



A closer look at Santiago de Compostela's pilgrims through the lens of motivations



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Motivations to undertake the *Camino de Santiago* were examined among 1140 pilgrims.
- Pilgrims' motivations were categorized in 8 different dimensions.
- Spiritual motivations and new experiences are the most important motivations.
- Religious motivations and promise fulfillment are the least important motivations.
- Motivations vary among several features (e.g. nationality, the way journey is taken).

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 July 2017

Received in revised form

4 September 2017

Accepted 6 September 2017

Keywords:

Camino de Santiago

Motivations

Pilgrims

Pilgrimages

Religious tourism

Saint James way

Santiago de Compostela

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify pilgrims' motivations to undertake the *Camino de Santiago* and examine differences regarding socio demographics and other characteristics. An online questionnaire was used to collect data from pilgrims that had travelled the *Camino de Santiago*. A total of 1140 valid responses was collected from 45 different nationalities. The results indicate that pilgrims are mostly motivated by spiritual aspects, by wanting new experiences and for the nature and sports experience. Interestingly, religious motivations are the least important. The study also found that motivations differ according to several factors such as gender, nationality and the way the pilgrims undertook their journey. The findings of this study offer a better understanding of modern pilgrims, providing useful insights to stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

A well-known definition of traditional pilgrimage was proposed by Barber (1993) as “a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding” (p.1). Not only is it one of the oldest forms of population mobility (Collins-Kreiner, 2010), it exists in all of the main religions of the world (Pavicic, Alfirevic, & Batarello, 2007). Medieval pilgrims would leave their homes, wanted others to know about their travel and some would return with souvenirs, such as the conch shell from Santiago de Compostela (Theilmann, 1987).

That is why religious pilgrimages are considered to be the early roots of tourism today (Digance, 2003; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). Thus, pilgrimages are considered to be one of the oldest forms of tourism (Mustonen, 2006; Rinschede, 1992; Štefko, Királová, & Mudřík, 2015).

Pilgrimages to sacred sites are obviously related to religious tourism considered as a “type of tourism whose participants are motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons” (Rinschede, 1992, p. 52). However, they are also closely related to other types of tourism, such as heritage tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2006) and cultural tourism (Rinschede, 1992). Indeed, the locations visited and the pilgrimage route itself are considered to be important heritage attractions (Timothy & Boyd, 2006) that attract tourists interested in learning about the history of a site or about religious faith and its culture (Olsen & Timothy, 2006).

A significant number of researchers have long argued that

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pilgrimages are a type of tourism (e.g. Blom, Nilsson, & Santos, 2016; Cãnoves, Romagosa, Blanco, & Priestley, 2012; Lois-González, 2013; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016; Rinschede, 1992). Being associated to tourism raises considerable debate on pilgrims' real motivations to undertake their journeys. Although historically a pilgrim was described as a person that walked to a shrine place with religious motivations (Rinschede, 1992), nowadays modern pilgrims travel for many other reasons (Oviedo, de Courcier, & Farias, 2014). Indeed, pilgrimage is not limited to devotional visits to historical shrines (Courtney, 2013).

An interesting development is the increase in pilgrimage (Ascoura, 2013; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016), which reinforces the importance of understanding pilgrims' real motivations. The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has become an example of increase pilgrimage in a contemporary society, reviving a medieval path, transforming the *Camiño de Santiago* in a cultural and touristic attraction (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). In fact, it is considered to be the first route to see the return of pilgrimages in the West and therefore, should be considered as a case study to promote other cultural routes (Lois-González & Santos, 2015).

Religious tourism represents an attractive market. Indeed, worldwide religious travel is one of the fastest growing segments, with 300–330 million tourists visiting religious sites every year, 40% of which take place in Europe (UNWTO, 2014). Religious tourism has a positive economic impact (Kouchi, Nezhad, & Kiani, 2016; Sánchez, Fernández, & Lara, 2016) and can contribute to the promotion of a region or a country. For instance, the growth of the *Camiño de Santiago* has become an important touristic product to promote Galicia, contributing for better routes, new hostels for pilgrims, rural houses and hotels and through a strong publicity campaign call for pilgrims around the world (Solla, 2006).

Given the rise in religious tourism, it is crucial to understand what motivates travelers to sacred sites (Raj, Griffin, & Blackwell, 2015). This study aims to identify pilgrims' motivations to undertake the *Camiño de Santiago* and examine differences regarding socio demographics and other characteristics. Surprisingly, there are not many studies addressing this topic. Furthermore, the few that do exist do not explore the relationship between motivations and other aspects, such as nationality or type of accommodations chosen. Pilgrims should not be considered as a homogenous group. It is important that all parties interested in this target group realize that pilgrims have different motivations in order to find the best way to cater for their needs. For instance, there are now many tour operators that sell packages for a pilgrimage experience. The results of this study are valuable to create and promote these packages. This study also responds to Damari and Mansfeld's (2014) call for research on pilgrims' travel motivations and contributes to the tourism literature by providing updated insights regarding the modern pilgrim with a meaningful sample of pilgrims.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Camiño de Santiago*

El Camino de Santiago, also known in English as “The Way of Saint James,” is the pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain. It is here that, according to Christian tradition, the remains of Saint James, one of Jesus' disciples, are interred. According to the official history of the pilgrimage, the body of Saint James was discovered by a shepherd in the Galicia region of Spain during the 9th century. The King at the time, King Alfonso II, had a small chapel built at this place, but later in 1078 the construction of the Romanesque cathedral began. The first pilgrimages date back to the 9th and 10th centuries, but it was in the 11th century that the pilgrimage to Santiago gained its

international dimension (Mendel, 2014). The popularity of the route contributed to the region's development with hostels and Romanesque style churches being built to accommodate the pilgrims and towns emerged along the routes (Villarrubia, 2010). By the 13th century it is estimated that 500,000 pilgrims a year arrived to Saint James's shrine (Digance, 2003; Murray & Graham, 1997). The 12th and the 13th centuries are considered the golden age of the pilgrimage. Shortly after, in the years of Renaissance and Reformation in Europe, the number of pilgrims to Santiago significantly declined (Pilgrim's Welcome Office, 2017). An additional element to this crisis was the disappearance of the apostle's remains that were lost for three centuries (Santos, 2002).

This medieval pilgrimage route saw its revival with force at the end of the twentieth century (Blom et al., 2016). In 1985, UNESCO declared the city of Santiago de Compostela a World Heritage site and in 1987, the route was acknowledged as the first European Cultural Route by the Council of Europe. In 1993, UNESCO recognized the *Camiño's* first-class heritage sites, outstanding natural landscapes and intangible heritage and declared the Routes of Santiago (the French Way and the Routes of Northern Spain) a World Heritage (UNESCO, 2017).

In last recent decades, public authorities have invested in promoting the cultural tourist attractions of their cities and regions along the route (Lois-González, 2013). The *Camiño* is seen as a tourist product (Lois-González & Medina, 2003) and its success benefits all urban centers and rural districts it goes through (Lois-González, 2013). The promotion efforts undertaken have generated increase in the number of pilgrims in the 21st century. In 1997, 25,179 pilgrims arrived to Santiago de Compostela and received the *Compostela* certificate, proof of a “traditional pilgrim”. In 2016, almost 20 years later, this number had risen to 277,915. The pilgrim of Santiago is recognized by this document given to those that travelled the *Camiño*. However, in order to receive the *Compostela* several conditions must be fulfilled. First of all, individuals must have travelled the *Camiño* at least 100 km by foot or horseback or 200 km by bicycle (Lois-González & Santos, 2015). Secondly, it is only given to those who declare that they travelled the *Camiño* for religious or spiritual reasons. According to the Pilgrim's Welcome Office's (2017) the reasons that pilgrims most indicated were religious and others (47.75%), followed by religious (44.26%) and non religious (8%). In spite of the religious motivations being the most indicated, this does not mean that it is the real motivation, since it is a requirement to obtain the certificate (Lois-González, 2013). Thus, these data are not particularly interesting in assessing Santiago's pilgrims' motivations (Murray & Graham, 1997). Therefore, it is important to examine pilgrims' real motivations to Santiago to confirm if religion is the main motivation to walk the way of Santiago. It is important to note that, in the particular case of the *Camiño de Santiago*, the route is more important than the final destination (Santos, 2002). This means that walking the *Camiño* is more important than visiting the Apostle's Tomb.

2.2. Pilgrims' motivations

Historically, a pilgrim was described as a person that walked to a shrine place with religious motivations (Rinschede, 1992). There is consensus that a traditional pilgrimage was conducted with a strong religious motivation (Shinde, 2007). This relationship seems to be even more authentic considering that the Church itself encourages pilgrimages in order of “rendering a deeper and richer experience of faith” (Ambrosio, 2015, p. 131).

Nowadays, the modern pilgrim is not necessarily motivated by religion (Štefko et al., 2015) and travels for many other reasons than religious ones (Oviedo et al., 2014). Even when pilgrims travel with religious motivations, there are many secular aspects such as

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