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## Tools to Persevere Towards a Challenging Goal: Lessons Learned about Grit Along the Way of St. James

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

\* The first and second authors contributed equally to the authorship and should be listed as co-first authors

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# Tools to Persevere Towards a Challenging Goal: Lessons Learned about Grit Along the Way of St. James

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Understanding the factors contributing to increased perseverance and passion toward long-term goals is an ongoing research challenge. The present study explores the inner drive of individuals to achieve meaningful goals over time, despite setbacks and challenges. The scenario chosen to uncover grit processes was the Way of St. James, a long pilgrimage demanding participants' perseverance and passion for achieving their goals, despite hardship. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-one individuals completing the Way of St. James. Thematic analysis indicated three key themes contributing to improve the participants' perseverance along the walk: behavioural tools (e.g., setting behavioural and time management goals), emotional tools (i.e., enjoyment and learning, belongingness), and cognitive tools (i.e., taking perspective, use of metacognitive knowledge). These findings are consistent with prior research and lifelong learning policies while suggesting that challenges and adversities are unavoidable; however, the more autonomous and open people are to continue learning over their lifespan, the more prepared they will be to cope with changes in the environment and to pursue their meaningful goals.

**Key Words:** perseverance, passion, grit, pilgrims, the Way of St. James

## Introduction

The primary purpose of education is to train individuals for later life challenges (Zipory, 2018). Lifelong learning literature reports that individuals are better prepared to face an uncertain future when they are equipped with abilities likely to help them pursue their goals with tenacity, adapt to new conditions, and cope with stressful events (OECD, 2018). Prior studies and

lifelong learning reports indicate a set of core abilities likely to foster adaptability in a changing environment: intellectual abilities (e.g., critical thinking), interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities (e.g., grit), and digital abilities

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(e.g., media literacy) (OECD, 2018; Park *et al.*, 2017). Out of this set of abilities, grit has been attracting the public and scientific communities' interest (Credé *et al.*, 2017). Duckworth *et al.* (2007) defined grit as the ability to persevere with passion toward long-term goals, despite hardships or lack of progress.

Extant research shows a positive relationship between grit and various outcomes over the lifespan (e.g., school achievement and well-being (Jin & Kim, 2017; Tang *et al.*, 2019); however, some aspects of grit have been poorly explored. For example, further investigation of personal or social factors strengthening this construct is needed. Aiming to fill this gap, the current study explores what sustains individuals' efforts to overcome challenges and achieve meaningful goals in a natural setting to investigate grit. The scenario chosen was the Way of St. James, a long pilgrimage requiring participants' perseverance and passion for pursuing their paths and achieving their final goals. Hopefully, the findings will help further understanding of the *process* of pursuing challenging goals and learn how individuals may practice this ability in contexts demanding determination. Lifelong learning research provides a relevant theoretical background for the current study.

### Grit

Grit combines passion and perseverance toward long-term goals (Duckworth *et al.* 2007). Literature on the topic is vast, and researchers have focused on the relationships between grit and related variables. For example, grit was found to be associated with subjective well-being (Jin & Kim, 2017), school engagement (Tang *et al.*, 2019), retention in demanding jobs (Eskreis-Winkler *et al.*, 2014), academic achievement (Steinmayr *et al.*, 2018), and career success (Danner *et al.*, 2020). Irrespective of the research focus, findings show that developing a strong interest or passion drives individuals to invest time and effort in regular and effective practices (Vallerand *et al.*, 2007). Consistent with these data, Hill *et al.* (2016) found that individuals pursuing passionate goals and working hard to complete their tasks will likely achieve better outcomes than those pursuing goals with less passion and persistence. However, literature warns that physical or mental fatigue, setbacks, failures, and lack of progress are likely to occur in the process of pursuing long-term goals; therefore, people may become

discouraged or give up on their goals in the presence of demanding experiences (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). For these reasons, exploring what sustains individuals while pursuing a challenging goal is relevant in grit literature.

Prior research exploring antecedents of grit has been stressing the role of personal and social-related factors as follows: positive affect and commitment to one's life purpose (Hill *et al.* 2016); mindfulness, in particular, the facets of acting with awareness and non-judgment (Raphiphatthana *et al.*, 2018); growth mindset in relation to intelligence (Park *et al.*, 2020) and; mastery-focused school culture (Park *et al.*, 2018). However, the literature lacks studies examining the *process* of pursuing a challenging goal by analysing personal and social factors contributing to sustaining grit. The current study investigates grit by exploring individuals' reported experiences while involved in a challenging task.

### *The Way of St. James: A Natural Setting to Investigate Grit*

Expressions like '*passion*,' '*determination*,' and '*structured practice*' are often used in biographies of great athletes to describe factors contributing to their successful path (e.g., Vallerand *et al.*, 2006). This may help explain why literature suggests that physical activity is a privileged arena to develop life skills (Pierce *et al.*, 2017) and a natural setting to investigate grit (Albert *et al.*, 2021). The Way of St. James is a well-known old pilgrimage and a physical activity that challenges many people yearly (Pilgrim's Reception Office, 2021). On foot, by bicycle, or by horse, many travellers pursue a route to reach the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (Spain), where the remains of Saint James are buried (Amaro *et al.*, 2018). Official data indicate that in 2019, 347,578 pilgrims from 190 countries completed this journey (Pilgrim's Reception Office, 2021).

Motivations for travelling the Way of St. James' pilgrimage are various and not all religious related (Kim *et al.*, 2016). Literature reports that spirituality, sensation-seeking quest, and fulfilment of personal values are among the most important motivations for pilgrims to take this journey (e.g., Amaro *et al.*, 2018; Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016). The unique opportunities and challenges provided to travellers along the Way of St. James make this a natural setting to explore how individuals practice perseverance

to achieve a challenging and meaningful goal. The reasons are five-fold: first, walking to Santiago de Compostela is an activity freely chosen, which is likely to reflect the degree to which individuals are interested in and value the activity (Amaro *et al.*, 2018). Second, these participants are moving towards a well-defined goal (Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Spain), which many perceive as challenging (Oviedo *et al.*, 2014). Third, participants are involved full-time in this activity for an extended period (e.g., one week, two weeks etc.) (Lois-González & Santos, 2015), which allows for exploring the *process* of pursuing a challenging goal over time. Fourth, this activity prompts participants to overcome numerous hardships (e.g., physical fatigue, sleeping in a large dorm room with snoring roommates, and walking in the rain for several hours (see Im & Jun, 2015). Finally, previous research suggests that completing the Way of St. James is an experience that encourages self-examination and fosters a sense of lifelong development (Nilsson, 2018). This experiential mood may help explore what contributes to promoting the growth of abilities, such as persevering with passion for achieving a challenging goal.

### ***Lifelong Learning Background***

Lifelong learning provides a relevant theoretical background for the present study. Lifelong learning assumes that people can fulfil their potential throughout life, particularly those open to cultivating new abilities, attitudes, and behaviours from birth to death (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). Lifelong learning aims to support individuals' growth in different life cycles, reduce economic and social inequalities, promote employability in a competitive and volatile labour market, and foster active citizenship (Commission of the European Communities, 2000). Moreover, international reports present examples of skills that should be cultivated throughout a lifetime due to their positive role in individuals' adaptability to cope with unpredictable and challenging work environments (e.g., determination to pursue challenging goals [grit], self-regulation, teamwork, flexibility to adapt to new circumstances, and respect for distinct cultures) (OECD 2018).

Regardless of the diversity of terms used in the literature for lifelong learning skills (e.g., non-cognitive abilities, life skills, characters strengths, virtues, social and

emotional learning abilities (Park *et al.* 2017), prior studies show that these skills increase prospects of a healthy and prosperous life, both in early age and in later life (Park *et al.* 2017; Steptoe & Wardle 2017). For example, the study by Park *et al.* (2017) with middle school students found that interpersonal abilities like gratitude and social intelligence predicted harmonious peer relationships. Also, intrapersonal abilities like academic self-control and grit predicted students' high grades, while intellectual skills such as curiosity and zest predicted class participation. Still, as OECD (2018) warns, to cope with unique and ongoing life challenges, individuals are expected to continue displaying efforts to acquire knowledge and cultivate core skills after finishing their studies. Consistent with these propositions, the work by Steptoe and Wardle (2017) shows that the accumulation of life skills (e.g., determination, emotional stability, optimism) is associated with economic growth, social and subjective well-being, and physical health in older ages. Finally, literature on lifelong learning education suggests that informal learning contexts, such as family, leisure time, or cultural activities, might be valuable settings for developing life skills useful to healthy trajectories (Commission of the European Communities, 2000).

### ***The Present Study***

Grit is associated with positive outcomes throughout one's lifespan (Eskreis-Winkler *et al.*, 2014; Tang *et al.*, 2019); still, further investigation is needed regarding the factors sustaining grit. We believe that the Way of St. James comprises the characteristics of a natural setting, helpful in investigating grit. Therefore, the current study aims to explore the perspectives of pilgrims walking the Way of St. James regarding the tools and management strategies needed to persevere and achieve their challenging ultimate goal. Findings are expected to contribute to a deepened understanding of grit processes in a natural, ongoing setting.

## **Methods**

This qualitative study is part of a larger research project about predictors of grit. Data from this independent study were analysed according to methodologies fit to address the research questions.



## Context

The main Way of St. James routes start in Spain, France, or Portugal (though routes start throughout Europe). According to the official data released by the Pilgrim's Reception Office, the Portuguese Way of St. James is the second most travelled, after the French route (Pilgrim's Reception Office, 2021). The Central Route, starting in Porto, is the most popular in Portugal due to the lack of municipal shelters between Lisbon, the capital, and the northern region. This route is approximately 149 miles long (240 km). Data were collected in the middle stage of this journey, in hostels for pilgrims at the end of a walking day.

## Participants

A total of 31 participants (65% male) aged between 31 and 75 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 49.38$  years,  $SD = 12.8$ ) completed a semi-structured interview about their experience on the Portuguese Way of St. James (see Table 1). Participants were from 11 different countries, including Portugal (22.6%), Brazil (22.6%), Germany (16.1%), the USA (13.0%), France (6.5%), Italy (3.2%), Australia (3.2%), Denmark (3.2%), Hungary (3.2%), Ireland (3.2%) and the Netherlands (3.2%). Of the sample, 80.6% completed a higher education degree. Participants had been walking or cycling for an average of 5 days ( $SD = 2.9$ ). Most (94%) were doing the Way of St. James on foot, and just 6% on a bicycle. About 61% of the participants were doing the Way of St. James alone, while 39% were accompanied or in a group. All participants were aiming to reach the final milestone: Santiago de Compostela. According to official data (Pilgrims' Reception Office, 2021), our sample demographic attributes (i.e., age, gender, and nationality) reflect the most representative profiles of pilgrims walking the Way of St. James.

## Data Collection

Data collection took place in the hostels of a city halfway between Porto (Portugal) and Santiago de Compostela (Spain) after the Ethics Committee's approval. This option allowed researchers to recruit participants who had been walking the Way of St. James for some days but still had many miles to walk. Every afternoon over two weeks, a team of researchers invited pilgrims settled in two hostels to participate in an interview about their

**Table 1: Descriptive Information About the Participants**

No.	Gender	Age	Nationality	Academic Qualifications
P1	Female	64	Brazilian	Higher Ed.
P2	Male	38	American	Higher Ed.
P3	Female	34	German	Higher Ed.
P4	Male	34	French	Higher Ed.
P5	Male	67	Australian	Higher Ed.
P6	Male	34	German	N/A
P7	Female	39	German	N/A
P8	Male	N/A	American	N/A
P9	Male	75	Danish	Higher Ed.
P10	Male	37	American	Higher Ed.
P11	Male	62	Italian	Higher Ed.
P12	Female	49	Portuguese	Higher Ed.
P13	Female	47	Portuguese	High school
P14	Female	48	Brazilian	Higher Ed.
P15	Male	31	German	Higher Ed.
P16	Male	71	American	N/A
P17	Female	38	German	Higher Ed.
P18	Male	58	Netherlands	Higher Ed.
P19	Female	52	Brazilian	Higher Ed.
P20	Male	69	Portuguese	Higher Ed.
P21	Female	59	French	Higher Ed.
P22	Male	N/A	Hungarian	N/A
P23	Female	36	Brazilian	Higher Ed.
P24	Male	61	Irish	Higher Ed.
P25	Male	50	Brazilian	Higher Ed.
P26	Male	33	Brazilian	Higher Ed.
P27	Female	57	Brazilian	Higher Ed.
P28	Male	46	Portuguese	Higher Ed.
P29	Male	47	Portuguese	Elementary Ed.
P30	Male	51	Portuguese	Higher Ed.
P31	Male	47	Portuguese	Higher Ed.

Note. N/A – Non-Answer.

experience on the Way of St. James. Inclusion criteria included understanding and fluently speaking Portuguese or English and having started the journey at or nearby Porto. Those who agreed to participate filled out an informed consent form before the interview.

The interviews were held in the hostels in settings with optimal conditions to guarantee participants' comfort and data confidentiality (e.g., a quiet and isolated place). The interviews were conducted in Portuguese and English by

trained native-speaking researchers. All the interviews followed the same protocol; the questions asked were as follows:

*'What reasons motivated you to pursue the Way of St. James?'*,

*'What difficulties have you encountered along the journey?'*,

*'How have you managed difficulties?'*,

*'What did you learn from this experience?'*,

*'What strengths about yourself did you identify or explore during the journey?'* and

*'What areas of growth did you identify or explore within yourself during the journey?'*.

Participants were asked for examples to illustrate their responses whenever necessary. Trained research assistants transcribed the 31 interviews verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were analysed using a hybrid approach of thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The deductive approach drew from the existing literature on grit (e.g., Duckworth *et al.*, 2007) and lifelong learning (e.g., Park *et al.*, 2017; Park & Peterson, 2009). The authors also followed a data-driven inductive approach to capture the range of idiosyncrasies involved in this experience (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts were analysed with the help of QSR NVivo 10 software (Richards, 2005).

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), data analysis was carried out through six phases: familiarisation with the entire data, generating initial codes, searching for potential themes, reviewing the themes, defining and labelling themes, and reporting data.

First, researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts to gain familiarity with the data set and make casual notes on relevant topics that might help answer the research question.

Second, all the transcripts were coded line-by-line at a semantic level. Literature on grit and lifelong learning helped authors create a codebook to conduct the coding process. From participants' reports, new codes emerged and were incorporated into the codebook (e.g., 'enjoyment and learning,' 'belongingness'). Researchers revised all transcripts

whenever a new code emerged to ensure a consistent coding procedure.

Third, researchers examined all the coded data extracts in each code and clustered them into categories and potential themes.

Fourth, researchers reviewed and refined themes to ensure the coherence of data gathered within a theme and the clear limits and differences between themes.

Fifth, themes were named and emergent categories and selected representative examples to illustrate themes and sub-themes.

Following Jackson and Bazeley (2019), the number of participants who referred to each theme and sub-theme indicates the degree of representation of each within the dataset. To aid clarity in the reporting process, the researchers followed Rodgers and Cooper's (2006) scoring scheme for qualitative thematic analysis: 'All' = 100%, 'nearly all' = 100% - 2 participants, 'most' = 50% + 1 to 100% - 2, 'around half' = 50% + 1 participants, 'some' = 3 to 50% + 1 participants, 'a couple' = 2 participants, and 'one' = one participant. To enhance the trustworthiness of the coding process, a second researcher coded 20% of the transcripts independently with an inter-rater agreement of 0.85, which is considered very good (Landis & Koch 1977). Participants' attributes of interest (i.e., age and sex) were used to explore patterns in data.

### **Findings**

The current study further explores the resources underlying the individual's perseverance toward a long-term goal despite setbacks and hardships. Three themes were identified through the Thematic Analysis: *behavioural tools*, *emotional tools*, and *cognitive tools*. Meaningful patterns in data were not found when accounting for participants' attributes.

Each theme is described in Table 2 which shows the three themes and categories and examples of interview quotations.

#### **Theme 1: Behavioural Tools**

This theme includes three behavioural tools pilgrims use to progress towards their challenging final goal (i.e., to reach Santiago de Compostela), despite hardships: *set*

**Table 2: Themes, Sub-themes, and Examples of Quotes from Interviews**

Themes	Sub-themes (n=)	Example quote
<b>Behavioural Tools</b>	Set behavioural and time management goals (n=20)	'I have a plan for this journey, and I will try not to give up before I fulfil that plan.' (P <sub>1</sub> ).
	Manage plans and tasks (n=21)	'I've had to think of alternatives to dry the previous day's clothes while I'm walking.' (P <sub>12</sub> ).
	Persist in conquering difficulties (n=31)	'I like to finish everything that I start. Only for important reasons like an injury would I consider giving up.' (P <sub>31</sub> ).
<b>Emotional Tools</b>	Enjoyment and learning (n=25)	'Taking a shower, drinking a beer, and talking to people are the best parts of my day here.' (P <sub>30</sub> ).
	Pride in small wins (n=30)	'(...) So, when I arrive at the hostel each day, I feel pleased, happy, and that fuels my energy' (P <sub>19</sub> ).
	Belongingness (n=31)	'There is a spirit of mutual help between the pilgrim community and the local community.' (P <sub>11</sub> ).
<b>Cognitive Tools</b>	Opportunities to take perspective (n=25)	'I am looking to know myself better.' (P <sub>1</sub> ).
	Hold positive outcome expectations (n=29)	'This experience is stimulating my critical thinking to solve problems.' (P <sub>12</sub> ).
	Use of metacognitive knowledge (n=29)	'Our mind is capable of everything, both in making us move forward and weakening us; that is why it is so important to know ourselves very well' (P <sub>30</sub> ).

*behavioural and time management goals, manage plans and tasks, and persist in conquering difficulties.*

#### **Set Behavioural and Time Management Goals (n=20)**

Most participants mentioned planning strategies used before and during the journey to progress toward the final milestone.

*doing the Way isn't like a simple tour outdoors*  
(P<sub>11</sub>).

Acknowledging this, most individuals reported having engaged in an exercise routine before starting the walking journey, as illustrated in this quote:

*We trained for a year to walk with the backpack on our backs, and now we are doing it* (P<sub>3</sub>).

Experienced participants who had completed the Way of St. James stated more than once that,

*good planning may prevent many difficulties like injuries in the pilgrimage* (P<sub>20</sub>).

Furthermore, participants said that the planning phase included defining how many miles they expected to walk each day, considering their physical strength, and

checking in advance which hostels they might rest in and spend the night. Several participants shared a strategy that helped them on their journey: focusing on the nearest stop of the trip (e.g., the next 6 miles or the next hostel). One participant illustrated this idea while sharing his strategy to set short-term milestones:

*There is this film that has a very funny cue that goes like this: 'there is a reason why the Earth is round. We are never to see the end of the road.' So, if we don't look at the end of the road, we don't realise how difficult it is to move forward. It is a step-by-step approach. I say this is my strategy to get along. Other people must have other strategies* (P<sub>31</sub>).

#### **Manage Plans and Tasks (n=21)**

Most participants shared several lived experiences demanding a flexible response (e.g., adjusting plans to new situations, building distinct perspectives about a topic, or exploring alternatives to solve a particular problem). Some participants reported having redefined the initial plan by adding more days to complete the journey when they learned they walked fewer miles a day than planned. Others shared that when they could not walk more that day, they used the local bus or a taxi



to get to the hostel. To deal with heavy backpacks, some participants reported leaving behind goods non-crucial to the journey, such as

*creams and hair conditioners (P<sub>12</sub>).*

Finally, to overcome difficulties related to drying wet clothing during the night, participants reported strategically hanging these clothes on their backpacks so they could dry out during the hike. Participants said that these adaptive reactions helped them overcome obstacles and progress sustainably. However, most participants shared that they had struggled to avoid over-planning all the steps in the journey (e.g., booking hostels in advance to spend the night and programming the best places to visit); and to be open to what the experience might reveal in every moment.

### **Persist in Conquering Difficulties (n=31)**

All participants stressed that this is a long journey with many unexpected adversities. For example, participants sometimes walked in heavy rain; other times, they had to travel on rough terrain, walk down steep hills or keep walking with difficulty because they were recovering from a minor foot injury. As a participant stated,

*In a great adventure such as this, I can't expect that everything is easy or perfect without any unforeseen (P<sub>29</sub>).*

Despite these challenging circumstances, all participants stated that they focused on completing the remaining 76 miles to reach Santiago de Compostela. By setting realistic expectations in relation to the activity's degree of difficulty, displaying positive effort beliefs, and agency strategies whenever needed, participants support their will and commitment to their goal; therefore, they overcome thoughts of giving up and continue moving forward.

This quotation illustrates this idea shared by many participants:

*I've discovered on the Way [of Saint James] that I have willpower and that if I try a little harder, I will be able to go further than I had ever imagined (P<sub>14</sub>).*

Most participants agreed that well-focused efforts helped to overcome hardships, such as moments of tiredness,

mental fatigue, interpersonal conflicts:

*try to find ways to make it [the walk] easier, and not complain about bad things (P<sub>17</sub>).*

### **Theme 2: Emotional Tools**

This theme includes mechanisms to manage emotions and persevere through challenges and hardships along the Way of St. James. Emotional tools include *enjoyment and learning, pride in small wins, and belongingness*.

#### **Enjoyment and Learning (n=25)**

Many participants reported that the journey allowed them to enjoy close contact with nature by exploring beautiful landscapes (e.g., waterfalls, mountain hikes) and vineyards on the slope of hills, which would not be accessible by car or train. One participant shared that

*here [on the Way of St. James], you learn to slow down. Look at nature and just enjoy the moment (P<sub>7</sub>).*

Walking on unknown paths, getting to know unfamiliar places and cultures, and talking to local people about wine production or gastronomy were enjoyable activities that helped participants enrich their experience. Moreover, participants who had already completed the journey several times mentioned how important it was to

*take your time, savour the moment, and don't let some artificial deadlines run your life (P<sub>16</sub>).*

Most participants reported that their experiences during this journey helped them to feel more confident in unknown territories or situations (e.g., sleeping in a dorm for pilgrims with little comfort and privacy and conversing in a foreign language with strange pilgrims). These novel situations will likely provide opportunities for good experiences and personal insights. The following quotation illustrates the overall idea of taking pleasure from little things:

*I'm not concerned with the stamps; I'm not worried about reaching the Cathedral. I'm busy doing the way. The way is to talk to people, rest and drink a beer, have a good meal, take some pictures, and go back to the road tomorrow and enjoy everything that the Earth gives us (P<sub>30</sub>).*

**Pride in Small Wins (n=30)**

Nearly all participants expressed that reaching the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela is a

*symbol of courage (P<sub>21</sub>),*

and pursuing the path until reaching that milestone was an opportunity to increase self-confidence in their abilities, regardless of personal-related hardships. Thus, for most of them, completing the Way of St. James is perceived as a

*testing time (P<sub>19</sub>),*

while seeking answers to the question

*Can I make it? (P<sub>18</sub>).*

Most participants reported that achieving milestones helped them realise their efforts and endeavours were worth it. One participant stated,

*When we are pursuing a long-term goal, we will not find immediate satisfaction; so, when I arrive at the hostel each day, I feel pleased and happy, and that fuels my energy (P<sub>19</sub>).*

For most of them, their self-confidence to complete the long walk grew as they completed various stages of the journey. A participant walking the Way of St. James with another friend said,

*I think we both know now that we are strong, that we can really achieve things. I think that our self-confidence is growing with the help of this journey (P<sub>3</sub>).*

**Belongingness (n=31)**

One of the hallmarks of this journey is that people from different countries and cultures, each with their motivations or interests, join on the road to achieve a final goal: The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

All participants highlighted in their responses that the sense of community experienced along the walk and support from pilgrims transformed a demanding physical activity into a

*very enriching experience (P<sub>18</sub>).*

Participants mentioned aspects illustrative of social support and the sense of community: empathy for others' pain or fatigue, simple gestures to help overcome obstacles, hospitality, and genuine dialogue between

pilgrims. The following quotation is an example of the sense of belonging found in the hostels:

*I felt the people on the road to Santiago [were] very close. Very different, some are cooks, others are tourists, doctors, or... I don't know, directors of something; but on the journey, they are all pilgrims, and this is absolutely extraordinary, and I like that (P<sub>30</sub>).*

Participants reported that this convivial atmosphere set the ground for deep and long-lasting conversations about personal weaknesses, life challenges, illnesses, complicated grief, job changes, ambitions, and hopes. As a participant shared,

*You learn from them, and they learn from you. So [pause] actually, you help people, and they help you. And it's addicting because now I have friends spread all around the world (P<sub>18</sub>).*

Moreover, most participants explained that the Portuguese route has some physically demanding sections, which means that, among other aspects, not everyone could keep the same pace. However, many participants stated that generosity and friendship show themselves in these harsh moments. For example, some participants slowed their walking pace to accompany those with difficulties moving forward; others started friendly conversations to distract counterparts from their physical pain; and others shared their sticks with injured pilgrims walking with incredible difficulty. Participants reported that this generous mutual assistance helped them to persist in the journey

*I'm walking the Way alone, but I've met very kind people who are willing to protect me, welcome me, and help me move forward through these hard moments (P<sub>1</sub>).*

The same idea was reported by those completing the journey in groups:

*We started the Way together, and we want to reach the final line together (P<sub>10</sub>).*

**Theme 3: Cognitive Tools**

Overall, participants reported that the Way of St. James encompasses various moments of self-reflection, and this inner experience of looking inside themselves increases the meaning and interest in the activity, making them persevere day after day. They indicated three tools

likely to have helped them look inside and expand their knowledge about themselves and how they think and behave: *taking perspective, holding positive outcome expectations, and using metacognitive strategies.*

### Take Perspective (n=25)

Most participants declared,

*I have a fast pace of life, and I think I live routinely without much time to reflect on myself, my choices, who is around me (P<sub>1</sub>).*

In contrast, along the journey, participants engage in the opportunity to pause, reflect on their daily lives, and examine what could be improved or changed in their life circumstances to enhance their overall well-being. Some participants shared that the life events they had been through (e.g., cancer disease) or were going through (e.g., complicated grief, pre-retirement challenges, ending of a romantic relationship) instilled profound moments of self-reflection and seeking a purpose in life. For example,

*I'm thinking about different ways of approaching life because one can't live in the past (P<sub>5</sub>);*

*I'm searching for new goals, new conquests (P<sub>25</sub>);*

*I'm analyzing whether I should go on or quit my current job (P<sub>17</sub>).*

For many participants, regardless of their age, this experience provided the ground to reflect on the ordinary circumstances of their life, examining whether they were in line with their values, aspirations, and priorities. Moreover, it fosters reflection on how and whether participants adapt positively to the changes occurring throughout their lifespan.

### Hold Positive Outcome Expectations (n=29)

Overall, participants indicated that they are refining intra, interpersonal, and intellectual skills needed to make life worth living.

Nearly all participants uncovered intrapersonal facilitation skills to succeed in the process of pursuing meaningful goals:

perseverance:

*difficulties arise everywhere, and we have to face this naturally and value the positive aspects of the journey (P<sub>20</sub>);*

delay of gratification

*when we are going up [the mountain], we have to go slowly, step by step, so we have to be patient ... sometimes we want to get there fast, you understand me? (P<sub>14</sub>);*

adaptability

*I've learned that things do not usually happen as planned... if I don't have a bed available for me at the hostel, I need to feel confident dealing with these things and find another option good for me (P<sub>16</sub>);*

proactivity:

*the better you know yourself, the nicer your life is. I've learned to go on my own, and I'm setting my own goals (P<sub>18</sub>), and;*

growth mindset

*I've learned that I don't need to prove anything to anyone, not even myself, and if I had that wisdom before I wouldn't be injured now (P<sub>2</sub>).*

The underlying idea that the journey is more important than just reaching the destination is expressed in participants' responses:

*I believe that I will reach the Cathedral, and in the end, what is left from this? Plus, I think that the pilgrimage is a metaphor for life (P<sub>1</sub>).*

Along with the intrapersonal skills, participants' efforts along the journey develop abilities needed to develop beneficial relationships and to be open to new perspectives and opportunities in life, such as gratitude, kindness, respect, tolerance, honesty, a spirit of cooperation, emotional regulation, and having a purpose in life. For example, participants stated that

*cultivating gratitude a sense of thankfulness for the people we have in our lives and for the material goods that give comfort to our lives (P<sub>24</sub>),*

helps people better appreciate the everyday good things.

Moreover, it helps to be attentive and careful of others

*I hear so many stories of failed relationships that I'm grateful for the relationship that my wife and I have built for so many years, despite the ups and downs (P<sub>18</sub>).*

Most participants shared that displaying kindness to others through ordinary acts, such as listening, smiling,

and helping with the backpack, strengthened relationships between people and led to great personal satisfaction. This is illustrated by the following quote:

*Strike up a conversation with someone who is not friendly, but later comes to find out that I was going through a difficult grieving process, and we support each other just listening to each other (P<sub>24</sub>).*

Moreover, for some participants, the experience provides the opportunity to

*consider points of view other than mine (P<sub>18</sub>),*

and look deeper to find new insights and strategies to approach core issues of their lives. For example, to experience curiosity

*I wanted to experience a way of spending holidays other than at a hotel or resting on a beach (P<sub>10</sub>);*

love of learning

*I think about the meaning of life, about how we can have a cleaner Earth, how we can save water... I am a person who likes to set questions and look for answers (P<sub>20</sub>);*

divergent thinking to solve problems

*I am learning to be a more resourceful person than I was before (P<sub>12</sub>), and;*

intellectual humility:

*I have some gaps related to religion, and I would like to fill them (P<sub>30</sub>).*

### Use of Metacognitive Knowledge (N=29)

Nearly all participants used similar expressions to express that:

*our mind is capable of everything, both in making us move forward and weakening us, that is why it is so important to know ourselves very well (P<sub>30</sub>).*

While participants reflected on their walking experiences and life circumstances, they identified patterns of thoughts and behaviours likely to undermine their performance, emotional stability, physical health, spirituality and faith, and relationships with those around them. Participants shared several examples:

*I often doubt my abilities to do something (P<sub>17</sub>),  
I tend to think that my opinion is more correct*

*than that of others (P<sub>4</sub>),*

*I was always seeking validation from others about what I should or shouldn't do (P<sub>2</sub>),*

*I keep focusing myself on the past instead of the future (P<sub>25</sub>),*

*I admit, I am not always the most patient and caring person (P<sub>16</sub>), and*

*In this [spouses' family] family, there is shame in talking openly about what each one is feeling (P<sub>10</sub>).*

Most participants stated that these thoughts and behaviours triggered negative emotions like sadness, loneliness, regret, or guilt. However, along the journey, participants' metacognitive strategies helped them to overcome them. Being aware of the effects of their thoughts and behaviours on their experience and, further, in their life quality, many participants discover in this experience the opportunity to develop a positive mindset about themselves and others and abilities to help them foster good relationships and success.

## Discussion

The current study's findings uncovered behavioural, emotional, and cognitive tools sustaining an individual's perseverance toward a meaningful goal in a natural setting: walking the Way of St. James. Overall, the themes are in line with previous studies in the field. For example, across an integrative review linking grit to desirable outcomes (e.g., performance, well-being), Datu (2021) summarised psychological processes and mechanisms (including, but not limited to behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions) underlying the grit–performance and lifelong learning relationships.

Data coded in Theme 1 are aligned with previous studies (Datu *et al.*, 2016; Locke & Latham, 2006; Lunenburg, 2011) and illustrate how behavioural mechanisms or resources are likely to sustain the individual's commitment toward a challenging goal, despite hardships. In fact, according to Datu *et al.* (2016), 'behavioural efforts' are psychological processes underscoring the effects of grit on outcomes. In the current study, one of the main ideas of pilgrims is that pursuing a challenging or long-term goal (e.g., walking 149 miles to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela) demands people to *break down* the long-



term goal into short- and medium-term goals. The goals must be challenging but attainable, considering each person's abilities and available resources, and they must be measurable, allowing people to gather information about their performance (Lunenburg, 2011). As Locke and Latham (2006) suggest, these actionable steps sustain an individual's motivation to pursue a challenging or long-term goal. Along with the skills needed to set goals, research suggests that coping with adversity and lack of progress (e.g., by managing plans and tasks) are core skills to maintain perseverance toward a long-term goal (Duckworth *et al.*, 2007). Thus, as shown by the current data, flexibility to adopt new strategies, positive effort beliefs and seeking help from others sustained individuals' persistence to overcome difficulties.

Aside from behavioural tools, perseverance towards a long-term goal was found to be strengthened by emotional tools and efforts. Consistent with grit literature, rather than strenuous efforts over long periods, passion and effort underline individuals' perseverance toward a long-term goal (Duckworth *et al.*, 2007). The main idea expressed by theme 2 is that enjoyment and learning, belongingness, and pride in small wins ground individuals' interest in an activity, which helps them to display persistent efforts. As defended by Frey (1998), walking along the Way of St. James is the ideal setting to experience 'leisure with meaning' and therefore fulfilling personal and social goals. Prior research on grit shows that individuals maintain interest in a new and complex activity to the extent they enjoy and feel able to stand up to the challenge and experience progress resulting from their efforts (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In line with the current data, these experiences of enjoyment and progress in achieving a challenging goal are supported by an individual's sense of belongingness. Following Datu (2017), people who feel accepted and appreciated tend to exhibit high interest and effort to achieve a long-term goal since they are helped to overcome hardships.

Beyond the behavioural and emotional psychological processes, the current findings disclose meaningful cognitive mechanisms underscoring the perseverance of effort. In fact, following Wolters and Hussain (2015), cognitive and metacognitive strategies and resources are needed to accomplish a wide range of tasks required to reach long-term goals. For example, in line with previous

studies (e.g., Shapiro *et al.*, 2006), findings depicted in theme three support that taking perspective and examining reality from different sides helps people let go of negative emotions and rigid thoughts. Furthermore, it helps them clarify their life purpose and seek new activities or opportunities to cultivate a growth mindset. These data are consistent with previous findings by Park *et al.* (2020), documenting a close relationship between a growth mindset and grit. Accordingly, individuals with a growth mindset perceive their abilities as being developed and improved over time. Difficulties in completing tasks or failures can be overcome through effective efforts (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). By contrast, those with a fixed mindset tend to perceive abilities as unchangeable and difficulties or personal failures as evidence of their lack of ability to succeed (Dweck, 2014). In the present study, participants' self-reflection and metacognitive processes allowed them to identify and refine skills, abilities, and strengths to instil their growth mindset and, therefore, their perseverance. As Park and Peterson (2009) stated, people must develop and practice several skills, strengths, and abilities to display optimal psychological functioning and good performance.

In sum, pilgrims' narratives echo the complexity and circuitry of mechanisms and psychological processes underscoring grit dimensions, particularly perseverance of effort. Expressions such as 'set goals', 'work hard', 'do your best', 'ask for help', or 'try to improve' are commonly used to encourage people to progress towards challenging goals (Park & Peterson, 2009). However, the literature suggests that these incentives are not helpful for people to approach a task efficiently, improve their skills, and instil a growth mindset (Locke & Latham 2006). Grit is not just 'walking' long towards a goal. Grit is about displaying a strong interest or passion while maintaining a commitment to a task despite experiencing setbacks (Duckworth *et al.*, 2007; Jachimowicz *et al.*, 2018).

### Limitations and Future Studies

This study has some limitations to be acknowledged. First, participants were enrolled halfway to Santiago de Compostela with experience in this task. However, unfortunately, we did not have access to information on which respondents reached the end of this journey. Nevertheless, we collected information expressing



participants' intention to reach Santiago de Compostela (all declared their intention to finish the journey). This contributes to reducing that limitation since, in line with research on planned behaviour, the will to achieve a goal is strongly related to displaying efforts to achieve a goal (Sheeran, 2002).

Second, this sample does not represent young pilgrims (less than 30 years old). Future studies with larger samples may explore if the tools and strategies used differ from this study's reported ones. Third, caution is needed when using findings from the current research to explain the grit of individuals pursuing challenging goals in other settings or domains of interest. Thus, future studies may investigate whether the themes reported by this study's participants are related to grit dimensions in a larger sample and whether the emergent themes reflect grit dimensions in other fields (e.g., sports, work). Finally, the current data analysis did not address the adaptability of participants' interests and actions according to situational and contextual factors, as Datu (2017) recommended.

## Conclusions and Implications

Based on data to explore the grit dimensions in a natural setting – The Way of St. James – this study helped to identify psychological tools and mechanisms sustaining individuals' interest and perseverance toward a challenging goal. In line, essential contributions are offered to the scarce literature on grit and pilgrimage tourism fields. Indeed, while most grit studies investigate the relationship between this construct and achievement in different domains (e.g., academic, sports, work, family), the current study has explored the *process* of pursuing a challenging goal in a natural setting, to

investigate grit dimensions. In line, the current findings provide essential insights into what drives individuals to pursue a challenging goal, such as motivation and goal setting (Locke & Latham, 2006; Lunenberg, 2011), passion (Vallerand *et al.*, 2007), mindfulness, and implicit theories (Park *et al.*, 2020), and character strengths and wellness (Ryff & Singer, 1996). In this specific setting, pilgrims activate tools and management strategies to persevere along the journey and fulfil their personal and social goals while overcoming hardships. Findings suggest that active involvement in a long-term and challenging activity sets the groundwork for relevant insights into the inner self and how to make one's life worth living. Also, the different motivations grounding pilgrims' journeys highlight grit's relevance to attaining long-term goals.

Current data provide clues on behaviours, feelings, and thoughts likely to help individuals persevere passionately toward a meaningful goal, particularly to reach the Cathedral of Santiago. These findings may help to guide the practice of professionals who organise and accompany pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. For example, these professionals could consider training pilgrims in perseverance of effort, to help them focus on the challenge of walking the Way of Saint James and use behavioural, emotional, and cognitive tools likely to help them overcome daily difficulties and attain their short and long-term goals.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to disclose.

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