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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.

To accomplish this objective, a search was conducted in the Scopus database, resulting in the analysis of 21 full empirical articles. A qualitative methodology was adopted.

From 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 to be 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). The topic of ST has been discussed in several scientific studies, especially since 2017. However, there are some authors (e.g., Bhalla et al., 2021 and Cheer et al., 2017), who argue that more research is needed in order 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 a variety of different 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 traveling 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 can be considered as “a phenomenon 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).

This study is important, therefore, because we intend to review scientific empirical articles as a way 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. As concerns 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 analysis of the articles selected by major 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 finally the last section presents the final reflections and conclusions.

2. Methodology

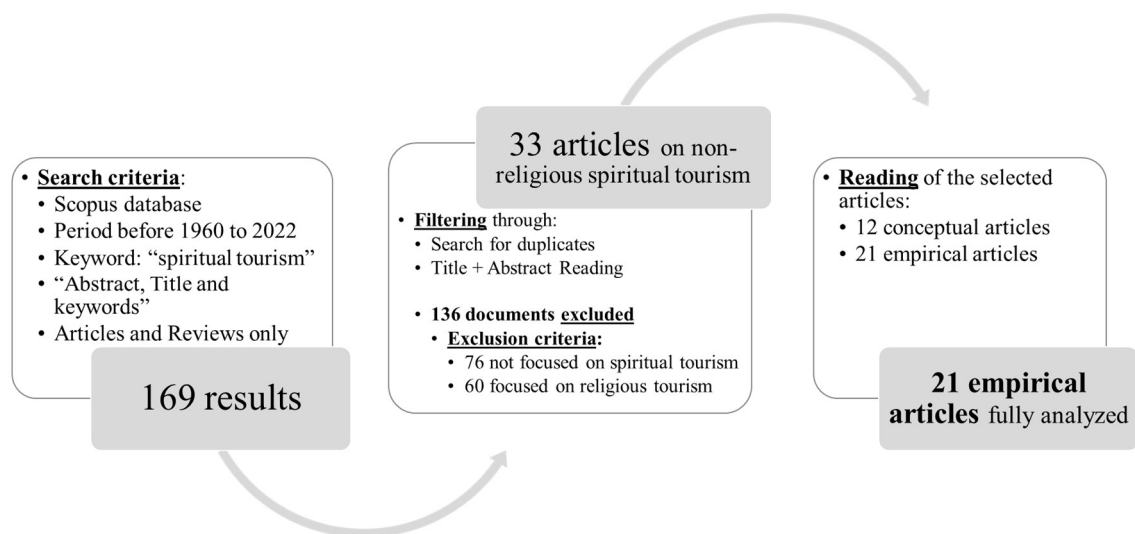
This article reviews the literature resulting from research, specifically research with an empirical component, on ST. To achieve this goal with limited time to conduct searches and analysis, searches were conducted using the Scopus database, chosen because it is considered among the most comprehensive 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 a total of 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 on. 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 that really focused on ST were separated into two categories, those focused on religious tourism (60) and those focused on spiritual non-religious tourism (33). Of those focused on spiritual non-religious tourism, and as the focus of this study is empirical research, the 21 empirical studies were considered relevant to this study (list in Appendix 1). These were fully 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 it to avoid differences in data coding, as recommended by Snyder (2019). 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 fully analyzed articles



Source: Elaborated by the authors

Only in 2017 was an empirical study focusing 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).

In the next sections, the empirical studies selected are analyzed according to the main conceptual dimension and methodologies used.

3. Results

3.1. 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 <i>et al.</i> (2021), Choe & O’ Regan (2020), Garg <i>et al.</i> (2021), Jasrotia <i>et al.</i> (2021), Gezon (2018), Kainthola <i>et al.</i> (2021), Kumar <i>et al.</i> (2022), Lopez <i>et al.</i> (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 <i>et al.</i> (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 <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Tour guide intermediation	Parsons <i>et al.</i> (2019)

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Most empirical studies focus on tourists' motivations for engaging in a ST experience. Wang & Blasco (2022) state that spirituality can be the main 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 next sections. Before analysis of the main themes of the articles, it was considered important to summarize the concepts of ST used in each study.

3.1.1. Theory – the concept of spiritual tourism

As Wang & Blasco (2022), Parsons *et al.* (2019) and Jaiswall & 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 very specific tourism experiences, such as wellness, yoga, or nature tourism (Wang & Blasco, 2022). Furthermore, these authors state that there is still no clear, widely recognized definition of ST. However, Wang & Blasco (2022) highlight a feature of the tourism spiritual concept common to several researches: ST is considered self-conscious improvement.

Senthil & Goswami (2021) state that the term spirituality derives from the Latin “spiritus”, which means “breath of life”. Kumar et al. (2022) define 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 better quality of life (Kumar et al., 2022). Hence, spirituality “has become a vastly complex quest in which each person seeks his or her own way” (Singleton, 2017, p.51). This spirituality, for non-religious individuals, can be the pursuit of various spiritual activities, such as yoga, meditation, or something self-defined, in various contexts.

Spirituality is increasingly understood as not only linked to institutional religiosity, with these spiritual experiences being based primarily on individual experience and self-authentication (Singleton, 2017). The pursuit of spirituality is currently considered a strong motivation for travel in the 21st century, as tourists feel the need for spiritual satisfaction and meaning in their lives, resulting in self-realization trips for well-being of body, mind and soul (Kainthola et al., 2021). Traveling 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).

Regarding ST, authors define it in several ways. Skinner & Soomers (2019) explain it as tourism where people travel individually or in groups, for leisure or pilgrimage. Jasrotia et al. (2021) and Choe & 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 that which 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 greatly on his or her 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 and 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 routine. Many of the participants in Bandyopadhyaya & 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), traveling 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 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 & Nairb (2019) highlight these ideas, arguing that more and more people have high levels of stress and individualistic lifestyles, making the search for the "true meaning of life" essential. Kumar et al. (2022) conclude that tourists' daily stress levels ultimately influence their decision to take a 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 a 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 confinements and other changes during the pandemic, as this type of tourism allow 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 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 clearly 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 <i>et al.</i> (2021), Choe & O' Regan (2020), Parsons <i>et al.</i> (2019), Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb (2019)
Spiritual growth/improvement	Singleton (2017), Kainthola <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Relief from experiences caused by the pandemic or by the fact that individuals are going through a difficult time in their lives	Bhalla <i>et al.</i> (2021), Gezon (2018)
Reduce the stress level	Kumar <i>et al.</i> (2022), Kainthola <i>et al.</i> (2021), Agarwal <i>et al.</i> (2021), Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb (2019), Bhalla <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Finding meaning and getting closer to oneself/working on the inner self	Kainthola <i>et al.</i> (2021), Jasrotia <i>et al.</i> (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 <i>et al.</i> (2021), Garg <i>et al.</i> (2021), Lopez <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Learning and harmony with nature	Jasrotia <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Search for adventure	Gezon (2018)
Social Media	Agarwal <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Mindfulness practice and recharging the batteries	Choe & O' Regan (2020)

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Summarizing, the main 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 an important attraction even for those tourists not motivated by religion. Also, the first group of motivations justify a second group related to a pursuit of authentic sense of discovery/experience, showing that this product is not isolated from other tourism activities (e.g., connection with nature or wellness activities). Sensory experiences (landscape, touch, feel, sounds, smells and flavors) seem to be perceived as even more essential for this kind of tourists.

Regarding pull factors, the presence of solitude seems to deserve more explanation as it appears as central but with moments when tourists can interact with other people (gurus, local community, other tourists) in a closer, intimate setting. Aiming to better understand this, the next 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 empty 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, but from different perspectives. The study by Bandyopadhyaya & 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 & Goswami (2021) intended to understand the key points of destinations and spiritual beliefs that lead tourists to visit India or intend to revisit it. The research of Than et al. (2020) focused on the influence of community involvement on a destination's sustainability, targeting community destinations and spiritual destinations in Vietnam. Jaiswall & Duggal (2019) explored the role of Varanasi's landscape in developing the spiritual identity of non-Indian visitors. The study by Wang & Blasco (2022) identifies motivational factors for individuals to stay in Buddhist temples in India and how the landscape influences this decision. Skinner & 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 & Thoung (2019) study aimed to define the factors and impact of attracting spiritual tourists to a destination.

In accordance with 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; Wolsko & Hoyt, 2012; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). Additionally, natural scenery and landscapes can stimulate emotional effects (spiritual experiences) that changes the tourists' body, emotions, behavior and skills, creating a sense of well-being (Bhalla et al., 2021; Sheldon, 2020).

According to Wang & 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 are able to provide the means for the development of ST, since ST products can be found more associated with Buddhism and other cultures. There are also areas that 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 gives tourists the opportunity to discover inner peace, build harmonious relationships with nature, and gain inner knowledge (Wang & Blasco, 2022). Jaiswall & Duggal (2019) conclude 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 certain aspects of the landscape are consistent with the spiritual needs of each participant.

Skinner & Soomers (2019) state that the ST market is growing and is characterized by higher education levels and high levels of income. 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 & Nairb (2019) say that a large number of participants are influenced by the spiritual practices that the wellness centers in Kerala offer (e.g., yoga, meditation, ancient practices for greeting and praising the sun, etc.). All these practices, according to the participants, are effective ways to achieve relaxation, enjoyment and peace of mind. Furthermore, the verdant landscape, the smell of the oils and herbs, the sounds of the mantras and meditations were mentioned as decisive in tourists' spiritual "renewal".

According to Than et al. (2020), in order to develop sustainable tourism in spiritual destinations, the link with the local community is essential. This link can occur through the 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 important 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 & 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 very important to have local 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, in order to create close relations between community and tourists, group dynamics, to develop beliefs/values. This kind of ST activities proved to be informal education tools, involving human transformation and transmission of important 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, organized offer of spiritual and reflection's activities, as well as contact with local communities), may be decisive for its success and for the tourists' satisfaction. This surrounding ambience may also condition the tourist experiences' effects. 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), as do 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 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 methodology (Table 3).

Regarding data collection instruments (Table 3), qualitative studies mostly used interviews. Some studies also used participant observation in addition to interviews (Singleton, 2017; Gezon, 2018; Skinner & Soomers, 2019; Choe & O'Regan, 2020; Rodrigo, 2020; Senthil & Goswami, 2021; Rodrigo, 2022). As concerns 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 the demand side by applying their data collection instruments to tourists. Only six focus on the supply side (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 commonly used.

Table 3 – Data collection instruments, population under study and type of sampling used in the 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)	<i>Backpackers</i>	Purposive
	Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb (2019)	Tourists	Purposive
	Jaiswall & Duggal (2019)	Tourists	Purposive and snowball
	Parsons <i>et al.</i> (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 <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Tourists employed and settled in metro cities of India	Snowball
	Jasrotia <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Millennials (tourists)	Purposive and snowball
	Kainthola <i>et al.</i> (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)	-	-
Documental research	Rodrigo (2022)	-	-
	Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb (2019)	-	-
	Kumar <i>et al.</i> (2022) (1 st phase)	-	-
Focus groups	Senthil & Goswami (2021)	Spiritual travelers	-
	Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb (2019)	-	-
QUANTITATIVE			
Questionnaire	Hai & Thoung (2019)	Tourists who are resting and visiting	Purposive
	Than <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Residents	Purposive
	Agarwal <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Tourists or people planning to visit a religious place	Judgement
	Garg <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Tourists	Convenience
	Kumar <i>et al.</i> (2022) (2 nd phase)	Experts in religious and spiritual tourism or working in organizations in the spiritual tourism industry	Convenience Purposive Snowball
MIXED			
Interviews and Questionnaires	Lopez <i>et al.</i> (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 in the qualitative studies, content analysis is the method used, 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 <i>et al.</i> (2017); Singleton (2017); Gezon (2018); Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb (2019); Jaiswall & Duggal (2019); Parsons <i>et al.</i> (2019); Skinner & Soomers (2019); Sirirat (2019); Choe & O' Regan (2020); Rodrigo (2020); Bhalla <i>et al.</i> (2021); Jasrotia <i>et al.</i> (2021); Kainthola <i>et al.</i> (2021); Senthil & Goswami (2021); Rodrigo (2022); Wang & Blasco (2022)
QUANTITATIVE	
Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP)	Garg <i>et al.</i> (2021)
SEM–Structural Modeling Equations	Agarwal <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Multivariate analysis (confirmatory and/or exploratory factor analysis)	Than <i>et al.</i> (2020); Hai & Thoung (2019)
MIXED	
Content analysis + Descriptive Statistics	Lopez <i>et al.</i> (2017); Sirirat (2019)
Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM)	Kumar <i>et al.</i> (2022)

Source: Elaborated by the authors

4. Conclusions and reflections for future research

The selective systematic literature review conducted in this study analyzed the empirical research published on Scopus regarding non-religious ST and identifies 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. In this regard, 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 definitely a challenge for those who offer experiences in this area. However, studies such as Garg *et al.* (2021) and Kainthola *et al.* (2021) provide important contributions for studying this topic, addressing both pull and push factors influencing spiritual travel. Moreover, further research in different locations or destinations, with different characteristics, would be of interest 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 as crucial for self-realization and inner peace. On analyzing the studies on spiritual destinations, it can be concluded that the environment of ST experiences can be decisive in tourists' satisfaction and also for successful experiences. Other recent studies (e.g. Robledo et al., 2023), reinforce this idea, concluding that a destination's natural beauty is extremely important for successful experiences, as is being away from big cities, surrounded by green countryside.

Bandyopadhyaya & 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 & Valeri (2023) concludes that destination marketing has a major impact on 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 the 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 of the existing studies analyze case studies from India. Skinner & Soomers (2019) mention that research is needed to understand the development of ST in other Mediterranean island destinations and to understand 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 studying 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 key 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 address 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 negative physical effects most commonly associated with its consumption are episodes of tachycardia, tinnitus, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, 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 feel the 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, that arises due to the stress and anxiety that are caused by individuals' modern life routines, being related to the involvement of technologies and their negative effects (Stankov et al., 2020). Thus, this new concept enables tourists to disconnect from the digital by focusing on themselves. Research oriented towards the creation of new products related to this theme would also be an interesting topic for the future.

Finally, it is believed that ST studies may have powerful insights if they truly 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 even benefit from assuming this, and ST products may benefit from assuming and incorporating it directly. Otherwise, the effects of consuming ST products/experiences may be very limited or have frustrating results for the tourists. Therefore, more research on the effects of different types of spiritual experiences for tourists seems vital.

Considering that ST supply and demand is 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, as well as improving agents' perceptions about this domain.

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Appendix 1 – 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

Source: Elaborated by the authors