

From Pilgrimage to Personal Transformation: Conceptualizing the Experiential Outcomes of Spiritual Tourism

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DOI:10.31033/IJEMR/16.4.2026.1936

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Spiritual tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing niches within contemporary travel, yet the conceptual understanding of what tourists actually gain from spiritually oriented journeys remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries. While extensive scholarship has examined why individuals undertake pilgrimages and spiritual travel, comparatively little theoretical attention has been devoted to systematically conceptualizing the experiential outcomes that follow such journeys. This paper addresses that gap by proposing an integrative conceptual framework that traces the pathway from pilgrimage-based travel experiences to personal transformation. Drawing on transformative learning theory, the anthropology of liminality and communitas, existential authenticity theory, and the experience-economy literature, the paper develops a four-stage model comprising antecedent conditions, the liminal experiential core, transformation-generating mechanisms, and multidimensional outcome domains encompassing psychological, spiritual, social, and behavioral change. Six theoretical propositions are advanced to guide future empirical inquiry, addressing the roles of disorientation, reflection, communitas, and meaning-making in shaping the depth and durability of transformation. The paper argues that spiritual tourism outcomes are best understood not as a single unitary construct but as a continuum ranging from transient hedonic upliftment to enduring existential reorientation. Theoretical contributions include a clarified conceptual vocabulary distinguishing transformation from satisfaction and memorability, and a framework that bridges tourism management and positive psychology perspectives. Practical implications for destination managers, pilgrimage-route custodians, and wellness-tourism operators seeking to design and communicate transformative experiences responsibly are also discussed, alongside directions for future empirical validation.

Keywords: Spiritual Tourism, Pilgrimage, Transformative Experience, Existential Well-Being, Transformative Learning Theory, Liminality

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How to Cite this Article

Gaurav K, Pawar A, Sapkal S, From Pilgrimage to Personal Transformation: Conceptualizing the Experiential Outcomes of Spiritual Tourism. Int J Engg Mgmt Res. 2026;16(4):22-32.
Available From
<https://ijemr.vandanapublications.com/index.php/j/article/view/1936>

To Browse



Manuscript Received
2026-07-03

Review Round 1
2026-07-18

Review Round 2

Review Round 3

Accepted
2026-08-04

Conflict of Interest
None

Funding
Nil

Ethical Approval
Yes

Plagiarism X-checker
3.25

Note



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1. Introduction

Travel undertaken in search of meaning is among the oldest forms of human mobility, predating leisure tourism by millennia. From walking to Santiago de Compostela to circumambulating Mount Kailash, journeys motivated by sacred purpose have historically been framed as pilgrimage rather than tourism. Yet in the last three decades, the boundary separating institutionalized religious pilgrimage from individualized, often secular, spiritual travel has become increasingly porous (Cheer et al., 2017; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). Contemporary travelers seek yoga retreats in Rishikesh, silent meditation courses in Thailand, and multi-day treks along the Camino de Santiago not necessarily because they subscribe to an institutional faith, but because they are searching for meaning, self-understanding, and psychological renewal (Norman, 2012). This broadening of motive and practice has given rise to the scholarly category of spiritual tourism, a niche that sits at the intersection of religious studies, tourism management, and positive psychology (Abdul Halim et al., 2021; Smith, 2022).

A substantial body of research has investigated the motivational drivers that propel individuals toward spiritual tourism, typically framed through push-pull models, self-determination theory, or typologies of the sacred journey (Norman, 2012). Considerably less theoretical effort, however, has been directed toward systematically conceptualizing what tourists actually experience and gain once they undertake such journeys. The tourism literature more broadly has begun to distinguish between transient satisfaction, memorable experiences, and genuine personal transformation (Hosany et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2012), yet spiritual tourism scholarship has been slower to adopt this differentiated vocabulary. Terms such as transformation, healing, self-discovery, and spiritual growth are frequently used interchangeably in empirical studies, producing what Cheer et al. (2017) describe as considerable conceptual ambiguity surrounding the field.

This conceptual paper responds to that gap by asking a focused theoretical question: through what mechanisms does the experiential core of spiritual tourism give rise to personal transformation, and what forms can that transformation take? Rather than testing a specific empirical hypothesis, the paper synthesizes theory from transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991),

the anthropology of pilgrimage and liminality (Turner, 1969; Turner & Turner, 1978), existential authenticity (Kirillova et al., 2017), and the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) to build an integrative conceptual model. The model traces a pathway from antecedent conditions, through a liminal experiential core, through psychological transformation mechanisms, to a multidimensional set of outcome domains. In doing so, the paper contributes a clarified conceptual architecture that can anchor future empirical research examining spiritual tourism's experiential outcomes, and offers destination managers and pilgrimage custodians a more precise vocabulary for describing what their offerings can, and cannot, be expected to deliver.

Building a more precise account of these outcomes matters for reasons that extend beyond scholarly tidiness. As spiritual tourism continues to expand commercially, destinations, retreat operators, and pilgrimage-route custodians face growing pressure to promise travelers meaningful, even life-altering, experiences, often without a clear theoretical basis for distinguishing genuine transformation from temporary upliftment or well-marketed novelty. A conceptual vocabulary capable of specifying how transformation actually arises, and of what it consists, therefore has direct bearing on how such experiences are designed, communicated, and evaluated. The framework developed in this paper is intended to serve that purpose: it treats the passage from pilgrimage to personal transformation not as a single, undifferentiated leap but as a traceable sequence of conditions and mechanisms whose theoretical articulation can inform both future empirical inquiry and more responsible practice within the spiritual tourism sector.

2. Theoretical Background

Conceptual Boundaries of Spiritual Tourism

Spiritual tourism resists a single, universally accepted definition. Early tourism scholarship tended to treat spiritual travel as synonymous with religious pilgrimage, a journey to a sacred site undertaken for devotional purposes within the framework of an established faith (Rinschede, 1992, as cited in Abdul Halim et al., 2021). However, as secularization has progressed alongside a parallel rise in individualized, eclectic spirituality, scholars have increasingly distinguished spiritual tourism from religious tourism proper.

Cheer et al. (2017) describe spiritual tourism as travel practice that functions as a geo-psychological laboratory, a bounded space and time in which individuals can examine, practice, and deepen spirituality in ways not readily available within the routines of everyday life. Norman (2012) similarly proposes a typology of spiritual tourist experiences encompassing the quest, the experiment, healing, retreat, and collective practice, positioning spiritual tourism as prompted primarily by a desire for personal growth rather than institutional devotion.

Smith (2022) situates spiritual tourism within a broader constellation that includes temple visitation, yoga, and wellness practices, noting that the category has expanded well beyond its religious origins to embrace New Age and esoteric pursuits. Abdul Halim et al. (2021) attempt to resolve this conceptual heterogeneity by mapping over forty dimensions identified across the literature onto a spiritual intelligence model, arriving at seven core themes: meaning and purpose of life, consciousness, transcendence, spiritual resources, self-determination, reflection and soul purification, and spiritual coping. This multiplicity of themes underscores that spiritual tourism is best conceived not as a single homogeneous product category but as a family of travel practices unified by an orientation toward transcendence, connectedness, and inner growth rather than by any particular doctrinal content (Şahin & Güzel, 2024).

For the purposes of the present paper, spiritual tourism is defined as travel undertaken, wholly or in part, with the intention of engaging with sacred, transcendent, or deeply meaningful dimensions of experience, whether framed within an institutional religious tradition or pursued through secular or eclectic practice, in pursuit of personal growth, connection, and inner change. This definition deliberately foregrounds intention and orientation rather than destination type, allowing the framework developed below to accommodate both traditional pilgrimage routes and contemporary wellness retreats.

From Religious Pilgrimage to Modern Spiritual Travel

The Camino de Santiago offers a particularly instructive case for understanding the pilgrimage-to-transformation pathway, precisely because it now attracts both devout pilgrims and secular walkers within the same physical and social space.

Empirical accounts of the Camino consistently report that pilgrims of widely varying religious commitment describe comparable experiences of increased well-being, spiritual growth, renewed life direction, and a strong sense of *communitas* with fellow travelers (Nelson-Becker et al., 2020; Roszak & Mróz, 2024). Older adults walking the Camino, for instance, report post-trip transformations involving greater self-understanding, inner peace, and a desire to live more simply and intentionally (Nelson-Becker et al., 2020). Such findings suggest that the transformative potential of pilgrimage-style travel does not hinge exclusively on religious belief but is substantially rooted in the structural and experiential features of the journey itself: sustained physical exertion, temporary withdrawal from ordinary social roles, and prolonged exposure to unfamiliar, often demanding, circumstances (Roszak & Mróz, 2024).

This observation aligns with a broader shift in the tourism literature away from treating pilgrimage and tourism as categorically distinct phenomena, and toward recognizing a pilgrimage-tourism continuum along which travelers move depending on motivation, degree of religiosity, and mode of engagement (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). It is this continuum, rather than any strict definitional boundary, that the present framework seeks to accommodate.

Theoretical Foundations of Tourist Transformation

Understanding how spiritual tourism produces personal transformation requires drawing on several complementary theoretical traditions, none of which was developed originally for tourism but each of which has been productively imported into the field.

Transformative Learning Theory: Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory remains the single most widely applied framework in the transformative tourism literature. The theory proposes that adults undergo perspective transformation when an existing frame of reference is disrupted by a disorienting dilemma, an experience that does not fit comfortably within prior assumptions about the self or the world. This disruption triggers critical self-reflection, a reassessment of underlying beliefs, and, potentially, the adoption of a new, more inclusive meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1991).

Tourism scholars have found this framework compelling because travel, and especially arduous or unfamiliar travel such as pilgrimage, readily generates disorienting circumstances: physical hardship, cultural unfamiliarity, encounters with strangers, and removal from habitual roles and routines (Kirillova et al., 2017). At the same time, subsequent tourism research cautions that tourist disorientation is often subtler than the acute life crises Mezirow originally had in mind, producing incremental shifts in awareness rather than sweeping perspective transformation (Zhao, 2025). Zhao's (2025) recent empirical work further complicates the simple disorientation-to-transformation pathway, finding that disorientation alone bears a negative direct relationship with perceived transformation, and that it is the perceived meaningfulness of the disorienting experience, together with the traveler's capacity for self-reflection, that determines whether disorientation ultimately catalyzes or undermines transformation.

Liminality and Communitas: Victor and Edith Turner's (1978) anthropological account of pilgrimage as a rite of passage offers a second foundational lens. Building on Van Gennep's tripartite structure of separation, transition, and incorporation, Turner (1969) describes the middle, liminal phase as a state of "betwixt and between," in which ordinary social structures, statuses, and obligations are temporarily suspended. Within this liminal space, pilgrims frequently experience communitas, an intense, egalitarian sense of fellowship with co-travelers that arises precisely because habitual social hierarchies have been set aside. Contemporary empirical work on the Camino de Santiago continues to find strong support for both constructs: pilgrims report an anti-structural quality to the journey and describe forming close, if temporary, bonds with strangers encountered along the route. Liminality and communitas are theoretically significant for the present framework because they identify structural features of the spiritual tourism experience, rather than the destination's religious content per se, as central drivers of psychological change.

Existential Authenticity and Meaningfulness: A third relevant strand concerns the existential dimension of tourist experience. Kirillova et al. (2017) conceptualize tourism-induced transformation as change in tourists' existential authenticity,

their felt sense of being true to themselves, and existential anxiety, their underlying unease about meaning and mortality. Their research identifies perceived meaningfulness as the single most powerful predictor of positive existential change following travel, and describes transformative tourist experiences as unfolding through a chronologically ordered sequence of existential themes, beginning with a triggering episode and culminating in longer-term shifts in self-understanding. This existential-psychological framing complements Mezirow's more cognitively oriented account by foregrounding affect, meaning, and the felt quality of authenticity.

The Experience and Transformation Economy:

Finally, Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy framework, later extended toward a proposed transformation economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2014), situates transformative experiences as the most economically and psychologically advanced form of value that an experience provider can offer, superseding commodities, goods, and services. Within this view, a transformative offering is one in which the guest, rather than simply consuming an experience, is changed by it, emerging afterward with new capabilities, perspectives, or ways of being (Amaro et al., 2025; Atari & Dias, 2025). This managerial perspective is a useful complement to the more consumer-oriented psychological theories above because it draws attention to the design conditions, such as the deliberate structuring of challenge, guidance, and reflection opportunities, that destination managers and tour operators can influence.

Taken together, these four theoretical traditions suggest that spiritual tourism's capacity to produce personal transformation rests on a convergence of factors: a disorienting or challenging experiential trigger, a liminal social and physical environment conducive to reflection and communitas, a perceived sense of existential meaningfulness, and, where relevant, an intentionally designed experiential structure. The conceptual framework developed in the following section integrates these strands into a single, stage-based model.

Distinguishing Transformation from Satisfaction and Memorability

Before advancing the conceptual model, it is necessary to disentangle three constructs that are frequently conflated in the spiritual tourism literature:

satisfaction, memorability, and transformation. Tourist satisfaction refers to the extent to which a travel experience meets or exceeds pre-trip expectations, and is typically measured immediately following the trip using evaluative, comparison-based judgments (Saayman et al., 2018). Memorable tourism experience, a related but distinct construct popularized by Kim et al. (2012), refers to an experience that is positively recalled and recounted well after the trip has ended, and is associated with downstream outcomes such as destination attachment, storytelling, and revisit intention (Hosany et al., 2022; Su et al., 2023). Both constructs are valuable and empirically tractable, and both can plausibly result from a well-designed spiritual tourism offering. Neither, however, is equivalent to personal transformation as conceptualized in the present paper.

Transformation, in the sense developed here, denotes a change in the traveler's underlying frame of reference, meaning perspective, or identity structure that persists and continues to shape thought and behavior after the traveler has returned home (Mezirow, 1991). A trip can be highly satisfying and richly memorable without producing any lasting change in how the traveler understands themselves or approaches their life; conversely, a physically arduous or logistically imperfect pilgrimage that scores modestly on conventional satisfaction measures may nonetheless catalyze profound existential reorientation. This distinction matters both theoretically, because conflating the constructs leads researchers to treat transformation as though it were simply an intensified form of satisfaction, and practically, because destination managers optimizing for satisfaction metrics (comfort, convenience, service quality) may inadvertently design away the very disorientation and challenge that appear to be prerequisites for transformation, as discussed further below.

3. A Conceptual Framework: From Pilgrimage to Personal Transformation

The proposed framework conceptualizes the pathway from spiritual travel to personal transformation as unfolding across four interrelated stages:

(1) antecedent conditions, (2) the liminal experiential core, (3) transformation-generating mechanisms, and (4) multidimensional outcome domains. Unlike linear stimulus-response models common in tourist behavior research, the framework treats this pathway as recursive: outcomes at one journey may become antecedent conditions for a subsequent one, and the depth of transformation achieved is contingent on the interaction among stages rather than any single stage in isolation.

Stage One: Antecedent Conditions

Antecedent conditions comprise the traveler's pre-trip motivational orientation, dispositional openness, and the sacred or restorative qualities of the chosen destination. Travelers who approach spiritual tourism already oriented toward growth, self-examination, or a search for meaning, as opposed to those seeking primarily relaxation or novelty, are more likely to interpret subsequent challenges as meaningful rather than merely inconvenient (Kirillova et al., 2017; Park & Ahn, 2022). Destination attributes such as remoteness, natural beauty, ritual density, historical and architectural sacredness, and the presence of a structured route or practice (for example, a defined pilgrimage trail or retreat program) further shape the likelihood that a liminal experiential core, described below, will actually be activated (Roszak & Mróz, 2024; Şahin & Güzel, 2024). Antecedent conditions therefore function as a threshold: they do not themselves produce transformation but determine the probability that the traveler will enter, and meaningfully engage with, the liminal core of the experience.

Stage Two: The Liminal Experiential Core

At the heart of the framework lies what is termed the liminal experiential core: the bounded period, whether a single day at a temple or weeks along a pilgrimage trail, during which the traveler is physically and socially removed from ordinary structures and routines. Drawing on Turner and Turner (1978) and Turner (1969), this stage is characterized by several recurring features documented across the pilgrimage and spiritual tourism literature: sustained physical or logistical challenge (long-distance walking, fasting, silence, or discomfort); the suspension of habitual social roles and status markers; close, often unplanned, encounters with fellow travelers that give rise to *communitas*;

and exposure to ritual, sacred space, or natural environments that prompt reflection. Empirical accounts of the Camino de Santiago illustrate this core vividly, with pilgrims consistently describing the walk's demands, its communal intimacy, and its removal from digital and professional obligations as central to what makes the experience feel transformative, independent of the walkers' religious commitment (Nelson-Becker et al., 2020).

It is important to note, following Zhao (2025), that the liminal core does not automatically or uniformly produce disorientation of the acute, life-crisis type described in Mezirow's (1991) original formulation. Rather, the intensity of disorientation experienced varies across travelers and destinations, and, critically, disorientation's effect on eventual transformation is not direct but is substantially mediated by the meaning the traveler is able to make of it and moderated by their capacity for reflection.

Stage Three: Transformation-Generating Mechanisms

The third stage identifies the psychological mechanisms through which the liminal core translates into lasting change, rather than remaining a merely pleasant or memorable but ultimately inconsequential experience. Four mechanisms are proposed.

Critical Self-reflection: Consistent with transformative learning theory, the opportunity and inclination to reflect on the disorienting or challenging aspects of the journey, rather than simply endure or enjoy them, is what allows tacit assumptions about the self, relationships, or life priorities to surface and be reassessed (Mezirow, 1991; Zhao, 2025).

Meaning-making: The traveler's subjective interpretation of the experience as personally significant, rather than incidental, is repeatedly identified as the strongest predictor of positive existential change (Kirillova et al., 2017; Park & Ahn, 2022). Two travelers undergoing an outwardly identical journey may derive markedly different degrees of transformation depending on the meaning each is able to construct from it.

Communitas and Relational Recalibration: The egalitarian, temporary community formed among co-travelers appears to function as both an emotional support mechanism that sustains travelers through physical hardship and a relational mirror against which travelers reassess their ordinary social relationships and identities upon return.

Embodied and Sensory Engagement: Unlike purely cognitive or contemplative forms of learning, pilgrimage-style spiritual tourism typically engages the traveler's body directly, through walking, fatigue, ritual gesture, and sensory immersion in landscape and sacred space. This embodied dimension appears to deepen and anchor psychological change in ways that purely intellectual reflection does not, helping to explain why transformation reported after physically demanding spiritual journeys is often described by travelers as more durable than insight gained through reading or conversation alone.

These four mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and typically operate in combination; a traveler's meaning-making process, for instance, is frequently prompted and shaped by conversations occurring within the *communitas* of fellow pilgrims.

Stage Four: Multidimensional Outcome Domains

The framework's final stage conceptualizes the outcomes of spiritual tourism not as a single construct labeled "transformation," but as a set of related yet distinguishable domains, varying in depth and durability.

Psychological and Existential Outcomes: These include increased existential authenticity, reduced existential anxiety, enhanced self-understanding, and a renewed or clarified sense of life purpose and direction (Kirillova et al., 2017; Nelson-Becker et al., 2020).

Spiritual and Hedonic-eudaimonic Well-being Outcomes: Spiritual tourism experiences have been linked to feelings of inner harmony, connectedness to something greater than the self, and both hedonic well-being (pleasure, relaxation) and eudaimonic well-being (meaning, personal growth), with research suggesting the two forms of happiness arise through partly distinct experiential pathways, pleasure and detachment feeding hedonic happiness,

and personal meaning and self-reflection feeding eudaimonic happiness (Park & Ahn, 2022; Saayman et al., 2018).

Social and Relational Outcomes: Many travelers report a lingering sense of connection to fellow pilgrims, a broadened sense of shared humanity, and, in some cases, a reprioritization of relationships in their everyday lives following the journey, reflecting the residual influence of *communitas* beyond the trip itself.

Behavioral and Life-course Outcomes: At the deepest level of transformation, some travelers report concrete behavioral change following their journey: adopting simpler lifestyles, changing careers, deepening or renewing religious or spiritual practice, or becoming advocates for causes encountered during travel (Nelson-Becker et al., 2020). These outcomes correspond to what transformative tourism scholars describe as the durable, identity-level end of the transformation continuum, distinguished from more transient memorable-experience or satisfaction outcomes (Hosany et al., 2022).

Crucially, the framework proposes that these outcome domains are not independent but are best understood as points along a single continuum of depth, ranging from transient positive affect, through memorable and meaningful experience, to durable existential and behavioral transformation. Most spiritually oriented travelers will experience outcomes toward the lower or middle portion of this continuum; profound, identity-altering transformation, while disproportionately emphasized in popular and promotional discourse, appears to represent a smaller subset of cases, consistent with tourism transformation researchers' caution that not all travelers actively seek, or are affected by, transformative experiences to the same degree.

4. Theoretical Propositions

Building on the conceptual framework developed above, the following six propositions are advanced to guide future empirical research on the experiential outcomes of spiritual tourism.

Proposition 1: The relationship between disorientation experienced during spiritual tourism and subsequent personal transformation is not direct but is mediated by the perceived meaningfulness of the disorienting experience.

Proposition 2: Travelers' capacity for critical self-reflection moderates the strength of the relationship between disorienting or challenging experiences and personal transformation, such that travelers higher in reflective capacity derive greater transformation from equivalent experiential challenge.

Proposition 3: The intensity of *communitas* experienced with co-travelers is positively associated with both the depth of psychological transformation and the durability of post-trip behavioral change.

Proposition 4: Destination attributes that combine physical or logistical challenge with sacred or restorative environmental qualities generate stronger liminal experiential cores, and thus greater transformative potential, than destinations offering either attribute alone.

Proposition 5: Eudaimonic outcomes (meaning, personal growth, existential authenticity) and hedonic outcomes (pleasure, relaxation, escape) of spiritual tourism arise through partially distinct experiential pathways and should therefore be modeled as related but empirically separable constructs.

Proposition 6: The depth of transformation reported by spiritual tourists follows a continuum from transient affective upliftment through memorable meaningful experience to durable existential and behavioral change, with the proportion of travelers reaching the deepest level of this continuum decreasing as depth increases.

5. Discussion and Implications

Theoretical Implications

This paper's principal theoretical contribution lies in synthesizing four previously separate theoretical traditions, transformative learning theory, the anthropology of liminality and *communitas*, existential authenticity theory, and the experience economy, into a single, stage-based conceptual model tailored specifically to spiritual tourism. Prior spiritual tourism research has tended either to catalogue motivations and destination dimensions (Abdul Halim et al., 2021; Şahin & Güzel, 2024) or to borrow transformation frameworks developed for tourism generally without adapting them to the particular structural features of pilgrimage-style travel, such as sustained physical challenge and route-based *communitas*.

By foregrounding these structural features explicitly, the present framework offers a more precise account of why spiritual tourism, and pilgrimage in particular, appears unusually prone to generating transformation relative to other tourism types.

The framework also contributes conceptual clarity to a literature repeatedly criticized for terminological looseness (Cheer et al., 2017). By explicitly distinguishing antecedent conditions, the liminal experiential core, transformation mechanisms, and a graduated set of outcome domains, the paper offers researchers a shared vocabulary with which to specify precisely which stage or outcome a given study addresses, reducing the risk of conflating, for example, memorable-experience outcomes with genuine existential transformation.

Practical Implications

For destination managers, pilgrimage-route custodians, and wellness-tourism operators, the framework carries several practical implications. First, because meaning-making and reflective capacity, rather than the disorienting experience itself, appear to drive transformation, providers seeking to design genuinely transformative offerings should build in structured opportunities for reflection, such as journaling prompts, guided debriefs, or facilitated group discussion, rather than assuming that physical challenge or novelty alone will suffice. Second, the centrality of *communitas* suggests that operators should deliberately design for meaningful traveler-to-traveler interaction, for example through shared accommodation, communal meals, or small-group formats, rather than optimizing purely for individual comfort or efficiency. Third, given that only a subset of travelers appears to reach the deepest levels of the outcome continuum, destination marketing that promises uniform, profound transformation to every visitor risks generating expectation gaps and disappointment; more calibrated messaging that distinguishes restorative, meaningful, and potentially transformative experiences may better serve both providers and travelers. Finally, the framework's attention to destination attributes, remoteness, sacred atmosphere, ritual density, route structure, offers practical criteria that destination planners can use when assessing a site's transformative potential and when designing infrastructure that preserves rather than erodes these qualities as visitor numbers grow.

Tensions Between Commercial Design and Authentic Transformation

A further implication concerns an underlying tension between the commercial logic of the experience economy and the conditions under which authentic transformation appears most likely to occur. Pine and Gilmore's (1999, 2014) framework encourages providers to deliberately design transformative offerings, yet the theoretical mechanisms identified in this paper, disorientation, physical or logistical challenge, and unscripted *communitas*, are precisely the elements that conventional hospitality design tends to minimize in the pursuit of guest comfort and satisfaction. A heavily curated, frictionless spiritual retreat, staffed to anticipate every need and scheduled to remove all ambiguity, may generate high satisfaction scores and positive reviews while offering little of the disorienting, reflective space that appears to be a precondition for deeper transformation. Destination managers and retreat operators seeking to support genuine transformation, rather than merely stage its outward markers, may therefore need to consciously preserve certain forms of unscripted difficulty and unstructured time, even where doing so runs counter to conventional service-quality optimization. This tension echoes broader debates in the transformative tourism literature about the limits of intentionally designing for an outcome that is, almost by definition, dependent on the traveler's own unscripted psychological response (Amaro et al., 2025; Atari & Dias, 2025).

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a conceptual paper, this work is necessarily speculative in the sense that its propositions await empirical testing; the framework synthesizes existing theory and evidence but does not itself generate new primary data. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs capable of tracking travelers from pre-trip motivation through post-trip outcomes at multiple time points, since cross-sectional designs common in the existing literature cannot adequately capture the durability dimension central to the proposed outcome continuum. Comparative research across destination types, contrasting institutionally religious pilgrimage sites with secular wellness retreats, would help clarify whether the mechanisms proposed here (reflection,

meaning-making, *communitas*, embodiment) operate similarly across the full breadth of what is currently labeled spiritual tourism, or whether religious and secular spiritual travel in fact represent theoretically distinct phenomena requiring separate models. Mixed-methods approaches combining validated psychological instruments, such as measures of existential authenticity, hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, and life satisfaction, with qualitative narrative methods capable of capturing the idiosyncratic meaning-making process central to Proposition 1, would offer a particularly promising avenue. Finally, cross-cultural replication is essential: the theoretical foundations underpinning this framework, and much of the supporting empirical literature, are disproportionately drawn from Western or Christian pilgrimage contexts such as the Camino de Santiago, and future work should examine whether the proposed framework generalizes to spiritual tourism practices rooted in Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Indigenous, and other traditions, where conceptions of the sacred, of community, and of the self may differ in ways that reshape the transformation pathway.

A further limitation concerns measurement. Much of the existing empirical literature relies on retrospective self-report, which is vulnerable to memory reconstruction and social desirability bias, particularly given the strong cultural narratives, popularized in memoirs, films, and destination marketing, that valorize spiritual travel as inherently life-changing. Travelers may be motivated to describe their journey as transformative regardless of the depth of change actually experienced, in order to justify the time, expense, and effort invested. Future research would benefit from incorporating third-party or behavioral indicators of change, such as informant reports from family members, observed shifts in occupational or lifestyle choices, or longitudinal tracking of concrete behavioral markers, alongside self-report measures, to help validate claims of durable transformation against the alternative hypothesis of narrative embellishment. Finally, the conceptual framework proposed here would benefit from formal operationalization and scale development analogous to existing instruments such as the Memorable Tourism Experience Scale (Kim et al., 2012) and the Spiritual Tourism Experience Scale (Şahin & Güzel, 2024),

enabling researchers to test the mediation and moderation relationships specified in Propositions 1 through 6 using structural equation modeling or comparable techniques.

7. Conclusion

Spiritual tourism occupies a distinctive place within the broader tourism landscape precisely because travelers frequently expect it to change them. Yet the scholarly literature has, until recently, offered a more developed account of why people undertake such journeys than of what they experientially gain from having done so. This paper has proposed an integrative conceptual framework tracing the pathway from pilgrimage-based and spiritually oriented travel to personal transformation, structured around antecedent conditions, a liminal experiential core, transformation-generating mechanisms, and a graduated continuum of psychological, spiritual, social, and behavioral outcomes. By synthesizing transformative learning theory, the anthropology of liminality and *communitas*, existential authenticity theory, and the experience economy, the framework offers both a clarified conceptual vocabulary for researchers and practical guidance for those who design and manage spiritually oriented travel experiences. As spiritual tourism continues to grow as a segment of the global travel industry, developing a more precise, theoretically grounded understanding of its experiential outcomes will be essential, not only for advancing tourism scholarship but for ensuring that the journeys travelers undertake in search of transformation are designed, and represented, with appropriate care.

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