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Spiritual Tourism – A Literature Review to Encourage Reflection on Emerging Concerns

Abstract

The potential of tourism to provide opportunities for people to explore their spirituality is increasingly recognized. In this article, we intend to review the existing empirical literature on spiritual tourism demand, systematizing some key elements to consider in the future development of this kind of tourism and emphasizing the potential contribution of this type of tourism towards sustainability.

Research from the Scopus database was conducted to accomplish this objective, analyzing 21 full empirical articles. A qualitative methodology was adopted.

From the analysis of the main results, research paths can be identified for the future, and the dimensions/themes most frequently included in the existing research can be highlighted, such as the profile of spiritual tourists, the most frequent motivations and the key features of spiritual destinations.

The study ends by reflecting on sustainability issues that appear vital to consider in future studies and/or new offers, as well as recognizing the need to address the negative issues most linked to spiritual tourism, such as the use of drugs.

Keywords: tourism, spirituality, spiritual tourism, spiritual tourist, sustainability

1. Introduction

According to Collins-Kreiner (2020), several new concepts related to types of tourism have appeared in recent years, which have caused several authors to show interest in these new areas, such as spiritual tourism (ST). ST has been discussed in several scientific studies, especially since 2017. However, some authors (e.g., Bhalla et al., 2021; Cheer et al., 2017) argue that more research is needed to understand the dimensions of ST and the full potential of this kind of tourism, both for tourists and destinations.

These days, more and more tourists are seeking various experiences, including, for example, the pursuit of knowledge, physical well-being, and improved spiritual well-being (Collins-Kreiner, 2020). Moreover, nowadays, after the Covid-19 pandemic, more and more people are concerned about their well-being and mental and emotional health. One of the possible ways to satisfy these needs is through travel (Bhalla et al., 2021). Agarwal et al. (2021) report that travelling to places where the goal is to get away from their daily routines, get away from stress, change their outlook on life, and find relaxation and comfort makes it easier for these individuals to achieve spiritual goals.

In essence, tourism offers opportunities for people to explore their spirituality, and according to Kainthola et al. (2021), travel can act as a stimulus for tourists to find personal meaning. Tourism is “a phenomenon

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in which spirituality is rooted” (Kainthola et al., 2021, p. 3). For Sheldon (2020), tourism can be “a therapeutic pause in life” or a “source of spiritual meaning or refreshment” (Sheldon, 2020, p. 3). Thus, this author states that inner transformation can be both a motivation for travel and/or an unexpected result of travelling.

While recognizing some effects of ST, most scientific studies focus on the motivations of individuals to engage in this type of tourism (e.g. Agarwal et al., 2021; Choe & O’Regan, 2020; Garg et al., 2021; Jasrotia et al., 2021; Gezon, 2018; Kainthola et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2017; Singleton, 2017) or on the features of/impacts on the spiritual destinations (e.g. Skinner & Soomers, 2019; Sirirat, 2019; Than et al., 2020; Jaiswall & Duggal, 2019; Wang & Blasco, 2022).

Therefore, this study is essential because we intend to review scientific empirical articles to systematize the published literature and highlight the most frequently included dimensions while also reflecting on sustainability issues that seem vital to consider in future studies and/or new offerings. Regarding the methodology used for this article, a qualitative methodology was used to analyze the content of the scientific articles selected from the Scopus database.

The article will begin by describing in detail the methodology and then moving on to a section on the results, with an analysis of the articles selected by significant themes – the concept of ST, the motivations for this type of tourism according to the studies, and ST destinations. The fourth section presents the most used methodologies in the studies, and the last section presents the final reflections and conclusions.

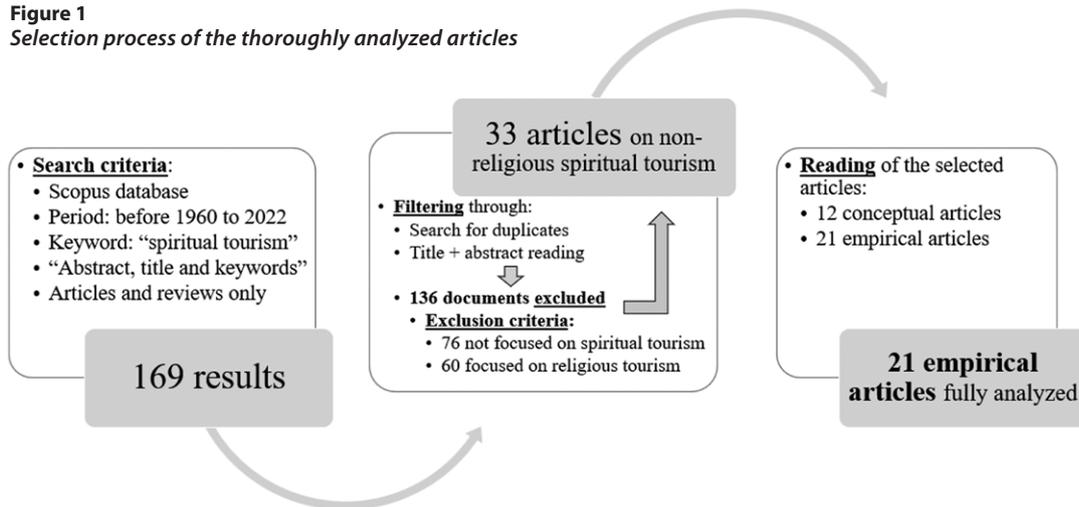
2. Methodology

This article reviews the literature resulting from research on ST, specifically research with an empirical component. To achieve this goal with limited time to conduct searches and analysis, searches were performed using the Scopus database, chosen because it is considered among the most comprehensive and reliable international databases of scientific publications (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016) and is one of the most used in the tourism area (Shen & Lai, 2022). Searches (and data collection) were conducted during December 2022 for the keywords “spiritual tourism” in journal articles and reviews under “Abstract, Keywords and Title”.

The period covered by the articles was from “before 1960” to the end of 2022, and 169 results were found. The first article on the theme was published on Scopus in 2005, and the number of articles on this theme increased between 2007 and 2011 and from 2014 onwards. However, it is noteworthy that in 2017, there was a peak of publications on ST (16 articles), justified by the first “special issue” dedicated only to this theme. The same happened in 2021 (43 articles), resulting from some journals having again devoted attention to the study of ST in special thematic issues.

The 169 articles identified were selected via the process in Figure 1. After filtering these results by reading their titles and abstracts, the 93 articles focused on ST were separated into religious tourism (60) and spiritual non-religious tourism (33). Of those focused on spiritual non-religious tourism, and as this study focuses on empirical research, 21 empirical studies were considered relevant to this study (listed in Appendix). These were thoroughly analyzed using a traditional content analysis approach (Creswell, 2009). Trying to minimize bias during content analysis, all researchers (authors of the present study) identified the main themes/codes for analysis, and it was ensured that all the researchers were familiar with them to avoid differences in data coding, as Snyder (2019) recommended. One author conducted the first coding of the articles, and then the codification was separately validated by the other two authors to ensure quality and reliability.

Figure 1
Selection process of the thoroughly analyzed articles



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Only in 2017 was an empirical study focusing on non-religious ST published on Scopus. Publication of the 21 selected articles ranges from 2017 to 2022.

These studies were published in the following journals: *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* (5); *Tourism Recreation Research* (2); *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* (1); *Annals of Tourism Research* (1); *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights* (1); *Cuadernos de Turismo* (1); *Int. J. Tourism Anthropology* (1); *Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business* (1); *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* (1); *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* (1); *Journal of Tourism Futures* (1); *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* (1); *Psychological Studies* (1); *Religions* (1); *Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural* (1); *Tourism Management Perspectives* (1).

The following sections analyse the empirical studies selected according to the central conceptual dimension and methodologies.

3. Results

3.1. The main conceptual themes analyzed

Table 1 summarizes the main themes studied by the authors of the studies analyzed.

Table 1
Themes analyzed by the empirical studies

Themes	Authors of the empirical studies
Motivations – Demand side / intentions of tourists	Agarwal et al., 2021, Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Garg et al., 2021; Jasrotia et al., 2021; Gezon, 2018; Kainthola et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2017; Singleton, 2017
Motivations – Supply side	Rodrigo, 2020; Rodrigo, 2022
Spiritual Destinations	
Marketing	Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019
Tourists' feelings/intention to return	Senthil & Goswami, 2021; Hai & Thuong, 2019
Residents' perceptions	Than et al., 2020
Influences of nature/landscape on the experience	Jaiswall & Duggal, 2019; Wang & Blasco, 2022
Impacts on the destinations	Skinner & Soomers, 2019; Sirirat, 2019
Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic	Bhalla et al., 2021
Tour guide intermediation	Parsons et al., 2019

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Most empirical studies focus on tourists' motivations for engaging in an ST experience. Wang and Blasco (2022) state that spirituality can be the primary motivation for visiting certain places. However, in addition to motivations, spiritual destinations are also widely studied using different dimensions of analysis, as will be seen in the following sections. Before analysis of the main themes of the articles, it was considered essential to summarize the concepts of ST used in each study.

3.1.1. Theory – The concept of spiritual tourism

As Wang and Blasco (2022), Parsons et al. (2019) and Jaiswall and Duggal (2019) point out, the theme of spirituality has progressively gained interest in tourism research, being an emerging area. However, to date, most research focuses on ST from a religious perspective or based on tourism experiences, such as wellness, yoga, or nature tourism (Wang & Blasco, 2022). Furthermore, these authors state that no clear, widely recognized definition of ST exists. However, Wang and Blasco (2022) highlight a feature of the tourism spiritual concept familiar to several researchers: ST is considered a self-conscious improvement.

Senthil and Goswami (2021) state that the term spirituality derives from the Latin “spirits”, which means “breath of life”. Kumar et al. (2022) defines spirituality as “an aspect of human existence wherein one tries to find out the meaning and purpose of life. (...) give direction to one’s journey to seek answers to questions that guide one’s living” (Kumar et al., 2022, p.78). Agarwal et al. (2021, p.96) define spirituality as “not just as a state of mind but the holistic integration of body, mind and heart while channeling energies to investigate the true meaning of life for oneself”. Spirituality positively impacts an individual's well-being and health, contributing to a better quality of life (Kumar et al., 2022). Hence, spirituality “has become a vastly complex quest in which each person seeks his or her way” (Singleton, 2017, p.51). For non-religious individuals, this spirituality can pursue various spiritual activities, such as yoga, meditation, or something self-defined in multiple contexts.

Spirituality is increasingly understood as not only linked to institutional religiosity, with these spiritual experiences being based primarily on individual expertise and self-authentication (Singleton, 2017). Pursuing spirituality is currently considered a strong motivation for travel in the 21st century, as tourists need spiritual satisfaction and meaning in their lives, resulting in self-realization trips for the well-being of body, mind and soul (Kainthola et al., 2021). Travelling can be seen “as a tool for inner transformation”; its positive effects “influence the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being” of individuals who travel (Bhalla et al., 2021, p.777).

The authors define ST in several ways. Skinner and Soomers (2019) explain it as tourism, where people travel individually or in groups for leisure or pilgrimage. Jasrotia et al. (2021) and Choe and O’Regan (2020) understand ST as an active choice of a kind of self-care intervention aimed at addressing daily life concerns without the constraints of everyday pressures, focusing on leisure activities helping to solve some aspect of life needing fixing or improving. For several authors (e.g. Kumar et al., 2022; Agarwal et al., 2021), ST is intended to be possible for self-knowledge, mental and emotional well-being, or seeking answers to the purpose or improvement of existence.

Thus, according to Sirirat (2019), ST is a broad concept associated with changes and relief for tourists from their daily routines, and different individuals may experience the same activities differently. Furthermore, the author states that each person expresses this concept differently, which may depend significantly on their beliefs.

3.1.2. Motivations for spiritual tourism

Some studies show that escaping an individual's standard of living is often mentioned in research on motivations to practice ST (e.g. Garg et al., 2021; Choe & O’Regan, 2020; Parsons et al., 2019). Kainthola et al. (2021) argue that this and related motivations are more commonly mentioned for ST than for other types of tourism. Singleton (2017) states that spiritual tourists' trips are intentionally directed toward spiritual growth, not just to break daily routines. Many participants in Bandyopadhyaya and Nairb's (2019) study

mentioned their intention to get peace of mind, away from busy routines, and a different experience. One of the most mentioned motivations was being away from their daily lives because thus they can bond with the sacred and find inner harmony.

However, for Gezon (2018), travelling is not only a mechanism for escape but also serves to open people to new experiences (transformative or not) outside their routines, empowering adventure and “healing”. The author argues that these experiences influence individuals in ways that can be disseminated as lessons for the future and contribute to more permanent change (“healing”).

Kainthola et al. (2021) also identify pull and push factors, where stress is mentioned as a push factor, along with other factors such as mental pathologies, emotional imbalance, curiosity, religious beliefs, and traditions. Agarwal et al. (2021) also mention that in the modern world, people increasingly deal with stress and pressure, and they seek ways to achieve spiritual improvement and connect better with their inner selves. Bandyopadhyaya and Nairb (2019) highlight these ideas, arguing that more and more people have high-stress levels and individualistic lifestyles, searching for the “true meaning of life” essential. Kumar et al. (2022) conclude that tourists' daily stress levels ultimately influence their decision to take an ST trip.

Also, tourists' level of spirituality influences their willingness to participate in ST activities, and a destination's image influences whether tourists intend to engage in ST (Kumar et al., 2022). Finally, as a pull factor, activities related to relaxation and recreation at the destination influence intentions to take an ST trip (Kumar et al., 2022).

Another motivation addressed in the recent literature is that ST often arises to obtain relief from experiences caused by COVID-19 (Bhalla et al., 2021). According to these authors, spiritual tourists are motivated by relief from the challenging period of confinement and other changes during the pandemic, as this type of tourism allows individuals to find their lost well-being.

Other motivations, also frequently mentioned in scientific studies, are the desire to get closer to oneself or connect with a sacred/higher entity, to find meaning in life or to seek spiritual improvement through enriching or different personal experiences (Kainthola et al., 2021; Robledo & Batle, 2015; Rodrigo, 2022; Singleton, 2017); the search for forgiveness, healing, expression of love and respect for God (Garg et al., 2021); the search for learning, harmony with nature and self-growth (Jasrotia et al., 2021); and adventure, or difficult times in individuals' lives (Gezon, 2018).

Motivations influenced by the media (Agarwal et al., 2021), motivations such as health and religion/peregrination (Lopez et al., 2017), the practice of mindfulness, personal reflection, self-evaluation and recharging batteries (Choe & O'Regan, 2020) are also mentioned.

It is worth mentioning that, according to Kainthola et al. (2021), a spiritual journey need not be motivated only by the end goal of seeking spirituality; this journey may have several other complimentary motivations (escape from routine, leisure, or adventure), and still be possible to achieve the encounter with spirituality. Finally, for these authors, spirituality is a personal, individual matter, and defining one's goals and identifying one's motivations is complex. A summary of the main motivations identified by the empirical studies analyzed is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Systematization of the main motivations mentioned in the empirical studies

Main motivations	Authors of the empirical studies
Escape from the routine of life	Garg et al., 2021; Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Parsons et al., 2019; Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019
Spiritual growth/improvement	Singleton, 2017; Kainthola et al., 2021
Relief from experiences caused by the pandemic or by the fact that individuals are going through a difficult time in their lives	Bhalla et al., 2021; Gezon, 2018

Table 2 (continued)

Reduce the stress level	Kumar et al., 2022; Kainthola et al., 2021; Agarwal et al., 2021; Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019; Bhalla et al., 2021
Finding meaning and getting closer to oneself/working on the inner self	Kainthola et al., 2021; Jasrotia et al., 2021; Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Rodrigo, 2022
Getting close to a higher entity, seeking forgiveness, healing, connection with the sacred, or the expression of love and respect for a God	Kainthola et al., 2021; Garg et al., 2021; Lopez et al., 2017
Learning and harmony with nature	Jasrotia et al., 2021
Search for adventure	Gezon, 2018
Social media	Agarwal et al., 2021
Mindfulness practice and recharging the batteries	Choe & O'Regan, 2020

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

To summarize, the primary motivators are spiritual growth and attaining meaning in life related to mental and spiritual wellness, the search for connection, and breaking routine. So, motives go beyond just religion. However, visiting places related to religion is usually a critical attraction, even for those tourists who are not motivated by religion. Also, the first group of motivations justifies a second group related to pursuing an authentic sense of discovery/experience, showing that this product is not isolated from other tourism activities (e.g., connection with nature or wellness). Sensory experiences (landscape, touch, feel, sounds, smells and flavors) seem to be perceived as even more essential for this kind of tourist.

Regarding pull factors, solitude deserves more explanation as it appears central, but with moments when tourists can interact with other people (gurus, local community, other tourists) in a closer, intimate setting. Aiming to understand this better, the following section tries to identify the main aspects highlighted regarding ST destinations. However, it is worth mentioning that the coexistence of these types of motivations leads us to question whether they can be summarized in one: the search to fill the space left by the lack of intimacy currently predominant in the lifestyle in developed countries.

3.1.3. *Spiritual destinations – Contexts of the experience*

In addition to motivations, spiritual destinations are often studied from different perspectives. The study by Bandyopadhyaya and Nairb (2019) investigated how Kerala, India, markets itself as "God's Own Country" so that individuals can achieve spiritual well-being, transformation, and even rejuvenation. Senthil and Goswami (2021) intended to understand the critical points of destinations and spiritual beliefs that lead tourists to visit or plan to revisit India. The research of Than et al. (2020) focused on the influence of community involvement on a destination's sustainability, targeting community and spiritual destinations in Vietnam. Jaiswall and Duggal (2019) explored the role of Varanasi's landscape in developing the spiritual identity of non-Indian visitors. The study by Wang and Blasco (2022) identifies motivational factors for individuals to stay in Buddhist temples in India and how the landscape influences this decision. Skinner and Soomers' (2019) research focused on exploring the transformative impact of ST on destinations and their residents. Sirirat (2019) studied ST as a tool for sustainability in Thailand, and finally, Hai and Thoung's (2019) study aimed to define the factors and impact of attracting spiritual tourists to a destination.

Following Bhalla et al. (2021), the natural elements of a destination can potentiate healing effects, especially on those who are more unmotivated with life, stressed and influenced by the media (Bhalla et al., 2021 referring to Wolsko & Hoyt, 2012; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). Additionally, natural scenery and landscapes can stimulate emotional effects (spiritual experiences) that change the tourists' bodies, emotions, behavior and skills, creating a sense of well-being (Bhalla et al., 2021; Sheldon, 2020).

According to Wang and Blasco (2022), China's protected areas tend to be associated with spiritual energy, contributing to tourists' physical and psychological well-being. According to the authors, these areas can provide the means for the development of ST since ST products can be found to be more associated with

Buddhism and other cultures. Some areas promote yoga and meditation, helping tourists discover inner peace and spiritual healing. In addition, that research also highlights that nature tourism can facilitate connection with spirituality, as it allows tourists to find inner peace, build harmonious relationships with nature, and gain inner knowledge (Wang & Blasco, 2022). Jaiswall and Duggal (2019) conclude that the landscape of Varanasi ultimately provides a unique context and offers an opportunity for participants to define their spiritual identity, making them feel awake, aware, and fulfilled. Thus, according to the authors, there is harmony between the self and the place, and specific aspects of the landscape are consistent with the spiritual needs of each participant.

Skinner and Soomers (2019) state that the ST market is growing and is characterized by higher education and high-income levels. Spiritual tourists are independent, travel alone (or in small groups), seek transformational experiences (Skinner & Soomers, 2019; Rao & Pathy, 2015; Richards, 2011, 2014; Smith, 2003; Voight et al., 2011) and search for pleasant landscapes (Skinner & Soomers, 2019).

Bandyopadhyaya and Nairb (2019) say that many participants are influenced by the spiritual practices of Kerala's wellness centers (e.g., yoga, meditation, ancient practices for greeting and praising the sun, etc.). According to the participants, all these practices are effective ways to achieve relaxation, enjoyment and peace of mind. Furthermore, the verdant landscape, the smell of the oils and herbs, and the sounds of the mantras and meditations were mentioned as decisive in tourists' spiritual "renewal".

According to Than et al. (2020), the link with the local community is essential to develop sustainable tourism in spiritual destinations. This link can occur through community attachment, for example, by diversifying local tourism products based on the local culture and spiritual practices. This diversification of ST products will increase tourist spending, contributing to local socio-economic sustainability. These benefits may, in turn, raise community attachment. It is also essential to plan and create policies (e.g. self-governing groups or civil society organizations) that involve the local population, seen as "the keys to the successful operation of the programs" (Than et al., 2020, p.368).

Senthil and Goswami (2021) conclude that tourists who have achieved some form of entertainment, aesthetic pleasure, emotional release, or escapism tend to form a more positive attitude toward the destination.

The study of Sirirat (2019) concludes that it is essential to have residents at ST destinations who can ultimately impart their knowledge of Buddhist history, culture, and nature to tourists. This author states that there is a need for education programs, with both practical training and formal/informal learning components, targeted at residents and tourists to create close relations between community and tourists, group dynamics, and to develop beliefs/values. These kinds of ST activities proved to be informal education tools involving human transformation and transmission of essential knowledge for the success of this kind of tourist experience (Sirirat, 2019).

These studies allow us to conclude that the environment surrounding the spiritual tourist experience (particularly the presence of natural elements/contact with nature, destination image associated with spiritual beliefs, the organized offer of spiritual and reflection activities, as well as contact with local communities), may be decisive for its success and the tourists' satisfaction. This surrounding ambience may also affect the tourist experience. Furthermore, it seems increasingly pertinent to analyze the factors that contribute to successful ST and make an effective contribution to the sustainability of the destinations where it takes place.

It can also be seen that most existing studies are case studies from Indian destinations (9) (Agarwal et al., 2021; Bhalla et al., 2021; Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019; Garg et al., 2021; Jaiswall & Duggal, 2019; Jasrotia et al., 2021; Kainthola et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022; Senthil & Goswami, 2021). Spain (Lopez et al., 2017; Rodrigo, 2020), Thailand (Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Sirirat, 2019) and Vietnam (Hai & Thoung, 2019; Than et al., 2020) have two studies each. The United Kingdom counts with one study (Rodrigo, 2022), as well as

the United States (Singleton, 2017), Greece (Skinner & Soomers, 2019), China (Wang & Blasco, 2022) and Guatemala (Gezon, 2018), regarding case studies location.

3.2. Methodologies used for the study of spiritual tourism

Most of the studies used qualitative methodologies (Table 3). This predominance is justified by many authors, stating that it allows an in-depth understanding of information, such as a person's values, beliefs, emotions, thoughts and feelings, perceptions, behaviors and motivations, which cannot be acquired through quantitative data (Bhalla et al., 2021; Jasrotia et al., 2021; Abdelhadi, Foster, Whysall & Rawwas, 2013). It can also be seen that since 2017, some studies (5) began to use quantitative methodology, and two studies opted for a mixed method (Table 3).

Qualitative studies mainly used interviews regarding data collection instruments (Table 3). Some studies also used participant observation in addition to interviews (Singleton, 2017; Gezon, 2018; Skinner & Soomers, 2019; Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Rodrigo, 2020; Rodrigo, 2022). Regarding quantitative studies, questionnaires were the most used instrument, while two studies adopted a mixed methodology, using interviews and questionnaires (Lopez et al., 2017; Sirirat, 2019).

Table 3 also shows the population and sampling technique of the studies. Most of these focus on demand by applying their data collection instruments to tourists. Only six focus on supply (Parsons et al., 2019; Skinner & Soomers, 2019; Sirirat, 2019; Rodrigo, 2020; Rodrigo, 2022; Kumar et al., 2022). In addition, non-random sampling techniques, namely snowball and convenience sampling, were the most used.

Table 3
Data collection instruments, population under study and type of sampling used in the analyzed empirical studies

Instruments for data collection	Authors of the empirical studies	Population under study	Sampling technique
QUALITATIVE			
Individual interviews	Singleton, 2017	Tourists and residents	Purposive
	Gezon, 2018	Backpackers	Purposive
	Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019	Tourists	Purposive
	Jaiswall & Duggal, 2019	Tourists	Purposive and snowball
	Parsons et al., 2019	Tour operators	Purposive
	Skinner & Soomers, 2019	Local residents, members of the spiritual community and tourists	Purposive
	Choe & O'Regan, 2020	Two local monks at a Buddhist temple and tourists	-
	Rodrigo, 2020	Persons in charge or connected with therapy centers/schools, holistic and alternative therapies	-
	Bhalla et al., 2021	Tourists employed and settled in metro cities of India	Snowball
	Jasrotia et al., 2021	Millennials (tourists)	Purposive and snowball
	Kainthola et al., 2021	Participants with spiritual inclination and those who travel for spirituality	Snowball
	Rodrigo, 2022	Spiritual journey organizers	Purposive
Wang & Blasco, 2022	Tourists well-acquainted with tourism and protected areas in China	Snowball	
Participant observation	Singleton, 2017	-	-
	Gezon, 2018	-	-
	Skinner & Soomers, 2019	-	-
	Choe & O'Regan, 2020	-	-
	Rodrigo, 2020	-	-
	Rodrigo, 2022	-	-
Documental research	Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019	-	-
	Kumar et al., 2022 (1st phase)	-	-
	Senthil & Goswami, 2021	Spiritual travelers	-
Focus groups	Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019	-	-

Table 3 (continued)

QUANTITATIVE			
Questionnaire	Hai & Thoung, 2019	Tourists who are resting and visiting	Purposive
	Than et al., 2020	Residents	Purposive
	Agarwal et al., 2021	Tourists or people planning to visit a religious place	Judgement
	Garg et al., 2021	Tourists	Convenience
	Kumar et al., 2022 (2 nd phase)	Experts in religious and spiritual tourism or working in organizations in the spiritual tourism industry	Convenience, purposive and snowball
MIXED			
Interviews and questionnaires	Lopez et al., 2017	Pilgrims and tourists	Random
	Sirirat, 2019	Key community informants and tourists	Snowball

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding the methodology of data analysis, it can be observed that content analysis is the method used in qualitative studies, with quantitative studies using several statistical tests in SPSS software (Table 4).

Table 4
Methodology of data analysis of the empirical studies

Data analysis	Authors of the studies
QUALITATIVE	
Content analysis	Lopez et al., 2017; Singleton, 2017; Gezon, 2018; Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019; Jaiswall & Duggal, 2019; Parsons et al., 2019; Skinner & Soomers, 2019; Sirirat, 2019; Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Rodrigo, 2020; Bhalla et al., 2021; Jasrotia et al., 2021; Kainthola et al., 2021; Senthil & Goswami, 2021; Rodrigo, 2022; Wang & Blasco, 2022
QUANTITATIVE	
Analytic hierarchy process (AHP)	Garg et al., 2021
SEM–structural equation modeling	Agarwal et al., 2021
Multivariate analysis (confirmatory and/or exploratory factor analysis)	Than et al., 2020; Hai & Thoung, 2019
MIXED	
Content analysis + descriptive statistics	Lopez et al., 2017; Sirirat, 2019
Interpretive structural modelling (ISM)	Kumar et al., 2022

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4. Conclusions and reflections for future research

This study's selective systematic literature review analyzed the empirical research published on Scopus regarding non-religious ST and identified tourists' motivations for taking a spiritual trip, as well as attributes that tourist destinations may explore to design more successful experiences. The methodologies used for studying ST were also identified.

The first conclusion that this review allows is that the most discussed theme in these empirical studies was tourists' motivations. Several motivations are mentioned (rest, "healing", inner knowledge and higher connection). De Montaigne (1952) said, "I know well what I am fleeing from, but not what I am in search of", a quote that summarizes the motivations for practicing ST and is a challenge for those who offer experiences in this area. However, studies such as Garg et al. (2021) and Kainthola et al. (2021) significantly contribute to this topic, addressing both pull and push factors influencing spiritual travel. Moreover, further research in different locations or destinations with various characteristics would be interesting to analyze whether tourists' motivations remain the same.

A second conclusion regarding the contexts of the experience is that landscape and nature are identified as influencing individuals' spiritual experience, being much valued by these tourists (Jaiswall & Duggal, 2019; Wang & Blasco, 2022). This conclusion is in line with Wang et al. (2023), who claim nature is crucial for self-realization and inner peace. By analyzing the studies on spiritual destinations, it can be concluded that the environment of ST experiences can be decisive in tourists' satisfaction and successful experiences. Other

recent studies (e.g. Robledo et al., 2023) reinforce this idea, concluding that a destination's natural beauty is essential for successful experiences, as is being away from big cities, surrounded by green countryside.

Bandyopadhyaya and Nairb (2019) stated that more research is needed on specific emerging themes, for example, how celebrities influence decision-making processes and their role in promoting a spiritual destination. Regarding this emerging research topic, the most recent study by Shekhar and Valeri (2023) concludes that destination marketing significantly impacts tourists' motivation to consume ST products.

In this line of thought, another conclusion is that the existing research provides a solid basis for further studies, but there is a need and opportunity for improvement. One emerging research field regards factors that influence the effective contribution of ST to the sustainability of the destinations where it is practiced. The research analyzed demonstrates the need for future studies with data from different types of destinations since most existing studies analyze case studies from India. Skinner and Soomers (2019) mention that research is needed to understand the development of ST in other Mediterranean island destinations and how they are managed. Some differences are expected to exist.

Furthermore, a more detailed analysis of the supply side of this type of tourism and the determinants of the effects obtained by spiritual tourists seems necessary. Also, we agree with Kainthola et al. (2021), who said that possible differences between tourist profiles (e.g., rural and urban) should be carefully studied. Garg et al. (2021) also advise on the importance of examining differences in the priorities and motivations of each demographic group to engage in ST.

Another emerging research path is regarding the effects of ST on tourists, both good and bad. A complimentary area of research that seems to be essential for the success of this potentially sustainable tourism product is the negative aspects of ST and what can be done to help minimize them.

It is interesting to note the new needs and the growth of new concepts linked to ST on the one hand, and on the other, that none of the studies addresses an issue often associated with ST, which is the use of drugs (for example, the use of ayahuasca), supposedly to facilitate the process of connection to "something higher" and "open-mindedness" (Perkins et al., 2022). Perkins et al. (2022) argued that ayahuasca consumption has been shown to reduce levels of anxiety and depression and to reduce cannabis and alcohol use and is related to significantly increased spirituality, positive mood, agreeableness, and social satisfaction when properly administered. Still, Durante et al. (2021) stated that the adverse physical effects most associated with its consumption are tachycardia, tinnitus, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, tremors, and chills. The media and some scientific literature (e.g., Airault, 2015 or the *Guardian*, 2022) widely acknowledge the existence of the "India syndrome" and report several events in which tourists from the West go to India in search of a higher spiritual connection and experience devastating effects from the consumption of hallucinogens. These facts show another future research path linked to the need to understand the motivations of tourists who need to undergo such a drastic experience and how this may impact both the destination and the origin regions.

Another growing concept that could be better explored is e-mindfulness, which arises due to the stress and anxiety caused by individuals' modern life routines related to the involvement of technologies and their adverse effects (Stankov et al., 2020). Thus, this new concept enables tourists to disconnect from the digital by focusing on themselves. Research-oriented towards creating new products related to this theme would also be an exciting topic for the future.

Finally, it is believed that ST studies may have powerful insights if they genuinely explore the concept of "*Freedom with*" (Doering, 2022, referring Nancy, 1994) – the need to be free while balancing the quest for the self-versus exposure/relations/the need for intimacy with others. Because "being with" is always happening (Doering, 2022), the much sought-after "search for the self" shall never forget, or try to hide it, or think of this quest as a completely isolated process, as promoted by some existing offers. On the contrary, the much-needed "search for

the self” may benefit from assuming this, and ST products may benefit from considering and incorporating it directly. Otherwise, the effects of consuming ST products/experiences may be limited or have frustrating results for the tourists. Therefore, more research on the impact of different spiritual experiences on tourists seems vital.

Considering that ST supply and demand are expected to grow, as observed with other niche markets, the state of the art presented in this article is intended to stimulate new, sustainability-related reflections. Specifically, it contributes to guiding the approach of future scientific studies and improving agents’ perceptions about this domain.

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Appendix

Table of the 21 empirical articles fully analyzed in this study

Authors	Year	Title	Journal
Agarwal, A., Kapoor, K., Walia, S.	2021	Impact of social media on spiritual tourism in India: An SEM analysis of the critical factors impacting on decision making	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage
Bandyopadhyay, R., Nair, B.	2019	Marketing Kerala in India as God's Own Country! For tourists' spiritual transformation, rejuvenation and well-being	Journal of Destination Marketing and Management
Bhalla, R., Chowdhary, N., Ranjan, A.	2021	Spiritual tourism for psychotherapeutic healing post COVID-19	Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing
Choe, J., O'Regan, M.	2020	Faith manifest: Spiritual and mindfulness tourism in Chiang Mai, Thailand	Religions
Garg, A., Misra, P., Gupta, S., Goel, P., Saleem, M.	2021	Prioritizing motivators influencing intentions to visit spiritual destinations in India: An Application of analytical hierarchical process (AHP) approach	Journal of Tourism Futures
Gezon, L.	2018	Global scouts: Youth engagement with spirituality and wellness through travel, Lake Atitlán, Guatemala	Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change
Hai, P; Thuong, M.	2019	The influence of the spiritual tourist destination attraction on international tourist's satisfaction and return intention: Empirical evidence of Danang city, Vietnam	African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure
Jaiswal, P., Duggal, C.	2019	When the ghats call: An exploration of the spiritual identity development of non-Indian visitors in the landscape of Varanasi	Psychological Studies
Jasrotia, A., Choudhary, P., Kour, P., Yadav, V.	2021	Exploring the motivations of millennials opting for temple stays in India	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage
Kainthola, S., Chowdhary, N., Kaurav, Tiwari, P.	2021	Motivations of urban millennials for spiritual travel in India	Tourism Recreation Research
Kumar, S., Gupta, S., Shekhar	2022	Determinants of spiritual tourism consumption: A hierarchical approach	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage
Lopez, L., González, R., Fernández, B.	2017	Spiritual tourism on the way of Saint James the current situation	Tourism Management Perspectives
Parsons, H., Houge Mackenzie, S., Filep, S.	2019	Facilitating self-development: How tour guides broker spiritual tourist experiences	Tourism Recreation Research
Rodrigo, M.A.	2020	La búsqueda espiritual a través del turismo. Su articulación desde el lado de la oferta	Cuadernos de Turismo
Rodrigo, M.A.	2022	Viaje mágico y espiritual a una tierra de manzanos	PASOS Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural
Senthil, V., Goswami, S.	2021	Can spiritual tourism in India be marketed properly? Learnings from an analysis of twitter	International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage
Singleton, A.	2017	The summer of the spirits: Spiritual tourism to America's foremost village of spirit mediums	Annals of Tourism Research
Skinner, H., Soomers, P.	2019	Spiritual tourism on the island of Corfu: Positive impacts of niche tourism versus the challenges of contested space	International Journal of Tourism Anthropology
Sirirat, P.	2019	Spiritual tourism as a tool for sustainability: A case study of Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand.	Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage
Than, T.; Kieu, H.; Pham, D.; Van, H; Tran, H.; Nguyen, D.; Dao, T.	2020	Impact of community attachment and resident's support on destination sustainability: Evidence from spiritual and community destination in Vietnam	Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business
Wang, S., Blasco, D.	2022	East meets West: Spiritual tourism in Chinese protected areas	Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights

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