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BEYOND TOURISM PRODUCTS: CULTURAL PILGRIMAGE TOURISM AS A PLACE-BASED STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT INSTRUMENT IN PERIPHERAL AND RURAL REGIONS

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Abstract

Cultural pilgrimage routes have increasingly emerged across Europe and beyond as instruments supporting regional development, heritage revitalization, and the socio-economic activation of peripheral and rural regions. In practice, these routes function as territorially embedded structures that organize mobility, connect dispersed settlements, and facilitate locally grounded service provision. Rather than operating solely as tourism itineraries, they increasingly constitute spatial frameworks that mediate relationships between cultural heritage, landscape, and local actors. Despite their growing practical relevance, cultural pilgrimage tourism (CPT) remains conceptually underdeveloped and insufficiently integrated into regional development theory and tourism studies. Existing research has largely treated cultural tourism and pilgrimage tourism as separate domains, limiting analytical understanding of their intersection as a development-related phenomenon, particularly in structurally disadvantaged regions. This study positions CPT within the broader theoretical shift toward place-based, relational, and heritage-led development approaches, conceptualizing it as a spatially distributed and process-oriented framework that extends beyond sectoral understandings of tourism. This study addresses this gap by examining how CPT can be conceptualized as a place-based strategic development instrument in peripheral and rural contexts. It seeks to identify both the development contributions attributed to CPT and the enabling conditions under which cultural pilgrimage routes may evolve beyond tourism products into broader territorial development frameworks. The research is guided by three key questions: how CPT contributes to regional development, which conditions are critical for its effective functioning, and how it can be conceptualized as a strategic planning framework. Methodologically, the study employs a two-round international Delphi survey involving 32 experts from 18 countries with interdisciplinary expertise in tourism, regional development, and route management. The first round used open-ended questions to capture a wide range of expert perspectives on development contributions and enabling factors, which were subsequently analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. In the second round, the identified themes were evaluated using a Likert scale, enabling a systematic assessment of consensus based on predefined statistical criteria, including agreement levels, mean values, and standard deviations. The findings indicate strong expert consensus that CPT contributes to regional development primarily through small-scale, dispersed, and incremental economic effects. These include support for local producers, service providers, and small businesses, diversification of rural economies, and income generation for local communities. CPT is not perceived as a driver of large-scale economic growth or investment-led development; rather, it acts as a catalyst for endogenous, place-based economic processes. In the socio-cultural domain, CPT plays a significant role in strengthening local identity and cultural memory, revitalizing tangible and intangible cultural heritage, enhancing regional visibility, and fostering community cohesion and social capital. Environmental contributions are closely associated with low-impact mobility patterns, particularly walking-based pilgrimage

and slow tourism, as well as with the experiential connection between pilgrims and landscapes. At the same time, the results suggest that commonly expected outcomes such as infrastructure expansion, increased investment attractiveness, or job creation are not inherent effects of CPT. Instead, the realization of CPT-related benefits is contingent upon a set of enabling conditions, including the protection and accessibility of cultural heritage, the quality, safety, and continuity of routes, active community involvement, supportive governance and institutional coordination, and the presence of attractive natural landscapes. These factors constitute a minimum threshold for CPT to function effectively as a development instrument. By integrating development contributions with enabling conditions, the study proposes an analytical matrix that conceptualizes CPT as a conditional, relational, and context-dependent development framework. The results suggest that CPT operates through place-based mechanisms rooted in cultural meaning, spatial continuity, and local actor engagement, rather than through conventional growth-oriented tourism models. In this sense, CPT can be understood as a soft strategic planning instrument that supports incremental, socially embedded, and territorially grounded development processes. The study contributes to both tourism and regional development scholarship by providing an empirically grounded conceptualization of CPT as a distinct development-related phenomenon and offers practical implications for policymakers and regional planners by highlighting the importance of governance, community engagement, and heritage-based approaches in designing sustainable development strategies for peripheral and rural regions.

Keywords: cultural pilgrimage tourism, regional development, place-based development, peripheral and rural regions, cultural pilgrimage routes

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