

# SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN PILGRIMAGES ON THE WAY OF SAINT JAMES

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the evolution of the Camino de Santiago into a hybrid of religious pilgrimage and spiritual tourism. Through statistical analysis and interviews with members of the *Camino de Santiago Polska* Facebook group, the research provides insights into the evolving nature of this historic route. Analysing data from 2003 to 2024, it reveals a significant increase in the number of international pilgrims. While religious motivations persist, non-religious and mixed motivations increase, especially after the pandemic. The study concludes that the Camino de Santiago represents a diverse form of tourism, blending religious and secular motivations, with implications for sustainable tourism development.

**KEYWORDS:** motivations, pilgrim, social survey, trends in pilgrimage, tourist

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“People who have reached Santiago de Compostela emphasize that at the Camino an old man dies and a new one is born, that at Camino de Santiago each step has life-changing power” (Ziółkowska-Weiss et al. 2014).

## Introduction

Religious tourism is one of the fastest growing forms of tourism. In this dynamic, multi-billion dollar global industry, approximately 330 million people undertake religious or religiously exploratory trips each year and visit major pilgrimage centres around the world (Štefko et al. 2015, Mróz 2021). Religious tourism is a recurring phenomenon in the history of religion that has evolved from pilgrimage (Kim et al. 2020). Pilgrimage is a time-honoured practice that can be seen in

ancient ceremonies, such as those held in honour of Zeus at Olympia or journeys to the oracle at Delphi. These early pilgrimages were an integral part of religious and cultural life, preparing the ground for later Christian traditions. In the Middle Ages, Christianity was the main driving force behind travel in Europe, primarily through pilgrimages to sacred sites and the viewing of associated relics (Ingram 2013). In colloquial language, the term ‘pilgrimage’ is associated with religious travel, especially to a shrine or a holy place, but the Latin root of the word, *peregrinus*,

allows for a broader interpretation, including, for example, foreigner, wanderer, exile and traveler, as well as stranger and alien (Puşcaşu 2015), suggesting that pilgrimage was undertaken not only for religious reasons. According to historical sources, in previous centuries, people from the highest social strata travelled for explicitly religious reasons, but at the same time indulged in cultural pleasures and activities (Rashid 2018). Thus, it can be concluded that religious travel is not a new phenomenon, but in modern times we are dealing with religious tourism which, according to Puşcaşu (2015), is becoming one of the many types of tourism. Religious tourism refers to contemporary patterns of visiting places of religious significance or pilgrimage sites, where visitors seek to satisfy religious and recreational needs (Shinde 2015). The term 'religious heritage tourist' has also been proposed in the literature to denote individuals who visit a place for cultural and historical purposes rather than in search of religious experience. This is partly due to dynamic social changes, especially the increasing secularisation of many social groups. Obviously, this does not imply that there are no people today who travel exclusively for religious reasons. They are referred to as 'religious tourists' who visit a place of religious significance for a specific religious purpose (Shackley 2005, Rosak-Szyrocka et al. 2023). It should be emphasised again that people may visit the same place for very different reasons, and that such a visit may be a religious pilgrimage for some, while for others it may be a cultural or nostalgic pilgrimage, as well as adventure or cultural tourism. Therefore, the term 'pilgrim' should no longer be associated exclusively with religious tourists, as there can be many non-religious reasons for calling someone a pilgrim, for example, a pilgrim can be someone who travels for spiritual reasons (Rashid 2018).

The fact that religious tourism and pilgrimages are increasingly contributing to the social and economic development of local economies and communities is also important for the development of this type of tourism (Romanelli et al. 2021, Budovich 2023). This fact has also been recognised by the business community, which is supporting the development of many religious destinations (Das et al. 2024).

Santiago de Compostela in Spain is one of the world's oldest and most famous pilgrimage

destinations. The origins of pilgrimage to the tomb of St. James the Apostle in Santiago de Compostela date back to the ninth century, when a marble sarcophagus containing the Saint's remains was discovered in AD 813, thus initiating his cult and the pilgrimage movement along the route (Mróz, Mróz 2013). Santiago de Compostela attracted a lot of interest in the Middle Ages (Graham, Murray 1997), but its popularity continued to decline in the following centuries until the 1980s. In 1987, the Council of Europe declared the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela the first European Cultural Route and parts of the route were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in the 1990s (Ziółkowska-Weiss et al. 2014). These two events have revived the interest in the pilgrimage to the tomb of St. James, which continues to grow every year. In 2023, more than 450,000 people registered their arrival in Santiago de Compostela (Pilgrim's Reception Office 2025), but this figure is probably underestimated since not all visitors register for the so-called 'Compostela'. The data from the Pilgrim Office of the Archdiocese of Santiago de Compostela also indicate that not all people who visit the shrine are Catholics or even believers. According to Mróz (2019), this is due to the fact that walking along the Camino de Santiago is often perceived as an inner journey, where each step is a transformation of life, a physical and spiritual breakthrough not necessarily related to religious spirituality. Thus, it can be concluded that even this remarkable pilgrimage route has not been able to resist contemporary trends in religious tourism, and the Camino has become a well-known example of the transformation of a place's identity into a tourist modification of traditional pilgrimage, which can serve to weaken religious meanings and symbolism (Nilsson, Tesfahuney 2016).

Tourists/pilgrims come to Santiago de Compostela from all over the world (more than 160 countries). Obviously, Spanish visitors are most numerous. For many centuries, Spain was considered a decidedly Catholic country, and Santiago de Compostela is regarded as a 'native' (local) sanctuary. Poland is also perceived as a Catholic country, which is confirmed by statistical data; in 2021, 71.3% of the Polish population identified as Catholics (Statistics Poland 2022). Pilgrimages to religious sites have been very

popular in Poland for centuries, which is closely linked to the country's history, especially after the end of the Second World War (Tarasiuk 2012). Poles consider pilgrimage walks to be their 'speciality', and the pilgrimage to the main Polish Marian shrine in Czestochowa is most famous. Approximately 100,000 people participate in organised pilgrimages to Czestochowa every year (Press Office Jasna Góra News 2024). Poland's membership in the European Union and the Schengen area has influenced Poles' interest in walking the Medieval pilgrimage routes, especially the Camino de Santiago. In 2004, this interest culminated in the creation of a Polish network of Camino de Santiago routes, which currently spans around 6000 km (Mróz 2014). According to the statistical data provided by the Pilgrim's Office of the Archdiocese of Santiago de Compostela, many Poles walk the Way of St. James and reach the shrine. For example, 7478 Poles received certificates of accomplishment in 2024. As was already mentioned, the vast majority of Poles identify as Catholics. However, the Polish society is becoming increasingly secularised, although at a slower rate than Western Europeans. Therefore, this study aimed to determine whether secularisation influenced the motivations of people who undertook the effort of pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella, and whether religious pilgrims or religious tourists, for whom the religious aspect was not important, predominated among Poles who followed the Way of St. James. This study also aimed to describe all stages of the Camino de Santiago (preparation, execution and completion) and its impact on the respondents' lives. The data from the Pilgrim's Reception Office in Santiago de Compostela were analysed to identify the total number of pilgrims from all over the world who had visited Santiago de Compostela in the last 20 years and were compared with the results of the survey.

## Materials and methods

The study involved desk research and a diagnostic survey. Desk research was conducted to collect statistical data on pilgrim traffic on the Camino de Santiago between 2003 and 2024. The information on the age, gender, mode of travel and motivation of those who apply for

the traditional pilgrimage certificate (known as the Compostela certificate) has been available online since 2003. These data were collected by the Pilgrim's Reception Office (2025) of the Cathedral Church of the Archdiocese of Santiago de Compostela. The statistical data collected by the office over the past 22 years were analysed in Excel using pivot tables.

A detailed survey of pilgrims was also carried out. The survey was conducted between 2021 and 2022 among members of the *Camino de Santiago Polska* Facebook group. The group has been active on Facebook since 2013. It currently has 9700 members – people who have participated in pilgrimages along the Way of St. James and decided to share their experiences. Responses were received from 278 pilgrims. The electronic survey consisted of 27 questions divided into three sections. The first section included the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. The second section provided background information on the respondents' previous pilgrimage experiences. The third section focused on the pilgrims' motivations and the impact of pilgrimage on their lives and personal development. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine statistically significant differences between the variables studied. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to test the presence of correlation between the variables studied. The data from the Pilgrim's Reception Office have confirmed the present findings – pilgrims arriving in Santiago de Compostela are predominantly residents of urban areas, with higher education and a good financial status (Pilgrim's Reception Office 2025). This demographic is likely to have the resources and time to undertake a financially and physically demanding journey.

## Results

### Statistical analysis based on data from the Pilgrim's Reception Office

Over the past two decades, the number of pilgrims travelling to Santiago de Compostela has increased from around 75,000 to almost 450,000 per year, with a sharp decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fig. 1). Pilgrims from outside Spain have been the majority since 2014.

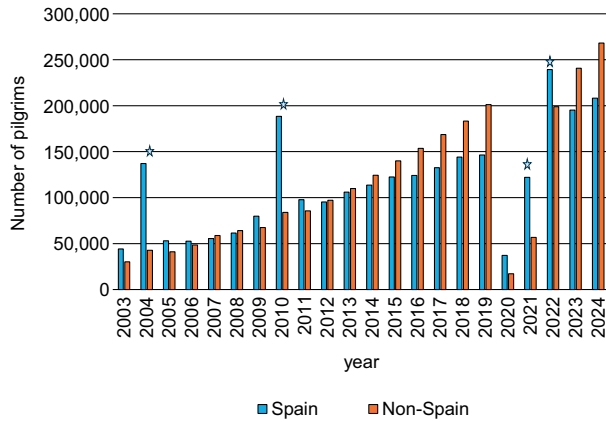


Fig. 1. Changes in the number of pilgrims registered at the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim's Office between 2003 and 2024. Jubilee Years of St. James are marked with an asterisk.

This trend was temporarily reversed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Jubilee Years of 2004 and 2010 (when 25 July falls on a Sunday) saw a significant increase in the number of Spanish pilgrims. This phenomenon was also observed in the Jubilee Year of 2021 (extended to the end of 2022), despite the negative impact of the pandemic on the total number of pilgrims. After the pandemic, the majority of pilgrims were women (Fig. 2).

Between 2003 and 2019, the majority of pilgrims were between 18 and 45 years old. The number of pilgrims aged <18 and >65 was similar over the study period. After the pandemic, there was a marked decrease in the number of younger pilgrims (<45 years of age), while the number of pilgrims >45 remained stable (Fig. 3). The number

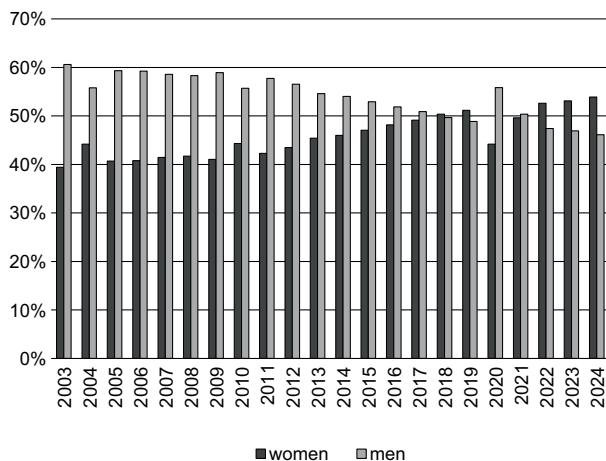


Fig. 2. Changes in the proportion of women and men among pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela between 2003 and 2024.

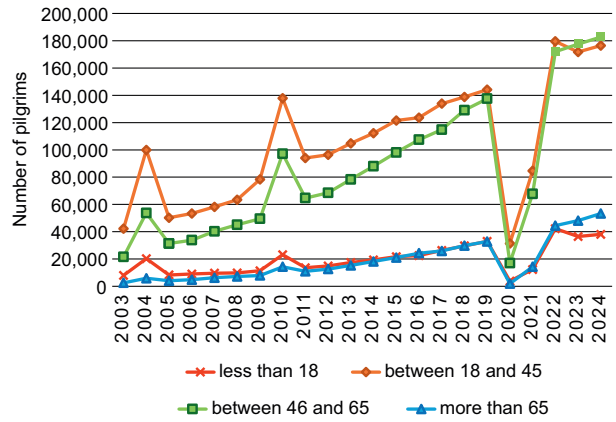


Fig. 3. Age structure of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela between 2003 and 2024.

of pilgrims travelling on foot showed a steady upward trend from 2003 to 2024 (excluding the COVID-19 period). The number of cyclists remained relatively stable (around 23,000 pilgrims per year on average). The number of pilgrims with religious or mixed motives has increased steadily over the years. By contrast, the number of non-religious pilgrims remained stable at around 10,000–15,000 per year, and a significant increase to around 100,000 per year was observed after COVID-19. The Jubilee Years saw a significant increase in both the total number of pilgrims and the proportion of religious pilgrims (at the expense of mixed-motive pilgrims). Between 2003 and 2019, the proportion of people setting out for a pilgrimage for non-religious reasons remained relatively stable at around 5%–10%. However,

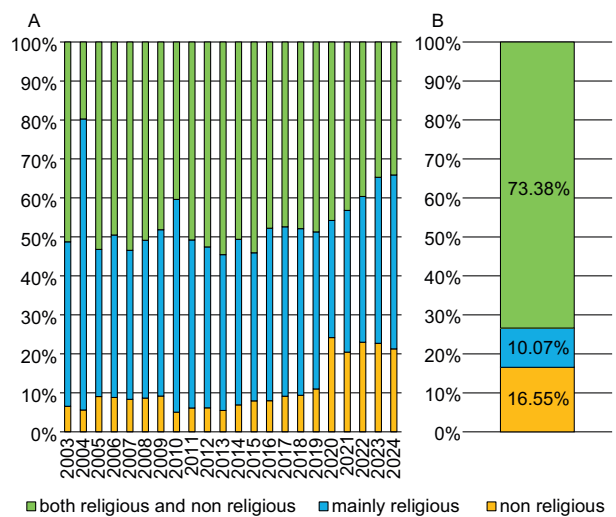


Fig. 4. A – motivation of the pilgrims: registered at the Pilgrim's Reception Office in Santiago de Compostela; B – from the surveyed group *Camino de Santiago Polska* (2021–2022).

after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this proportion increased significantly to approximately 20% (Fig. 4A). Nearly 75% of the members of the *Camino de Santiago Polska* group made the pilgrimage for mixed reasons (Fig. 4B).

### The *Camino de Santiago Polska* group: Results of the survey

In the *Camino de Santiago Polska* group, women accounted for 70%. More than 90% of the pilgrims identified as believers, mainly Catholics (Table 1). People aged between 18 and 45 were the most numerous age group (51.4%). The largest number of pilgrims resided in cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants (33.5%) and the smallest number of pilgrims resided in rural areas

Table 1. Demographics of respondents.

Typical features	Respondents (n = 278)	Respondents (%)
Gender		
Male	89	32.0
Female	189	68.0
Age		
under 18	1	0.4
18–45	143	51.4
46–65	117	42.1
over 65	17	6.1
Faith		
Catholicism	236	84.9
Protestantism	5	1.8
Other	10	3.6
Religiously indifferent	27	9.7
Place of residence		
Countryside	40	14.4
Town with population of up to 50,000	51	18.3
City with 50,000 to 150,000 inhabitants	52	18.7
City with 150,000 to 500,000 inhabitants	42	15.1
City of more than 500,000 inhabitants	93	33.5
Education		
Primary	3	1.1
Vocational	5	1.8
Secondary	39	14.0
Higher	231	83.1
Financial situation		
Very good	41	14.75
Good	156	56.12
Average	77	27.70
Poor	4	1.44

(14.4%). The majority of the respondents had a university degree (83.1%) and a good financial status (70.9%).

More than half of the respondents had previous pilgrimage experience; of those, almost 70% had participated in pilgrimage walks and almost 65% had taken part in domestic pilgrimages (in Poland). Over 53% of the respondents had made the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela once, while 8.3% had done so five or more times (Table 2). Approximately 53% of the surveyed subjects obtained information about the Camino de Santiago from family or friends, and around 43% obtained it from film, literature or the Internet. Around 93% of the pilgrims organised their trips independently. The time taken to plan the pilgrimage was between one and five months in 36.7% of the cases, and <1 month in 21.6% of the cases (Table 3). Walking was the most popular mode of travel, with 92% of the respondents travelling on foot. About 80% of the respondents walked between 16 and 30 km per day. The largest group (38.4%) walked 200–400 km, 25.5% walked 700–1000 km and 10.1% walked >1000 km. Almost 60% of the respondents spent between €16 and €40 per day, while more than 40% spent between €5 and €15. Most pilgrims (86.3%) stayed in albergues, and very few camped out. Over 73% of the respondents travelled alone or with a companion. Statistically, men are significantly more

Table 2. Experience of pilgrimage/religious tourism (n = 278).

Factor	Respondents (n = 278)	Respondents (%)
Previous pilgrimage experience		
Yes	184	66.2
No	94	33.8
Type of pilgrimage		
Domestic	180	64.7
International	102	36.7
Pilgrimage mode (n=184)*		
Hiking	128	69.5
Bus	27	14.7
Bicycle	6	3.3
Other	23	12.5
Frequency of pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela		
Once	148	53.2
Twice	56	20.1
Three to five times	51	18.4
More than five times	23	8.3

\* applies to persons with previous pilgrimage experience

Table 3. Preparation for a pilgrimage along the Way of St James (n = 278).

Factor	Respondents (n = 278)	Respondents (%)
Inspiration		
Internet	39	14.0
Friends and family	80	28.8
Film and literature	149	53.6
Other	10	3.6
Pilgrimage organiser		
Independently	263	94.6
Travel office	5	1.8
Church	10	3.6
Time to prepare for pilgrimage		
More than year	45	16.2
6-12 months	71	25.5
1-5 months	102	36.7
Less than one month	60	21.6

Table 4. Making the journey to Santiago de Compostela (n = 278).

Factor	Respondents (n = 278)	Respondents (%)
Pilgrimage mode		
Hiking	261	93.9
Bicycle	17	6.1
Total kilometres		
100-200	21	7.6
200-400	107	38.5
400-700	51	18.3
700-1000	71	25.5
Over 1000	28	10.1
Average daily kilometres		
16-30	222	79.9
Over 30	56	20.1
Daily expenses (€)		
5-15	112	40.3
16-40	160	57.5
Over 40	6	2.2
Place of accommodation		
Albergue	240	85.3
Rental rooms	16	5.8
Tent	20	7.2
Open air	2	0.7
Companionship		
Alone	97	34.9
With one companion	106	38.1
In small group	75	27.0
Impact on life and personality		
Yes	201	72.3
No	16	5.8
Not sure	61	21.9

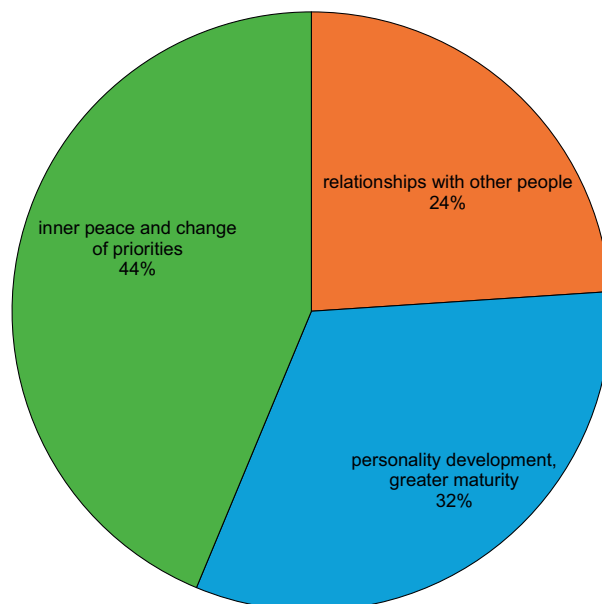


Fig. 5. Impact of the pilgrimage on the life and personality of the participants (N = 201).

likely to be solo travellers than women ( $p = 0.03$ ). Women choose the company of one or more people more often than men. The vast majority of the respondents (72.3%) noted the impact of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela on their lives and personal development (Table 4). The relevant answers can be divided into three groups. Some respondents declared that the pilgrimage had helped them to make new friends or deepen the existing relationships. Others emphasised an increase in their independence, openness and resourcefulness, as well as the opportunity to get to know themselves better. Some respondents highlighted a change in their perception of reality, inner peace and balance (Fig. 5).

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the total number of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela has followed a steady upward trend (Fig. 1). A similar upward trend has also been observed in other major global religious centres (Awasthi, Nain 2023). The proportion of foreign pilgrims relative to Spanish pilgrims has been increasing steadily since 2016. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of pilgrims were women, which was not the case in previous years, possibly because COVID-19 had a greater psychological impact on women than on men. Women showed more

symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, more feelings of loneliness and lower levels of spiritual well-being than men (Ahuja et al. 2020). The pilgrimage to Santiago is usually a combination of physical exertion and spirituality, which can be seen as an effective way to reduce stress and improve mood. The respondents also had an opportunity to reflect deeply on the difficult experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which (as mentioned above) has affected women to a greater extent than men. This change may also be linked to other factors, such as increased safety and accessibility of routes, as well as changing social norms and perceptions of solo travel. It should be noted that the Polish group interviewed for the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela was also dominated by women. In the surveyed group of Polish pilgrims, almost half of the respondents (48.2%) were >45 years old. The mental well-being of people aged  $\geq 45$  and over deteriorated during the pandemic (Ahuja et al. 2020). A temporary decline in the number of pilgrims was observed only between 2020 and 2021, which could be related to both travel restrictions and fear of infection (Raj, Griffin 2020, Mróz 2021).

The search for a meaningful experience is an increasingly important component of tourist trips which focus on the spiritual aspect, the search for one's own identity and contact with oneself, others and the world. The reference to the spiritual instead of the religious is also becoming more popular (Roszak, Mróz 2024). Today, the modern pilgrim is not necessarily motivated by religious factors (Štefko et al. 2015) and travels for many other reasons (Silva et al. 2023). After the pandemic, there was a significant increase in the number and proportion of people undertaking pilgrimages for non-religious reasons (Fig. 4). This may be due to the specific nature of the pilgrimage to Santiago, where pilgrims usually travel on foot, either individually or in small groups, usually of two pilgrims. The increased interest in this form of cultural tourism may be a result of people's previous experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Roszak, Huzarek 2022).

The vast majority of the Polish respondents had mixed motives for going on the pilgrimage. There are probably two reasons for the above. First, most of them were Catholics. Second, a pilgrimage to a country distant from Poland and attractive to tourists, such as Spain (as well as

France and Portugal, where the main Camino routes are located), offers additional sightseeing opportunities. Most pilgrims from Poland who were religiously motivated took advantage of these opportunities on the route to Santiago. In addition, it is important to remember that the majority of the respondents were university graduates (Table 1). Among the believers, more than half travelled to Santiago with a specific religious intention. For others, the main purpose of walking the Camino was to deepen their faith. In the group of non-believers, the motivation to take a break from everyday life and the desire for new experiences were clearly dominant. Similar motives dominated among Italians who travelled to Santiago de Compostela (Lopez 2013) and among pilgrims from China (Zhang et al. 2021). According to the personal accounts analysed in this study, the Camino de Santiago seems to be a complex place, associated with cultural, historical and spiritual values, not only religious ones (Kim et al. 2020, Zhang et al. 2021). Therefore, the Camino is an example of the transformation of a place's identity towards a tourist modification of traditional pilgrimage (Nilsson, Tesfahuney 2016).

The postmodern perception of pilgrimage, linked to the experience of enlightenment, transformation and life change, is gaining ground in pilgrimage studies. This search for a meaningful experience is therefore increasingly present in tourism, where the spiritual quest is mentioned, that is, the search for one's identity and contact with oneself, others and the world (Roszak, Mróz 2024). Many people are looking for 'the way to themselves'. As mentioned earlier, thousands of people have chosen to travel to the tomb of St. James, believing that this is 'the' way. In the group of the Poles surveyed in this study, more than half found inspiration for their journey in films and literature, and almost a third were inspired by the stories of friends and family. This is a very interesting result considering the fact that for the majority of Poles (62%), the Internet is the main source of knowledge about the world (IBIMS 2021). There are many websites and groups dedicated to the Camino de Santiago on the Internet, but this study revealed that traditional channels of communication and sources of knowledge proved to be more important in this case.

The present research demonstrated that only a few percent of the respondents went on trips organised by travel agencies or the Church. In an era of mass and organised tourism, independent preparation for the trip to Santiago de Compostela can be considered as yet another characteristic of the pilgrimage, especially since the preparation takes quite a long time – up to a year or longer on average. The literature suggests that it is primarily physical and mental preparation, followed by organisational issues such as route planning, the purchase of equipment and so on (Lopez 2013). Physical preparation seems to be a key issue, with the majority of the respondents choosing to walk. This is also one of the characteristics of pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela, as confirmed by the data from the Pilgrim's Reception Office (2025) and the research conducted by other authors (Lopez 2013, Mróz, Matuszczak 2019). The choice of this form of travel leads to the conclusion that pilgrimage represents special interest tourism that provides health benefits. According to Slavin (2003), for those who follow the Camino de Santiago, walking is simultaneously a physical, social and spiritual practice, although its spiritual value may not be recognised at the beginning of the journey. As the miles are covered, however, a deep awareness develops of the multiple effects of walking in different areas of human life. For these effects to be positive, both physical and mental preparation is necessary beforehand, as walking the Camino de Santiago is very demanding on both the body and the mind. The study revealed that the respondents walked an average of 30 km per day. The total distance covered by the travellers is usually several hundred kilometres in terrain with different topographical features. The walk inspired some respondents to become more physically active when they returned home: 'Thanks to the Camino, I am more motivated to be physically active, I have started running, I have improved my fitness considerably'. It should also be noted that almost half of the respondents had taken part in walking pilgrimages in the past (Table 2); therefore, it can be assumed that they embarked on the journey to Santiago with some previous experience. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of tourists travel on foot suggests that pilgrimage trips are a form of ecological and sustainable tourism.

In the Polish tradition, a pilgrimage is an organised group journey to a place of religious worship, without the opportunity to visit the sites passed along the way. Some pilgrimages are attended by groups of more than a few hundred people, for whom communion with their fellow travellers is important. Therefore, it is interesting to note that the surveyed Polish pilgrims chose the Camino, a walking route that is travelled individually or in small groups of less than 20 people (Mróz, Mróz 2013). The surveyed respondents also tended to walk alone or with a companion. This is undoubtedly related to the needs and motivations of the travellers who undertake this journey, and its spiritual aspect, which requires silence and concentration. According to those interviewed, "the Camino is freedom – if you want to walk with people, you walk with people; if you want to separate, you separate from people". However, there were also voices saying that the Camino is also about meeting other pilgrims, which is a value for the respondents: "I met very interesting people from whom I learnt a lot". The fact that the journey to the tomb of St. James is a personal experience does not surprise anyone; it is a specific feature of this route and its defining characteristics. However, it is worth noting that the number of such journeys is generally on the rise (Karantzavelou 2018). For solo travellers, the key motivators are transformative experiences, freedom, flexibility and self-discovery (Yang 2020). In other words, tourists set out on the journey for the same reasons as the 'Caminers'. The COVID-19 pandemic has probably exacerbated an already existing trend.

Walking hundreds of kilometres over several days means deliberately and consciously foregoing faster and more comfortable transport, exposing oneself to different weather conditions, physical exertion and fatigue. The choice of accommodation along the route also indicates that comfort is not a priority – 75% of the respondents stay in albergues, while others sleep in tents, guest rooms or even 'out in the open', although there is no shortage of high-quality accommodation along the Way of St. James, including hotels and guesthouses. Contributions to numerous online forums dedicated to the Pilgrim's Way suggest that staying in albergues is an important experience shared with other pilgrims, and an essential part of the journey, and many people who



opted for this form of accommodation encourage future pilgrims not to give up this experience for the sake of comfort. On the contrary, the majority of tourists who visit pilgrimage centres around the world require services at a comfortable level. They expect well-developed tourist and commercial infrastructure, which is necessary for a satisfactory religious or tourist experience (Liro 2020). Given that the majority of the surveyed respondents described their financial status as good or very good, it can be assumed that the choice of accommodation during the pilgrimage is not dictated by financial considerations. Nevertheless, the use of cheap/free accommodation translates into relatively low expenditures (accommodation, food and other). More than half of the respondents spend up to €40 per day, whereas others spend even less – up to €15 per day.

The vast majority of pilgrims in the surveyed group declared that participation in the pilgrimage had influenced their life and personal growth in various ways (Fig. 5). This impact was associated with a change in life priorities and finding inner peace for almost half of the Polish pilgrims surveyed in this study. A third of the respondents noted a greater maturity and personal development after returning from the Way of St. James. Others emphasised a change in their attitudes towards other people and interpersonal relationships, which confirms our previous findings. Similar experiences were reported by pilgrims interviewed by other authors (e.g. Lopez 2013, Roszak, Mróz 2024), which points to the universal values of the Way of St. James. It should also be noted that for some respondents, the pilgrimage strengthened their faith or restored their belief in God.

## Conclusions

The data obtained during the study support the conclusion that the Pilgrim's Way to Santiago is a journey that combines different types of tourism. In the case of purely religious motives, the journey can be classified as a pilgrimage. Mixed and non-religious motives, on the other hand, indicate cultural tourism. The mode of travel – walking, but also cycling or horseback riding – is indicative of special interest tourism, which implies that, in addition to the spiritual value, the

journey also has a health-promoting effect in the broad sense of the word. It is also important to note that this mode of transport has a smaller impact on the natural environment and leaves a smaller carbon footprint than traditional means of transport. On the other hand, the lack of support from travel agencies in the organisation of the trip, the choice of specific accommodation facilities, the support given to local communities through the use of their services and the need for social contacts make it possible to classify the Pilgrim's Way to Santiago as alternative tourism, the opposite of mass tourism. It can therefore be considered sustainable tourism. Furthermore, this study revealed clear differences between the Pilgrim's Way to Santiago and conventional tourism. These differences can be seen already during the preparation for the trip, as well as during the journey. The tourists' motives and expectations are also different. However, the most significant difference can be seen in the way the travellers interpret their destination and the ways of reaching it. In conventional tourism, the destination is usually a specific place that the tourist finds attractive. Most tourists expect to reach their destination as comfortably and quickly as possible, and only at the place of their temporary stay they begin to satisfy their recreational needs. Travel is a mode of transport and a service that enables travellers to reach a geographical destination. For tourists who walk the Camino de Santiago the situation is different: their aim is to reach the tomb of St. James on foot (or by bicycle or horse). The results of this study suggest that Santiago de Compostela seems to be the geographic end of the pilgrimage, but only in the physical sense, because the spiritual pilgrimage does not end when one arrives at the Basilica. It continues long after returning home, and lasts a lifetime for many pilgrims.

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## Authors' contribution

AAO: conceptualisation, validation, investigation, resources, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, visualisation, supervision, project administration; GFS: methodology, formal analysis, resources, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, visualisation, MJW: methodology, software, formal analysis, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, visualisation, funding acquisition.

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