

Cultural pilgrimage tourism as a regional transformation ecosystem: developing a CPT Transformation demand framework

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Extended Abstract

Regions are increasingly confronted with a combination of demographic decline, economic peripheralisation, sectoral dependency, environmental pressures, and governance fragmentation. These structural dynamics are particularly visible in rural, post-industrial, and heritage-rich territories that seek alternative, endogenous development pathways capable of strengthening resilience and long-term sustainability. Within regional science, growing attention has been devoted to innovation ecosystems, place-based development, socio-technical transitions, and smart governance models as mechanisms for enabling structural transformation. However, culturally embedded mobility phenomena, especially cultural pilgrimage tourism (CPT), have not yet been systematically integrated into this transformation-oriented regional discourse.

While pilgrimage tourism and cultural tourism have each generated substantial scholarly attention, they are typically examined within sectoral tourism frameworks, focusing on visitor motivations, experience design, economic impacts, heritage management, or destination marketing. Far less consideration has been given to their potential systemic role within regional transformation processes. In particular, cultural pilgrimage tourism has not been conceptualised as a territorially embedded innovation mechanism capable of mobilising latent regional capital, fostering cross-sectoral synergies, and contributing to ecosystem-based governance dynamics. This omission represents a research gap at the intersection of tourism studies and regional science.

The present paper responds to this gap by conceptualising cultural pilgrimage tourism as a regional transformation ecosystem and by proposing a CPT Transformation demand framework. The central premise is that CPT should not be understood merely as a tourism product, but rather as a multi-layered socio-technical system embedded within territorial governance structures, community identity, cultural heritage networks, and regional innovation dynamics.

The primary objective of the paper is to develop a structured analytical framework capable of explaining under what structural and institutional conditions CPT can function as a catalyst for sustainable regional transformation. Rather than presenting definitive empirical findings, the study seeks to construct a theoretically grounded model that can guide subsequent empirical validation and comparative case analysis. In this sense, the contribution of the paper is primarily conceptual and theory-building, while remaining open to further refinement and operationalisation.

The framework is grounded in four interconnected theoretical streams. First, research on cultural and pilgrimage tourism provides insight into mobility patterns, symbolic landscapes, identity formation, and the socio-cultural dimensions of travel. Second, regional innovation ecosystem theory highlights the importance of networked collaboration among public institutions, private enterprises, academia, and civil society actors, often conceptualised through the quadruple-helix model. Third, socio-technical transition theory frames transformation as an iterative and multi-level process shaped by structural pressures, institutional arrangements, and

innovation niches. Fourth, place-based development approaches emphasise the mobilisation of endogenous territorial capital and context-sensitive governance strategies.

Methodologically, the study adopts a theory-building research design based on abductive reasoning and conceptual synthesis. Abduction is particularly appropriate given the emerging and interdisciplinary character of CPT within regional transformation discourse. The research process iteratively connects existing theoretical frameworks with observed characteristics of cultural pilgrimage initiatives in European regions. Through systematic conceptual mapping, the study identifies key structural drivers, capacity conditions, and transformation mechanisms that can be integrated into a coherent analytical model.

The proposed CPT Transformation demand framework consists of three analytically distinct yet dynamically interrelated layers: the Transformation demand layer, the Ecosystem capacity layer, and the Synergic transformation dynamics layer.

The Transformation demand layer captures the structural conditions that generate the need for endogenous transformation. Many (not only rural) regions experience demographic ageing, outmigration of young populations, economic marginalisation, or limited diversification opportunities. At the same time, they often possess substantial yet underutilised cultural and historical heritage assets, and landscape identity. Transformation demand emerges from the interaction between structural pressures and latent territorial capital. In this sense, CPT becomes relevant not only because of its tourism appeal, but because it offers a potential mechanism for activating dormant cultural resources in contexts where conventional development pathways are constrained. The framework intentionally leaves room for different operational indicators of transformation demand, allowing future research to refine its measurement through demographic, economic, governance, or cultural capital variables.

The Ecosystem capacity layer assesses whether a territory possesses the institutional and social readiness necessary to mobilise CPT effectively. Structural demand alone does not automatically generate transformation; it must be mediated by governance arrangements, stakeholder alignment, and innovation capacity. This layer includes elements such as strategic coordination among local authorities, participatory engagement of community actors, entrepreneurial initiatives linked to cultural assets, digital infrastructure supporting route management and visitor information, and the presence of knowledge institutions capable of facilitating innovation processes. By framing CPT within an ecosystem logic, the model emphasises interaction and co-creation rather than isolated sectoral interventions. At this stage of conceptual development, the framework remains adaptable in terms of how ecosystem capacity may be empirically assessed, thereby allowing for qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches in subsequent research phases.

The third layer, Synergic transformation dynamics, conceptualises CPT as a nodal mechanism capable of generating multi-dimensional territorial effects when transformation demand and ecosystem capacity align. These effects are not limited to tourism revenues. They may include economic diversification through local supply chains and creative industries, revitalisation of tangible and intangible heritage, strengthening of community identity and social cohesion, enhancement of environmental awareness through slow mobility practices, and improvements in perceived quality of life. Importantly, the model conceptualises transformation as iterative and feedback-driven. Positive outcomes can reinforce governance capacity, strengthen trust among actors, and stimulate further innovation cycles. Conversely, weak coordination or over-commercialisation may limit transformative potential. The framework therefore remains open to exploring both enabling and constraining dynamics in future empirical work.

Based on the interaction between transformation demand and ecosystem capacity, the paper tentatively proposes a typology of CPT territories. Some regions may be characterised as latent territories, possessing strong cultural capital but limited coordination mechanisms. Others may be fragmented territories, experiencing high structural pressure yet lacking governance alignment. Emergent ecosystems may demonstrate growing collaboration and early synergistic effects, while transformative ecosystems represent contexts in which CPT has become integrated into long-term regional development strategies. This typology is presented as a heuristic tool rather than a definitive classification, leaving room for further refinement through comparative analysis.

Although the present contribution remains primarily conceptual, preliminary reflections suggest several implications for regional policy and governance. First, the transformative potential of CPT depends not solely on heritage assets but on coordinated ecosystem-building processes. Second, digital and data infrastructures may play an increasingly important role in enabling interoperability, monitoring, and adaptive management of pilgrimage networks. Third, community participation and identity-building appear central to sustaining long-term transformation dynamics. These tentative insights will require empirical testing, but they highlight the broader systemic relevance of CPT beyond conventional tourism development.

In conclusion, the paper contributes to regional science by introducing a structured framework that situates cultural pilgrimage tourism within territorial transformation and innovation ecosystem discourse. By developing the CPT Transformation demand framework, it provides a conceptual foundation for analysing when and how CPT may evolve from a cultural mobility phenomenon into a territorially embedded transformation ecosystem. The model is intentionally flexible and open to empirical operationalisation, allowing future research to test, refine, and adapt its components across different regional contexts. Through this integration of tourism theory and regional transformation analysis, the study advances a more systemic understanding of how culturally embedded mobility practices may support resilient, place-based regional futures.

Keywords: Cultural pilgrimage tourism; territorial transformation; regional innovation ecosystems; transformation demand; ecosystem capacity.

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