Exploring Pilgrim’s Satisfaction and Emotions Derived from the Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage Route

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Abstract. Pilgrimage tourism, of which the Camino de Santiago is a notable example, has a significant social and economic impact and is therefore included in tourism planning activities. Given the economic and social importance of pilgrimage routes, it is important to examine pilgrim’s satisfaction and emotions during their journey. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to examine pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago satisfaction and emotions. Based on a sample of 124 pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago, the results show that they are satisfied with the Camino, with the strongest emotions being happiness, joy and peace. These findings are important to support the management of pilgrimage routes.

Keywords: Camino de Santiago · Emotions · Pilgrimage route · Religious tourism · Satisfaction

1 Introduction

Religious tourism represents an important tourism segment. Not only does it have significant economic impacts, contributing to local development [1, 2], it also creates awareness of humanity’s common heritage and builds cultural understanding [2]. Pilgrimages are an important part of religious tourism and are considered one of the oldest forms of tourism by many authors [e.g. 3, 4]. Although Pilgrimages were traditionally taken to ask for forgiveness or other religious motives, nowadays they are a tourism product that have become increasingly important [2].

Different studies have evidenced the importance of pilgrimage tourism. For instance, Vijayanand [5] demonstrated not only the significant economic and social impacts of pilgrimage tourism, but also stressed that it could contribute to reduce poverty in local communities. This conclusion is echoed in Parga-Dans [6] study that found that the pilgrimage route to Finisterre not only had a positive social and economic impact on local communities along the route, but had also contributed to the revitalization of the supply of services in the local communities. Rotherham [4] also highlights the impacts of the pilgrimage to Lourdes, in France, and of the pilgrimage to Mecca in South Arabia. Several studies have also discussed the positive effects of the Camino de Santiago, namely its substantial impact on the local economies and rural
areas [e.g. 7, 8], its important role regarding the preservation and restoration of the cultural heritage [9], in rehabilitating city centers along the route [10] and on how it helps the rural population to preserve their values [8].

The Camino de Santiago (The Way of Saint James) has also been considered a good example of successful destination management [11] and has received researcher’s attention in the past years. Studies have focused on motivations to undertake this pilgrimage [e.g. 12–14], its cultural heritage and history [e.g. 15] and pilgrims use of technology along this route [e.g. 16, 17]. However, there appear to be no studies focusing on Camino de Santiago’s pilgrim’s satisfaction and emotions. This is an important issue because satisfied pilgrims are more likely to return and recommend the pilgrimage route.

In order to fill this gap, and given the importance of this pilgrimage route, the main aim of this study is to examine Camino de Santiago’s pilgrims’ satisfaction and emotions. Managing religious tourism requires a better understanding of the experience and of the site [2]. Therefore, the findings of this study will provide useful insights to the Camino de Santiago stakeholders, such as local businesses, policy makers, religious site managers, among many others.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Camino de Santiago

The Camino de Santiago is one of the main pilgrimage routes of Christianity that ends in Santiago de Compostela, located in the northwest of Spain [18], where the remains of the Apostle Saint James the Greater are believed to be buried. During the Middle Ages, the Camino was very popular, due to the rich cultural and architectural heritage along the way in the form of churches, monasteries and medieval hospitals. The Camino lost popularity after the Middle Ages, but gained popularity in the 1980s [see 13 for reasons for this revival]. The Camino has received several international awards, such as Declarations of Historic Santiago (1985), the Way as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (1993), the first European Cultural Route (1987), and the appointment of Santiago de Compostela as a European Cultural Capital (2000), which have contributed to its international recognition [19]. It is the first route to see the return of pilgrimages in the West and therefore, it is considered as a good example for the promotion of cultural routes [10].

The Church considers a Camino de Santiago pilgrim to be one who travels 100 km on foot or 200 km by bicycle or horse and who obtains a certificate for reaching this objective as the meaning of this effort. However, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is a spiritual practice that is very different from religious practice. Many of these pilgrims are atheists or agnostics, Christians, Muslims or Jews [13, 20] and move to a sacred place due to a contemporary posture of individual spirituality, less institutionalized and lived in a more free and creative way. It is not only the religious motivations that lead people to the Camino[18]. Many pilgrims travel to Santiago de Compostela for cultural, adventure or simply to find themselves in the peace that the Way transmits.
In 2019, the Camino de Santiago reached, and for the third consecutive year, a new record, with 350 thousand pilgrims arriving at Santiago de Compostela through the various routes. According to the Spanish agency EFE, the Camino de Santiago reached 300 thousand pilgrims for the first time in 2017 and 327,378 in 2018, a new record. None of these years were Jacobean Holy ones, years in which there is a large increase of pilgrims. The last one was in 2010 and the next will happen in 2021. Despite the steady growth, the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 will most likely affect the numbers of pilgrims.

2.2 Satisfaction with the Camino de Santiago

Antón et al. [21] argue that satisfaction is “a post-purchase evaluation made by consumers concerning their experience with the product and emerges from comparing the latter with previous expectations” (p. 241). However, satisfaction is not limited to products as this definition seems to suggest and has also been studied extensively in the tourism field. For instance, research has examined satisfaction with tourist destinations [e.g. 22], with tourist attractions [e.g. 23] and with hotels [e.g. 24]. What is common in studies addressing satisfaction is that regardless of the field, most studies have found that it has a positive effect on loyalty. Many studies have found that satisfied tourists are more likely to be loyal to a destination [e.g. 25, 26]. Destination loyalty is defined as tourists’ intention to revisit the destination and recommend it to others [27]. Many tourist destinations rely heavily on the repeat visitor segment [28]. These findings demonstrate the importance of having loyal tourists, where satisfaction has a crucial role.

Despite the importance of satisfaction, apparently, there are few studies addressing pilgrims’ satisfaction with pilgrimage routes. Regarding the Camino de Santiago, only one study seems to address satisfaction with the route and indirectly. Indeed, Fernandes et al. [29] did not ask pilgrims directly if they were satisfied with the Camino, they asked respondents the probability of repeating the Portuguese Camino de Santiago, with 24% answering very likely. The authors concluded that this number suggested a relatively high level of intention to repeat the route and therefore, the level of satisfaction amongst pilgrims appeared to be high.

2.3 Emotions felt on the Camino de Santiago

The emotions tourists evoke during their leisure and tourism experience is of central importance to tourism marketing researchers [30]. Yet, they tend to be neglected in tourism research [31]. Research has shown that tourists that experience greater emotions, such as pleasure and arousal, have an increased level of satisfaction as well as they tend to be more loyal and willing to pay more [30, 32]. Positive emotions such as joy, love, and pleasure are also relevant to tourist’s experience and influence their satisfaction [33, 34], as well as they have been to lead to place attachment [34].
Buda et al. [31] argue that tourism studies should pay closer attention to emotions. There appear to be no studies addressing pilgrim’s feelings felt on a pilgrimage route. However, it is also important to understand pilgrims’ emotions. The current study examines how pilgrims feel on the Camino de Santiago, therefore, expanding our knowledge of pilgrim’s emotions.

3 Methodology

An online questionnaire was developed to examine pilgrim’s satisfaction and feelings regarding the Camino de Santiago. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections. The first section contained questions to measure satisfaction and emotions, based on existing measures or adapted from similar scales (see Table 2 in Sect. 5 for the items used). These were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 being “Strongly Agree” and 1 “Strongly Disagree”. The first section also included questions regarding pilgrim’s intention to return and if they recommended the Camino to others. The second section contained socio-demographic questions and some general information regarding the context of the pilgrimage (e.g. how it was taken). The questionnaire was available in English, Portuguese, Spanish, French and Italian. The online questionnaire was distributed on Camino de Santiago Facebook groups and was aimed at pilgrims who had taken the Camino de Santiago at least once. A total of 124 complete responses were considered for the empirical analysis.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Pilgrim’s Profile

A demographic profile of survey participants is summarized in Table 1. Regarding age there is a great diversity, since several age groups answered the online questionnaire. The age group with the most significant number of responses was the age group 35–44, with 26% of the total of responses, while only approximately 7% are aged over 65. In terms of gender, there is a balanced distribution, since there is not a great difference in the number of men and women that filled out the questionnaire. Regarding the country of residence, there was a prominence of responses from the Portuguese.

Regarding the number of times that the respondents undertook the Camino de Santiago, 53.2% had taken it only once, while 16.9% had taken it twice. The remaining 30% had undertaken the Camino more than 3 times. Most of the respondents had walked the Camino (88.7%).
4.2 Satisfaction and Emotion

The mean and standard deviation of all items used to measure satisfaction and emotions are presented in Table 2. Emotions were divided in positive and negative emotions.

Overall, pilgrims are satisfied with the Camino de Santiago (average of 3.97). They are more satisfied with the information available (4.26) and with the general conditions of the way (4.13) and less satisfied with the quality of the hostels (3.6).

Regarding emotions pilgrims feel on the way, overall, pilgrims have positive feelings (4.27), with the feelings of happiness, joy and peace standing out the most. Negative emotions have a relatively low average (1.9), with disappointment being the highest negative emotion (2.79).

Pilgrims demonstrate high levels of loyalty, since 98% of them said they had recommended the Camino de Santiago to others and 95% had intentions to return. These results reveal the important role that satisfaction and positive emotions play in creating loyalty.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

| Variable     | Category                | N  | %  |
|--------------|-------------------------|----|----|
| Age          | 18–24                   | 11 | 9% |
|              | 25–34                   | 25 | 20%|
|              | 35–44                   | 32 | 26%|
|              | 45–54                   | 27 | 22%|
|              | 55–64                   | 18 | 15%|
|              | Over 65                 | 9  | 7% |
|              | Not available           | 2  | 2% |
|              | **TOTAL**               | 124| 100%|
| Gender       | Male                    | 67 | 54%|
|              | Female                  | 57 | 46%|
|              | **TOTAL**               | 124| 100%|
| Nationality  | Portuguese              | 70 | 57%|
|              | Brazilian               | 36 | 29%|
|              | Argentine               | 5  | 4% |
|              | French                  | 4  | 3% |
|              | English, American and Italian* | 6 | 5% |
|              | Ukrainian, Australian and Spanish** | 3 | 2% |
|              | **TOTAL**               | 124| 100%|

* Two of each nationality
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Conclusions and Implications

Pilgrimage tourism is an important sector in socio-economic development [5]. Therefore, the significant research focusing on the Camino de Santiago and its pilgrims is not surprising. However, none of the existing studies focus on pilgrim’s satisfaction and emotions with the Camino. The present study contributes to the literature mainly because it examines these variables. This is an important issue, since satisfaction and positive emotions will affect pilgrims’ intentions to return and their level of recommendation of the pilgrimage route.

This study shows that pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago show high levels of satisfaction and feel mostly positive emotions and not negative ones, most definitely the reason for the success that this pilgrimage route has faced in the past years. Since they are satisfied and feel positive emotions they want to return and recommend it to others.

The findings offer useful insights for the Camino de Santiago’s stakeholders. Indeed, since emotions are closely associated with satisfaction [30], their aim needs to be providing ways of improving such emotions to maximize satisfaction and, consequently loyalty. Positive emotions also increase the likelihood of tourist’s posting their experiences on social media [35], which further demonstrates the importance of positive emotions. It is crucial that stakeholders provide pilgrims with positive emotions.

| Variable          | Indicators                              | Mean  | Std Deviation |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Satisfaction (3.97) | STF1-Information Available              | 4.26  | 0.857         |
|                   | STF2- Hostel Quality                     | 3.60  | 1.192         |
|                   | STF3-General Conditions of the Way       | 4.13  | 0.849         |
|                   | STF4-Existing support during the Path    | 3.75  | 0.955         |
|                   | STF5 - Safety on the Way                 | 4.11  | 0.993         |
| Positive emotions (4.27) | PE1-Joy                                | 4.62  | 0.719         |
|                   | PE2- Happiness                          | 4.66  | 0.687         |
|                   | PE3- Gratitude                          | 4.43  | 0.942         |
|                   | PE4- Peace                              | 4.54  | 0.861         |
|                   | PE5- Hope                               | 3.87  | 1.130         |
|                   | PE6- Euphoria                           | 3.54  | 1.25          |
|                   | PE7- Enthusiasm                         | 4.37  | 0.936         |
|                   | PE8- Pleasure                           | 4.34  | 1.023         |
|                   | PE9- Pride                              | 4.05  | 1.336         |
| Negative emotions (1.9) | NE1- Disappointment                     | 2.79  | 1.363         |
|                   | NE2- Anxiety                            | 1.33  | 0.709         |
|                   | NE3- Distress                           | 1.47  | 0.899         |
|                   | NE4- Fear                               | 1.87  | 1.208         |
|                   | NE5- Sadness                            | 1.69  | 1.153         |
|                   | NE6- Concern                            | 2.28  | 1.243         |
experiences, which can be obtained by improving the less satisfying factors identified in this study.

A better understanding of satisfaction and emotions with the Camino de Santiago will assist managers in attracting pilgrims. With the right planning and promotion, pilgrimage routes can stimulate the economic and social growth of communities.

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, results should be generalized with caution, given the small sample size. Despite the questionnaire being available in five different languages, this sample is clearly overrepresented by Portuguese pilgrims. It would have also been important to have collected a greater number from different nationalities. Future research should include a higher response rate from other nationalities. With a higher number of responses from other nationalities, it would be worthwhile to compare differences between them.

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