



INVESTIGATING THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM: GREECE IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Lagou Maria¹,

Kottara Chara²ⁱ

¹Department of Accounting and Finance,
University of West Attica,
Athens, Greece

²Delegated Assistant Professor
Department of Business Administration,
University of West Attica,
Athens, Greece

Abstract:

Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of human mobility and is closely associated with cultural heritage, sustainable local development, the diversification of the tourism product, and the search for authentic experiences. Over recent decades, tourist interest in visiting religious sites around the world has increased markedly. The primary aim of this research is to investigate the economic impact of religious tourism by comparing Greece with the broader European context. The research adopts a rigorous systematic literature review approach and follows a structured review protocol. The findings indicate that while Greece possesses exceptional religious and cultural resources, important gaps remain in measuring visitor expenditure, employment, and multiplier effects. The research therefore proposes an integrated model linking sacred resources, accessibility, visitor experience, destination image, the local value chain, governance, and sustainability to direct, indirect, and induced economic effects. Taken together, these dimensions provide a basis for more coherent policy design in religious tourism, making them highly relevant to both public and private stakeholders involved in the development and management of this tourism sector.

JEL: F30, R11

Keywords: religious tourism; Greece; Europe; economic impact; systematic literature review (SLR)

ⁱ Correspondence: email hkottara@uniwa.gr

1. Introduction

Religious tourism in Europe forms part of the wider market for cultural, spiritual, and special-interest tourism. Pilgrimage routes and major sacred centres can stimulate local consumption, employment, and tourism development, provided that visitor flows are integrated into local value chains rather than being limited to short visits with little or no overnight stay or local expenditure (Graave *et al.*, 2018; Soljan & Liro, 2021; Niezgoda *et al.*, 2025).

Religious tourism occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of faith, culture, heritage, and the destination economy. Existing research has approached it either as travel driven primarily by religious motivation or as a hybrid form of tourism in which pilgrims and cultural tourists coexist within the same spatial and symbolic environment (Adirestuty *et al.*, 2025). This distinction remains important because economic impact is determined not only by visitor numbers, but also by length of stay, the composition of expenditure, linkages with local businesses, and the quality of destination governance (Rinschede, 1992; Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Smith, 1992; Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

Greece represents a particularly relevant case study because of its dense concentration of religious monuments, strong Orthodox monastic tradition, island pilgrimage destinations, routes associated with the Apostle Paul, and World Heritage sites such as Mount Athos and Meteora (WTTC, 2025).

Previous studies further suggest that the development of religious tourism in Greece is influenced by the promotion of religious resources, cooperation between the Church and tourism stakeholders, and the coordinated management of the destination's religious image (Tsironis, 2022; Tsorvas *et al.*, 2025).

The economic development of special-interest tourism also requires human capital, appropriate skills, and stronger links between tourism, education, digital marketing, and contemporary service provision (Guriță & Scortescu, 2023). Asonitou and Kottara (2019) and Kottara *et al.* (2023) associate the enhancement of professional skills in Greek tourism with financial performance and competitiveness. This issue is especially important in religious tourism, where the quality of guiding, hospitality, digital information, and authenticity management can directly shape the visitor experience (Kottara, Kavalieraki-Foka, & Asonitou, 2026). These capabilities may also strengthen local value creation and the market positioning of the tourism product, generating wider benefits for destinations (Figini & Patuelli, 2022; Richards *et al.*, 2025).

Accordingly, the central research problem is not whether religious tourism has economic significance, but how that significance can be measured, compared, and incorporated into sustainable development strategies without undermining the sacred character, authenticity, or social acceptance of destinations. In the Greek context, the development of this tourism product increasingly requires coordinated policy, more effective promotion, and stronger cooperation among the stakeholders involved (Terzidou *et al.*, 2008; Paganopoulos, 2021; Tsorvas *et al.*, 2025; Kottara *et al.*, 2025).

Greece has substantial historical and religious wealth; nevertheless, the economic valuation of religious tourism remains fragmented. Most Greek studies concentrate on

residents' perceptions and attitudes, visitor experiences, and development potential, whereas research that directly estimates tourism expenditure, employment, and the multiplier benefits specifically attributable to religious tourism remains limited.

The tourism image of island destinations also affects travel decisions, which makes it necessary to connect religious identity with the broader destination image and with coordinated promotional strategies (Pachou *et al.*, 2025; Tsorvas *et al.*, 2025).

Overall, the literature reveals a gap at the intersection of three levels: (a) the theological and cultural significance of sacred places; (b) destination management, skills, and tourist experience; and (c) the measurement of economic impact. The present research addresses this gap through a structured synthesis and a proposed measurement framework.

The research focuses on the investigation and comparison of religious tourism in Greece with the broader European context and on the economic impact associated with this form of tourism. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the main factors affecting the economic impact of religious tourism?

RQ2: What insights emerge from comparing Greece with other European pilgrimage centres?

RQ3: What are the principal weaknesses in measuring the economic activity generated by religious tourism in Greece?

RQ4: What conceptual model could support future empirical research?

The remainder of the research is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, Section 3 presents the methodology, Section 4 reports the main findings, Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the research questions, Section 6 presents the conclusions, and Section 7 outlines the research limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Context of Religious Tourism

Religious tourism cannot be reduced to travel to churches, monasteries, or sacred monuments. A comprehensive understanding must also incorporate experience, spatial organisation, services, authenticity, governance, and the economic mechanisms through which a visit can be converted into local value.

This multidimensional nature is particularly important in unique settings such as Mount Athos, where sacredness, hospitality, and tourism coexist within a complex framework of boundaries and expectations (Della Dora, 2012; Paganopoulos, 2021).

Several researchers stress the importance of distinguishing religious tourism from general cultural tourism (Soljan & Liro, 2021; Belucio & Fuinhas, 2023; Niezgodna *et al.*, 2025). Rinschede (1992) examined the forms and motivations of religious travel, while Nolan and Nolan (1992) analysed European religious sites as tourist attractions serving both believers and secular visitors. In the same year, Smith (1992) introduced the pilgrim–tourist continuum, anticipating subsequent research which demonstrates that pilgrimage

experience is continuously transformed and increasingly connected to cultural, personal, and postmodern forms of mobility (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, 2020).

2.2 Religious Tourism as an Economic Phenomenon

The economic impact of religious tourism is generated through direct, indirect, and induced channels. Direct effects arise from visitor expenditure on accommodation, food and beverage services, transport, retail, guiding, and religious or cultural artifacts (Adirestuty *et al.*, 2025). Indirect effects emerge when tourism businesses purchase goods and services from local suppliers, while induced effects arise when employees spend income generated by tourism-related activity. The regional input–output analysis of the Camino de Santiago provides an important example of how these channels can be quantified (Graave *et al.*, 2018).

More specifically, economic impact depends not only on the volume of arrivals but also on the quality of the tourism product (Kottara *et al.*, 2025). Skills development in the tourism sector is equally important because it can improve service quality, strengthen the use of digital tools, and connect tourism activity more effectively with financial outcomes (Asonitou & Kottara, 2019; Kottara *et al.*, 2025a; Kottara *et al.*, 2025b). At the same time, entrepreneurship in special-interest tourism can generate local networks and diversified income streams, as illustrated by research on agritourism entrepreneurship in Greece (Poulaki *et al.*, 2021; Figini & Patuelli, 2022).

The case of Fátima provides a complementary econometric perspective, since international pilgrimage demand can be related to macroeconomic determinants. Belucio and Fuinhas (2023) demonstrate the usefulness of panel approaches for analysing and forecasting pilgrimage flows and underline the need to combine economic impact assessment with demand modeling in the research of religious tourism.

2.3 Religious Tourism in Greece

Tinos, an island in the Cyclades, receives substantial religious visitor flows. Terzidou *et al.* (2008) demonstrate that residents generally perceive the socio-economic effects of religious tourism positively, although social acceptance is also influenced by cultural proximity and the visitor typology.

At Mount Athos and Meteora, the relationship between sacred landscape, tourist experience, and the preservation of authenticity emerges as a core prerequisite for sustainable development (Della Dora, 2012; Kotsi, 2012; Paganopoulos, 2021).

Following the pandemic, Orthodox pilgrimage mobility has shown potential to be repositioned as a multidimensional form of tourism connecting faith, cultural experience, and regional development (Mróz, 2021; Kottara *et al.*, 2025). The route of the Apostle Paul and cultural routes in island regions also suggest that the product can be organised as a network of stops and experiences rather than as a set of isolated points of visitation (Tsironis, 2022; Fafouti *et al.*, 2023).

Tsorvas *et al.* (2025) identified factors that facilitate or hinder the development of religious tourism in Greece and argued for a policy framework dedicated to the

promotion of religious sites. Among the most important constraints, they highlighted insufficient cooperation among the Church, the tourism industry, and local government.

Another important issue is that the tourism image of Greek islands influences travel decisions and the ability of destinations to differentiate their tourism product. The findings of Pachou *et al.* (2025) are relevant to religious tourism because many Greek pilgrimage destinations are located on islands, where religious identity interacts with the overall destination image. The literature therefore suggests that strategies linking sacred landmarks with cultural narratives, local gastronomy, sustainable mobility, and off-season experiences can generate wider multiplier benefits for local communities and strengthen the economic impact of tourism.

2.4 European Experience in Religious Tourism

Europe presents diverse case studies characterized by distinct institutional organisations, branding strategies, and economic performance metrics. The Camino de Santiago operates as a networked route for which visitor expenditure and employment effects can be quantified, whereas Fátima functions as an international sacred centre whose visitor flows can be monitored econometrically (Graave *et al.*, 2018; Belucio & Fuinhas, 2023). Urban service zones surrounding major sanctuaries further illustrate how the spatial organization of services forms part of the economic impact on local and regional economies (Soljan & Liro, 2021).

A key distinction lies in the fact that several European benchmark destinations have established more mature route systems, networks, promotional mechanisms, and frameworks for economic indicator measurement. While Greece possesses a comparable spiritual and cultural intensity, its economic capitalisation is less systematic and remains heavily reliant on the broader mass tourism product. Consequently, the comparison highlights discrepancies in organisational capacity and performance metrics rather than a deficiency in Greek religious or cultural resources (Tsorvas *et al.*, 2025; Pachou *et al.*, 2025).

3. Methodology

This research employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology and followed the principles of PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) in order to enhance transparency, systematicity, and the documented selection of sources (Page *et al.*, 2021). This approach was considered appropriate because it allows the systematic mapping and critical synthesis of the international and Greek literature on religious and pilgrimage tourism, its economic impact, regional development, and the differences between the Greek case and comparable European destinations. The process involved successive stages of record identification, initial relevance screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion in the literature synthesis.

The search was organized around combinations of keywords relating to “religious tourism”, “pilgrimage tourism”, “faith tourism”, “spiritual tourism”, “economic impact”,

“local development”, “regional development”, “Greece”, “Europe”, “Camino de Santiago”, “Fátima”, “Mount Athos”, “Meteora”, and “Tinos”.

The review spanned the period 1992–2026, thereby capturing both the foundational theoretical frameworks that historically shaped the field and contemporary studies focusing on sustainability, regional development, and the post-pandemic transformation of religious tourism. The final synthesis included peer-reviewed journal articles, recognized academic publications, and official institutional or statistical sources providing necessary evidence on the wider economic and tourism context.

Eligibility criteria dictated a direct relevance to religious or pilgrimage tourism, alongside at least one dimension pertaining to economic impacts, local or regional development, tourism management, sustainability, or comparative destination analysis. The review excluded purely theological studies without a tourism or economic dimension, non-academic publications, non-verifiable sources, and studies without a substantive connection to the research questions. For each record, the review considered geographic focus, methodological approach, research object, type of economic or social impact, and contribution to the comparison between Greece and European cases.

The final bibliographic database comprised 31 records, which formed the core corpus for the descriptive and thematic analysis. The synthesis was conducted at two levels. First, descriptive mapping documented geographic distribution, major themes, and evidence types. Second, critical thematic synthesis focused on definitions of religious tourism, channels of direct, indirect, and induced economic impact, differences between Greece and European destinations, and existing research gaps. The selection and synthesis procedure is represented in the PRISMA flow diagram. Particular attention was paid to bibliographic traceability and to avoiding unsupported or non-identifiable sources.

3.1 Search Protocol

The search protocol covered the period 1992–2026 and focused geographically on Greece and Europe. Peer-reviewed articles, academic publications, and official institutional sources were considered. Systematic searches were executed utilising Boolean operators to combine keywords related to religious tourism, pilgrimage, and economic impact. Non-verifiable or insufficiently documented sources were systematically excluded; consequently, supplementary literature was integrated solely to reinforce the interpretation of empirical findings.

Table 1: Search and Documentation Protocol

Element	Operational Choice	Rationale
Coverage period	1992–2026	Captures foundational typologies and contemporary post-pandemic studies.
Geographic focus	Greece and Europe	Greece is compared with well-documented European benchmark cases.
Source types	Peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books/chapters, official statistics and institutional reports	Official reports provide macro-level context; they do not substitute for peer-reviewed causal evidence.
Main keywords	religious tourism; pilgrimage; faith tourism; Greece; Europe; economic impact; local development; Camino de Santiago; Fátima; Mount Athos; Meteora; Tinos; Symi	Terms were combined using Boolean operators.

3.2 Keyword Combination

The keyword combination of current research analyzed as follows: ("religious tourism" OR pilgrimage OR "faith tourism" OR "spiritual tourism") AND (Greece OR Greek OR Europe OR European OR "Camino de Santiago" OR Fatima OR Fátima OR Lourdes OR Meteora OR "Mount Athos" OR Tinos OR Symi) AND ("economic impact" OR expenditure OR employment OR "gross value added" OR "local development" OR "regional development" OR receipts OR "input-output").

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were designed to ensure thematic relevance and source quality. Studies on religious and pilgrimage tourism were included when they addressed an economic, managerial, or development dimension.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Topical relevance	Religious tourism, pilgrimage, or spiritual/cultural tourism with tourism, economic, managerial, or destination-development relevance.	Purely theological studies without tourism, management, or economic relevance.
Geography	Greece, Europe, or international theoretical/methodological evidence suitable for comparison.	Out-of-scope cases without theoretical or comparative transferability.
Evidence type	Peer-reviewed articles, high-quality books/chapters, and official statistical or institutional reports.	Blogs, undocumented opinion pieces, and non-traceable sources.
Economic relevance	Expenditure, employment, GVA/GDP, local development, seasonality, entrepreneurship, and destination management.	Sources with no economic or managerial relevance.

3.4 Selection Process, PRISMA and Coding

Each core source was coded according to geographic focus, type of evidence, methodological use, relationship to economic impact, and usefulness for comparing Greece with the wider European context. This coding procedure provided a structured evidence map that supported the descriptive and thematic synthesis of the corpus.

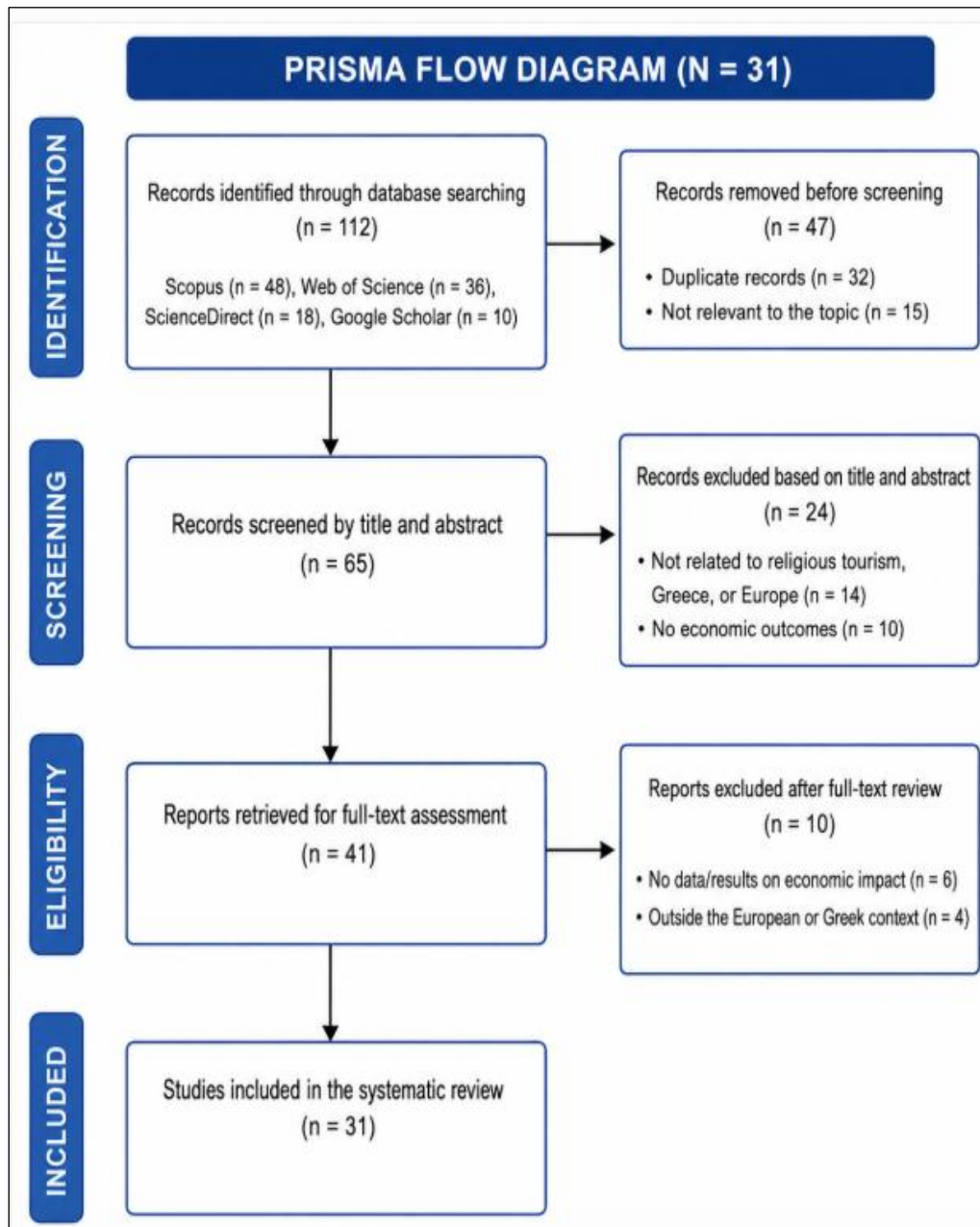


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for the Systematic Review

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Analysis of the Evidence

The final analysis comprises 31 sources covering theoretical research on religious tourism and pilgrimage, Greek cases, European comparative cases, and official statistical sources

describing the broader tourism environment. This sample size should not be construed as an exhaustive census of the entire international literature; rather, it constitutes a transparent and structured corpus of evidence curated specifically to facilitate a rigorous comparative synthesis.

Table 3: Distribution of Core Evidence by Geographic Focus

Geographic Focus	Number of Sources	Share	Role in the Synthesis
Greece	13	41.9%	Core comparison case and policy application
Europe / EU	9	29.0%	Comparative baseline and market/statistical context
Global	6	19.4%	Definitions, theory, and methodology
Spain	1	3.2%	Economic-impact benchmark via Camino de Santiago
Portugal	1	3.2%	Demand/econometric benchmark via Fátima
Other	1	3.2%	Supplementary mechanisms

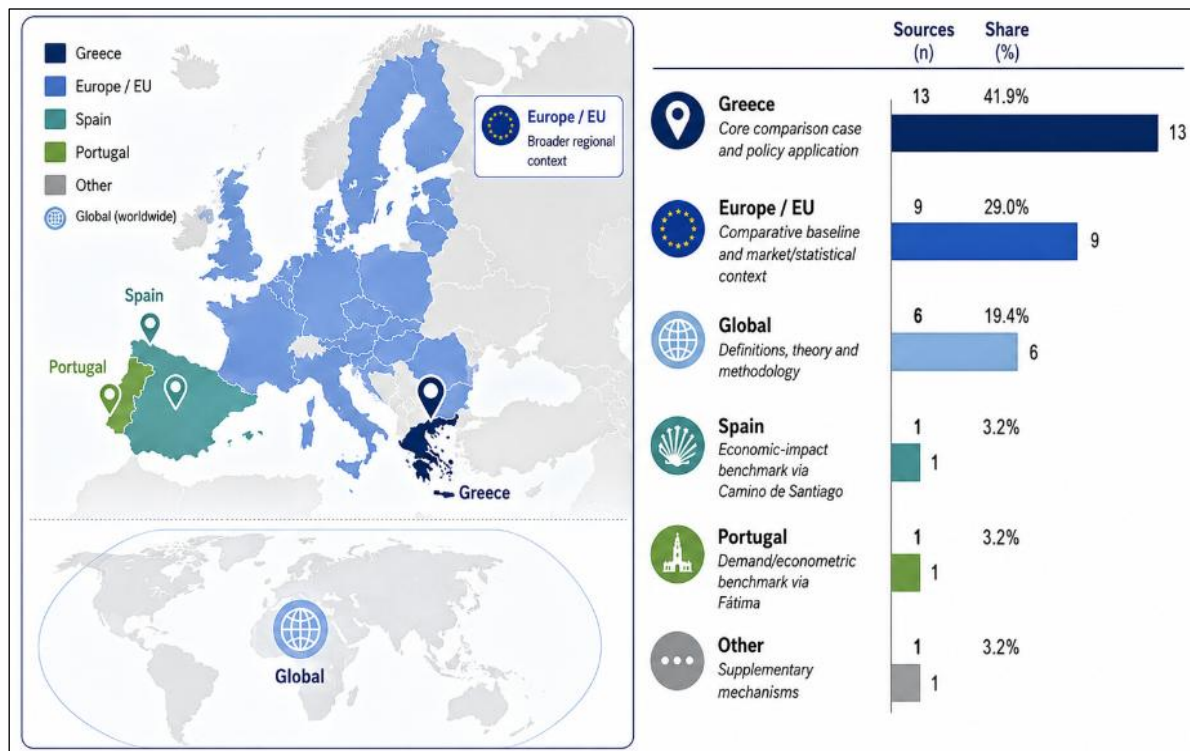


Figure 2: Evidence Distribution by Geographic Focus (n = 31)

4.2 Thematic Synthesis

The thematic synthesis indicates that religious tourism is a complex field connected to pilgrimage, spiritual tourism, and cultural tourism. Greece possesses substantial religious and cultural capital, particularly through its Orthodox tradition, but remains comparatively weak in the systematic measurement of the associated economic impact.

European cases, by contrast, provide more mature models of measurement and management. The synthesis also shows that effective promotion, stakeholder coordination, human capital, local entrepreneurship, sustainability, and the protection of authenticity are critical preconditions for the long-term development of religious tourism (Richards *et al.*, 2025).

Table 4: Thematic Synthesis of the Literature

Thematic Domain	Indicative Sources	Synthesis Finding
Definitions and typologies	Rinschede, 1992; Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Smith, 1992; Collins-Kreiner, 2010	Religious tourism forms a continuum with pilgrimage, spiritual travel, and cultural tourism.
Greece and Orthodox tradition	Terzidou <i>et al.</i> , 2008; Della Dora, 2012; Kotsi, 2012; Gaki <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Tsironis, 2022; Paganopoulos, 2021; Fafouti <i>et al.</i> , 2023; INSETE, 2025	Greece has strong sacred-cultural capital but limited nationwide measurement of its specific economic impact.
European comparative cases	Graave <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Soljan & Liro, 2021; Belucio & Fuinhas, 2023; Niezgoda <i>et al.</i> , 2025	Mature cases show how pilgrimage can be measured through GVA, employment, demand, and spatial-service structures.
Destination management and image	Guriță & Scortescu, 2023; Tsorvas <i>et al.</i> , 2025; Pachou <i>et al.</i> , 2025; Pedrosa <i>et al.</i> , 2025; Richards <i>et al.</i> , 2025; Kottara <i>et al.</i> , 2025a	Promotion, stakeholder coordination, and destination image are central development conditions.
Human capital and local entrepreneurship	Asonitou & Kottara, 2019; Poulaki <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Figini & Patuelli, 2022; Kottara <i>et al.</i> , 2024; Adirestuty <i>et al.</i> , 2025	Skills, cooperation, and entrepreneurial networks support service quality and local value capture.
Sustainability and authenticity	Mileva & Krachanova, 2024; Wang, 2022; Paganopoulos, 2021; Fafouti <i>et al.</i> , 2023	Economic value depends on heritage protection, visitor experience, community acceptance, and carrying capacity.

4.3 Economic Impact

The evidence suggests that religious tourism affects the economy not only through direct visitor expenditure but also through local value chains, employment, regional development, and seasonality. Economic impact is stronger when a destination functions as an integrated network of accommodation, gastronomy, transport, local production, and cultural heritage, and when tourism businesses are supported by a workforce with the skills required to deliver high-quality services and create economic value (Graave *et al.*, 2018; Asonitou & Kottara, 2019; Poulaki *et al.*, 2021; Kottara & Asonitou, 2024).

Table 5: Economic Impact Channels of Religious Tourism

Economic Impact Channel	Mechanism	Interpretation for Greece–Europe
Direct visitor expenditure	Accommodation, food, transport, guiding, retail, and religious/cultural products	Strong in organised routes; Greece needs destination-specific expenditure surveys.
Indirect local multiplier	Purchases by hotels, restaurants, transport providers, and local tourism firms	Depends on the depth of local supplier linkages and the reduction of economic leakage.
Employment and skills	Hospitality, transport, guiding, cultural interpretation, and destination management	Can support peripheral destinations; skills and training condition service quality and productivity.
Entrepreneurship and local value chains	SMEs, family businesses, local products, agritourism, and complementary experiences	Diversification can retain spending locally and connect sacred sites with wider regional economies.
Seasonality reduction	Religious festivals, pilgrimage periods, and thematic routes	Particularly relevant to Greece because mass tourism is heavily concentrated in summer.
Risks and externalities	Overtourism, commodification, heritage degradation, and community pressure	Requires carrying-capacity indicators, heritage governance, and community participation.

4.4 Comparability of Greece with European Comparative cases

The literature indicates that Greece does not lag behind in terms of religious or cultural tourism resources; rather, the main differences concern the degree of organization and institutional coordination. The Camino de Santiago, for example, has a more mature framework for economic valuation, while Fátima offers an established case of econometric monitoring of pilgrimage demand.

In Greece, Tsorvas *et al.* (2025) document the need for stronger promotion and stakeholder cooperation, while Pachou *et al.* (2025) confirm the importance of destination image in shaping the travel decisions of potential visitors.

Table 6: Comparative Analysis: Greece and European Comparative Cases

Dimension	Greece	European Comparative cases
Destination structure	Many island, monastic, and Orthodox pilgrimage sites, often embedded in cultural or coastal tourism.	More mature route systems and international pilgrimage brands in selected cases.
Visitor motivation	Mixed religious, cultural, family, historical, and spiritual motives.	Also mixed, but with a clearer pilgrimage-route identity in some destinations.
Impact measurement	Limited religious-tourism-specific measurement of expenditure, GVA, and multiplier effects.	More applications of input–output models, panel/demand models, and spatial analysis.
Destination image and promotion	High heritage value but fragmented coordination of religious branding.	More standardised identity and route-based promotion in mature benchmark cases.
Economic potential	High latent value through season extension, regional diversification, and local value chains.	Already operationalised through more structured service networks.

Dimension	Greece	European Comparative cases
Main governance risk	Under-measurement, fragmented promotion, and weak inter-organisational coordination.	Saturation, commercialisation, and pressure on authenticity in mature sites.

5. Discussion

The discussion is structured around the four core research questions, focusing on the principal mechanisms through which religious tourism generates economic value, the position of Greece relative to European benchmark destinations, the weaknesses of existing measurement practices, and the conceptual framework proposed for future empirical investigation.

5.1 Main Factors Affecting the Economic Impact of Religious Tourism

Asonitou and Kottara (2019) associate skills development among tourism employees with financial outcomes, emphasising that human capital is a prerequisite for service quality and competitiveness (Kottara *et al.*, 2025a; Kottara *et al.*, 2025b). Similarly, Poulaki *et al.* (2021), in the context of agritourism entrepreneurship, argue that local entrepreneurial activity can reinforce the sustainability of modern firms operating in highly competitive environments. These earlier findings are consistent with the synthesis of the present review: religious tourism acquires a larger economic footprint when it is embedded in a network of complementary local services and products (Pedrosa *et al.*, 2025).

The principal factors operating at the economic level include direct expenditure, indirect tourism expenditure, multiplier effects, employment, entrepreneurship, seasonality, and regional diversification. International studies indicate that pilgrimage expenditure can translate into regional value added and employment. For Greece, the critical question is how much visitor expenditure remains within the local economy and how effectively it is connected to small businesses, local production, accommodation, and tourism services (Figini & Patuelli, 2022; Niezgoda *et al.*, 2025; Kottara *et al.*, 2025a; Kottara *et al.*, 2025b).

5.2 Greece in the European Perspective

While Greece possesses robust religious and cultural appeal, it displays a lesser degree of maturity in both economic measurement and coordinated promotion relative to established European benchmark destinations.

This contrast is largely explained by the fact that Greece has many strong but fragmented religious landmarks. Research on Tinos, Mount Athos, Meteora, Symi, and routes associated with the Apostle Paul provides a rich empirical foundation, but does not yet amount to an integrated national system of measurement and destination management (Terzidou *et al.*, 2008; Della Dora, 2012; Tsironis, 2022; Fafouti *et al.*, 2023).

5.3 Weaknesses in Measuring the Economic Activity of Religious Tourism in Greece

A major weakness is the absence of systematic and comparable measurement of religious tourism as a distinct area of economic activity (Gaki *et al.*, 2022; INSETE, 2025). General tourism statistics provide a macroeconomic framework, but they do not isolate religious motivation, destination-specific expenditure, the cost-to-serve of the destination, or local multiplier effects. Without expenditure surveys, visitor profiling, and links to regional accounts, public policy risks being based on impressions rather than measurable economic value (Graave *et al.*, 2018; Bank of Greece, 2025; Eurostat, 2025).

Governance and promotion constitute an additional weakness. Tsorvas *et al.* (2025) identify insufficient promotion of religious sites and a lack of cooperation among key stakeholders as significant constraints on development.

5.4 Proposed Framework

The proposed framework links five sequential levels: sacred and cultural resources → accessibility and destination services → visitor experience and destination image → local tourism value chain → direct, indirect, and induced economic impact. The strength of these relationships is influenced by governance and stakeholder cooperation, human capital and skills, digital information and promotion, and sustainability and carrying capacity.

The framework synthesises evidence from the economic measurement of the Camino de Santiago, demand management in Fátima, Greek destination studies, and recent research on promotion, cooperation, and skills (Graave *et al.*, 2018; Asonitou & Kottara, 2019; Belucio & Fuinhas, 2023; Tsorvas *et al.*, 2025; Pachou *et al.*, 2025).

Empirically, the model could be tested using visitor expenditure surveys; structural equation modelling to examine relationships among experience, destination image, and revisit intention; regional input–output models to estimate multipliers; and panel or spatial analysis to compare destinations and time periods. A common set of variables applied across Tinos, Meteora, Patmos, Symi, Ouranoupoli/Mount Athos, and the routes of the Apostle Paul would make it possible to construct a comparable Greek database and provide stronger evidence for causal inference.

Table 7: Horizontal Input–Output Model of Religious Tourism Economic Impact

Inputs	Visitor Experience & Destination Image	Local Tourism Value Chain	Economic Impact	Outputs
Sacred & Cultural Resources	Experience Quality	Local Businesses	Direct Impact	Local Income
Accessibility	Destination Image	Local Spending	Indirect Impact	Employment
Destination Services	Visitor Satisfaction	Employment Creation	Induced Impact	Regional Development
Governance & Funding	Revisit Intention	Supply-Chain Linkages	Multiplier Effects	Destination Resilience
Environment & Community	Recommendation Intention	Local Value Capture	GVA / GDP Contribution	Sustainable Local Growth

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, religious tourism should be understood as a socio-economic destination system rather than as an isolated religious visit. Spiritual value remains at the core of the experience, but economic impact is produced through organized services, local entrepreneurship, skills, destination image, and institutional cooperation.

The findings point to five policy priorities for Greece: establishing a national register and hierarchy of religious routes; conducting pilot expenditure surveys in major destinations; linking religious visitor flows with regional and business data; developing off-season tourism packages connected to local value chains; and creating an institutional framework for cooperation among the Church, regions, municipalities, and tourism businesses. Investment in human capital, digital promotion, and destination management is also necessary if Greece's strong cultural capital is to be converted into sustainable and measurable local value.

This review demonstrates that religious tourism is an important field for the tourism economy, regional development, and the sustainable use of cultural heritage. Europe provides mature examples of measurement and management, whereas Greece combines strong religious and cultural capital with comparatively limited systematic measurement of economic impact. The central finding is therefore not that Greece has lower potential, but that it faces a disadvantage in the production of economic indicators and in the coordinated conversion of its potential into measurable value.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This research is subject to several limitations. The final body of evidence is relatively limited and displays geographic and methodological heterogeneity, combining different types of religious destinations, different definitions of pilgrimage tourism, and measurement methods that are not fully comparable. The findings should therefore be generalized with caution. The most important empirical limitation is the absence of harmonized microdata specifically for religious tourism in Greece. Available official statistics generally record total tourism flows, overnight stays, and receipts without systematically distinguishing visitors whose primary motivation is religious or pilgrimage-related. Future studies should develop fully reproducible SLR protocols, including stored search strings, database exports, deduplication records, and detailed reasons for research exclusion. It would also be valuable to create a harmonised database for major Greek religious destinations using common variables for visitor numbers, expenditure, accommodation, travel motivation, and local economic effects. The use of panel data, input-output models, spatial analysis, and longitudinal surveys could provide stronger evidence for causal relationships and enable systematic comparisons between Greece and mature European religious-tourism destinations.

Creative Commons License Statement

This research work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>. To view the complete legal code, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.en>. Under the terms of this license, members of the community may copy, distribute, and transmit the article, provided that proper, prominent, and unambiguous attribution is given to the authors, and the material is not used for commercial purposes or modified in any way. Reuse is only allowed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors confirm that this research was conducted and reported free of any conflict of interest, whether financial or otherwise. No individual or organisation with a commercial interest in the subject of this study provided either author with funding, employment, consultancy fees, shareholdings, honoraria, or payment for expert testimony. The study was undertaken independently, and no institutional, commercial, or personal relationship influenced the analysis, the findings, or the integrity of the manuscript. Any financial support connected with the work is disclosed in full in the acknowledgements. The authors attest that the manuscript is the product of impartial scholarly enquiry, carried out in keeping with recognised standards of academic integrity and research ethics.

About the Authors

Dr. Lagou Maria is a graduate of the Department of Economic and Regional Development at Panteion University and holds an MBA specializing in Accounting and Auditing from the University of the Aegean. She earned her PhD from the Department of Accounting and Finance at the University of West Attica, where her research focused on employee motivation and leadership within the tourism sector. She possesses over a decade of extensive professional experience. Her primary research interests include employee motivation, leadership, regional economic development, and tourism management.

Dr. Chara Kottara is Economist – Accountant A' Class. She is a Delegated Assistant Professor, Dpt. of Business Administration, University of West Attica, Greece. She holds a PhD in Social Sciences with a specialization in Economics, Management and Accounting. She has a Pedagogical qualification and specialization in Special Education. She holds certification from the National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications and Professional Guidance. Her main research interests include Accounting and Finance, Technology, University Pedagogy, E-learning, Blended Learning, Sustainable Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship. She is the author and co-author of 13 books and more than 60 scientific publications.

References

- Adirestuty, F., Ratnasart, R. T., Wardhana, A. K., Miraj, D. A., & Battour, M. (2025). Gastronomy of religious tourism: Overview and future research agenda. *Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites*, 58(1), 188–199. <https://gtg.webhost.uoradea.ro/PDF/GTG-1-2025/gtg.58116-1401.pdf>
- Asonitou, S., & Kottara, C. (2019). *Sustainable development of skills for the tourism sector and its financial impact*. In A. Kavoura, E. Kefallonitis, & A. Giovanis (Eds.), *Strategic Innovative Marketing and Tourism* (pp. 1121–1129). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12453-3_129
- Bank of Greece. (2025). *Developments in the balance of travel services: 2024*. Bank of Greece.
- Belucio, M., & Fuinhas, J. A. (2023). How does the economy affect a religious phenomenon? A panel approach to international pilgrimages to the Shrine of Fátima. *European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation*, 13(2), 109–122. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ejthr-2023-0010>
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2010). Researching pilgrimage: Continuity and transformations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37(2), 440–456. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016>
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2020). Pilgrimage tourism—Past, present and future rejuvenation: A perspective article. *Tourism Review*, 75(1), 145–148. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-04-2019-0130>
- Della Dora, V. (2012). Setting and blurring boundaries: Pilgrims, tourists, and landscape in Mount Athos and Meteora. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), 951–974. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.11.013>
- Eurostat. (2025). *Tourism statistics and record tourism nights in the European Union*. European Commission.
- Fafouti, A. E., Vythoulka, A., Delegou, E. T., Farmakidis, N., Ioannou, M., Perellis, K., Giannikouris, A., Kampanis, N. A., Alexandrakis, G., & Moropoulou, A. (2023). Designing cultural routes as a tool of responsible tourism and sustainable local development in isolated and less developed islands: The case of Symi Island in Greece. *Land*, 12(8), 1590. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12081590>
- Figini, P., & Patuelli, R. (2022). Estimating the economic impact of tourism in the European Union: Review and computation. *Journal of Travel Research*, 61(6), 1409–1423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875211028322>
- Gaki, E., Arsenos, P., Balomenou, C., Poulaki, P., & Lagou, M. (2022). The impact of financial crisis on tourism disparities: The case of Greek regions. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism*, 20(2), 47–70. Retrieved from <https://johat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/3.pdf>
- Graave, E. J. E., Klijs, J., & Heijman, W. (2018). The economic impact of pilgrimage: An economic impact analysis of pilgrimage expenditures in Galicia. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 5(3), Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.21427/D7DD83>

- Guriță, D., & Scortescu, F. I. (2023). Religious tourism and sustainable development of the economy in the context of globalization in the northeast area of Romania. *Sustainability*, 15(16). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151612128>
- INSETE. (2025). *Tourism and Greek economy 2023–2024*. Institute of the Greek Tourism Confederation. Retrieved from <https://insete.gr/studies/the-contribution-of-tourism-to-the-greek-economy-2024-2025/?lang=en>
- Kotsi, F. (2012). Mount Athos: Development policies for short-term religious tourism. *International Journal of Tourism Anthropology*, 2(2), 149–163. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTA.2012.048993>
- Kottara, C., Asonitou, S., Mukokoma, M. M. N., Gonidakis, F., & Kavalieraki-Foka, D. (2023). *Enhancement of Social and Teamwork Skills Through Blended Learning Methodology in Accounting Studies*. In The International Conference on Strategic Innovative Marketing & Tourism (pp. 967-976). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51038-0_104
- Kottara, C., Asonitou, S., Mukokoma, M. M. N., Gonidakis, F., & Kavalieraki-Foka, D. (2024). *Enhancement of social and teamwork skills through blended learning methodology in accounting studies*. In A. Kavoura, T. Borges-Tiago, & F. Tiago (Eds.), *Strategic Innovative Marketing and Tourism* (pp. 967–976). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51038-0_104
- Kottara, C., & Asonitou, S. (2024). Artificial intelligence and the new norm in Financial and Managerial Accounting and Auditing. *International Journal of Science and Research Archive*, Volume 13, Issue 2, pp: 3200–3212. <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2024.13.2.2551>
- Kottara, C., Asonitou, S., Kavalieraki-Foka, D., Gkigas, G., & Giannopoulos, G. (2025). *Revolutionizing Financial Accounting: Student Engagement in a Blended Learning Approach*. WSEAS Transactions on Environment and Development. <https://doi.org/10.37394/23207.2025.22.206>
- Kottara, C., Charamis, D., & Gonidakis, K. F. (2025a). The Contribution of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) to Reducing Tax Evasion. *Journal of Accounting, Business and Finance Research* 20(2). <https://doi.org/10.55217/102.v20i2.967>
- Kottara, C., Charamis, D., & Gonidakis, F. K (2025b). *Investigating Tax Evasion: Insights from Greece and the International Context*. 24th Annual Conference of the Hellenic Association of Financial & Accounting Scientists (H.F.A.A.)
- Kottara, C., Kavalieraki-Foka, D., & Asonitou, S. (2026). Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Redefinition of the Accounting Profession. <https://doi.org/10.55217/102.v22i1.1054>
- Niezgoda, A., Markiewicz, E., & Kędzia, M. (2025). The Role of Religious Tourism in the Regional Development of Tourist Destinations. *European Research Studies Journal*, 28(3), 1914-1931. Retrieved from <https://ersj.eu/journal/4285>
- Mileva, S., & Krachanova, M. (2024). In search of new dimensions for religious tourism: The case of the ancient city of Nessebar. *Heritage* 7(10), 5373–5389. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage7100253>

- Mróz, F. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimages and religious tourism in Europe during the first six months of the pandemic. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 60, 625–645. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01201-0>
- Nolan, M. L., & Nolan, S. (1992). Religious sites as tourism attractions in Europe. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(1), 68–78. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(92\)90107-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(92)90107-Z)
- Pachou, A. M., Lagou, M., & Gousiou, A. (2025). The tourism image of the island destinations of Greece. *Journal of Tourism & Development*, 48, 117–147. <https://doi.org/10.34624/rtd.v48i0.34552>
- Paganopoulos, M. (2021). Contested authenticity: Anthropological perspectives of pilgrimage tourism in Mount Athos. *Religions*, 12(4), 229. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040229>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Pedrosa, A., Martins, F., & Breda, Z. (2025). The critical success factors for tourism routes development: A systematic review. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 39, 3903–3903. <https://doi.org/10.54055/ejtr.v39i.3439>
- Poulaki, P. (2023). Pilgrimage and religious tourism—Case research: North Aegean of Greece. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism*, 21(1), 31–49. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393330239_Pilgrimage_and_Religious_Tourism_-_Case_study_North_Aegean_of_Greece
- Poulaki, P., Lagou, M., & Valeri, M. (2021). *The role of female entrepreneurship to the development of agritourism in Greece*. In M. Valeri & V. Katsoni (Eds.), *Gender and Tourism: Challenges and Entrepreneurial Opportunities* (pp. 219–234). Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80117-322-320211013>
- Richards, G., Adie, B. A., Gaeribaldi, R., Ivanov, S., Ivanova, M., James, L., ... & Zocchi, D. M. (2025). Cultural and creative tourism in rural and remote areas: European perspectives. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 73(4), 771–798. <https://doi.org/10.37741/t.73.4.12>
- Rinschede, G. (1992). Forms of religious tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(1), 51–67. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(92\)90106-Y](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(92)90106-Y)
- Smith, V. L. (1992). Introduction: The quest in guest. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(1), 1–17. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(92\)90103-V](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(92)90103-V)
- Soljan, I., & Liro, J. (2021). Religious tourism's impact on city space: Service zones around sanctuaries. *Religions*, 12(3), 165. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12030165>
- Terzidou, M., Stylidis, D., & Szivas, E. M. (2008). Residents' perceptions of religious tourism and its socio-economic impacts on the island of Tinos. *Tourism and Hospitality Planning & Development*, 5(2), 113–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790530802252784>
- Tsironis, C. N. (2022). Pilgrimage and religious tourism in society, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic: A paradigm shift? *Religions*, 13(10), 887. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100887>

- Tsorvas, P. F., Lagou, M., & Gousiou, A. (2025). *Determinants of the development of religious tourism in Greece*. In M. Valeri (Ed.), *Contemporary Religious Tourism: Multidisciplinary Insights, Environmental Engagement, and Community Impact* (pp. 219–236). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-79074-4_14
- Wang, K.-Y. (2022). Sustainable tourism development based upon visitors' brand trust: A case of "100 religious attractions." *Sustainability*, 14(4), 1977. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14041977>
- World Travel & Tourism Council. (2025). *Greece travel & tourism economic impact research*. WTTC Research Hub. <https://researchhub.wttc.org/product/greece-economic-impact-report>