, R. N. (2018). Residents' perceptions of socio-economic impacts on pilgrimage trails: How does the community perceive pilgrimage tourism. *Asian Journal of Tourism Research*, 3(2), 148–178. <https://doi.org/10.12982/AJTR.2018.0014>
- Pugh, K. J. (2011). Transformative experience: An integrative construct in the spirit of Deweyan pragmatism. *Educational Psychologist*, 46(2), 107–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2011.558817>
- Pung, J. M., Gnoth, J., & Del Chiappa, G. (2020). Tourist transformation: Toward a conceptual model. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 81, Article 102885. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102885>
- Pung, J. M., Khoo, C., Del Chiappa, G., & Lee, C. (2024). Tourist transformation: An empirical analysis of female and male experiences. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 49(5), 1036–1050. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2022.2117353>
- Rahimi, S. (2024). Saturation in qualitative research: An evolutionary concept analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances*, 6, Article 100174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnsa.2024.100174>
- Reisinger, Y. (Ed.). (2013). *Transformational tourism: Tourist perspectives*. CABI.
- Rich, S. A., Hanna, S., & Wright, B. J. (2017). Simply satisfied: The role of psychological need satisfaction in the life satisfaction of voluntary simplifiers. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 18, 89–105. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9728-0>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.
- Senbeto, D. L. (2024). The greener, the better? Probing green innovation in pilgrimage tourism destinations. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 48(4), 757–769. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10963480231151674>
- Sheldon, P. J. (2020). Designing tourism experiences for inner transformation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 83, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102935>
- Sørensen, A., & Høgh-Olesen, H. (2023). Walking for well-being: Exploring the phenomenology of modern pilgrimage. *Culture & Psychology*, 29(1), 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X221131354>
- Soulard, J., Lundin, E., & Zou, S. S. (2024). Exploring inclusivity perceptions among residents: Insights from rural tourism destinations. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 32(12), 2580–2602. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2023.2295815>
- Soulard, J., McGehee, N. G., Stern, M. J., & Lamoureux, K. M. (2021). Transformative tourism: Tourists' drawings, symbols, and narratives of change. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 87, Article 103141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103141>
- Sparkman, D. J., & Hamer, K. (2020). Seeing the human in everyone: Multicultural experiences predict more positive intergroup attitudes and humanitarian helping through identification with all humanity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 79, 121–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijntrel.2020.08.007>
- Tasci, A. D., & Godovykh, M. (2021). An empirical modeling of transformation process through trip experiences. *Tourism Management*, 86, Article 104332. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2021.104332>
- Teoh, M. W., Wang, Y., & Kwek, A. (2021). Conceptualising co-created transformative tourism experiences: A systematic narrative review. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 47, 176–189. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2021.03.013>
- Turner, V., Abrahams, R., & Harris, A. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Routledge.
- Twohig-Bennett, C., & Jones, A. (2018). The health benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes. *Environmental Research*, 166, 628–637. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2018.06.030>
- Van Iwaarden, M., & Nawijn, J. (2024). Eudaimonic benefits of tourism: The pilgrimage experience. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 49(1), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.1986777>
- Xu, S., LaPan, C., Lewis, H., Holladay, P., & Dixon, H. (2024). Trust and transformative learning: How faculty-led study abroad experiences Foster sense of belonging and community. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10963758.2024.2342814>
- Zhao, Y., & Agyeiwaah, E. (2023). Understanding tourists' transformative experience: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 54, 188–199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2022.12.013>
- Zielinski, S., Kim, S. I., Botero, C., & Yanes, A. (2020). Factors that facilitate and inhibit community-based tourism initiatives in developing countries. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(6), 723–739. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2018.1543254>

Connie Johnmeyer is an avid Camino hiker interested in the psychological aspects of pilgrims.

Shuangyu Xu is an Assistant Professor, interested in nature-based tourism, agritourism, and heritage tourism.

Sonja Wilhelm Stanis is a professor interested in the human dimensions of natural resource management with an emphasis in the social psychological aspects of outdoor recreation.

Mark Morgan is a faculty emeritus interested in the education and outreach of human dimensions of natural resource management.