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From pilgrimage to volunteer tourism: A spiritual journey in the contemporary world

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore how the experiences of international volunteer tourists can contribute to the rejuvenation of the concept of pilgrimage in the contemporary world. Through thematic analysis of the individual portraits, this paper identifies the intertwining of the rejuvenation of pilgrimage with the concepts of meaning, ritual, and transformative experiences within the context of international volunteer tourism. The findings suggest that the current understanding of pilgrimage in contemporary tourism surpasses the notion of a journey to a religious destination, transcending religion itself. This paper extends the comprehension of modern pilgrimage and spirituality, and highlights the necessity for further research into the complex interconnections between tourism, religion, and spirituality.

Introduction

The tourism landscape has witnessed a significant evolution in recent years, with tourists seeking more than just leisure and adventure but also deeper, transformative connections with the places and the communities they visit. This shift has given rise to unique niches within the tourism sphere, one of which is international volunteer tourism. The question of why people engage in international volunteer tourism has garnered considerable research attention and is well-documented in the literature (e.g. Knollenberg et al., 2014; Lee & Yen, 2015; Magrizos et al., 2021). Researchers have identified a range of motivations, from the desire to immerse oneself in a new culture and contribute to communities, to the pursuit of profound spiritual quests aimed at finding meaning and purpose in life. Moreover, numerous studies have highlighted the potential for international volunteer tourism to facilitate positive personal changes (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). For instance, Zahra and McIntosh (2007) observed that returning volunteers experienced changes in behaviour and emotional states, potentially leading to positive transformations in their lives. Additionally, the volunteer tourism literature has highlighted heightened awareness of others among volunteers, particularly in relation to local communities, as volunteer tourists have the opportunity to enter local homes and see things that many mainstream tourists may never see (Kahana, 2021; Sin, 2009). These studies collectively indicate a connection between the experiences of volunteer tourism and spirituality.

International volunteer tourism essentially represents a profound combination of altruism, exploration, and spirituality, wherein individuals embark on journeys not solely for sightseeing

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and/or adventure but for profound soul-searching. Scholars have pointed out that this type of tourism bears similarities to a pilgrimage in the contemporary world (Morgan, 2010; Mustonen, 2006; Polus et al., 2022). Volunteer tourism is often seen as a type of travel where people seek more than just being tourists. Morgan (2010) describes it as a form of tourism taken on with a traveller's or pilgrim's mindset. According to Cohen (2008, p. 332), it is a form of tourism for those in search of deeper "meaning" in their holiday. Additionally, some view volunteer tourism as a selfless form of travel. For instance, Scheyvens (2002, p. 102) refers to it as a part of "justice tourism" where individuals from Western countries pay to go to less developed regions to assist with development or conservation efforts, driven by a desire for a more meaningful experience than a typical pleasure-filled holiday. Consequently, volunteer tourism is believed to provide a profound and self-discovery journey (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007), offering individuals the chance to explore themselves and build connections (McIntosh & Zahra, 2008). Mustonen (2006) even labelled this type of tourism as a Western-based pilgrimage. However, no empirical research has yet been conducted to demonstrate this connection.

As such, this study aims to explore how the experiences of international volunteer tourists can contribute to the rejuvenation of the concept of pilgrimage in the contemporary world. To achieve this, the study takes a unique approach by exploring spirituality through the lens of pilgrimage. Although pilgrimage has historically been linked to religious or spiritual tourism, its definition has evolved in contemporary tourism. In the next section, we will look into the intricate relationship between pilgrimage, spirituality, and tourism, identifying how these elements intertwine and influence one another. By exploring these connections, this section provides deeper insights into the transformative and meaningful dimensions of tourism, providing a nuanced perspective on the interplay of pilgrimage, spirituality, and tourism in this contemporary setting.

Pilgrimage, spirituality, and tourism in the contemporary world

The search for spiritual fulfilment through travel is not a new phenomenon. Rather, for centuries, people have been using tourism as a way to escape from the stresses of everyday life and to search for something more meaningful (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; DiGiovine & Choe, 2019). Religion and travel have a long history of coexisting, particularly through pilgrimage, which has been part of human culture for thousands of years. In the history of humankind, a pilgrimage is an enduring form of spiritual exercise, associated with some world's major religions, including Christianity (particularly Catholicism), Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shintoism (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Digance, 2006). Scholars have even noted pilgrimage as being one of the oldest forms of travel (Digance, 2006; Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011).

During medieval times, the definition of pilgrimage was centred around its connection to religion and the challenging nature of the journey. For example, Digance (2006) views medieval pilgrimage as a long demanding journey undertaken by individuals or groups to religious shrines around the world. Similarly, Turner and Turner (1978) defined pilgrimage as the physical journey of the religious devotee to a sacred religious site. Yet it is important to recognize that as a social construct, the concept of pilgrimage is constantly evolving. Currently, pilgrimage is understood as a journey that can be secular, sacred, or a blend of both (Barber, 1991; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Digance, 2006; DiGiovine & Choe, 2019). This expanded definition of pilgrimage is referred to as "dedifferentiation" (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, p. 442), which acknowledges the blurring of the boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism. According to Collins-Kreiner (2016b), this shift represents a postmodern approach to the study of pilgrimage, where people seek non-ordinary experiences, such as transformation, enlightenment and life-change, through travel. This transformation of pilgrimage from dedifferentiation to rejuvenation highlights the evolving nature of the concept as people seek more meaningful experiences through their tourism journeys.

In contemporary society, religious-based reasoning appears to be losing relevance as people undertake pilgrimages for more diverse reasons and visit locations that do not have any formal

religious affiliation (Qurashi, 2018). In the 21st century, the notion of pilgrimage travel has been revitalized through the conceptualization of various tourism segments (Polus et al., 2022), including spiritual tourism, dark tourism (Collins-Kreiner, 2016a), church tourism (Kiely, 2013), frontier tourism (Laing & Crouch, 2011), backpacking tourism (Mendel, 2010), Dracula tourism (Hovi, 2010), volunteer tourism (Mustonen, 2006), and gambling tourism (DiGiovine & Choe, 2019), among others. However, there is limited research on how tourists experience pilgrimage within these different types of tourism segments.

Through the phenomenon where people are taking non-traditional paths in their spiritual searches, the conceptualization of pilgrimage in the 21st Century as stepping beyond religion to emphasize the notion of spirituality is situated (Polus et al., 2022). For decades, the study of the "sacred" in the tourism experience was done exclusively from the religious point of view, as for many the term sacred is linked to religion (Willson, 2012). However, in recent times, embracing spirituality in tourism studies is growing. Scholars have argued that the sacred tourism experience is not merely about religion. Rather, the experience can be about "getting in touch with oneself, with others and with the world at a deeper level", emphasizing the notion of spirituality (Laing & Crouch, 2011; Liutikas, 2017; Sharpley, 2016).

This trend is aligned with the phenomenon of many individuals identifying themselves as "spiritual and religious" or "spiritual but not religious," rather than strictly religious (Cheer et al., 2017; Weathers et al., 2016). These individuals reject religion as an authoritative, restrictive, and organized institution, while spirituality is seen as encompassing personal, subjective experiences of the sacred, which are more private and individualized (Vincett & Woodhead, 2016). According to Vincett and Woodhead (2016), spirituality has become a "preferred alternative" to religion because it is more aligned with contemporary values. In other words, spirituality is seen as fashionable, while religion is not.

In this study, we inclusively define spirituality as a process of discovering the sacred beyond the traditional concept of a Higher Being/God through a limitless number of pathways involving systems of belief, such as traditional religious practices, newer spirituality movements and more individualized worldviews (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In this way, we recognize spirituality as a multidimensional construct. Reviews of literature on the various constructs of spirituality have reported three major themes; namely, meaning in life, connectedness, and transcendence (Cheer et al., 2017; DiGiovine & Choe, 2019; Weathers et al., 2016).

Methodology

This study employed an ethnographic approach, known as netnography (Kozinets, 2010) to examine online communities. Originating from the marketing discipline, netnography has been increasingly used in hospitality and tourism (e.g. Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023; Hernández et al., 2022; Nayak et al., 2023). According to Kozinets (2010), netnography is a type of online ethnography that provides guidelines for conducting participant-observation procedures, gathering cultural data, and ensuring a high-quality ethnographic interpretation while adhering to ethical standards in online communities. Similar to ethnography, in a netnographic study data is collected in three forms: archival data, which consists of recorded site interactions on online platforms over time; elicited data, co-created through researchers' interaction with the online community; and fieldnotes data, which includes observational and reflective notes (Kozinets, 2010; Kulavuz-Onal, 2015). This study followed Kozinets (2010) five phases of netnography: planning and preparation, entrée, data collection, data analysis, and representation.

The focus of the planning and preparation phase was the selection of online international volunteer tourism communities. AIESEC[1] was selected as the online international volunteer tourism community based on Kozinets (2010) criteria for interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich sites. AIESEC is a global, non-political, independent, non-profit, and the world's largest youth-run organization, whose mission is to "empower young people for peace and fulfilment of

humankind's potential" (AIESEC, 2022). AIESEC offers young people international volunteering experiences on various social projects around the world through their Global Volunteer programme. The underlying purpose of this programme is to offer "opportunities for young people to develop their leadership skills while contributing to a cause they are passionate about by volunteering on a social project abroad" (AIESEC, 2022). Global Volunteer is open to people between 18 and 30 years old. Projects normally last between six and eight weeks, although some can last for up to a year. Each volunteer project is designed to align with at least one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). Although previous studies (Šuba, 2017; Yu & Na, 2022) on volunteer tourism have been conducted with this organization and its members, particularly concerning youth volunteering, to our knowledge, no study has explored the perspective of spirituality and international volunteer tourism from them.

After choosing AIESEC as the online community, the subsequent phase, referred to as the entrée phase, revolved around obtaining permission from the selected sites (i.e. blogs and Social Networking Sites (SNSs)). This process was particularly crucial for sites that necessitated registration and maintained a private nature. The data collection phase began with online participant observation. The main aim was to discover the nature of experiences shared by international volunteer tourists, explore the types of experiences shared during the timespan of a project and identify participants for the interviews. Kulavuz-Onal (2015, p. 66) depicted netnography as "participant-observational research based on online hanging out, download, reflection and connection". Throughout the online observation, archival material specifically the blog entries and social media posts were also documented using the screenshot method. Simultaneously, reflective observational fieldnotes that captured both textual and non-textual data were taken. These notes included descriptions of observations, experiences, and reflections. Finally, the data collection phase was completed with online in-depth interviews. In this study, interviews were not conducted to broaden the understanding of insights derived from online observation, as highlighted by Kulavuz-Onal (2015). Rather, they facilitated a deeper comprehension of observations, providing an additional perspective into the richness of the lives of the participants (Polus & Carr, 2023).

Table 1 provides information on the study participants' profiles. The participants were between 20 and 25 years old. The international volunteer tourism experience with AIESEC was their first such experience. Seven out of eight of the participants volunteered in support of UNSDG 4, namely Quality Education. UNSDG 4 promotes inclusive and equitable quality education opportunities for all (AIESEC, 2022). The other participant volunteered as a president at a newly developed AIESEC entity. Four participants noted that their Muslim faith is the foundation of their lives. One participant noted his Christian faith played a central part in his life, whereas one participant noted she is a Hindu, but her life is not defined by her faith. The other two participants did not declare if they associate with any faith.

The goal of this study was not to achieve generalization across a larger population. Rather, we aimed to conduct an in-depth exploration of the distinctive experiences of each participant, crafting individual "portraits" that provide a comprehensive and intricate understanding of their volunteering journeys. To achieve this, we adhered to the concept of "information power" (Malterud et al., 2016). This considers factors such as study aim, sample specificity,

Table 1. Profiles of research participants.

First Name/Pseudonym	Gender	Country of origin	Volunteering destination	Duration of volunteering
Mona	Woman	Algeria	Malaysia	6 weeks
Ford	Man	Indonesia	Czech Republic	6 weeks
Chana	Woman	Morocco	Egypt	6 weeks
Hapu	Man	Egypt	Indonesia	6 weeks
Aarya	Woman	India	Sri Lanka	6 weeks
Angi	Woman	Kenya	Rwanda	6 weeks
Bina	Woman	Turkey	Morocco	6 weeks
Lia	Woman	Thailand	Laos	1 year

theoretical background, dialogue quality, and analysis strategy to determine whether the sample size should be larger or smaller. In this case, eight participants were deemed sufficient. This decision aligns with the narrow study aim, the high specificity of participant selection, support from established theory, strong interview dialogue, and the in-depth exploration of narrative and discourse details. Importantly, the interview dialogues, derived from elicited data, are further supported and enriched by archival and fieldnotes data, thus contributing to a comprehensive exploration of participants' narratives. To ensure diversity within our sample, we considered a range of demographics, volunteer project types, and cultural backgrounds (Table 1).

As this project is based on a narrative inquiry, the aim of the data analysis and representation phases is to make sense of the field texts and maintain the coherence of the research. The main focus is on ensuring unbiased interpretations by utilizing a consistent pattern and avoiding internal contradictions in the data. As such, we have chosen to present the results of this study as individual "portraits" of eight international volunteer tourists who engaged in volunteering projects through AIESEC. The portraits were compiled using all three forms of data, including interview transcripts (elicited data), social media posts, blogs (archival data), and fieldnotes (fieldnote data), to give each participant a voice and showcase their unique experiences.

To incorporate the data into the portraits, we employed Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) three analytical tools: broadening, burrowing, and storying and restorying. Broadening entailed providing a general overview of each participant, encompassing their personal background, way of life, character, and values – commonly referred to as "the voice behind the story" (Willson, 2010). Burrowing involved a deeper exploration of the participants' experiences, concentrating on specific details, emotions, understandings, challenges, and the impact of these encounters. Subsequently, through the process of storying and restorying, the text was structured into coherent sentences and paragraphs to create meaning. In the storying phase, data from observations, fieldnotes, and interviews is organized chronologically. A narrative is crafted by linking elements of participants' experiences, and carefully selecting key events to create a coherent story that represents their voices. Transitioning to the restorying phase, the narrative undergoes refinement and analysis, ensuring clarity, coherence, and relevance to research aims. Overarching themes are identified, looking beyond individual narratives for commonalities and differences that deepen the understanding of the research topic. The narratives are then contextualized within a broader framework, considering external factors, cultural influences, and socio-economic backgrounds that may shape participants' experiences. This phase also involves a reflective process by the researcher, deriving meaning from participants' stories and interpreting them in relation to existing literature, theoretical frameworks and the broader research context. Through "storying" and "restorying", the intricate layers of meaning within the data are uncovered and comprehensively explored. Lastly, when we introduced our perspective, it enriched and reshaped the participants' narratives. This perspective is seamlessly integrated with the participants' narratives to create a nuanced and comprehensive portrayal, contributing to a holistic understanding of the research findings.

After developing each portrait, thematic analysis was used to identify and describe the patterns and themes that emerged from the individual portraits. This method allowed for an inductive approach to analysis, meaning that themes were identified from the data instead of being imposed upon it (Willson, 2010). Thematic analysis of participants' portraits involved several key steps. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading and re-reading the portraits to gain an overall understanding of the content. Next, we generated initial codes by identifying recurring themes or patterns within the data. We then organized these codes into potential themes. Afterwards, we reviewed and refined the themes to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the portraits. Once we had clearly defined and named each theme, we proceeded to write up the analysis. This involved incorporating quotes and examples from the participants' portraits to illustrate each theme, ultimately providing a comprehensive understanding of the data. Key quotes were categorized under common headings before being grouped into themes, and both short and long quotes

were used to demonstrate the trustworthiness and reliability of the emergent themes (Peterson, 2019).

In the findings section, relevant quotes are highlighted to illustrate and support each theme, providing a deeper understanding of the participants' volunteering journeys. The use of multiple shorter quotations in the findings section conveys the complexity and nuance of the themes, while one quotation of several lines is provided to signify the breadth and depth of the associated theme. We chose to retain all the grammatical errors of the original quotes. The main reason for these errors is the interview participants were not English-speaking natives, but people who spoke the language with tolerable grammatical mistakes. We believe that making corrections could alter the intended meaning, resulting in the quotes no longer reflecting the participant's actual narrative. Thus, altering the quotations may lead the reader to "hear" the researchers' rather than the research participants.

Findings and discussions

Analysis of the eight in-depth individual portraits reveals that the rejuvenation of pilgrimage is interwoven in the meaning, ritual, and transformative experience of international volunteer tourism (Polus et al., 2022). Despite the changing nature of pilgrimage within religions and civilizations, pilgrimage can be seen to share these three common elements. The first important element is the individual's "sense of felt purpose" (Roos, 2006, p. 17), or their personal motivation for undertaking the pilgrimage. This intent is what defines the pilgrimage, whether it be to Compostela, Mecca, Mount Kailash, or Graceland. The second key feature is the ritual nature of pilgrimage. Despite some individuals opting for cyber pilgrimage or staying in one place, "movement" is an essential part of the experience. The sense of community and facing challenges are also integral to the pilgrimage experience. Finally, all types of pilgrimages have the potential to be transformative or profound experiences. By embarking on the journey, encountering various obstacles, and meeting different people, individuals have the opportunity to rejuvenate themselves mentally, physically, and/or spiritually, leaving them feeling renewed and transformed.

The meaning

Pilgrimage embodies a spiritual journey that often commences with a motivating intention, commonly referred to as "the calling" (Cousineau, 1998). In this context, the deep intention and comprehension of the journey's purpose are argued to be the interwoven central essence of pilgrimage, encapsulating its true meaning (Polus et al., 2022). Participants in the study shared motivations for participating in international volunteer tourism that were similar to those found in previous research on the topic. In addition to wanting to contribute to the community, volunteers expressed a desire for adventure, cultural exploration, and stepping outside of their comfort zones.

> . . . Vacation, [is] the most obvious. I wanted to see at least a part of Europe. Czech is also very famous for their beer, and I love beer, so it was a perfect match. Since most Indonesian Colleges have compulsory social work as a prerequisite to Graduation, I thought 'Why not kill 2 birds with 1 stone?' I can have my social work done and have a vacation at the same time. I wanted to get out of my comfort zone (because I'm mostly passive) and do something productive while I was still on holiday. – Ford

> I wanted to step out of my comfort zone. I wanted to challenge myself and go to a new environment where I'm going to unleash my potential and see what I can do to impact someone else's life. Morocco is my comfort zone. – Chana

However, a closer look at the portraits revealed some deeper psychological motivations for the participants undertaking their volunteer experiences, such as finding life purpose and meaning. For example, as we explore deeper into Chana's motivation to volunteer, we discover that this

motivation stemmed from a challenging period in Chana's life characterized by severe depression. The encounter with this challenge was so profound that she lost her sense of purpose in life. During this time, Chana sought inner peace, and volunteering became a means to attain it. She wrote on her Instagram Page:

> It all started when I decided to join AIESEC before that I was struggling to find my inner peace, I was suffering from severe depression and I was thinking that I will never achieve something meaningful in my life but it all changed when I became officially an AIESECER ... – Posted July 7, 2020; Instagram Inc.

This discovery is consistent with previous research that suggests that having a sense of purpose or meaning in life is often considered a driving force, and the absence of it can lead to spiritual anguish, and feelings of hollowness and misery (Frankl, 1988). As Chana equated spirituality to inner peace, she described her volunteering journey as one to find inner peace.

Another example is Angi, who as a young woman living in a patriarchal society, felt that she was trapped in a difficult past and volunteering gave her the opportunity to "heal" from this and "be true to herself". This is evidenced by her article blog which she entitled "a journey of learning, healing and growing". She explained the "healing" aspect of her volunteering journey by noting that,

> ... at that specific time in my life I was going through a lot of things, and I needed an escape, I needed to be at a new place on my own so that I could work out every detail of all of these feelings on my own. I needed to spend time with myself and heal from some past things I had experienced, being away from my day-to-day activities was a good way of healing. – Angi

Searching for inner peace and healing through a volunteering journey echoed Cousineau's (1998, p. 8) idea that people embark on a journey in search of "what they cannot find at home". The search guides them to the "strong meaning-making potential" of a journey (Schnell & Pali, 2013). Taken together, these various motivations reveal that underlying their apparent diversity is a profound sense of longing – for meaning, for healing, for peace, for life in all its fullness. This longing for life is a desire "to get back in touch with life" (Cousineau, 1998, p. 18). These findings echo the idea of disconnectedness by de Souza (2012). Participants answered the call to embark on a volunteering journey when it became apparent that to move through suffering, one has to look within to journey into the soul.

The ritual

The transformative potential of international volunteer tourism can be attributed to the ritualistic nature of the journey, where the experiences of communitas and overcoming challenges are integral to the transformative process.

The communitas

On the volunteering journey, unconditional love and connectedness with others took many forms and were expressed in myriad ways. Unconditional love was a major theme in the reflections of participants, many of whom believed that the opportunity to make others feel appreciated and loved was among the profound and enduring parts of their volunteering journey. The "others" in this study refers to the community that the participants volunteered in, their host family, fellow volunteers, and all the people they met throughout their international volunteering journey. On this note, connectedness with others is expressed by a sense of inclusion, compassion, tolerance, sympathy, acceptance, and contentment. For most participants, the unconditional love experienced was non-blood-related family love, expressed in the form of an emotional bond with the host family, the children they volunteered with, and fellow volunteers. Most importantly, all participants found friendship love, some of which have turned into lifelong commitments, although some faded as soon as the physical journey ended.

A deep, meaningful human connection with fellow volunteers was noted in some participants' journeys. For Ford, one of the highlights of his volunteering journey was his connection with fellow volunteers. Volunteering with people from different backgrounds was an eye-opening experience for Ford. He learned the shared purpose among the international volunteers of giving back to the community bound all the varying beliefs, values, and habits of volunteers together.

> It's more of feeling amazed because it's the first time that I personally see people from different countries getting together for one shared purpose. – Ford

The trust, respect, and friendship that emerged among the volunteers developed a strong partnership and commitment to the project. This resonated with Hapu's view of international volunteering as a tool for peace and intercultural understanding. The volunteering journey has increased his mutual understanding with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Hapu learned that volunteering and living with people of diverse cultures contributes to the development of tolerance, respect, and acceptance. Regardless of race or culture, Hapu learned that people want to be understood, respected, and appreciated.

> The volunteering journey gave me chance to meet people from different countries ... we sat and talk to each other, you find out that everyone is very different from what you've perceived of them. Not only in religion but how they perceived a lot of things, people, and other things. There are other times when we get into conversations where we have opposite viewpoints. It was not a bad experience, but it was very interesting to be able to understand how other people think and letting them know how I think. I was giving a chance to speak up, and also giving other people a chance to speak up. And it was, I think, part of what changed me. Being able to discuss this with another person who's experiencing the same thing as I was just amazing. So, I think for me personally, the idea of diversity, different contexts, or different viewpoints, and being able to accept that I think it made this experience unique. – Hapu

Bina regarded her emotional connection, which she noted as a "non-logical connection", with people that crossed her path throughout the volunteering journey as something very spiritual for her. The most valuable outcome of the connection was the emotional ties that she built with one of her fellow volunteers'. As she noted, it was "turning a cultural stranger into a lifelong close friend." The experience showed that on volunteering journeys, as in life, it is the love and connectedness of others that carried the volunteers through their trials and triumphs. Thus, similar to pilgrimages, the common interest and shared experience of volunteers may develop a bond and fellowship – a sense of *communitas* (Digance, 2006) and the idea of "tourism as an agent for peace" (Wintersteiner & Wohlmuther, 2014).

The challenges

On the volunteering journey, although it was often a life-changing and positive experience, there was no shortage of challenges and trials that had to be met and overcome by the participants. These challenges were often beyond what their ego-mind thinks. As first-time international volunteers, most participants were nervous about the unknown and unsure of what to expect. From body to mind, to spirit, each stage of the international volunteering journey presented new challenges that the participants had to overcome.

For the participants, the test of the spirit was probably the most difficult one of all. Although each participant's journey was distinctive, the effect of seeing poverty firsthand and the emotions that derived from knowing the inequality in access to education and health care were universal. The feeling of sadness and hurt from seeing others struggle in life was an emotional trial faced by most participants. For example, Chana experienced overwhelming sadness and helplessness from witnessing poverty. Every time she talked about her encounters with the orphans and the local community, her eyes were clouded with some distressing emotions. At some point, Chana coped with the sadness of poverty by looking for "happiness" in the local communities. She was mystified at how these people, with so many reasons to complain, were only being generous.

> They showed me something that most rich people didn't. You know, you can go to someone very rich in their house and they will not treat you well as those people treated us. They were sharing with us their food, laughing with us, and showing us their place . . . And I'm sure that the food that we ate for one meal was going to last for three or four days for them. Instead, they decided to share it with us . . . – Chana

Hapu's portrait also highlighted how happiness comes with inner peace, not material possessions. The key to a contented life does not come from material goods but from a genuine feeling of satisfaction and peace. This was illustrated in how Hapu described the living conditions of his host family, characterized by a lack of material comfort. Hapu sensed gratefulness as the host parents were openly thankful for everything they have, fostering in their children the qualities of appreciation and generosity. Through the volunteering journey, Hapu experienced what he referred to as ". . .a humbling experience that make me understand the true meaning of happiness".

> It was a very, very different experience because everything is so basic. For example, they don't have a normal toilet seat or a bidet. The bathroom was outside the house . . . They didn't have a shower, so we showered using buckets . . . it was not a challenge but more like a barrier which I think is a must part of the journey. It's part of the experience that makes it unique. The most amazing thing was I didn't hear complaints from my host parents or family. Instead, it was all about being grateful and accepting for what they had.– Hapu

Being surrounded by others who have much fewer opportunities not only led to increased self-awareness but also injected a big guilt-inducing slap to the face of most participants. Chana, Hapu, Mona, and Aarya, for example, felt an intense feeling of guilt due to a new sense of self-awareness of their advantaged life. The emotional challenges were so overwhelming, that at some point, they led the participants into feelings of powerlessness. Strong guilt was apparent in Mona's portrait. The thought of being a temporary solution by volunteering to teach the children was heart-breaking for Mona. She had a great time with the children she volunteered with and they were emotionally attached to her without realizing that her presence was only temporary. Mona was very emotionally attached to the children and the thought of the abandonment that the children will face over and over again by different volunteers was upsetting for her.

Although they encountered various challenges throughout their participation, individuals in this study perceived their involvement in international volunteer tourism as a transformative and life-changing experience. Participants reported developing resilience and persistence, and experiencing unique opportunities for reflection, insight, personal growth, and restoration. These findings resonate with existing literature, highlighting similarities between pilgrims who view challenges as acts of religious devotion and tourists who perceive challenges as facilitators of self-transformation (Freidus & Caro, 2021; Frey, 1998).

The transformation

It was apparent in most of the portraits that little by little, the participants began to see that life can only grow outward in proportion to how stable it is inward. Simply put, it is critical to find love and peace within oneself, before searching for something outside. As previously stated, participants were inspired to embark on their journey to heal their suffering souls, to find peace within their circumstances, or to find answers to questions. Having successfully completed the volunteering journey, the participants gained a profound understanding of their purpose and skill, and attained higher levels of consciousness. Evidence of attaining a higher state of consciousness was illustrated within the participants' journeys which involved them being mindful of what was happening at the present moment. During this, the participants passed through the stages of trials – body, mind, and spirit – and ultimately turned their attention towards spiritual rejuvenation. Despite most of the participants being devotees of faith, spirituality for them is beyond God or a Higher Being. In other words, spirituality in this study was mainly used not to connote a personal and affective relationship with God/a Higher Being but to refer to the subjective relationship with their values and/or beliefs.

Some participants reported a climatic experience that seemed to mark their journey. Participants who were seeking healing, for example, found that pain can be a catalyst for personal and spiritual growth. Angi's volunteering journey was emotionally healing. She confronted her pain by channelling her energy into compassionate concern for others. Angi revealed in her blog that she had suffered from mental disorders, such as chronic stress and anxiety, her whole life. Angi believes she is now "more open and ready to face whatever comes in my life" as a consequence of her volunteer experience. The volunteering journey gave Angi an endless source of inspiration that challenged her thinking. She noted "volunteering had always been something I saw as selfless, something we did purely to benefit others. However, it has turned out to be I benefit more." Relatedly, the volunteering experience changed Chana's outlook on the world and opened her up to different people, food, and experiences. Volunteering not only makes a difference in the lives of those Chana volunteered for. In reality, it immensely changed her own personal outlook as well. She described this as a "reciprocal experience". The findings suggest that Angi's and Chana's perceptions of volunteering are changed as now they understand volunteering as a two-way street, where the benefits run both ways.

For many participants, while the journey may differ from their initial preconceptions, confronting the self was the greatest atonement of all. Each portrait revealed that the ultimate boon of the participants' volunteering journey was that they found their life meaning and purpose through understanding more about themselves as individuals. In this case, international volunteer tourism serves as the source and/or the result of the participants' search for meaning and purpose both in and for life. Chana's portrait illustrated that she found her life purpose through AIESEC and her volunteering journey in Egypt had significant personal meaning. As such, international volunteering was a journey that was not just for her body, but also for her soul.

Ultimately, some participants indicated that while they may have not found exactly what they were looking for on the international volunteering journey, they did find valuable lessons that changed their lives. Lia, for example, who initially was hesitant to heed the call to volunteer due to fear and self-doubt, described this extraordinary experience, saying, "this experience meant a significant part of my life to me. It made me happy, stronger, fulfilled, and proud." Lia's experience was echoed by all the participants, as they spoke of the transformation that took place simply by heeding the insistent call to volunteer. For Lia, leaving her comfort zone paid off as the experience was not only self-rewarding but also gave her a new perspective on happiness. Lia held no personal connection with the word spirituality and does not consider herself a spiritual person because she is quite happy with her life, but she found contentment through her connection with people through volunteering, which she considered a spiritual experience. This finding is consistent with that of McKenzie (2016), who argues happiness is a sense of feelings cultivated by connectedness with self, whereas connectedness with others is grounded in the notion of contentment, which is a deep and meaningful relationship with others. This form of "happiness" echoed Ulluwishewa's (2014, p. xiv) notion of "spiritual happiness" which she believes is "the only true and lasting happiness" that one experiences through activities undertaken for purely selfless or altruistic reasons. In this context, these findings highlight the important role of spirituality in promoting the sustainable development of self through volunteering.

Conclusion and implications

The findings of this study reveal that international volunteer tourism incorporates elements of pilgrimage, including meaning, ritual, and transformative experiences that lead to rejuvenation. Despite the diverse motivations for embarking on the international volunteer tourism journey, the one theme that united the experiences of all participants for this study was the sense of connectedness. This feeling of connectedness encompassed connections with oneself, others, the world, and something beyond, leading to a transcendence of self, time, and space. Importantly, participants approached connectedness from a spiritual perspective, rather than a religious one, indicating that

the conceptualization of pilgrimage in international volunteer tourism extends beyond the confines of religion to emphasize spirituality. Additionally, the transformative journey of international volunteer tourism is rooted in the ritualistic nature of the journey, particularly the experiences of communitas and overcoming challenges during the journey. Scholars have noted that international volunteer tourism often fosters a sense of communitas among volunteers due to their shared liminal and emotional space (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017). As such, the study reveals a sense of connectedness among participants when they find meaning in life, undergo transformative and life-changing challenges (harmony with self), experience communitas (harmony with others), and accept life's trials and living in the present (harmony with the universe).

The theme of unconditional love emerged as a dominant aspect of participants' experiences, with many expressing that feeling appreciated and valued was one of the most profound and lasting parts of their volunteering journey. Satisfaction and gratification derived from the love and affection of the hosts and the children the seven participants worked with. The interactions and connections with these people were so profound that the participants considered the experience spiritual. This aligns with existing literature, which highlights the significant role that children play in cultivating meaningful experiences in international volunteer tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017), as they serve as agents of participants' spiritual experience. Witnessing poverty, suffering, and inequality in access to education and healthcare, and recognizing their own privilege, evoked complex emotions of increased self-awareness, guilt, and sadness amongst participants. However, encountering these challenging situations also stimulated the spiritual experiences of them. Accordingly, the study's findings indicate that achieving true and lasting happiness requires a pursuit of selfless and altruistic activities.

This paper presents a novel approach to exploring spirituality in the context of international volunteer tourism, by linking it to the concept of pilgrimage. The findings demonstrate that the experiences of international volunteer tourists can contribute to the rejuvenation of the pilgrimage concept in the contemporary world, which reflects the ongoing evolution of pilgrimage from an act of religious devotion to a more fluid, subjective, and nuanced concept. As such, individuals are now free to seek out experiences that are similar to the spiritual, sacred, or mystical experiences of pilgrims, without being constrained by religious or spiritual tourism, or formal or secular pilgrimage sites where externally imposed rituals dominate (Polus et al., 2022). This study contributes to the expanding understanding of pilgrimage by highlighting its potential to encompass a broad range of experiences that foster personal growth, transformation, and connectedness, beyond traditional religious frameworks.

The paper argues for a more subjective approach to understanding pilgrimage and spirituality in the context of contemporary tourism. Rather than focusing on rigid categories based on motive or faith, the paper suggests exploring the functional context of the pilgrimage journey. By undertaking this, we can enhance our comprehension of how such experiences can bring about personal transformation, irrespective of an individual's religious or cultural backgrounds. By focusing on the inner journey and the process of becoming, rather than on external markers of religiosity, the paper suggests that we can better understand the fluid realities of the post-modern world and the spirituality embedded within it (Polus et al., 2022). Ultimately, this approach allows for a more inclusive and flexible understanding of pilgrimage and spirituality that can accommodate a wide range of individual experiences and perspectives.

This paper has shown the importance of subjective aspects in volunteer tourism, countering the limitations of current understandings and representations of volunteer tourism that are focused almost exclusively on the economic and social aspects of the industry. This is especially important as it is believed that spirituality, or religion in general, can be one of the most effective tools to cultivate inclusive and sustainable development when working with local communities (Jain, 2001; Ulluwishewa, 2014). By highlighting the subjective and spiritual experiences of volunteers in international volunteer tourism, this paper suggests that incorporating spirituality into the development of volunteer tourism programmes could be a valuable way to promote sustainable and

inclusive development in local communities. Such activities may encompass programmes that extend beyond tangible benefits, prioritizing the cultivation of profound connections with local communities, facilitation of cultural exchange, and the active highlighting of positive impacts on community well-being. In addition, a further investigation of this area could assist in identifying ways of integrating spiritual and religious elements into volunteer tourism programmes in a respectful and beneficial manner for both volunteers and the local community. Furthermore, it is imperative to broaden the scope of this work beyond the current sample utilized in this study to encompass a more diverse range of socio-demographic characteristics. Finally, there is potential for future research to explore how religious distinctions might influence or impact volunteering experiences and conceptualizations of pilgrimage.

Note

1. AIESEC stands for the "Association internationale des étudiants en sciences économiques et commerciales" in French, which translates as the "International Economic and Commercial Sciences Students Association". However, AIESEC is no longer used as an acronym but simply as the name of the organization (AIESEC, 2022).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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