

Article

Modeling the Mediation Variables of the Restorative Potential of the Way of Saint James (Camino de Santiago)

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ABSTRACT

Background/Objective: Pilgrims attribute therapeutic effects to the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*). A study was designed to model the mediating variables of therapeutic effects. **Method:** A total of 1,080 pilgrims participated in the study, 52.8% women, aged between 18 and 75 years who responded via the Google Forms platform to a questionnaire comprised by a measure of the attitude towards the Way, the potential restorative of the way, moral norm, and fear of crime perception. **Results:** The results supported a predictive role of attitudes towards the Way on the restorative potential, as well as the mediating effect that both the moral norm and fear of crime perception exert on this relationship in a complementary and independent manner. **Conclusions:** Positive attitudes toward the way, the perception of it being a safe path across its different routes, and the normative values associated with it constitute a mediating model of the therapeutic effects of the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*).

Modelización de las Variables de Mediación del Potencial Restaurador del Camino de Santiago

RESUMEN

Antecedentes/Objetivo: Los peregrinos atribuyen efectos terapéuticos al Camino de Santiago. Se diseñó un estudio para modelar las variables mediadoras de los efectos terapéuticos. **Método:** Un total de 1.080 peregrinos participaron en el estudio, 52,8% mujeres, con edades comprendidas entre 18 y 75 años, que respondieron a través de la plataforma *Google Forms* a un cuestionario compuesto por una medida de la actitud hacia el Camino, el potencial restaurador del camino, la norma moral y la percepción del miedo al delito. **Resultados:** Los resultados respaldaron un papel predictivo de las actitudes hacia el Camino sobre el potencial restaurador, así como el efecto mediador que tanto la norma moral como la percepción del miedo al delito ejercen sobre esta relación de manera complementaria e independiente. **Conclusiones:** Las actitudes positivas hacia el camino, la percepción de que es un sendero seguro a lo largo de sus diferentes rutas y los valores normativos asociados constituyen un modelo mediador de los efectos terapéuticos del Camino de Santiago.

Palabras clave:

Peregrinación

Efectos terapéuticos

Psicología ambiental

Actitudes

Normas morales

Miedo al delito

Experiencias basadas en la naturaleza

Introduction

The relationship between human behavior and the socio-physical environment is fundamental both from the perspective of promoting pro-environmental behaviors and from the perception of health and quality of life improvement. This is explained not only by experiences in the environment but also by the objective characteristics of the place. When discussing the qualities of the environment and nature in people's psychological recovery, the role played by the intrinsic characteristics of the environment cannot be overlooked, as psychological restoration requires that space contains the necessary restorative qualities for those who perceive it (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983). In this regard, the importance of studying the restorative potential of the environment for quality of life improvement has led the scientific community in recent decades to address this issue from different perspectives (Brumec et al., 2023; Frumkin et al., 2017; Jørgensen et al., 2020; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Liu et al., 2020; San Juan, 2016; Subiza-Pérez et al., 2020; Ulrich et al., 1991).

According to Staats et al. (2003), restorative potential is the process by which the organism reestablishes functional capacities and resources that have been diminished by different environmental factors to which it has been exposed. Through this process, we have the capacity to recover cognitive resources and psychophysiological responses (Van den Berg et al., 2007).

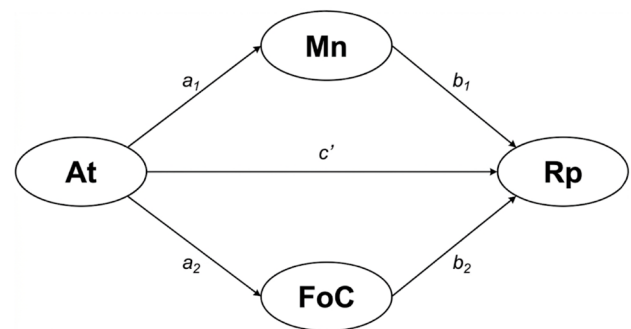
Although restorative potential can vary from one environment to another, as well as from one person to another, various studies have demonstrated that interaction with natural environments has healthy and restorative effects insofar as they have positive effects on health by improving mood and attention and reducing stress levels (Frumkin et al., 2017); facilitating group cohesion and generating a greater sense of community (Wilkie et al., 2020), enabling processes of reflection, personal transformation, and spiritual connection (Passmore & Krause, 2023), shaping long-term attitudes toward nature through formative experiences (Ward Thompson et al., 2008); and even influencing mortality rates (Mitchell & Popham, 2008).

On the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*), nature plays a crucial role not only by providing a magnificent landscape along the different Jacobean routes but also by generating possible health benefits for pilgrims. While existing literature recognizes the importance of landscape quality, including attractiveness and uniqueness, in shaping individuals' engagement and fostering positive perceptions (Chen & Marzbali, 2023), research on the specific relationship between landscape quality and its restorative potential remains incomplete. The Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*) is a route that attracts thousands of pilgrims each year not only for its religious and cultural value but also for the psychological experiences it offers.

Research on the psychological therapeutic effects of the Way is relatively scarce, especially when considering quantitative approaches with large samples (Feliú-Soler, 2024), but even more so when circumscribed to the context of the Way and approached from the perspective of environmental psychology. From this perspective, it is important to emphasize that not all natural environments contribute to restoration, primarily when other variables influence the subjects experiencing the setting, such as the perception of danger or lack of pleasantness (Van den Berg et al., 2007). Thus, variables related to the perception of how safe the Way seems in relation to the characteristics of the place cannot be overlooked,

nor can variables such as attitudes expressed toward it and/or moral obligation norms that could be influencing whether the way becomes a therapy or self-therapy (Jørgensen et al., 2020; Beck & Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify to what extent these variables are part of the restorative qualities of the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*). Our study aims to analyze the predictive relationship between Attitudes toward the Way and Restorative Potential, and the mediating role that Moral Norm and Fear of Crime Perception might have in this relationship. This mediating effect is expected to be positive in the case of Moral Norm and negative in the case of Fear of Crime Perception; that is, positive attitudes are expected to increase Moral Norm and decrease Fear of Crime Perception, and a higher degree of Moral Norm is expected to increase Restorative Potential, while a higher degree of Fear of Crime Perception is expected to decrease Restorative Potential. Regarding the direct effect of Attitudes toward the Way on Restorative Potential, it is expected to be positive; that is, positive attitudes are expected to increase Restorative Potential. The proposed mediation model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Proposed Mediation Model for the Relationship Between Attitudes (At), Moral Norms (Mn), Perceived Fear of Crime (FoC) and Restorative Potential (Rp)



Method

Participants

A total of 1,080 pilgrims participated in the study (52.8% women, 47.2% men), aged from 18 to 75 years. Most of the pilgrims were of Spanish origin (68.4%), although there were also significant numbers from other regions, such as Latin America (21.8%), other EU countries (5.3%) and 2.2% from the United States. Regarding educational level, 5.7% had primary education, 12.4% secondary education, 26.9% high school diploma, 49.8% university education, and 5.2% postgraduate studies.

Measures

Therapeutic potential was measured with the Landscape Restorative Potential Scale (LRPS), a Likert-type scale consisting of 8 items with response options ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Completely*): After being in the environment of the Way, I felt calmer; After visiting this place I felt renewed and relaxed; Being there I gained new spirit and energy to return to my daily routines; After being in this place, my concentration capacity increased; In

that environment I can forget my everyday worries; Being there was a way to clear my thoughts; In this place I distance myself from the things that happen to me and see them from a new perspective; There I usually think about my priorities and goals in life. The scale showed excellent reliability, $\alpha = .906$, and construct validity.

To measure Attitudes toward the Way (AC), a 7-point semantic differential was used, composed of a single statement evaluated on 5 pairs of adjectives. The two components of the individual's global evaluation were taken into account: instrumental component (harmful-beneficial) and experiential component (pleasant-unpleasant) (Ajzen, 2006). "For you, doing the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*) is...": "Harmful—beneficial, pleasant—unpleasant, useless—useful, good—bad, boring—fun." The scale showed excellent reliability, $\alpha = .915$.

For the measurement of Moral Norm (MN), 3 items were used, responded to on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5): "I feel morally obligated to do the Way at least once in my lifetime." "Not doing the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*) at least once goes against my moral principles." "Regardless of what others do, my values tell me that I should do the Way at least once." The measure showed good reliability, $\alpha = .833$.

The Fear of Crime Perception (FCP) measure was obtained with 10 items adapted from San Juan et al. (2005), to which participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Completely*): It is a place conducive to committing crimes; There are usually people with a "suspicious appearance"; When passing through that place I sometimes think I could be a victim of a crime; In case of danger it is likely that no one will help me; Some part of the place could be a hiding place for a criminal; It is a physically deteriorated place, very mistreated, abandoned; It is a lonely place, where there is no commercial activity, nor people walking around; There is not enough lighting; There are no security measures, surveillance, fences, etc.; There are no paths or ways to escape in case of danger. The scale showed good internal consistency, $\alpha = .844$.

Procedure

For this study, a questionnaire was designed using some scales already employed by other authors and adapting others to this study. The wording of each item was developed and presented in a clear and precise manner, allowing subjects to make value judgments by offering different opposing alternatives, from the most favorable to the most unfavorable depending on different categories or response options. These are scales where each subject responds to both Likert-type scales (1-5) and semantic differentials. To analyze the results obtained, a numerical value was assigned to these categories, always maintaining the internal coherence of the trait being measured. To avoid stereotyped responses, the different items were combined with each other, so that all statements denoting positive or favorable perceptions were not located on one side, that is, at the beginning or end of the questionnaire, with those indicating more negative or unfavorable perceptions on the opposite side.

The questionnaire was conducted using the Google Forms platform and distributed online through social networks, reaching different organizations and interest groups so that its dissemination would reach the largest number of pilgrims possible. Participants, who signed informed consent, responded voluntarily and

anonymously, with data being stored and processed in accordance with Organic Law 3/2018, of December 5, on the Protection of Personal Data and guarantee of digital rights (2018).

Data Analysis

As a first step in determining the predictive model, internal consistency was calculated for each of the scales involved, using Cronbach's alpha. Next, mean scores were calculated for each scale, which were used in the mediation model.

In a second step, the effect that sociodemographic variables might have on the model scales was examined. To this end, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed, taking the global scores of the scales as dependent variables and sex as the independent factor, including age and educational level as covariates in the analysis.

In a third step, means, standard deviations, and correlations between the model scales were calculated. For the mediation analyses, Model 4 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) was used, corresponding to that shown in Figure 1. Sex, age, and educational level were included as covariates to be controlled in the model. To generate 95% confidence intervals for the estimation of model parameters, 5,000 samples were generated through bootstrapping; an effect is considered significant when the confidence interval does not include zero (Preacher et al., 2007).

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations between the model variables.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the Model's Scales

Escala	<i>M (SD)</i>		Correlation matrix		
Rp	4.31 (.70)		Rp	Foc	Mn
Foc	2.06 (.71)	FoC	-.194***		
Mn	3.26 (1.37)	Mn	.352***	-.115***	
At	4.85 (.36)	At	.565***	-.193***	.307***

As can be seen in Table 1, the correlations between the 4 scales of the model were highly significant, with the highest being that between Restorative Potential and Attitudes toward the Way, followed by that between Restorative Potential and Moral Norm. As expected, the relationship between Fear of Crime Perception and the other 3 scales was inverse in all cases.

The MANCOVA results showed a significant multivariate effect of the sex factor, $F(4, 1073) = 14.08, p < .001$, as well as of the covariates age, $F(4, 1073) = 4.17, p < .01$, and educational level, $F(4, 1073) = 4.96, p < .001$. The univariate effects showed a significant effect of the sex factor on the 4 model variables: Attitudes toward the Way, $F(1, 1076) = 14.12, p < .001$; Moral Norm, $F(1, 1076) = 13.63, p < .001$; Fear of Crime Perception, $F(1, 1076) = 4.17, p < .05$; and Restorative Potential, $F(1, 1076) = 10.41, p < .01$. Inspection of the means by sex showed a significantly higher mean in Attitudes toward the Way for women ($M = 4.89$) than for men ($M = 4.81$). However, the effect size for this difference

is small ($d = 0.21$); a significantly higher mean in Moral Norm for men ($M = 3.47$) than for women ($M = 3.07$); a significantly higher mean in Fear of Crime Perception in women ($M = 2.12$) than in men ($M = 2.00$); finally, a significantly higher mean in Restorative Potential was found for women ($M = 4.36$) than for men ($M = 4.26$).

For its part, the age covariate showed a significant effect on Moral Norm, $F(1, 1076) = 10.72, p < .01$, Fear of Crime Perception, $F(1, 1076) = 4.60, p < .05$; and on Restorative Potential, $F(1, 1076) = 5.97, p < .05$. To interpret these significant effects, nonparametric correlations were calculated between age and each of the scales. The correlation coefficients indicated the existence of a positive relationship between age and Moral Norm, $r = .106, p < .001$, a negative relationship with Fear of Crime Perception, $r = -.096, p < .05$. However, the correlation between age and Restorative Potential was not significant, $r = .025, p = .415$.

Finally, the results revealed a significant effect of educational level on Attitudes toward the Way, $F(1, 1076) = 4.72, p < .05$, on Moral Norm, $F(1, 1076) = 17.51, p < .001$, and on Restorative Potential, $F(1, 1076) = 5.62, p < .05$. The nonparametric correlations between educational level and these scales showed a negative correlation between educational level and Moral Norm ($r = -.145, p < .001$), while the correlation of educational level with Attitudes toward the Way, $r = -.053, p = .080$, and Restorative Potential, $r = -.041, p = .181$, were not significant.

Based on the results found and given the existence of several significant effects of sociodemographic variables on some of the model scales, these variables were included as covariates to be controlled in the mediation model.

The mediation analysis showed a significant effect of both mediators, Moral Norm and Fear of Crime Perception, on the predictive relationship between Attitudes toward the Way and Restorative Potential. This mediation effect is partial, as the direct predictive power of Attitudes toward the Way on Restorative Potential, $c = .56, p < .001$, once both mediation effects are taken into account, continues to be significant, although of lesser magnitude, $c' = .48, p < .001$. Figure 2 shows the standardized coefficients corresponding to the different effects of the model, as well as the variance explained for the mediating variables and the dependent variable.

It can be seen that the mediation effect of Moral Norm is appreciably greater than that of Fear of Crime Perception and is positive in nature; that is, Moral Norm is increased by positive attitudes and, in turn, has a positive effect on Restorative Potential.

Conversely, Fear of Crime Perception is reduced by positive attitudes and this, in turn, has a negative effect on Restorative Potential. Thus, although attitudes have an overall positive effect on Restorative Potential, this is mediated positively by Moral Norm, and negatively in the case of Fear of Crime Perception.

Table 2 contains the unstandardized coefficients of the model, along with their standard errors and 95% confidence intervals, as well as the effects of the covariates sex, age, and educational level on Moral Norm, Fear of Crime Perception, and Restorative Potential. The interpretation of the unstandardized coefficients corresponding to the model is analogous to that already discussed for the standardized coefficients shown in Figure 2.

When examining the covariate coefficients in Table 2, significant effects of sex, age, and educational level are observed in the relationship between Attitudes toward the Way and Moral Norm. In the case of sex, this effect is negative, which indicates significantly higher values in Moral Norm for men than for women across different levels of Attitudes toward the Way (see Figure 3a). For its part, the positive coefficient associated with age indicates significantly higher values in Moral Norm as it increases (see Figure 3f), while the negative coefficient associated with educational level indicates significantly lower levels in Moral Norm for individuals with more education (see Figure 3e). In the case of the relationship between Attitudes toward the Way and Fear of

Figure 2

Standardised Coefficients (b) and Coefficients of Determination (R^2), and the Total (c) and Direct (c') Effects of X on Y for the Mediation Model Involving Attitudes (At), Moral Norms (Mn), Perceived Fear of Crime (PMD) and Restorative Potential (PR). Note: ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

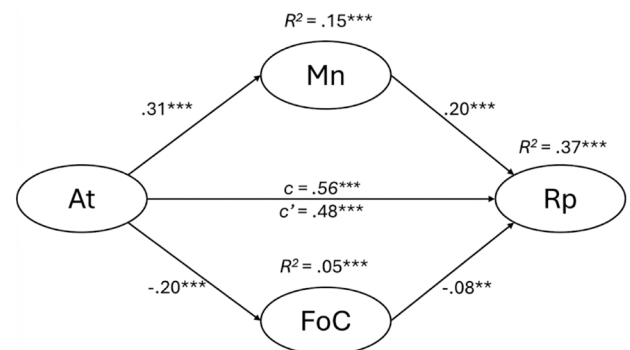


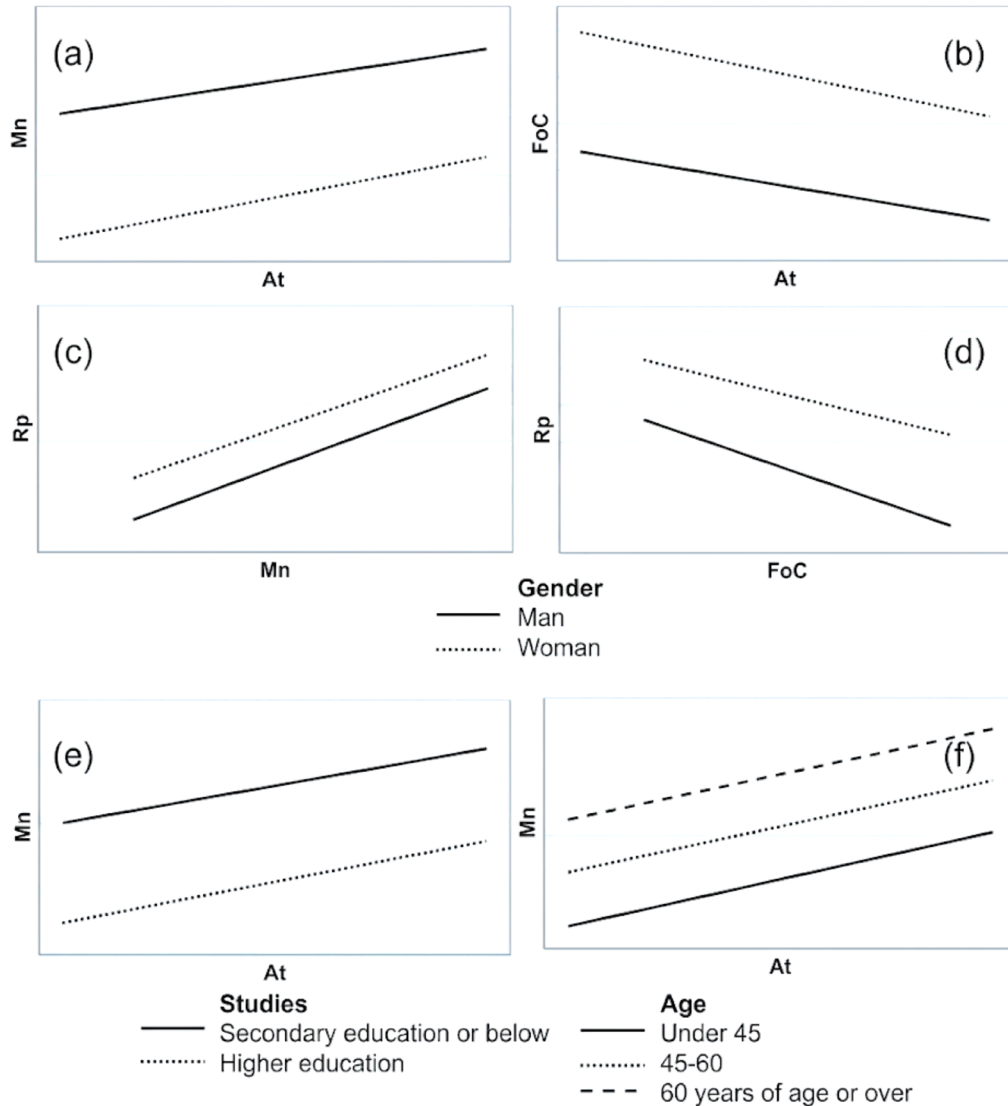
Table 2

Unstandardised Coefficients, Standard Errors, and 95% Confidence Intervals for the Mediation Model Involving Attitudes (At), Moral Norms (Mn), Perceived Fear of Crime (Foc) and Restorative Potential (Rp), Together With the Effects of the Covariates Gender, age and Educational Attainment

At (X) → M			M → Rp (Y)			At (X) → M → Rp (Y)			
M		Coef. (e. t.)	I. C. 95%		Coef. (e. t.)	I. C. 95%		Coef. (e. t.)	I. C. 95%
Mn	a_1	1.22(.11)	[1.01,1.43]	b_1	.10(.01)	[.08,.13]	$a_1 * b_1$	.12(.02)	[.09,.17]
Foc	a_2	-.40(.06)	[-.52,-.28]	b_2	-.08(.02)	[-.13,-.03]	$a_2 * b_2$	.03(.01)	[.01,.06]
							c'	.94(.05)	[.84,1.05]
Covariables		Dependent: Mn		Dependent: Foc		Dependent: Rp			
Gender		-.41(.08)	[-.57,-.26]		.12(.04)	[.04,.21]		.10(.04)	[.03,.17]
Age		.14(.05)	[.05,.23]		-.05(.02)	[-.10,-.00]		.03(.02)	[-.01,.07]
Studies		-.15(.04)	[-.23,-.07]		.03(.02)	[-.01,.07]		-.01(.02)	[-.04,.03]

Figure 3

Effects of the Covariates age, Gender and Educational Attainment on the Relationships Between the Variables in the Model. The x-Axis Represents the First, Second and Third Quartiles of the Independent/mediating Variable, Whilst the y-Axis Represents the Mean Scores on the Mediating/Dependent Scale



Crime Perception, only a positive effect of sex is found, which indicates significantly higher values in Fear of Crime Perception for women than for men across different levels of Attitudes toward the Way (see Figure 3b). Finally, in the case of the relationship between both mediators and Restorative Potential, the positive effect of sex indicates significantly higher levels of Restorative Potential for women compared to men (see Figures 3c and 3d). Overall, these covariate effects correspond to those found by the MANCOVA.

The proposed mediation model assumes that the mediation effects of Moral Norm and Fear of Crime Perception are independent of each other. To rule out the possible existence of relationships between both mediators, two alternative mediation models were tested in which there was an additional predictive relationship between both mediators (Model 6; Hayes, 2013). In the case of the first model, the effect of Moral Norm on Fear of Crime

Perception was proposed, while in the second, the effect of Fear of Crime Perception on Moral Norm was proposed. In both cases, the coefficient obtained was not significant ($MN \rightarrow FCP = -.0166, p = .318$; $FCP \rightarrow MN = -.0559, p = .318$). This result confirms the independence of the mediation effects of Moral Norm and Fear of Crime Perception in the relationship between Attitudes toward the Way and Restorative Potential.

Discussion

The present research has examined the role played by the restorative potential of the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*), a natural and culturally significant environment, in its possible relationship with attitudes and fear of crime. The results obtained robustly confirm the predictive role of Attitudes toward

the Way on perceived Restorative Potential. This relationship underscores that individual disposition can be a highly relevant factor in experiencing the restorative benefits offered by natural environments.

A central finding of this study is the identification of the complementary and independent mediating effects of Moral Norm and Fear of Crime Perception in the relationship between Attitudes and Restorative Potential. Specifically, it is observed that more positive attitudes toward the Way predict higher values of Moral Norm, which in turn translates into greater Restorative Potential. In the case of fear of crime, the mediation effect is negative; that is, high values in Attitudes toward the Way predict lower fear of crime which, in turn, predicts greater Restorative Potential.

Moreover, the analyses reveal that the mediating role of Moral Norm is notably more pronounced than that of fear of crime. This difference in the magnitude of the mediating effects could be explained by the generally low mean levels of fear of crime observed in the sample, suggesting a widespread perception of safety among pilgrims on the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*).

Likewise, regarding the sociodemographic variables introduced as covariates in the model, male sex is associated with higher Moral Norm, while female sex is associated with higher fear of crime, as well as higher values of Restorative Potential. Furthermore, older individuals and those with lower educational levels tend to report higher Moral Norm. These findings reveal the complex interaction between individual characteristics, environmental perceptions, and restorative outcomes.

The demonstration of how attitudes, moral norms, and perception of safety interact to shape restorative experiences goes beyond traditional models focused solely on environmental characteristics or direct psychological responses. The inclusion of Moral Norm and Fear of Crime Perception as mediators suggests that the restorative potential of an environment is not merely a function of its inherent natural qualities or an individual's immediate preference but is deeply intertwined with sociocultural values and perceptions of safety. The Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*), with its strong cultural and moral connotations, presents itself as an ideal context for revealing these less explored mediating pathways. This points toward a more holistic model of human-environment interaction, where personal values and perceived safety play active roles rather than merely background roles in the restorative experience.

In sum, the findings of this research suggest that the Way of Saint James (*Camino de Santiago*) could be conceived as a "therapeutic landscape," where the natural environment intertwines with social conditions, cultural meanings, and human perception to foster psychological well-being. The Moral Norm variable in this study provides empirical evidence that the cultural and moral significance of the Way actively shapes the pilgrim's experience, making it more restorative. It is not only the physical act of walking in nature, but the meaning attributed to that walk through shared cultural norms and values, that amplifies its therapeutic potential. We would be witnessing how cultural frameworks transform a natural space into a restorative setting, transcending generic exposure to nature to become a healing journey.

Replicating this study on other pilgrimage routes or long-distance trails, both within and outside Spain, would allow for cross-cultural comparisons and a better understanding of how specific cultural contexts influence the interaction of attitudes, norms, and safety.

The findings presented may have direct implications for the design, management, and promotion of natural spaces, especially long-distance trails and pilgrimage routes. First, promotional campaigns for the Way could emphasize its unique restorative qualities, fostering positive attitudes that, as demonstrated, predict greater restoration. Second, maintaining and improving the perception of safety on these routes is paramount. Efforts to reduce fear of crime perception (e.g., through visible security, community engagement, and proper maintenance) will contribute directly to greater psychological restoration, especially for vulnerable groups. Finally, recognizing and subtly reinforcing the normative and cultural values associated with the Way can amplify its restorative effects. This could involve promoting shared values, community engagement among pilgrims, and highlighting the historical and spiritual significance of the journey.

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