

Gastronomic festivals -cultural entrepreneurship - tourism and cultural heritage in Lesvos -Chios-Lemnos

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Abstract

This study examines the role and importance of gastronomic festivals in the cultural and economic development of the islands of the North-Eastern Aegean (Lesvos, Chios and Lemnos). The aim of this essay is to assess how these festivals contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, the promotion of sustainable tourism and the strengthening of local economies Through a literature review and analysis of primary data from 120 questionnaires, the study demonstrates the multiple contributions of gastronomic festivals and their potential to act as catalysts for regional development. The findings highlight the potential of festivals to contribute to preserving cultural heritage and supporting local businesses.

Keywords: Gastronomic Festivals; Cultural Heritage; Economic Development; Tourism; Lesvos; Chios; Lemnos; Cultural Entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Culinary festivals have become important factors for cultural and economic development, particularly in areas where local traditions and cultural identity are central to the community. In the border islands of the NE Aegean (Lesvos, Chios and Lemnos), these festivals act as living expressions of cultural heritage, promoting local products and fostering a sense of belonging for both locals and visitors (Fontefrancesco, 2020). At the same time, they contribute to the diversification of the tourism product, enhancing the attractiveness of destinations and prolonging the length of stay of tourists (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017).

The NE Aegean islands face particular challenges due to their geographical isolation, limited infrastructure and the seasonal nature of tourism. Gastronomic festivals offer an important opportunity to address these problems by integrating local culture into tourism strategies, enhancing regional identity and promoting sustainable economic development (Pavlidis &

Markantonatou, 2020). Moreover, they play a key role in preserving traditional knowledge about food preparation, which is threatened by globalization and modernization trends (Fontefrancesco & Zocchi, 2020).

The aim of this essay is to examine the role and importance of gastronomic festivals in the cultural development of the NE Aegean islands. Furthermore, it seeks to assess how these festivals contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, the promotion of sustainable tourism and the strengthening of local economies (Dourountaki et al., 2024). Through a literature review and analysis of primary data from questionnaires, the study demonstrates the multiple impacts of gastronomic festivals and their potential to act as catalysts for regional development (Liu et al., 2019; Sorcaru, 2019).

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By analysing the link between gastronomy, culture and tourism, this essay contributes to a better understanding of how local initiatives can promote sustainable cultural and economic development in remote areas. The findings offer valuable insights to policy makers, festival organisers and local communities. By recognising culinary festivals as important drivers for regional development, particularly in areas where heritage and tourism converge, the study addresses issues related to promoting local identity, preserving traditional food practices and enhancing economic (Manola & Tsatalbassoglou, 2021; Manola et al., 2022)

2. Cultural entrepreneurship and case studies of gastronomic festivals

Entrepreneurship and culinary festivals are an important pillar for the promotion of the local economy and cultural heritage, especially in regions such as the northeastern Aegean islands such as Lesvos, Chios and Lemnos. These festivals combine traditional cuisine with innovation and sustainable development, offering opportunities for local producers, businesses and communities to showcase their products to visitors from around the world. (Manola & Koufadakis 2022)

Through the culinary festivals, local flavours are highlighted as an integral part of the cultural identity of each region, enhancing tourism and enabling the development of new business initiatives related to the agri-food sector, culture and hospitality. These festivals also provide a platform for networking and cooperation between local entrepreneurs, operators and tourism stakeholders, promoting sustainability and local self-sufficiency. (Maniou, 2024; Maniou, 2024b; Maniou et al., 2024; Maniou et al., 2024b).

Gastronomic festivals on islands such as Chios, Lesvos and Lemnos have become important tools for cultural entrepreneurship, promoting not only local products but also the cultural identity and heritage of these regions. For example, the Mastic Festival in Chios highlights the uniqueness of mastic as a product with a protected geographical indication, which contributes to the strengthening of the local economy and the international visibility of the island (Karagiannis, 2018). The organization of such festivals enhances cultural entrepreneurship, combining tradition with innovation and promoting sustainable development. Chios also organises the Honey Festival, which highlights the rich tradition of beekeeping on the island. The festival includes honey tastings, workshops on the production and applications of honey in cooking and confectionery, as well as exhibitions of local honey-based products. (Maniou et al., 2024c; Maniou et al., 2025; Manola, & Nasiou, 2022)

The Olive Oil and Olive Festival in Lesvos is a typical example of the coupling of cultural and agri-food entrepreneurship. The festival promotes traditional olive cultivation, but at the same time paves the way for new business approaches and international partnerships through the promotion of olive oil as a high value-added product (Papadopoulou, 2020). The Sardine Festival is another popular festival organised in Lesvos, mainly in the village of Kalloni, where the sardines of Kalloni Bay are considered to be of excellent quality and have been recognised as a product with a protected geographical indication. The festival includes culinary events where visitors can taste sardines cooked according to traditional recipes, accompanied of course by local ouzo. Ouzo Festival Lesvos is known for its ouzo production, and the Ouzo Festival showcases this tradition. The festival includes ouzo tasting, visits to distilleries, and seminars on the production and use of ouzo in gastronomy. The event is a celebration of local culture that combines drinking with local cuisine; it also promotes local entrepreneurship in the seafood sector, enhancing the commercial importance of sardines to the local economy. The festival attracts visitors from various parts of Greece and abroad, enhancing gastronomic tourism and the sustainable development of the region (Antoniou, 2019; Manola & Tsagkarellis 2020; Manola, 2020; Manola & Koltsikoglou, 2020)

In Lemnos, the Cheese Festival promotes local cheeses, such as kalathaki and melichlor, and promotes cultural entrepreneurship through the promotion of local dairy products in tourist markets, linking gastronomy with the sustainable development of the island. The Wine Festival in Lemnos is one of the most important events on the island, showcasing the long-standing wine-making tradition and linking local entrepreneurship with cultural heritage. Lemnos is renowned for its excellent wines, with Muscat of Alexandria and the local red wine Limnos standing out. (Manola & Palanta, 2020; Manola & Angelopoulos, 2020)-

The cultural entrepreneurship developed through these festivals helps to create new business models that combine culture, gastronomy and tourism. Linking local heritage with the global market offers opportunities to diversify the tourism product and strengthen the local economy. Gastronomic festivals can make a decisive contribution to strengthening entrepreneurship in local communities, attracting investment, creating new jobs and contributing to the promotion of the cultural and natural heritage of the areas where they are organised. (Maniou, Mitoula, 2025; Maniou et al., 2025a; Argiros et al., 2024)

3. Cultural heritage - local sustainable development - tourism

Gastronomic festivals are emerging as key tools for promoting cultural heritage and enhancing local development. Through them, traditional knowledge and practices about local food are revived, while promoting the cultural identity and economic activity of local communities (Fontefrancesco, 2020; Pavlidis & Markantonatou, 2020). Festivals strengthen local businesses, boost employment and attract tourists, exemplified by the cheese fair in Trujillo, Spain (Folgado-Fernández et al, 2017- 2019). They also contribute to social cohesion by acting as spaces for cultural exchanges, especially in geographically isolated areas (Sorcaru, 2019; Dourountaki et al., 2024). They are directly linked to gastronomic tourism, which is a sustainable regional development option as they promote repeat visits and improve the image of a destination (Hall & Gössling, 2016-; Montanari & Staniscia, 2014).

Sustainability is a central reference point in the debate on gastronomic festivals. These events help to promote sustainable practices by emphasising local food production, reducing waste and raising environmental awareness (Liu et al., 2019). For example, using sustainability indicators when planning festivals ensures that they deliver positive outcomes for communities while minimising environmental impacts. By focusing on local resources and traditions, these festivals are linked to regional development strategies, addressing economic disparities between urban and rural areas (Montanari & Staniscia, 2014).

Despite their significant benefits, gastronomic festivals face challenges such as limited funding, logistical issues and poor infrastructure, especially in remote areas such as the NE Aegean islands (Lesvos, Chios, Lemnos) (Pavlidis & Markantonatou, 2020). Moreover, the pressure for higher attendance may lead to commercialisation, compromising the authenticity of the cultural experiences they offer (Koufadakis & Manola, 2020 ; Manola, 2022a ; Manola et al., 2022; Manola, 2022 ; Manola, 2024)

However, these challenges create opportunities for innovation. Collaboration between local stakeholders, entrepreneurs and communities, as well as the use of digital tools to manage and promote festivals, can help address constraints and improve the visitor experience (Liu et al., 2019). Moreover, fostering synergies between different stakeholders can ensure the sustainability and long-term success of these events (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019).

The importance of collaboration between stakeholders for successful festival organisation is also highlighted by Hall & Gössling (2016), who highlight the role of local communities and entrepreneurs in shaping sustainable gastronomic tourism products.

Finally, we underline the importance of all digital technologies in education and especially in cultural entrepreneurship training and education. ICTs support education for everyone, give new methods for efficient teachers training, improve the knowledge retention, encourage collaboration, improve transparency, create learner-centered approaches, invent new teaching methods, and accelerate the knowledge acquisition. Moreover, provide new tools for knowledge representation and endorse the education activities and methods via virtualization, mobilization, artificial intelligence, and through new learning environments- worlds. More specifically in entrepreneurship training ICTs are very productive and successful, facilitate and improve the assessment, the intervention and the educational procedures via Mobiles which brings educational activities everywhere [34-35] and through various ICTs applications which are the core supporters of education [36]. The exploitation of AI, STEM & ROBOTICS raise educational procedures into new levels of adaptability, innovation and performance [37-38], while games transform education in a multisensory, very friendly and enjoyable interaction [39]. Additionally, the adoption, enhancement and combination of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation and emotional intelligence cultivation [40-46] brings the mental abilities to the core of the education procedures and policies, and accelerate and improve even more the educational practices and results, especially in business and new entrepreneurs training [47-53].

4. Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach to collect and analyse data on the role and importance of gastronomic festivals in the cultural and economic development of the NE Aegean islands (Lesvos, Chios and Lemnos). A structured questionnaire was developed and distributed through social networks. A total of 120 responses were collected over a period of 6 weeks, providing information on the demographics, perceptions and experiences of participants of gastronomic festivals.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and multiple-choice questions, enabling respondents to provide concise responses while ensuring that the data collected was uniform and easy to analyse. The questions addressed

various aspects of gastronomic festivals, including frequency of participation, motivations for participation and their contribution to cultural heritage and economic development. Respondents were also asked about their familiarity with specific islands and festivals in the NE Aegean region (Lesvos, Chios and Lemnos).

Data were quantitatively analysed using descriptive statistics including percentages and visualised through pie charts and bar graphs. This allowed a clear representation of trends and patterns in the responses. The charts were used to examine gender, age, educational attainment, familiarity with the islands and festivals and perceptions of their cultural and economic impact.

The survey participants were not all residents of the islands but also visitors. . This was important for integrating perspectives as future visitors and those of island residents. The findings provided valuable insights into visitors' perceptions and their understanding of the impact of the festivals.

This methodology ensured the collection of different views and allowed for a thorough analysis of the role that culinary festivals play in promoting cultural identity and economic development, particularly in geographically isolated areas such as the islands of the NE Aegean (Lesvos, Chios and Lemnos). The results were integrated into the discussion to highlight opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness and impact of such festivals.

5. Analysis of findings

Commenting on the results of the survey we can say that: the gender of the participants, 75% were female, while 25% were male. There were no participants who self-identified as "Other". This finding suggests a significant majority of women, which may influence the perspectives presented by the survey, as it mainly reflects the views of women, especially in the context of gastronomic festivals in the North Aegean.

The age distribution of respondents shows that 62.5% belong to the 18-25 age group, with 16.7% belonging to both the 25-35 and 45-55 age groups. A smaller proportion, 4.2%, is in the 35-44 age group, while no participants over 55 years of age were recorded. This data suggests that the views recorded mainly reflect the perceptions of younger people, especially those under 25.

Regarding the educational level of the participants, the majority, 70.8%, hold university degrees (HEI/TEI), while 16.7% have postgraduate or doctoral degrees. A smaller proportion, 12.5%, have completed secondary education (Lyceum), while there were no respondents with only primary or secondary education. This distribution highlights that the sample is predominantly composed of highly educated individuals, which may influence the perspectives expressed in the survey.

In terms of visiting the North Aegean islands, of those who have visited them, 29.2% visited Lemnos, 20.8% visited Mytilini, and only 8.3% visited Chios. These figures suggest limited first-hand experience with the islands, indicating that respondents' opinions may be based on their own experiences as well as on the perceptions and information of others.

5.1. Question

Translated with DeepL.com (free version)

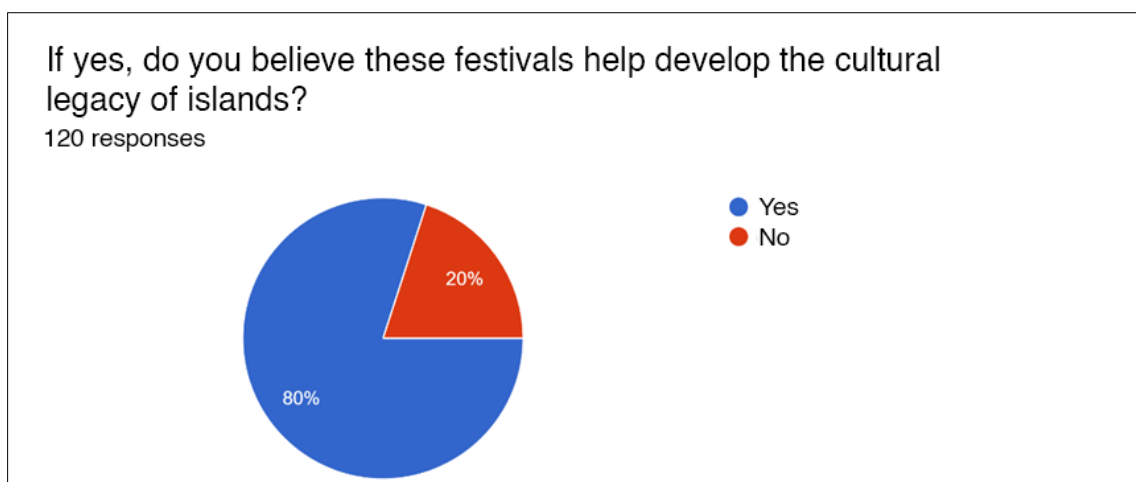


Figure 1 illustrates the respondents' views on the contribution of gastronomic festivals to the preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of the islands. Of the 120 respondents, 80% believe that festivals make a positive contribution to cultural heritage, while 20% disagree. The results show a broad consensus on the positive cultural impact of festivals, highlighting their role in strengthening local identity and heritage, although a small percentage express doubts about their effectiveness

5.2. Question How often do you attend a gastronomic festival?

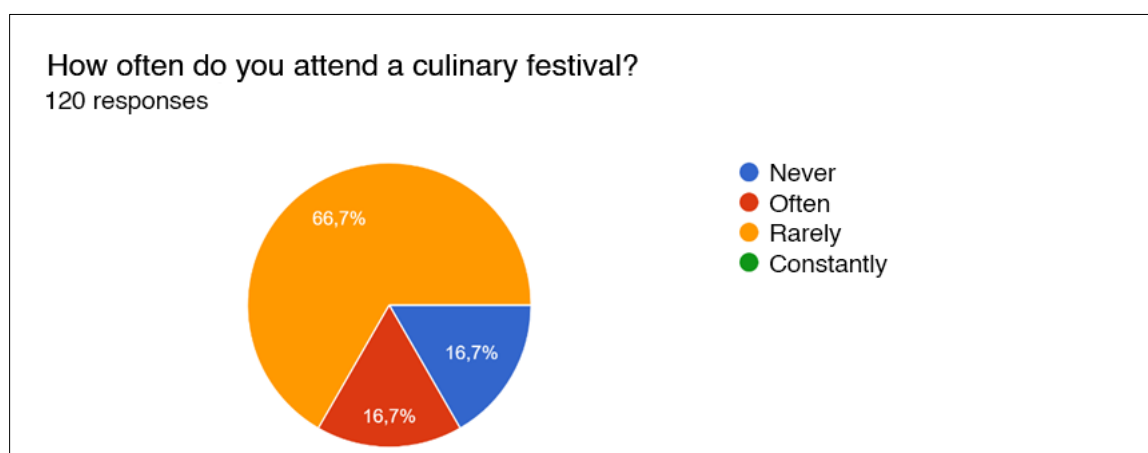


Figure 2 shows the frequency of participation in gastronomic festivals among 120 respondents. The majority of participants (66.7%) rarely attend these festivals, while 16.7% say they never attend and 16.7% attend often. None of the respondents reported that they attend festivals regularly. These results suggest that although some people do attend culinary festivals, the majority have limited or no participation, which may reflect gaps in public interest or accessibility issues

5.3. Question. What do you consider to be the main advantage of gastronomic festivals?

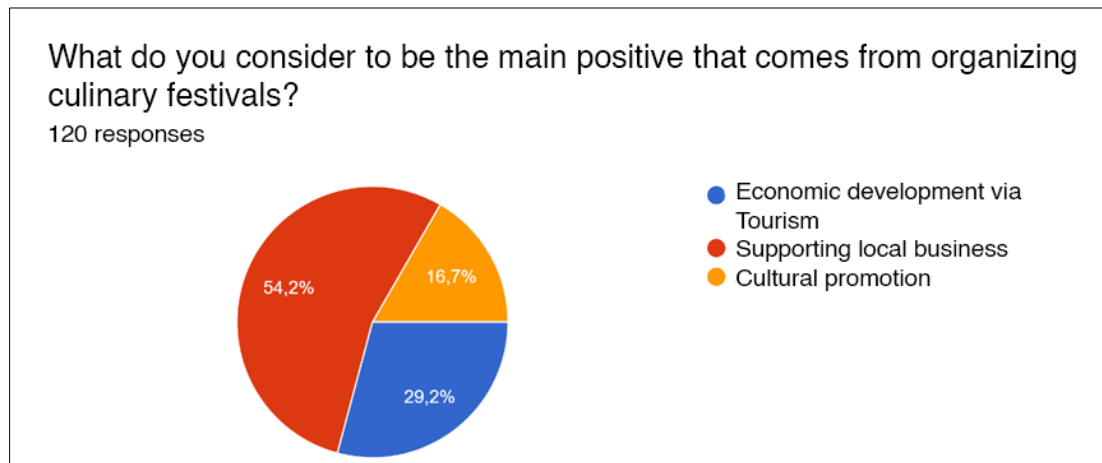


Figure 3 illustrates the respondents' views on the main benefits of gastronomic festivals. Approximately 54.2% of respondents consider the greatest benefit to be the strengthening of local businesses, followed by 29.2% who recognise economic development through tourism and 16.7% who emphasise cultural enhancement. These results demonstrate a clear recognition of the important role of festivals in supporting local businesses, while economic and cultural benefits are also recognised, albeit to a lesser extent. The totality of the data reflects the multi-dimensional impact of these events on local communities

5.4. Question. Do you think that culinary festivals help the economic development of the outlying islands?

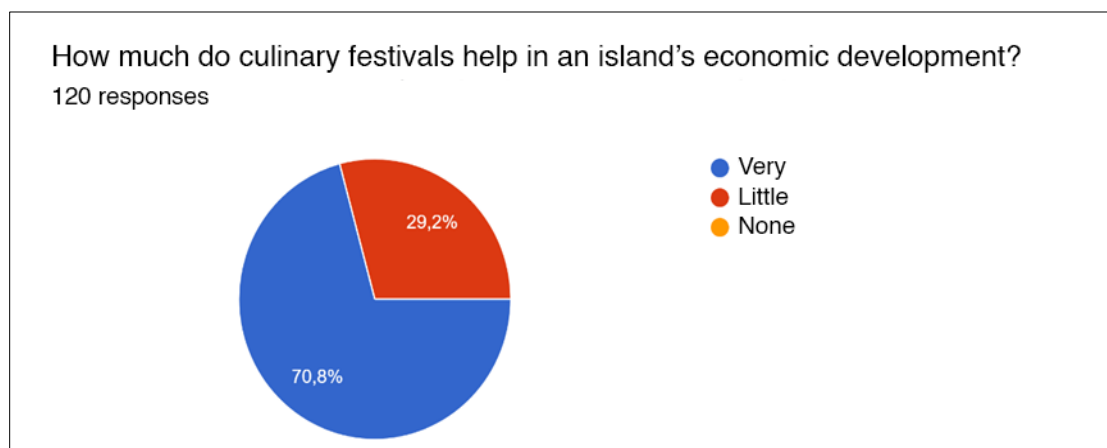


Figure 4 shows the respondents' views on the economic impact of gastronomic festivals on the development of the outermost islands. The majority of respondents (70.8%) consider that festivals contribute significantly to economic development, while 29.2% believe that their impact is limited. None of the respondents indicated that festivals have no economic benefit. These results highlight the common belief that culinary festivals play a key role in boosting the local economy, although some respondents feel that their impact is moderate

5.5. Question. Which of the following cultural heritage activities do festivals enhance?

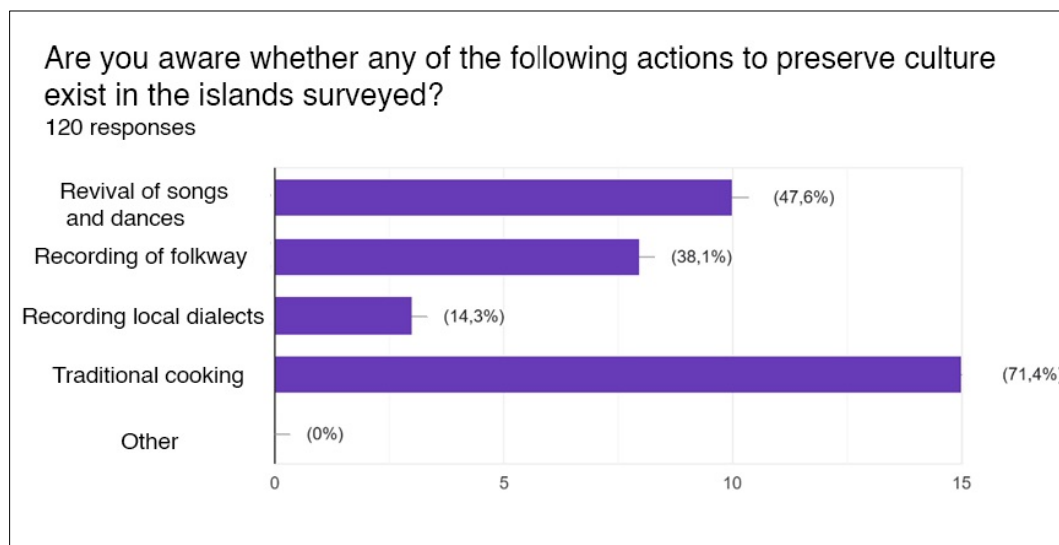


Figure 5 illustrates respondents' views on the methods of heritage conservation on the surveyed islands. The majority (71.4%) identifies traditional gastronomy as the main method of conservation, followed by reviving dances and songs (47.6%) and documenting customs (38.1%). A smaller percentage (14.3%) mentions the recording of local dialects. None of the respondents suggested alternative methods. This suggests a strong emphasis on gastronomy and cultural practices as primary tools for heritage conservation

5.6. Research conclusions

The analysis of the questionnaires provides valuable insights into respondents' perceptions of gastronomic festivals and their role in the cultural and economic development of the North Aegean islands (Lesvos, Chios, Lemnos). The participants were predominantly female (75%), young (62.5% aged 18-25 years) and highly educated (70.8% held higher education qualifications). Despite the high level of education, 58.3% had not visited any of the islands and none had stayed on the islands, indicating that the perceptions of the remaining 50% were mainly based on external information rather than personal experiences.

Participation in gastronomic festivals was generally low, with 66.7% reporting infrequent participation. Although the importance of festivals is recognised, few had attended specific events, such as the ouzo and olive oil festival in Mytilene (4.2%) or the wine festival in Lemnos (4.2%). However, 80% of respondents felt that festivals make an important contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage, while 70.8% believed that they play a key role in economic development, mainly by supporting local businesses (54.2%).

Motivations for attending festivals focused mainly on entertainment (50%) and cultural experiences (29.2%). Traditional gastronomy (71.4%) and cultural practices were seen as key factors for heritage conservation. These results demonstrate the high value placed on festivals, despite low participation, and highlight the need for strategies to increase accessibility and participation in these events.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the results of the questionnaire confirms the important role that gastronomic festivals can play in the cultural and economic development of the NE Aegean islands (Lesvos, Chios and Lemnos). The findings reveal that the participants recognise the contribution of these events to the preservation of cultural heritage and the strengthening of local businesses. At the same time, gaps in public participation and information are highlighted, as the majority of respondents had no real experience of these events.

The data show that traditional gastronomy and cultural practices are considered central tools for preserving the cultural identity of the islands, underlining the importance of gastronomic festivals as levers for strengthening local identity. While the majority of respondents believe that festivals make an important contribution to economic development and cultural preservation, participation levels remain low, suggesting the need for more targeted promotion and increased accessibility.

The information gathered indicates clear opportunities for further development of these festivals. Strategies could focus on enhancing public awareness, improving the overall visitor experience and strengthening links between festivals and local communities. By addressing these challenges, culinary festivals could become more effective tools for promoting cultural sustainability and economic development in the region.

Overall, the findings highlight the need to exploit the unique cultural resources of the NE Aegean islands (Lesvos, Chios and Lemnos) through gastronomic festivals, while suggesting to address the existing barriers to participation. A more inclusive and sustainable approach could benefit both local communities and visitors, promoting regional development and cultural heritage.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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