MA Thesis Sustainable Tourism

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Analysis of Sustainable Island Tourism Development: The Case of Ikaria

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores sustainable development in Ikaria by using qualitative research which involves interviews, field observation and secondary data. The analysis investigates the interaction between cultural identity, tourism dynamics, seasonality, governance and sustainability in the context of a small island. The findings show that cultural sustainability and solidarity networks are a central part of the formation of tourism and social resilience. This historical and cultural practices of the local people, such as festivals and welcoming is what draws visitors who are looking for authenticity and alternative lifestyles, perpetuated through the global Blue Zone narrative. Tourism is more intense during the month of August and develops overtourism symptoms such as congestion, infrastructure stress and waste problems. These pressures point to limitations to carrying capacity and imbalances in impacts upon residents.

Despite weak formal governance structures, informal governance mechanisms and community agency moderate the development of tourism, and help prevent rapid commodification. Economic sustainability is based on seasonal diversification and multi livelihood strategies instead of exclusive tourism specialization. Environmental and infrastructural vulnerabilities are still areas of concern. The study adds value to the academic disciplines of cultural sustainability, Island studies, and tourism governance literature by showing how informal social mechanisms can support the sustainable tourism pathways. It argues that sustainable development in Ikaria is not determined as much by formal planning as it is by the vitality of cultural life, negotiated forms of community control and adaptive seasonal strategies.

KEYWORDS

Ikaria, Sustainable tourism, Cultural Sustainability, Island Studies, Blue Zones, Overtourism, Seasonality, Governance, Authenticity, Informal Institutions, Community Resilience, Qualitative Research

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1. Introduction

1.1. Project Summary

This thesis discusses sustainable tourism development on the Greek island of Ikaria, accomplished through an integrated qualitative study built off semi-structured interviews, participant observation and secondary literature. In particular, the paper examines the relationship between tourism growth, cultural heritage, community management and sustainability in a small island context. The island of Ikaria has a unique cultural model based in solidarity, hospitality, music, and symbiotic relationships that define the social life and local community while also attracting tourists who desire a specialised experience. Ikaria is attractive for visitors who desire authenticity and alternative culture. Tourism has increased in recent years, especially in August, creating peak season pressures that cause congestion and stress on the limited island infrastructure that inevitably poses potential impacts to culture, community and quality of life for residents.

The findings indicate that cultural sustainability plays a central role in shaping social livelihoods in Ikaria and requires informal community-based governance with an emphasis on cultural heritage, rather than mainstream environmental/economic sustainability. Local ownership of cultural practices and spaces, particularly festivals, contributes to the preservation of authenticity and helps limit the commodification of culture, despite increasing external exposure through media and influencer-driven promotion.

Economic generation on the island is significantly dependent on tourism, but project results suggest that more diversified livelihood strategies and reduced reliance on seasonal tourism are necessary for long-term viability of tourism. At the same time, environmental and infrastructural constraints reveal clear limits to the island's carrying capacity for visitors, and highlight the need for adaptive planning and infrastructure development. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that sustainable tourism development in Ikaria is shaped by complex interactions between cultural identity, governance structures, seasonality, and changing tourist profiles.

The thesis contributes to a research gap related to sustainable tourism development in a small island context as it is related to local cultural and social factors. Literature and qualitative data explains how global narratives of alternative and sustainable tourism demand have increased, while results reveal trends which comment on the impact of a changing tourism landscape on local conditions- particularly cultural heritage and community interactions. Results highlight the importance of participatory planning between tourism stakeholders and locals and the creation of infrastructures/monitoring which aim to safeguard cultural heritage and local livelihoods. Results also emphasise the importance of engaging locals and keeping sustainability of culture at the forefront of tourism planning in order to ensure long term resilience and success.

1.2.   Problem Statement

Despite the considerable amount of research on sustainable tourism and island development there is a lack of empirical data that explores how culturally distinctive small islands, like Ikaria, deal with development pressures and rising tourism demands. Ikaria is an example of a modern day development paradox, where tourism offers economic gains and options for diversification and resiliency while threatening cultural practices, social cohesion and ecological stability. Interviews and secondary data indicate an ongoing work-in-progress between cultural sustainability and infrastructural capacity to ensure the protection of unique Ikarian (and island) culture.

Current academic literature on slow tourism emphasises the potential to facilitate meaningful experiences and to foster cultural heritage. However some scholars are concerned that slow tourism does not address (or slow) mainstream tourism, and the existence of both tourism paradigms in one place can result in unprecedented forms of pressure on destination carrying capacity (Richards, 2021; Salazar, 2020). Ikiaria seems to embody such hybridisation, in which alternative and mainstream tourism co-exist with no shared long-term strategy to prevent damage to local culture, environments, etc.. With no clear infrastructure in place in Ikaria, including a plan to control visitor numbers, tourism poses a clear and present threat to sustainability of culture and environment, infrastructural constraints and likely multi-level institutional

fragmentation. Further, from a researcher's perspective, no clear tourism strategies causes a lack of clarity regarding sustainable development pathways in Ikaria.

Furthermore, cultural sustainability is understudied in the debates on tourism infrastructure and decision-making. Ikaria exemplifies why sustainability debates need to go beyond environmental and economic factors to include social dimensions. Cultural practices on Ikaria, such as festivals and informal social organizations, contribute to community identity and perceived wellbeing, but such practices can be commodified or strained without proper infrastructural frameworks for protection. For example, initially an increase in tourists at a festival could be perceived positively through the lens of sustainable development as a significant economic stimulant and a non-environmental threat, while ignoring the potential cultural consequences of commodified cultural experiences.

1.3.   Study Significance

The study adds to three fields of academic research. First, it contributes to debates on sustainable tourism by incorporating cultural sustainability and decision-making into frameworks of island development. Second, it adds to island and development studies by exploring how islands engage with global trends in tourism by increasing access to local cultural practices. Third, it introduces empirical qualitative evidence to gaps within slow tourism literature that tends to remain at the conceptual level.

Practically, the study is relevant to policy makers, local authorities, community associations and tourism stakeholders who are interested in the balance between development, cultural and social wellbeing. Methodologically, the research shows how qualitative methods can reveal nuanced local perceptions that may not be captured in quantitative evaluations.

1.4.   Research Aim and Objectives

By using the UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Development Toolkit as the main framework for cultural preservation, this thesis discusses how sustainable tourism development can be carried out on Ikaria in a way that maintains cultural identity and reinforces

community wellbeing. This is accomplished through critical analysis of interviews, personal observation, and secondary literature to identify UNESCO toolkit safeguards for culture that are not present in Ikaria- leaving the island vulnerable to cultural fragmentation. The research aims to exemplify how development strategies can be aligned with cultural preservation and what this would look like practically in the context of Ikaria.

The research objectives are:

- To understand the perception of local actors regarding recent developments in tourism and changing visitor profiles
- To study the interaction of tourism with cultural practices, heritage and collective identity
- To evaluate perceived sustainability issues related to culture in Ikaria
- To look into how sustainable development could be conceptualised from the outlook of the local stakeholders
- Explore what types of decision-making and infrastructure can be conducive to sustainable tourism development in Ikaria that preserves culture and community

1.5.   Research Questions

Guided by these objectives, the thesis answers the following research questions:

1. What impact does growing tourism have on cultural heritage and community in Ikaria?
2. How can sustainable tourism development be promoted in Ikaria in a way that preserves cultural identity and the community wellbeing?

1.6.   Critical Gaps in Available Literature

The literature on sustainable tourism, island sustainability, community-based tourism (CBT), slow tourism, cultural sustainability, and governance/decision-making offer several frameworks for sustainability analysis which could be used in the context of Ikaria. However, there are some gaps that make the further need for empirical study.

First, there is a scarcity of existing research that investigates the changing nature over time of slow or alternative tourism models, especially in light of mounting visibility or fashionability of destinations. Studies usually conceptualize slow tourism as stable tourism or niche tourism, yet Ikaria indicates that the area of hybridization may arise when alternative tourism meets mainstream tourism trends.

Second, cultural sustainability research focuses on intangible heritage, identity and authenticity with empirical research that rarely examines the negotiation of cultural change in communities where cultural practices have a dual function (as local and as attractions for tourism). The *panigiria* of Ikaria are a good example of this dual role.

Third, island sustainability studies often bring environmental vulnerability and carrying capacity to the fore, but less frequently have explored social carrying capacity, cultural pressures, or community wellbeing. Overtourism research has widened the scope, but is still overshaded towards major urban destinations or iconic mass tourism islands.

Fourth, the focus of governance studies is on participation and collaboration with the emphasis on empirical exploration of informal governance systems based on cultural practices is limited. Ikaria shows how cultural systems can replace or supplement formal institutions.

Finally, there is a gap in research to incorporate these dimensions into one analytical framework. Few research studies focus on the question of how sustainable development can be conceptualized by communities themselves, rather than in terms of policy or market frameworks. This thesis fills these gaps using a qualitative case study of Ikaria, looking at how changes in tourism, cultural dynamics, sustainability challenges and governance needs are perceived by the local actors.

2. Research Background

Tourism has become a major force of social, cultural, and economic change throughout the islands in the world. Tianming et al. (2025) presents island tourism as a thriving development opportunity that has seen an unprecedented rise in recent years. The UN

Tourism group highlights that small island destinations have seen the fastest recovery in visitor numbers and economic generation post-COVID (Tourism in SIDS, 2025). The resilience and attractiveness of island tourism can be linked to "unique political, socio-economic, and natural backgrounds" that can be found on islands which pull a variety of global tourists seeking many types of travel (Tianming et al., 2025, p. 75). Small islands are often home to unique conditions which are determined by scale, geographic isolation, ecological diversity and sensitivity, and demographic limitations. Such conditions are not usually found in mainland locations, thusly islands present distinctive opportunities for tourism development while also being open to multiple vulnerabilities (Baldacchino, 2006; Grydehoj, 2018).

Particularly in Europe, island destinations in the Mediterranean have experienced an intensified growth in tourism over the past few decades, which has happened parallel to global changes in tourist expectations as well as growing concerns with respect to sustainability, cultural preservation and governance capacities (Apostolopoulos et al., 2001; Peeters et al., 2018). In the last twenty years, the concept of sustainability has become mainstream as globally people have begun to consider sustainability and economic impact during decision making in many aspects of life, including tourism. Sustainability concerns have altered the tourism landscape as Piva (2025) found that 84% of (global) travelers said that sustainability is important to them and more than half of the participants reported a plan to travel more sustainably and chose vacation options that reduce their consumption and damage to a local place.

At the same time, the emergence of alternative tourism trends, such as slow tourism, wellness tourism and community-based tourism, have appeared and transformed tourism demand and local capacities/capabilities. Hoeffner (2026) used annual Tripadvisor data to conclude that in 2026 the major trend in tourism is that "travelers aren't booking based just on destinations, but rather the experience[s] they can have in a particular place". There has been a recent global shift away from commodified, commercial tourism towards community-based and slow tourism opportunities that offer more chances for cultural immersion and authentic experiences.

Slow tourism is characterised by slower rhythms of mobility, local culture, embeddedness, longer stays and deeper engagement with a place (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010; Fullagar, 2012; Richards, 2021). Further, slow tourism "accentuates [a] slow paces of action and environmental and socio-cultural sustainability through… enriched authentic experiences" with the ultimate goal of providing "enriched tourism experience[s]" while "minimising environmental impacts during travel" (Klarin, et al. 2023, p.1).

Studies have pointed to the extent that slow tourism can strengthen the sustainability of the cultural identity by sustaining local identities, social practices, heritage and community cohesion through local decision making (Salazar, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022). While others emphasize a paradox, "while many island territories are highly dependent on tourism in order to drive economic growth and survival… the same [tourist] industry that is seen as crucial to economic survival is also the main element in impending destruction" (Island Tourism, 2022). Despite the inextricable links to tourism and impact on local communities (as seen through environmental, social, cultural, and economic factors) empirical information on the interaction of tourism with governance structures and culture is scarce. This paper attempts to address this research gap by critically analysing the Greek island of Ikaria, home to a unique and popular cultural heritage and environmental attractions- all which draw tourists but can be threatened by an uncontrolled rise in visitors.

2.1. Sustainable Development and Tourism

Sustainable development became a dominant global discourse in the late twentieth century, after the publication of the Brundtland Report, which defined sustainable development in terms of satisfying "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). This definition has influenced international policy frameworks, environmental governance and academic research, including the rapidly expanding field of sustainable tourism. In tourism research, the concept of sustainability was adopted to address issues of how destinations could achieve economic growth and environmental protection simultaneously.

Literature on sustainable tourism grew exponentially in the 1990s and 2000s, examining the impact of tourism on natural resources, socio-cultural systems and government governance systems. In their article, Bramwell and Lane (2011) have stressed that sustainable tourism is not just about the limits of ecosystems, but also about sustained socio-cultural wellbeing. Hunter (1997) believes that to be sustainable, tourism cannot be limited to the carrying capacity of the environment, given that the cultural and institutional aspects are also considered equally necessary for the resilience of a place in the long term. This academic shift is part of broader discussions in sustainability science where researchers are addressing the growing interest in socio ecological systems, cultural heritage and place-based identities (Folke et al., 2010).

The relationship between sustainability and tourism is complex. Critics point out that the concept of sustainable tourism has been framed by dominant sustainability paradigms that emphasise the continuation of economic and environmental growth over cultural preservation (e.g., Sharpley, 2020). This tension has resulted in some debates between reformist and transformative approaches. As debates on sustainability broadened in tourism studies, researchers began placing greater focus on the interactions between environmental limits, community wellbeing, heritage and on local governance structures (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2019).

Reformist approaches try to enhance efficiency and reduce negative impacts of tourism through planning and environmental management. Transformative approaches suggest alternatives to growth driven tourism, e.g. degrowth, post-tourism or slow mobility frameworks which inherently keeps culture and local decision-making at the forefront (Higgins Desbiolles, 2022; Kallis et al., 2022).

Institutional actors have had key roles in developing mainstream sustainability frameworks. Organizations like United Nations World Trade Organization (UNWTO), United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU)), among others, have drawn up guidelines, toolkits and policy instruments to promote sustainable tourism at the local, regional, and national levels. Often these frameworks advance the principles of

participatory planning, integrated destination management, cultural preservation, and community empowerment (UNESCO, 2016; OECD, 2020). While such guidelines are influential, implementation varies substantially across destinations due to differences in governance capacity, economic structure and cultural contexts.

For island destinations such as Ikaria, issues of sustainable development are intertwined with other challenges related to peripherality, seasonal fluctuations, infrastructural limitations, population shifts, and the unique cultural heritage. Island sustainability research clearly points out the importance of geographical isolation and low economies of scale in making conventional development models less feasible (Baldacchino, 2006; Grydehøj, 2018). At the same time, islands often have unique cultural resources and strong place identities can provide anchors for sustainable tourism strategies that focus on culture, community and local value retention.

2.2.   Sustainable Tourism and Island Destinations

Small island destinations have long been the focus of tourism research in recognition of the combination of vulnerability and attractiveness. The Mediterranean, Caribbean and Pacific regions all include islands that depend heavily on the tourism revenues but are also suffering from ecological stress, natural hazards, low land resources, dependence on external markets, and threats to locality (Butler, 1993; Coccossis, 2004). Island tourism has certain structural features such as mono-sectoral economies, seasonal demand peaks, high transport costs and limited infrastructure capability (Buhalis, 1999). These characteristics underpin the need for context-specific approaches to sustainability and not a generic development model.

The vulnerability and resilience to island environments is a common theme in the literature relating to sustainability on islands. Islands are sensitive places because they generally have higher exposure to climate change, narrow resource base and little diversification, and lack of transportation networks, but they may also exhibit a degree of resilience because of strong community networks, cultural cohesion and adaptive strategies (Hay, 2013). Research on Aegean islands reflects the importance of development trajectories in terms of spatial inequalities, reliance on the maritime transport, fragmented governance, and geopolitics that are unique to each place

(Apostolopoulos et al., 2001). These conditions affect the way that sustainability challenges develop as well as how communities view the impacts of tourism. Further, insularity, environmental fragility and poor resource bases limit development pathways (Buhalis, 1999).

Carrying capacity and overtourism have become popular concepts in the debate on tourism in islands. Carrying capacity is the most commonly referred to indicator of tourism and subsequent negative impact on terms of environmental, social or economic systems (Saveriades, 2000). Mainstream tourism takes this concept and focuses more on subjective experiences of overcrowding, local discontent, environmental stress, and governance failures rather than local-specific capacities (Milano et al., 2019). Mediterranean case studies tell us that overtourism can create tensions between tourists and everyday life as locals can be exposed to congestion, housing pressures, price inflation and cultural commodification (Dodds & Butler, 2019). Even islands with relatively small visitor numbers may be affected by overtourism if their infrastructure, social systems and governance institutions have limited capacity to manage seasonal peaks (Peeters et al., 2018).

Within the context of the Greek islands tourism studies, scholars have explored the study of mass tourism in the Cyclades and Dodecanese, cultural tourism in Crete, rural tourism in the Northern Aegean, as well as hybrid tourism models throughout the archipelago (Buhalis, 1999; Spilanis & Vayanni, 2004). Alternative findings consistently reveal that the issue of sustainability cannot be reduced to a carrying capacity of the environment or economy, because cultural resilience and community wellbeing are significant parts of the concept of sustainability. Coccossis (2004) emphasizes the importance of Mediterranean islands to have planning mechanisms that include heritage, culture, environment and community rather than focusing on economic indicators only.

Ikaria forms a special place in this literature. Despite the growth in tourism in the area, the island has been relatively spared from the mass development models of islands such as Santorini or Mykonos. Instead, Ikarian tourism has been a combination of alternative, cultural, rural, and wellness orientations. This hybrid model has positive implications for sustainability due to the principles of diversified incomes strategies and local

ownership. However, literature recommends that even alternative tourism can create pressures for sustainability if the demand is higher than the infrastructure or if the cultural resources become commodified (Salazar, 2020). That being said, slow tourism is not a 'cure' for sustainable tourism development unless it has been implemented with specific local contexts with the aid of local decision-making. The case of Ikaria thus exemplifies that debates on sustainable tourism need to include cultural, social, and governance dimensions in addition to environmental and economic ones.

2.3.   Tourism Paradigms
2.3.1.   Community Based Tourism

Community-based tourism (CBT) was developed in response to top-down or externally controlled tourism development models which have been criticized for ignoring local needs and excluding local decision-making. Conversely, CBT is characterized by local control, community involvement, cultural preservation and fair benefit-sharing (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009). Scholars have argued that CBT has the potential to reinforce local empowerment and build social cohesion through linking tourism to cultural identity and environmental stewardship (Zapata et al., 2011). However, other studies have proposed that CBT can protect livelihoods. There is potential for the creation of social inequalities and conflicts related to who is involved in decision-making and those who may be 'left behind' if they are not employed in the tourism sector (Scheyvens, 2002).

2.3.2.   Slow Tourism

Another alternative tourism paradigm is slow tourism. Derived from wider literature on slow movements, slow tourism focuses on slower mobilities, longer time spent in a place, immersion, and engagement with locals (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010). Fullagar (2012) suggests that slow tourism can reverse the process of acceleration, standardisation and commodification which are characteristic of mass tourism in an effort to replicate experiences and satisfy a large number of people. Richards (2021) identifies slow tourism with creativity and the quest for meaning, implying that many visitors are looking for experiences that have a community base and authenticity rather than efficiency or consumption.

Slow tourism has seen a growing interest in academia in the last decade because of its compatibility with sustainability issues. Studies emphasize how slow tourism can contribute to heritage conservation, minimise environmental footprints and create local value retention (Salazar, 2020). Richards (2021) points out that slow tourism might become fashionable or even hybridized, and attract new groups of visitors with different expectations from those of previous alternative tourists.

Ikaria is in line with some aspects of slow tourism, as visitors frequently express interest in local culture, nature, conviviality and longer stays. The Blue Zone narrative also promotes more long-term involvement in health, diet and community, and reinforces a slow living ideology. However, interviews conducted for this thesis, reveal a new profile of visitors with the recent growth of tourism which includes younger profiles of visitors attracted by festivals, nightlife or social media visibility. This hybridity represents larger discussions of slow tourism literature about how modes of alternative tourism will change when exposed to the dynamics of global tourism.

2.4.   Cultural Sustainability and Heritage

Cultural sustainability has become a major part of sustainable development that has enlarged existing sustainability frameworks which previously primarily focused on environmental protection and economic viability. Throsby (1999) argues that culture is a form of capital, in that its aesthetic, historical, symbolic and social values contribute to the wellbeing and identity of a community. Thusly, any damage to culture would damage a place's capital and inherently the wellbeing of residents. Soini and Birkeland (2014) point to a number of frameworks for cultural sustainability such as heritage preservation, cultural vitality, economic valuation of culture, and culture mediating social change. These perspectives point to the complexity of the linkage between culture and sustainable development because culture can simultaneously reinforce continuity and facilitate transformation.

In the tourism studies, culture sustainability is frequently related to heritage, identity, authenticity and community cohesion. Intangible cultural heritage in particular, plays a

central role in the maintenance of local identities and transmission of values from one generation to another (UNESCO, 2003). Intangible heritage is the heritage of traditions, festivals, food ways, oral histories, rituals, crafts, and performing arts. These practices are challenging to maintain through conventional planning instruments, as they are living processes that are embedded within social relations, as opposed to material fixed objects (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Tourism can contribute to cultural sustainability through visibility, funding and generational involvement, but also through commodification, cultural deterioration or loss of meaning through adaptation of traditions for external consumption (Salazar, 2010). At the same time tourism can also damage cultural sustainability when it is designed with commodification and economic generation over authenticity and preservation.

Figure 1: *Ikarian panigiria and community dinner*

Note. Summer time *panigiria* and communal dining in Ikaria taken during fieldwork in Summer 2024

Festivals, religious celebrations, music and food practices contribute to the vitality of a culture and the attractiveness of tourism. However, the current rapid growth of tourism poses a threat to the rhythms, participation, and meanings attached to the cultural practices (Herzfeld, 1985). In Greek islands *panigiria* and other communal events have historically served social and economic functions such as informal welfare, fundraising

and reaffirming local identity (Spyridakis, 2012). When tourism is involved with such practices, the historical cultural significance is eroded as *panigiria* become designed for tourist experiences rather than communal togetherness. In contrast, it can also be said that such touristic involvement is beneficial as it brings renewed interest in cultural traditions . Cultural sustainability research increasingly focuses on the relational and dynamic characters of culture, such as authenticity. Rather than conceptualising authenticity as an inherent attribute, scholars have suggested that authenticity is coproduced in social interactions between residents, visitors and institutions (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). This perspective is relevant in islands such as Ikaria where the cultural practices, such as *panigiria*, social conviviality and dietary customs are not frozen nor performed in the same way- so authenticity can vary.

Cultural sustainability requires mechanisms of governance that safeguard cultural rights and promote community participation and that ensure that intangible heritage continues to be meaningful to local people. For small islands, however, this challenge is added to a situation of scarce institutional capacity and the necessity to balance tourism with daily life. The case of Ikaria is an opportunity to examine the role of cultural practices in sustainability and the impact on cultural systems due to the development of tourism.

2.5.   Local Participation and Decision-Making

Sustainable tourism development calls for decision-making arrangements that coordinate between diverse stakeholders, reconcile competing interests, and support long-term planning (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Decision-making is not limited to governmental institutions, but encompasses networks of public, private and civil society actors that interact in the decision-making process (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Local governance literature emphasises the need for collaboration, participation, knowledge sharing and adaptive management, especially in contexts where uncertainty and conflicting meanings prevail (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007).

Institutional frameworks for tourism governance are very diverse. In many islands within the Mediterranean sea, tourism development takes place within multi-level governance systems which connect municipalities, regional authorities with national

ministries and EU policy instruments (Triantafyllidou, 2017). Fragmentation may prevent coordination, planning and allocation of resources. For small islands like Ikaria, limited administrative capacity, seasonality and reliance on informal networks are often obstacles to the smooth running of governance processes. Spilanis and Vayanni (2004) argue that in Greek islands, there is a need for integrated planning models that should ensure a balance between cultural heritage and environmental protection and tourism services.

Local participation is key to sustainable governance. Participatory approaches stimulate community participation in planning, decision making and benefit sharing (Scheyvens, 2002). They can help contribute to legitimacy, reduce resistance and provide local knowledge into the development strategies. However, participation is not inherently inclusive, and power asymmetries, institutional barriers and socio-economic inequalities may prevent meaningful participation (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009). For islands, participation may be mediated through kinship networks and local associations and informal arrangements of governance rather than through formal planning structures.

Governance research reveals the relation between decision-making and cultural sustainability. Cultural practices can serve as informal governance mechanisms as they can reinforce social cohesion, norms and mutual support (Herzfeld, 1985). On Ikaria, *panigiria* and community associations were in the past mechanisms of welfare financing and organization. These practices confuse boundaries between culture and politics. When tourism comes into contact with such systems, governance needs to consider the formal and informal aspects of community life.

Ikaria is a good example of governance challenges in relation to small island development. The island is based on the municipal authorities, local associations, informal networks and regional policies, but does not have comprehensive structures in tourism planning and destination management. Interviews suggest that residents perceive the opportunities of and vulnerabilities towards increased tourism but differ in how development should proceed. These perspectives represent broader discussions of how governance can support sustainable pathways instead of top-down solutions that ignore local values.

3.   Ikaria as a Case Study

The island of Ikaria in the Eastern Aegean Sea of Greece provides a fascinating place to study the dynamics between a rapidly changing tourism landscape on an island with significant cultural, environmental, and social characteristics. Historically, Ikaria has been linked to collectivist forms of social organization, high levels of community network and unique cultural identity manifested in festivals (*panigiria*), food traditions and informal social organization (Poulain et al. 2013). International media and academic interest was heightened after Ikaria was classified as a Blue Zone, a term popularized by Buettner (2012) to refer to geographic regions with demographic longevity indicators. Similarly, in 2023 Netflix released a popular documentary "Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones" which had an episode featuring Ikaria. Although the Blue Zone narrative has contributed to the visibility of Ikaria, local culture and identity is much older than such classifications and represents profound socio-historical trajectories that are rooted in the political exile, remoteness and self-sufficiency.

In recent years, however, Ikaria has seen an increase in the demand for tourism services and for the extension of the tourist season beyond the peak summer months. A shift in tourism desires has catalysed Ikaria to the diversity that tourism offers instead of efforts to establish a management paradigm that protects the island's culture and community. Qualitative accounts from local actors, collected as the main method for this paper, suggest that forms of alternative tourism have started to intersect with forms of mainstream tourism. This is linked to impacts on cultural practices, infrastructure, and economic organization (Swanson and Cavender, 2019). Interviewees often mentioned the issue of more crowding in August, stress on waste management and sewage systems, price rise, new tensions between authenticity and commercialisation, and changing cultural practices related to festivals and social spaces. As will be critically analysed in this paper, such sentiments during interviews in Ikaria suggest that the topic of sustainable (tourism) development must include focus on cultural and governance aspects, in addition to environment and economic aspects which have historically been centered. Sartika (2024) points out that certain definitions of sustainable tourism within mainstream discourses leave (preservation of) local cultural heritage and community as a second thought after economic and environmental preservation are satisfied.

Mediterranean islands have been at the heart of recent debates on tourism, especially on the issue of overtourism. Overtourism is defined as a situation where the intensity of tourism is emphasizing the social, environmental, economical or infrastructural carrying capacity of destinations (Milano et al., 2019). Although a lot of overtourism research focused on big cities (Koens et al., 2018) the new literature has shown that islands and coastal zones may be particularly vulnerable to seasonal peaks, infrastructural bottlenecks and insufficient governance capacities (UNWTO, 2018; Dodds & Butler, 2019). These are conditions that are pertinent for Ikaria, that does not have large-scale tourism infrastructures, is dependent on seasonal maritime and air connections and needs to balance development with heritage and collective identity.

Institutional and policy frameworks contribute to the direction of island tourism. International and European organizations have developed strategies and guides in the service of sustainable tourism and management of islands and coasts (UNESCO, 2016; OECD, 2020; ESPON, 2021). However, implementation has been fragmented and is highly reliant on local governance capacity and public participation, cooperation amongst stakeholders and long-term planning. Mediterranean islands tend to have complexities in multi-level governance organisation in response to the interactions of municipalities, regional authority, institutions, EU and also local associations (Triantafyllidou, 2017). This is a complex aspect that brings up strategic questions about how to operationalize sustainability in practice.

Within this broader context, Ikaria is an important, theoretically and empirically relevant, case for exploring how small island destinations negotiate the challenge of achieving sustainable tourism development within the context of maintaining cultural identity and community wellbeing. The recent tourism dynamics in the island, the cultural uniqueness and perceived infrastructural and governance problems make it suitable for the qualitative case study method. By engaging with the local actors, this thesis aims at developing an empirical understanding of how sustainable development can be conceptualized and pursued from within the community, rather than being imposed from the outside.

3.1. Geographic and Socio Economic Profile

Ikaria is situated in the Eastern Aegean, between Samos and Mykonos and is a part of the North Aegean region of Greece. The island covers an area of ca. 255 km2 with a coastline of ca. 160 km. Its terrain is mostly mountainous, dominated by the Atheras range (over 1,000 meters), with narrow valleys and short coastal plains where most of the people are living. The climate is typically Mediterranean with hot dry summers and mild wetter winters and microclimatic differences between north and south facing slopes.

Figure Two: *Map of Mainland Greece and Ikaria*
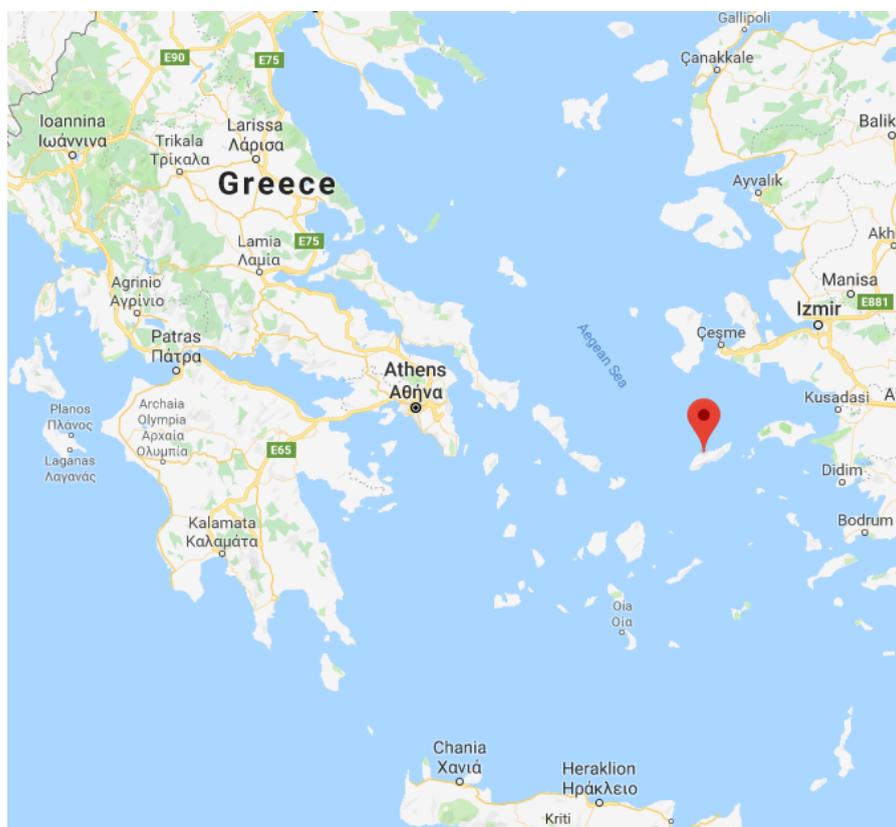
Note. Ikaria highlighted with the red marker
(https://www.guidegr.com/en/2020/02/04/ikaria-the-island-of-the-long-life-2/)

According to recent demographic data, Ikaria has exactly over 8000 permanent residents, many of whom live in small dispersed villages as opposed to large urban centers. Population ageing is marked, and the island is known internationally as one of the so called Blue Zones, where the proportion of people over 90 years of age is unusually high. Epidemiological studies attribute this longevity pattern to a combination

of eating habits, physical activity associated with the mountainous country, social cohesion and low levels of chronic stress (Panagiotakos et al., 2011; Legrand et al., 2021; Poulain et al., 2021).

The socio economic profile of Ikaria is influenced by past dependence on agriculture, livestock, small scale fishing and out migration. Traditional activities included subsistence farming, viticulture, and olive growing, beekeeping and small herds of goats and sheep. Many households still have gardens and small plots which contribute to food security and dietary patterns described in Blue Zone research. Pensions, seasonal work, employment in the public sector and money sent home by migrants are other sources of additional income.

Tourism has begun to play an increasingly important role in the local economy though Ikaria is not so specialized in tourism as many Cycladic or Dodecanese islands. Small hotels, guesthouses, rental rooms, tavernas, cafes and seasonal service jobs are some of the occupations in the island. Research on agritourism and rural livelihoods has shown that some Ikarian households combine tourism with agriculture and other activities which results in the diversification of income portfolios and enhances the resilience of rural households (Kizos and Iosifides 2007). At the same time, in a recent socio-metabolic study stress on the fact that there are multiple pressures in Ikaria: unmanaged waste, water scarcity, limited healthcare access and inflation, these interact with tourism growth and demographic change (Lopez Barreiro, 2024).

 Connectivity still remains a structural constraint. Ikaria is reachable by a small airport and a number of ferrying routes that connect it with Piraeus, Samos and nearby islands, yet weather conditions, frequency of services and the cost of travel makes a feeling of peripherality. Interviews with long term residents point to the fact that, until comparatively recently, poor port infrastructure, erratic connections and the rugged relief of the island, were contributing to social and economic isolation. This context is key to understanding the development trajectories and the perception of sustainability both in terms of geography and socio economic structures.

3.2.   History and Culture

The historical path of Ikaria makes a strong contribution to the cultural identity of the present day. The island has been inhabited since Antiquity and has gone through various regimes such as Byzantine, Genoese, Ottoman and also under the modern Greek state rule. In 1912 Ikaria declared a fleeting "Free State of Ikaria" before coming under the wing of Greece, an event still celebrated every July in the Eleftheria festival which is a celebration of local resistance and autonomy.

During the mid twentieth century, the island was used as a place of exile for political dissidents particularly communists, post the Greek Civil War. Ethnographic and historical studies indicate that this period left a strong imprint on the social norms of the area, with strong traditions of solidarity, mutual aid and political left leaning orientations (Papalas, 2005; Kallis et al., 2022). Interviews with older residents speak of practices of labor exchange, barter and collective support in times of poverty where households depended highly on each other for survival and social security. This history feeds into a local ethos of egalitarianism and suspicion of outside control or speculative investment.

Cultural practices are very important to the identity of the island. Ikaria is well known in Greece for its *panigiria*, communal festivals organized by local associations to celebrate religious name days and other things. These feasts involve a mixture of live music and collective dancing, collective meals and fund raising for local infrastructure or social causes. Oral histories have indicated that in the past, *panigiria* have been used as a way of providing cohesiveness among the community and informal welfare mechanism, in the form of financing roads, schools and medical expenditure. Contemporary narratives from residents outline how festivals remain used to raise money for people in need, e.g. for medical treatment, while at the same time being key attractions for visitors. The concept of "slow living" is often used in association with Ikaria. Ethnographic work on islandness and degrowth describes Ikaria as a site where values of frugality, conviviality and moderation are practiced in everyday life in contrast to growth focused development models (Kallis et al., 2022). Blue Zone research reinforces this image by

stressing social networks, intergenerational ties, frequent social interactions and patterns of activities where work, leisure and communal life are interspersed (Panagiotakos et al., 2011; Legrand et al., 2021).

However, cultural practices are dynamic. Residents interviewed for this thesis observe changes in the scale, rhythm and orientation of *panigiria* and some of the older residents report that modern festivals are more geared towards younger people and extended nightlife than in previous decades. At the same time, there is a generally held perception that many visitors are active seekers to participate respectfully in local customs and that cultural identity is strong. These nuances point to the need to conceptualize cultural sustainability as a dynamic process and not as the preservation of a fixed tradition.

3.3.   Development of Tourism in Ikaria: Greek Island Context

Ikaria has been involved in the tourism economy later and less than many other Greek islands, which became mass tourism destinations from the 1960s onwards (Buhalis, 1999). For much of the twentieth century limited port infrastructure, steep terrain and out migration limited the attractiveness of the island for large scale tourism investment. Early forms of tourism were mostly on an informal basis, consisting of guest rooms in family houses, small pensions, spa tourism, centered on the thermal springs of Therma, and visits of Greeks with personal connections to the island.

From the late twentieth century, however, Ikaria began to attract an increasing number of visitors with an interest in nature, hiking, local culture and perceived authenticity. Agritourism projects, small guesthouses and cultural events like the Ikaria Festival and music events contributed to a profile that was different from mainstream sun and beach destinations.

The designation of Ikaria as a Blue Zone, which gained popularity in the international media in the 2000s and 2010s, strengthened its image of a place of healthy ageing and simple living (Buettner, 2012; Panagiotakos et al., 2011; Poulain et al., 2021). This narrative lured wellness oriented visitors, researchers and journalists, and contributed to a new phase of tourism demand, including international tourists outside of the traditional Greek visitor base. At the same time social media, travel blogs, and influencer

content began to portray *panigiria*, beaches, and landscapes and as a result, this diversified the visitor profile and led to more seasonal inflows.

Qualitative interviews indicate an increase in visitor numbers, particularly in August, over the last five to ten years, and a change in the composition of tourists. Local respondents describe the presence of both repeat visitors that return regularly and new groups which relate to Ikaria as a fashionable destination. Some residents see positive economic impacts for local businesses, while others have complaints about overcrowding of the festivals, congestion of narrow roads, lack of parking, and pressure on such basic necessities as water, waste management, and sewage.

Recent studies about the metabolism of the society of Ikaria confirm that unmanaged waste, low level of waste treatment facilities, and seasonal peaks of consumption give rise to serious environmental and managerial problems (Lopez Barreiro, 2024). These findings reflect broader discussions on overtourism and carrying capacity in Mediterranean destinations, which highlight the impact of seasonal peaks on limited infrastructure and local governance, even in locations that do not have the visitor numbers to match the volume of a major mass tourism resort (Peeters et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019).

The narrative of the development of tourism in Ikaria may be summed up as one of a gradual transition from low volume tourism, informal, and alternative types of tourism to a more complex pattern of visitors and activities. The island still lacks huge resorts and package tourism to the extent of other Aegean islands, and many tourism enterprises are owned and operated by locals, which supports the local value capture. At the same time, the recent increasing popularity of the island and the interaction between Blue Zone branding, social media promotion and cultural festivals raise questions on how to handle tourism with respect to the sustainable development goals.

Greek island tourism has been studied extensively using the concepts of peripherality and competitiveness and also regarding sustainability. Buhalis (1999) demonstrates that in many islands of the Aegean, tourism accounts for between 50 and 90 percent of the Gross Regional Product, but also points out the dependence on international tour

operators, vulnerability to outside shocks and pressure on the environment. Coccossis (2004) and Spilanis and Vayanni (2004) propose that small islands are a combination of high ecological sensitivity and a lack of planning and governance, and thus sustainable tourism is a structural rather than a policy choice.

Within this larger framework, Ikaria is in a somewhat unique position. Compared to other Greek islands like Mykonos, Santorini or Rhodes, Ikaria is still not so dependent on massive international tourism and is not even dominated by the big hotel complexes. Its economy is more diversified with a greater presence of agriculture, pensions and employment in the public sector. At the same time, the island has characteristics that are close to other Greek islands, such as limited infrastructure, dependence on maritime and air links, limited capacity of local governments, and a fluctuating heavy and light demand seasonality (Coccossis, 2004; Spilanis and Vayanni, 2004).

Ikaria is also symbolically involved in the current debates on alternative development of the Mediterranean. Kallis et al (2022) interpret Ikaria as a place of "real existing degrowth", where slow rhythms, frugal abundance and communal practices challenge dominant narratives of growth based development. These interpretations are relevant to tourism, in that they affect the ways in which outsiders imagine the island and the types of things they want to see when they visit. Ikaria is frequently described as an escape from city stress, an experiment in a slow existence, a location where there are communal festivals and lengthy social evenings which are another manner of life.

At the same time, critical authors are concerned with the ways in which such imaginaries can produce new forms of commodification. As the island's reputation is spread, there is a risk that the very qualities which make the island attractive to visitors, such as conviviality and low commercialisation, will be changed by the forces of the market, property speculation and gentrification. When looking through the context of Greek island tourism as a whole, Ikaria could thus be considered a hybrid case. It is not a traditional mass tourism destination nor is it a marginal island with little tourism. Instead, it is a combination of elements of rural and alternative tourism, with ever-growing mainstream appeal. This position does create both risks and opportunities. Ikaria has the opportunity to develop a sustainable trajectory of

development based on the use of its cultural capital, social cohesion and diversified economy, and not towards paths of intensive external controlled tourism. At the same time, the structural constraints revealed in the study of islands, such as the limited infrastructure, the multi level governance complexity, as well as the exposure of these islands to the dynamics of tourism in the global marketplace, continue to be highly relevant (Coccossis, 2004; Spilanis & Vayanni, 2004; Island Studies Journal, 2023).

For this thesis it is important to place Ikaria in this broader context. It helps to clarify the fact that the island is not a unique anomaly, but a part of a regional system of island destinations that are being affected by similar drivers of change. At the same time, its particularities of historical experiences, cultural practices, and recent visibility in the context of the Blue Zone and degrowth debates give it certain specificities that justify a detailed qualitative case study. By understanding the geographical and socio economic profile of Ikaria, its historical and cultural characteristics, the path of development of tourism and its place within the Greek island tourism, it is possible to analyze sustainable development pathways, which are not grounded in abstract models, but on local realities.

4.   Theoretical and Analytical Framework

4.1.   Frameworks for Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism frameworks have been established as the theoretical foundation for understanding how tourism development can facilitate long term ecological, socio-cultural and economic wellbeing. Classic sustainable tourism literature builds from the Brundtland Commission's (1987) definition of sustainable development, especially the principles of intergenerational equity, resource preservation and growth balance. Within tourism studies, the focus of sustainable tourism was initially on environmental carrying capacity, mitigation and planning (Hunter, 1997; Butler, 1993). Over the years, scholars built upon these frameworks to add social justice, cultural continuity, local empowerment and community wellbeing (Sharpley, 2020; Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

An important contribution of frameworks for sustainable tourism is that they are

multi-dimensional. Rather than seeing sustainability through one lens only (i.e., ecology), frameworks like the triple-bottom-line and the socio-ecological models highlight that sustainable tourism must find a balance between protecting the environment, cultural and social wellbeing, and economic viability (Hall, 2019). This is in keeping with the view that the outcomes of sustainability cannot be reduced to quantitative indicators only. Values, identities, cultural heritages and governance processes influence the ways communities determine the desirability and impact of tourism (Soini & Birkeland, 2014).

Within Mediterranean islands, frameworks for sustainable tourism aid the analysis of the interaction of tourism with structural vulnerabilities. Seasonal patterns cause temporary population peaks, increasing pressures on infrastructures, waste management and mobility networks (Peeters et al., 2018). At the same time, cultural heritage and place identity are important elements of destination attraction. This duality implies that sustainable tourism, in island destinations, has to be a balance between conservation and development, based upon a wider understanding of socio-cultural resilience.

Ikaria is an example requiring the use of a multi-faceted sustainable tourism framework. The development of tourism has been slow and alternative in orientation for the island, but there have been recent signs of increasing visitor numbers, seasonal peaks in visitor demand and changing tourist profiles, indicating pressures for development in keeping with the discourse about Mediterranean overtourism. However, Ikaria is unique from mass tourism islands as it features special cultural practices, communal ethos and diversified livelihoods and gorgeous landscapes and treacherous terrain which attract tourists. Further, the exact factors which attract tourists to Ikaria are the same factors which pose threats to cultural sustainability if tourism were to be uncontrolled and unintentional in design. Thusly, the case of Ikaria requires a specialized framework which emphasises the cultural and social aspects of tourism and presents a clear framework for how tourism should be designed in order to stimulate tourism while first-and-foremost protecting culture and community.

4.1.1.   The UNESCO World Heritage Convention: Sustainable Tourism Toolkit

The UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Toolkit provides a systematic operational approach to the integration and preservation of cultural heritage in sustainable tourism planning. Developed as part of the mandate to protect tangible and intangible heritage as enshrined in the 1974 Convention on the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage, the toolkit advocates for approaches that put culture, communities and heritage at the core of tourism development (UNESCO, 2016). It focuses on capacity building, stakeholder collaboration, visitor management and heritage interpretation as key elements to sustainable tourism destinations.

The conceptual contribution of the toolkit is to draw a link between heritage preservation and tourism, not as competing priorities but as mutually reinforcing, if appropriately managed. UNESCO promotes heritage-based tourism that reinforces identity and builds community pride and helps cohesion of communities while creating economic opportunity for locals. This is consistent with Throsby's (1999) notion of cultural capital, which describes culture as a resource for sustainable development which is not susceptible to market exchange value.

Certain dimensions of the toolkit are of particular relevance for the island contexts:

- First, the toolkit emphasizes participatory approaches that engage local communities in the decision-making processes. Participation is the means to ensure that heritage narratives reflect local meaning and that cultural continuity and not external interpretations prevail in tourism development. This has particular relevance for the critical analyses of this project because through participant observation and interviews, I am able to identify to what extent local communities are represented in the decision-making process regarding choices made during tourism development phases;
- Second, the importance of managing tourism flows to prevent overcrowding or cultural disruption or degradation of heritage sites is emphasised by the UN body. While most of the previous studies on Mediterranean islands had focused on

environmental carrying capacity, the framework proposed by UNESCO goes beyond the environmental dimension and broadens the concept of carrying capacity to encompass cultural and social dimensions. Similarly, I am able to harness my personal observations and interview data to identify any changes in tourist numbers and if there has been any changes in the communal culture and state of the island in general (such as poor waste management and increased traffic);

- Third, the toolkit encourages training, governance coordination, and capacity building - aspects that are responsive to institutional fragmentation that is often evident in governance of tourism in islands. This is also of particular relevance for my chosen methodology because I am able to investigate if there are any co-ordinated efforts to successfully integrate a tourist economy into Ikaria.

Applying the toolkit to the area of Ikaria brings theoretical concepts into practical contexts. Ikaria's cultural practices - *panigiria*, foodways, conviviality and communal associations are intangible heritage with social, symbolic and identity building functions. These are practices contributing to the tourism attractiveness of Ikaria which are not performed primarily for tourism audiences. By building off of the three dimensions listed above, this toolkit is leveraged for this project by identifying factors which need to be present in order for tourism to not negatively impact cultural heritage; thusly data found from interviews and observations will be compared to the toolkit to allow for a glimpse into the current state of tourism in Ikaria and what is needed for it to successfully protect cultural heritage. Furthermore, the focus of the toolkit on participatory government fits well with the informal social structure and the patterns of collective decision-making of the people of Ikaria. The impact of increased tourism is a cause of concern in terms of scale, participation, and access - issues consistent with the concerns of the UNESCO toolkit which has warned of the potential for unmanaged cultural tourism to compromise the integrity of heritage. Consequently, the framework developed by UNESCO offers analytical tools for evaluating the effects of tourism development on intangible heritage as well as the role of governance interventions in supporting sustainable pathways. These analytical tools will be used for data analysis.

4.2. Conceptual Model for the Study

Drawing from the frameworks of sustainable tourism and from the toolkit of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), this thesis makes use of a conceptual model that combines three dimensions of analysis: (1) cultural sustainability, (2) community participation and governance, and (3) tourism development pressures. This model is well suited to the case of Ikaria where cultural identity, informal governance structures and the growth of tourism intersect.

The first dimension, cultural sustainability, considers the role of cultural practices, identity and intangible cultural heritage in the wellbeing of communities and in the attractiveness of destinations. It draws on the scholarship on cultural sustainability that understands the roles of culture as both a resource and a mode of social reproduction (Throsby, 1999; Soini & Birkeland, 2014). In Ikaria, cultural sustainability is focused on conviviality; social cohesion; *panigiria*; diet and lifestyle practices that fit the Blue Zone narrative; and collective memory.

The second dimension, community participation and governance, deals with the question of how decisions on tourism development are made, who is involved and how benefits and burdens are allocated. It draws from tourism governance literature that focuses on participation, collaboration and multi-level governance (Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Dredge and Jamal, 2015). In Igika, there is both the formal government in the municipal structures and informal community associations, which reflect hybrid modes of governance, considered important in heritage-based tourism by the World Heritage Convention at the World Heritage Center.

The third dimension, tourism development pressures, focuses on the impacts that tourism has on infrastructure, cultural practices and socio-economic systems. It includes debates on overtourism, carrying capacity and alternative models of tourism (Milano et al., 2019; Richards, 2021). In Ikaria, pressures arise not only from visitor numbers but from seasonal concentration, changing visitor profiles and increased visibility through the media and Blue Zone branding.

The conceptual model is based on the assumption that the outcomes of sustainable tourism are dependent on the balance between these three dimensions, which will be the core assumption for data analysis. The sustainable development pathways are more likely to be taken if cultural sustainability is not forgotten, if governance is designed to provide community participation, and if tourism pressures are kept manageable. Conversely, sustainability could be at risk when the growth of tourism is higher than the levels of governance capacity, or when cultural practices become commodified.

This conceptual framework is used to guide the empirical approach and analysis of the thesis. It informs data collection by suggesting relevant themes to be developed for semi structured interviews and it helps in data interpretation by relating grounded insights to established theoretical constructs. It also fulfills the gap between the abstract sustainability debates and the living realities of the island of Ikaria, which will enable the study to produce actionable and context-specific findings.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design and Approach

This research takes a qualitative case study approach to examine how sustainable tourism development is understood, practiced and negotiated in Ikaria. Case studies are appropriate for complex socio-cultural situations due to their ability to see processes, interactions, and meanings in depth (Yin, 2018, p. 43). Qualitative inquiry focuses on interpretation, located knowledge, and experiential understanding as opposed to generalization or prediction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach is in line with the objectives of research, which is aimed at cultural sustainability, heritage practices and governance and community perspectives rather than simply quantitative assessments of tourism impacts.

The research is based on an interpretivism epistemological position. Interpretivism is the assumption that social reality is built by shared meanings, narrative and practice and consequently cannot be broken down into abstract variables that are detached from their context (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Sustainable tourism is interpretive, especially when it is associated with heritage, identity and community. Cultural practices like *panigiria* can't be explained by economical indicators or the amount of visitors. They

get meaning through involvement, memory, ritual and social relations. Likewise, local views of tourism pressures, sustainability and governance are shaped by individual experiences and collective histories and are therefore not objective measures.

Ikaria is a good empirical setting for qualitative inquiry because of its unique cultural practices, shifting tourism landscape and tensions with alternative/slow tourism and a new tourism visibility. The qualitative design makes it possible to explore these dynamics as lived processes, including the capture of different voices, contrasting positions of residents, associations, tourism actors and visitors. The research also recognises the changing character of debates on tourism development and sustainability on small islands. Rather than taking for granted that frameworks for sustainable tourism can be applied in a one-size-fits-all manner, the qualitative design allows us to investigate the local understanding of sustainability.

Finally, qualitative methodologies favor methodological flexibility. Fieldwork was a combination of semi-structured interview, participant observations that took place in two different periods of time and a qualitative exploratory questionnaire. Triangulation and thick description (Geertz, 1973) were possible with these methods, providing credibility and depth of analysis.

5.2.   Researcher Positioning and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is not an external observer, and is instead an instrument in data collection and interpretation (Patton, 2015). Reflexivity therefore has an important methodological role to play. Reflexivity is the critical reflection on the influence of the positionality of the researcher, assumptions, and interactions in the research process (Finlay, 2002). For the purposes of this research, I take a reflexive approach which is based on the understanding that tourism and cultural heritage research are value-laden and situated in political and social contexts.

My positionality is shaped by my Greek origin, linguistic fluency, and familiarity with Greek cultural and social contexts. Being a native Greek speaker allowed me to access informal conversations and interpret symbolic expressions, such as graffiti, political slogans, and local narratives, which may be less accessible to non-Greek-speaking

researchers. For example, I observed widespread expressions of solidarity with Palestine, including graffiti and a large pro-Palestinian demonstration, which highlighted the persistence of leftist political ideologies within local identity and social discourse. However, despite a shared national and linguistic background, I remained an outsider to the specific Ikarian community, and my interpretations are necessarily partial and shaped by my temporary presence and researcher perspective.

My professional background in the Greek tourism industry and academic training in tourism studies further shaped how I interpreted these experiences. This dual positioning—as a culturally embedded observer and a critical tourism researcher—required continuous reflexivity regarding potential biases, assumptions, and the influence of my background on data interpretation.My place as a researcher was crucial to determining both access and interpreting data. Entering the field as an outside researcher to research sustainable tourism created some initial curiosity from interviewees. Some of the participants viewed the research as an opportunity to voice concerns about tourism, while others expressed pride in Ikaria's cultural distinctiveness. These interactions influenced what was said, how it was said and under what conditions. Reflexivity here does not work as a methodological problem, but instead as a source of analytical insight. Power dynamics, trust and rapport were involved in the stories that residents and tourism actors shared.

Reflexivity was also important to interpreting cultural practices such as *panigiria.* As an outsider, my initial interpretations were at risk of romanticizing cultural events in the imagined context of tourism or in the sustainability discourse. Continuous critical reflection was helpful in overcoming this tendency by foregrounding local meanings rather than external frames. Participant observation aided in this process, as it allowed me to experience festivals and interactions firsthand instead of having to depend only on verbal accounts.

Furthermore, reflexivity was extended to analytical decisions. Selecting themes, interpreting discourses and contextualizing findings necessitated an awareness of the role played by theoretical frameworks in interpretation. For instance, governance and participation are highlighted in the sustainable tourism literature, and intangible heritage and identity are the focus in cultural sustainability literature. These

frameworks influenced my interpretation of interview material. Acknowledging these influences helps to build methodological transparency and credibility.

5.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount in designing the research because of the qualitative, community-based nature of the research. Ethical principles were guided by academic research standards focusing on informed consent, confidentiality, respect for participants, and nonmaleficence (Israel & Hay, 2006). Participants were told about the purposes of the research and the voluntary nature of participation before interviews and questionnaire participation. Moreover, participants were able to refuse to answer questions or withdraw from research at any point and not suffer any negative consequences. In general, every interview had the form of an informal conversation without a strict questionnaire rather than some key topics that the participants were free to elaborate.

Confidentiality was a central issue of ethics considering the small population size of Ikaria and the interconnections in social networks. Certain roles (e.g., association organizers or local business owners) could be used to identify participants, so the analysis avoided attribution of specific quotes to organizational positions unless with explicit consent.

Ethical sensitivity extended to cultural practices. *Panigiria* and other cultural events include informal governance, community participation and symbolic meaning. Research engagement with such practices required respect, non-intrusiveness, and sensitivity to the social context. Participant observation was conducted without disturbing events or calling attention to note taking. Reflexive awareness contributed to making sure observation was interpretive and not extractive.

The research also dealt with possible power dynamics. As an outside researcher, my presence could be interpreted as being evaluative or included in external interest such as tourism promotion or policy interventions. Transparency about research intent helped to minimize misinterpretation and helped build rapport. In addition, care was taken not to impose normative sustainability or cultural interpretations in response to participants

articulating alternative viewpoints.

Finally, there were ethical considerations in dissemination. The research is aimed for academic use and adds to the discourse on sustainable development and cultural sustainability. Care was taken to ensure that research outputs do not cause harm to the community through stigmatising local practices, misrepresenting the dynamics of tourism or increasing tensions between residents and visitors.

5.4.   Data Collection Methods

5.4.1.   Semi-Structured Interviews

The main source of the data was semi-structured interviews. I conducted 10 interviews throughout the course of July 2024 during a stay in Ikaria. Another 15 interviews were conducted during a second stay in Ikara during the dates of 1-15 August 2025. The majority of interviews were conducted in person in an informal setting such as a cafe or campsite. Other interviews were conducted by phone when participants were not available.Going into interviews I had pre-written questions curated to the 'type' of participant. During interviews I asked follow-up questions when needed and did not strictly stick to a script.

Semi-structured interviews offer the opportunity to have guided but flexible conversation, where participants can describe their experiences and perspectives in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guide was informed using the theoretical framework, Guide for Sustainable Tourism Toolkit by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural and Sport Organization (UNESCO) and the research objectives. Core themes included cultural sustainability, the dynamics of tourism development, heritage practices, tourism pressures, governance and future visions for Ikaria.

Interviews were carried out with residents, members of cultural associations, tourism actors and people involved in *panigiria.* This mixed sample allowed the research to represent a variety of viewpoints and look for both commonalities and differences of opinion. Interviews varied in length depending upon participant interest and context. Some of them continued for more than an hour, while others were shorter but with

plenty of content.

The process of the interview was iterative. Early interviews helped to inform later questions so that emerging themes could determine inquiry. This adaptive approach is consistent with qualitative best practices and is consistent with depth over breadth (Charmaz, 2014). A number of the interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Other interviews were recorded by detailed field notes when a recording system was not possible. The combination of transcripts and notes enhanced the analysis and minimized data loss.

5.4.2.   Participant Observation

Participant observation complemented the interviews by providing direct experiential insight into everyday life, cultural practices and social interactions. For ethnographic and qualitative research, observation is an integral part of the method because it uncovers informal practices, tacit knowledge and embodied experiences that might not be spoken about in interviews (Spradley, 1980). In Ikaria, participant observation focused on participating in *panigiria,* public gatherings, and daily interactions in cafes and communal spaces.

Overall, personal observations from both field visits enriched my understanding of Ikaria as a tourism destination and provided contextual grounding for the analysis presented in this thesis. They also allowed for a comparative reflection on seasonal variations in tourism dynamics and their socio-cultural and infrastructural implications.

My engagement with Ikaria developed through two field visits. I first visited the island in July 2024 for a summer holiday, during which I also conducted exploratory field observations. This visit allowed me to experience Ikaria simultaneously as a visitor and as a researcher, and it provided initial insights into local culture, everyday life, and tourism practices. During this period, several residents and visitors emphasized that August constitutes the peak tourism season, often describing it as a period of overcrowding and intensified pressures on local infrastructure and community life. These narratives motivated me to return to the island during the high season to observe tourism dynamics under peak conditions.

Consequently, I conducted a second field visit from 1 to 13 August 2025. During this trip, I camped at Mesakti Beach, which facilitated frequent interactions with both residents and visitors. Travelling solo enabled me to engage in spontaneous conversations in various social settings, including beaches, cafés, festivals, and transportation contexts. I attended more than five traditional panigyria, which offered opportunities to observe cultural practices, social interactions, and the impacts of mass participation during the peak season. I also reconnected with individuals I had met during my first visit, which enabled longitudinal reflections on perceived changes in tourism and local life.

5.5. Sampling Strategy and Participants

Sampling used in qualitative research aims at depth and relevance more so than statistical representation (Marshall, 1996). This research utilized the purposive method of recruitment to identify the participants who have relevant experience and knowledge pertaining to tourism, cultural practices and community dynamics. Purposive sampling was complemented by snowball sampling whereby participants recommended other people involved in cultural associations, tourism-related activities, or community initiatives (Noy, 2008).

Participants included residents who have been engaged in cultural associations for a long time, organizers of *panigiria*, local business owners and tourism actors. This diversity offered various angles to analyse issues on sustainable development, cultural sustainability and governance. The qualitative exploratory questionnaire allowed for a broader participation as it allowed individuals who did not want to participate in full interviews to contribute their views around tourism and culture.

Because Ikaria is a small and closely knit community, sampling was also ethically sensitive. Maintaining confidentiality was critical so that the participants felt comfortable disclosing concerns over tourism or future development. The research avoided sampling strategies that could generate social discomfort or local tensions.

5.6.   Typology of Participants

Participants can be divided into three empirical categories. This helps to explain differences in perception without reading something into the data.

Table 1. Typology of Participants

Category	Characteristics	Observed Focus
Locals	Permanent residents, multi income survival, cultural attachment	Infrastructure, prices, cultural authenticity, seasonality
Repeaters	Long term returning visitors with cultural familiarity	Festivals, community, cultural continuity, change over time
First timers	Occasional and peak season visitors	Crowd intensity, festive atmosphere, transportation difficulties

5.7.   Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was based on a thematic analysis approach, which is suitable for qualitative research that aims to identify patterns of meaning in the interview and observation data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is supportive of the interpretivist inquiry as themes can be both inductively generated from the data and driven by the theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2014). This dual inductive and deduction mode was appropriate for this research, as the theoretical framework focused on the themes of cultural sustainability, governance and tourism development, but empirical fieldwork revealed the articulation of these themes at the local scale.

The analytical process was divided into several stages. First, interview transcripts, field notes and interview answers were compiled, reviewed, and organized. Repeated readings of the material provided for familiarization with the data and for preliminary

patterns to emerge. Second, initial codes were generated which focused on recurring concepts, concerns and narratives that were expressed by participants. Codes contained such terms as "cultural continuity," "*panigiria*," "tourism pressures," "seasonality," "community," "authenticity," "heritage," "commodification," "governance," and "future visions." Coding was iterative in that early codes were refined as more data was processed.

Third, codes were grouped into broader themes that were used to link empirical material to the conceptual model. Themes such as cultural sustainability, informal governance, tourism imaginaries, and development tensions allowed the analysis to move from descriptive coding to interpretive synthesis. Observation data provided contextual detail that clarified and expanded on interview themes in this process. For example, themes associated with *panigiria* and cultural practices were strengthened not only with the verbal accounts but also by direct observation of festivals and interactions.

Fourth, analysis was interpreted and finalised using the theoretical and analytical framework set up in section 4.1.1. This stage associated local experiences and sustainable tourism frameworks, the UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Toolkit, and debates on cultural sustainability and island development. Theory provided analytical structure without overwhelming local narratives in line with reflexive interpretivist methodology. Finally, findings were synthesized into coherent analytical categories which inform the empirical analysis chapters.

Triangulation contributed to the analytical credibility. Interviews, observations and questionnaire data converged around key themes such as cultural distinctiveness, festival participation, tourism pressures and visions of sustainability. Thematic coherence was also assisted by secondary material, such as reports, local publications and Ikaria-specific documents. Triangulation did not mean consistency across sources; differences of perspective were analytically important and helped to understand disputed meanings around tourism development.

5.8.   Methodological Shortcomings

All research methodologies have limitations that impact on interpretation. The

limitations in this study are mainly due to qualitative, interpretive approach of study, scope of sampling and also due to fieldwork constraints. First of all, qualitative research is more about depth than breadth. While interviews and observations yielded rich information about Ikaria's cultural and tourism dynamics, the results are not statistically generalizable beyond the case. Instead, it is the analytical generalization (Yin, 2018) which has value for theoretical and policy debate on sustainable island tourism and cultural sustainability.

Second, how things were sampled influenced the findings. A wide range of participants, but still a limited number, were obtained by purposive and snowball sampling. Voices that were less accessible or less interested in discussions of tourism may be underrepresented. Third, participant observation provided a valuable understanding of context and was reliant on access and positionality. As an outside researcher, my interpretations of cultural practices such as *panigiria* may differ from the interpretations made by residents. Reflexivity helped to mitigate the effects of interpretive bias, but cannot eliminate it. The longevity narrative linked to Ikaria as a Blue Zone destination further complicates interpretation, as external tourism imaginaries and media portrayals frame expectations and discourse.

Fourth, the process of the development of the analytical framework informed by the UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Toolkit but was not operationalised by the local institutions. The research therefore deals with the conceptual engagement of the concept of the UNO and not its applied effectiveness. This distinction points towards the gap between global frameworks of sustainability and local governance realities.

Finally, methodological triangulation worked in favor of the research, but did not completely address data constraints. The qualitative exploratory questionnaire increased participation but was based on self-reporting and variable levels of participation. Secondary materials were used to supplement primary data and may be institutional or promotional biased.

These limitations do not detract from the research, but rather put the scope of the research into perspective and make the interpretation of the results clear. Qualitative methodology is suitable to the study of sustainable development as a lived cultural and

social phenomenon, especially in island situations.

6. Results

This chapter presents the results of the interviews, field observations, and relevant literature findings. I present how participants describe culture, tourism, seasonality, infrastructure and sustainability dynamics in Ikaria. The section is descriptive with an analytic structuring with interpretation is left to the discussion chapter.

6.1. Cultural Identity and Community Practices

Participants regularly described Ikaria as a place characterised by community belonging and solidarity and informal social support. Locals and repeaters characterized the concepts of mutual aid as common. One interviewee recalled that the old generations had to use product exchanges during times of poverty and lack of state support. He explained that survival required cooperation and that this influenced the attitudes toward hospitality and social responsibility.

Solidarity is still present in the festivals that fundraise for people with medical problems. One participant told of a recent event where residents had organized a festival to raise money for a woman's cancer treatment. These accounts have revealed that cultural identity in Ikaria is rooted in collective action and is not only about symbolic heritage.

Hospitality was another cultural characteristic. A visitor described how when he came to the island a local family gave him food and a shower without hesitation. Such gestures were put in the routine. Locals also emphasized on slow living. One participant who lived abroad said that for Ikaria there was a unique rhythm that was not like other places that she had lived. She shared that time, sociability and community are of prime importance to many Ikarians at the expense of work.

Music and dance became cultural anchors. Panigiri festivals are a major cultural manifestation. A visitor remarked that during August festivals music and dancing went on for days in several villages. Another said many kids learn traditional instruments so that they can play at festivals should the occasion arise. This means reproduction of

culture through informal education, community participation takes place.

The leftist political heritage of the island was also mentioned. According to one of the interviewed, communists exiled influenced local communities during the civil war period. This influence is still felt by collective practices, egalitarian norms and informal governance structures.

6.2.   Tourism Dynamics and Changing Visitor Profiles

Tourism development on Ikaria is marked by gradual but evident changes. Several participants described a shift from alternative and low budget visitors towards a broader mix of younger Greek visitors as well as more affluent foreign visitors. Repeaters saw that new tourists came in with their SUVs and rented small hotels. Locals observed an increase in the number of people especially in August.

Visitors estimated peak inflows of up to one thousand people per day in the middle of August. This was a time that was characterized as a time of chaos, crowdedness, and intensity. One participant explained that usually fifteen-minute roads could take forty five. Another reported that beaches were so crowded that sand couldn't be seen. Visitors during peak season, according to many interviewees, are Greeks, specifically young, attracted by free camping, affordability, and non-commercial festival years. A statement that I can also confirm to an extend, during my second visit on the island

Locals understood the spread of promotional content in the digital environment. Several interviewees said that Ikaria gained popularity through outside influence such as social media influencers and Blue Zone stories. They formulated the following arguments: the municipality lacks targeted promotion, and tourism demand is a result of outside image construction and not strategy.

Participants characterized differences between repeat visitors and first timers. Repeaters often identified cultural motivations such as music, community festivals and alternative lifestyles. First timers were drawn more to the festive ambiance and cost. Further, locals showed concern for long term sustainability and cultural rhythms.

Repeaters highlighted change and continuity. First timers focused on sensory and logistical aspects of peak season.

Interviews reveal that many residents see cultural change as natural and ongoing, but show concern about pressures related to increased tourism, such as inflation, congestion and perceived change in festival participation/meaning. Some people interviewed highlight how respectful engagement among the visitors can help to reinforce cultural continuity, while others fear that it may be commercialized. These views are in conjunction with overall discussions about the role of cultural resources in promoting sustainable development without becoming subordinated to the logic of markets.

Moreover, qualitative evidence from the interviews indicates that some residents already notice changes in land prices, cost of living and social composition, even when these processes may still be at an early stage in comparison to more intensively developed islands.

6.3.   Seasonality and the Local Survival Strategies

One of the prominent topics was seasonality. Many participants identified a two month tourism season. Restaurant owners lean on personal gardens and other occupations in the wintertime. Several of the interviewees explained that locals make a mix of income from construction, agriculture, livestock in general (small animals), or family support.

One local explained to us that restaurants and cafes only work in the summer months and are shut down for the winter months. He said that tourism is important but insufficient for a stable income without diversification. Another explained that increases in prices and tax inspections have reduced the net benefit for so many locals.

There were indications of seasonal extensiveness. A participant pointed out that in the past year accommodation in Raches was fully booked at the end of September. Visitors come earlier on a more frequent basis and avoid August. This is an extension which has not yet led to structured planning but represents changes in demand patterns.

Generational differences were experienced in the themes of seasonality. Younger people expressed tolerance or even enthusiasm for summer crowds. Older participants showed frustration and said they avoid going to central places during the month of August because of congestion.

It is worth mentioned, that a couple of the locals that I met during my first visit on the island, reported to me during my second visit that they were looking to buy a piece of land in the north east side of the island which is considered rural and is being used mainly for agriculture and livestock. The reason behind it was that they want to avoid the masses of people, as they said, during the period of mid July and August that affects their everyday rhythm.

6.4.   Infrastructure, Mobility and Public Services

Interviewee after interviewee fingered infrastructure limitations. Transportation was said to be the most visible problem. Narrow mountainous roads, lack of public transportation, and lack of parking spaces lead to bottlenecks during peak times. A visitor has witnessed a car accident due to drunk driving near a cliff, and described the stress caused by heavy traffic. Locals agreed that infrastructure is not able to support current volumes of visitors.

Public transport was often cited as not being adequate or even existing. Participants reported dependence on hitchhiking, private vehicles and taxis. Locals raised the issue of access to ambulances during high times.

Waste management and sewage emerged as issues. One of the interviewees stated that these systems are under pressure in the summer time due to population spikes. Another mentioned plans for wind turbines with local resistance because of fears of environmental degradation.

During the second visit, I also observed infrastructural and social pressures associated with peak-season tourism. Compared to my first visit, I experienced increased travel times due to congestion and limited infrastructure, longer waiting times in restaurants

and cafés, overcrowded beaches, and reduced accessibility of public and social spaces. The *panigyria*, which are often represented as spaces of communal participation and cultural expression, were marked by long queues and limited space for dancing due to the large number of attendees. These observations contributed to a more critical understanding of tourism development and its implications for local quality of life and visitor experience.

6.5.   Cultural Commodification and Festivals as Hybrid Spaces

Participants provided mixed opinions on whether or not cultural heritage is being commodified. Some locals argued that the quality of tourism is low, as well as a fact that Ikaria attracts low spending visitors. Others argued that culture is being marketed in superficial ways. They said influencers and non-local entrepreneurs selling products with Blue Zone branding with non-connection to Ikaria.

Panigiri festivals are hybrid between culture and tourism. For locals, panigiri is used to keep the social ties and intergenerational continuity. For the youthful visitors, panigiri is a cheap and intense entertainment experience. One local explained that festivals change throughout August to cater for younger audiences and that the older residents prefer festivals in June. Another suggested festivals lose intimacy when they are in high season and cultural enjoyment is reduced if there is limited dancing space. In connection to this issue, some interviews suggest that cultural sustainability relies on sustaining meaning to the residents, not just on providing entertainment for visitors from the outside. This is in tune with the view of the United Nations World Heritage organization, which has defined intangible heritage as the heritage that should not be commodified for tourism, but should continue to be part of community life.

Locals also stressed the fact that most tourism businesses are still locally owned. They noted that there were some external operators but that ownership of property and its operation remains mainly local. This means that the cultural spaces are experiencing adaptation but not full external control.

6.6.   Local Agency and Informal Government

Participants characterized a type of informal governance. They said that Ikarians have a strong sense of agency in the development of tourism. Locals fight unwanted developments such as wind turbines. They also have an impact on the development of tourism through the role of informal rules of the community.

One interviewee referred to the municipal tourism council as passive, and suggested that local changes are determined by community interaction more than formal planning. Another explained that external promotion is driving the tourist flow while another participant mentioned the lack of internal institutions and the fact that in the past, local councils had a significant role in the decision making among the main villages of the island.

6.7.   Summary of Empirical Patterns

The empirical material reveals a tourism system which is growing without any formal planning. Cultural identity and solidarity practices are very strong and allow for adaptive survival during tourism fluctuations. Tourism is becoming increasingly heterogeneous which brings new demographics who have different involvement in cultural events and rhythm according to the seasons. Infrastructure and public services - this is the main constraint. Local ownership and the community norms still control change informally. Commodification dynamics do appear, however, and do not dominate local spaces at this stage.

Participants described sustainability tensions in cultural, social, environmental and economic dimensions. Cultural sustainability seems strong but stressed during peak months. Social sustainability is mediated by the intergenerational differences. Environmental sustainability is questioned with the waste and mobility strain. Economic sustainability is precarious because of the price rises, the short seasonality, and the

informal methods used to sustain themselves. Visitors seldom referred to sustainability in academic terms but expressed their concerns about accidents, congestion and overcrowding. Locals rarely spoke in sustainability lingo but talked of culture, survival and development in action terms.

7.   Discussion

7.1.   Cultural Sustainability and Community Practices

The research shows that cultural identity and solidarity are a key part of life in Ikaria. Festivals, music, hospitality and the informal systems of social support emerged as a major cultural practice for the locals and the repeat visitors. Cultural sustainability literature contends that cultural identity serves as a building block for sustainable development for social cohesion and common meaning (Gibson & Kong, 2005). In the case of Ikaria, the concept of solidarity and collective action was not only symbolic but also instrumental for survival as was the case for mutual aid festivals and informal support networks, as reported by several participants. When interpreted through the UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Toolkit, these practices reflect the centrality of community wellbeing and living culture as core components of sustainable destination development, particularly where intangible heritage and social cohesion underpin local resilience.

The multicultural practices being embedded in the people's daily life is in accordance with research on intangible heritage and cultural sustainability in small communities (Soini & Birkeland, 2014). The empirical material indicates that cultural sustainability in Ikaria is a bottom-up process rather than a formal institutional process. This helps support the argument by Duxbury and Jeannotte (2012) that cultural vitality is often manifested outside of state structures in small communities. This aligns with the UNESCO Toolkit's emphasis on community participation and the safeguarding of cultural values through locally rooted governance and custodianship, rather than relying solely on formal heritage institutions.

Music and festivals give continuity from one generation to another and they appeal to visitors who wish to experience authenticity. Richards (2018) contends that the cross

cultural experiences are the drivers of current tourism demand, especially older, younger travellers. The case of Ikaria reveals that visitors are not consuming culture as a performance but as a participatory experience as well. Repeaters indicated that festivals and music helped them connect with local rhythms, which is a theory of cultural immersion and slow tourism (Fullagar, Wilson & Markwell, 2012). Such participation can strengthen sustainability across culture if done in ways that uphold the local agency. In UNESCO Toolkit terms, this points to the importance of visitor experience design that supports host community agency and avoids transforming cultural practices into purely consumable products.

However, the peak season festival overcrowding reported by participants suggest the emerging tensions between cultural practices and tourism intensity. These tensions relate to issues of cultural commodification when expectations on the part of visitors begin to influence the shape of cultural forms (Cohen, 1988). Although locals continue to control the contents of festivals, adaptations during August do point to subtle cultural changes that have been influenced by the demands of tourism. This is consistent with UNESCO Toolkit concerns about visitor pressure on cultural places and practices, where the sustainability of heritage requires active visitor management and monitoring to prevent cultural dilution and loss of meaning.

7.2.   Slow Tourism, Alternative Attractiveness and The Blue Zone Narrative

Ikaria's reputation as a "slow" and "authentic" destination fits in with the slow tourism literature, which focuses on immersive and low-intensity experiences (Heitmann, Robinson & Povey, 2011). Interviews characterised Ikaria as a place of time, sociability and relaxed rhythms, typical of the alternative attractiveness documented in more marginal destinations (Macleod, 2006). Informality, community and low commercialization were valued by repeaters and younger visitors. From a UNESCO Toolkit perspective, this corresponds to a destination profile where cultural integrity and community wellbeing are key assets, and where tourism development should be designed to reinforce (rather than accelerate or displace) local rhythms.

The Blue Zone global story contributed to the symbolic capital of Ikaria. Blue Zones are the connection between lifestyle, diet, and longevity (Buettner, 2010). While the

municipality is not directly involved in promoting tourism, external actors promote the Blue Zone brand offline. This is an example of how tourism imaginaries are created outside the bounds of local governance systems (Salazar, 2012). The Blue Zone narrative has the possibility to appeal to wellness and lifestyle-based tourists who are extending beyond alternative subcultures linked to Ikaria in earlier decades. The UNESCO Toolkit highlights the importance of aligning destination branding and visitor messaging with community values; in this case, externally produced imaginaries can shape demand in ways that are not coordinated with local priorities or capacity.

However, the narrative of the Blue Zone also brings with it the risk of commodification. Commodification is the change of local practices into marketable signs (MacCannell, 1999). External branding can alienate symbols from their culture and thus limit local control over representation. Some participants raised their concern that influencers and outsiders market Ikaria selectively, picking out lifestyle components and not addressing structural issues like health infrastructure and seasonality. This fragmentation can be seen as similar to Milano, Cheer and Novelli (2019) on tourism-led place commodification in Mediterranean contexts. In UNESCO Toolkit terms, this points to a governance and interpretation gap: when representation is externalized, communities may lose control over meaning-making, and sustainability requires mechanisms for locally led interpretation, communication, and stakeholder engagement.

7.3.   Overtourism, Seasonality and Carrying Capacity Tensions

The results showed high intensity in the month of August. Participants described congestion, accidents, delays and overcrowded beaches. These conditions are the symptoms of overtourism. Overtourism has been defined as the growth of tourism that reduces the quality of life for residents or visitor experience due to spatial or temporal concentration (Milano et al., 2019). The overtourism of Ikaria is seasonal and very concentrated. It is consistent with Hall's (2019) perspective that overtourism tends to be uneven and especially so in the small island context with limited infrastructure. The UNESCO Toolkit specifically foregrounds visitor management, carrying capacity, and the need for monitoring systems that can identify pressure points during peak periods—precisely the temporal concentration observed here.

Temporal concentration also reflects in the literature of the seasonality. Seasonality is a

limiting factor for economic viability for tourism businesses, especially peripheral islands who rely on short peak periods (Baum & Lundtorp, 2001). Some participants highlighted that tourism alone is incapable of supporting incomes. They rely on producing agricultural products, building construction and multi-job strategies to survive winter. This is consistent with Ioannides and Petridou (2016) who found that island economies are based on diversified livelihoods as opposed to tourism specialisation. In UNESCO Toolkit terms, this relates to strengthening local economic benefits while reducing vulnerability—encouraging models that support community wellbeing across the year rather than concentrating value extraction in a short high season.

Participants described signs for seasonal extension in September. Seasonal extension is a known method of sustainability in that it takes the pressure off of infrastructure and enhances economic stability (Butler, 2001). However, the extension of Ikaria seems more spontaneous and demand-led than planned. Without governance and infrastructure adaptation, extension alone is not a solution in tackling carrying capacity challenges. The UNESCO Toolkit would frame this as a planning and adaptive management challenge: season extension can be beneficial only if accompanied by infrastructure readiness, service capacity, and governance mechanisms to manage cumulative pressure.

The carrying capacity concept is still relevant. It means threshold at which tourism gives negative social, environmental and cultural effect (Saveriades, 2000). Interview data implies Ikaria is sensitive to peaks in transportation, parking, waste and sewage. One participant described an motor accident and another highlighted delays in ambulances, and this brings out the fact that carrying capacity is not just of the environment but also of infrastructure and social. This directly resonates with UNESCO Toolkit approaches that treat capacity as multi-dimensional (social, cultural, infrastructural, environmental) and recommend identifying specific thresholds and indicators that can trigger management responses.

7.4. Informal Government and Local Agency in Island Tourism Development

Governance became one of the dimensions. Participants stated the dependence of Ikaria is informal governance more so than formal planning. Informal governance is when communities control tourism through norms, collective action and social negotiation

instead of official strategies (Jamal & Dredge, 2014). In Ikaria, governance is based on solidarity, local control and social control. Local businesses and residents control tourism indirectly by influencing permissible behavior in cultural space. The UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Toolkit places strong emphasis on inclusive governance and stakeholder participation; the Ikarian case suggests that these functions operate through informal mechanisms, which may protect cultural integrity but can also limit scalability, accountability, and coordination.

Island studies literature highlights that island communities often have a high degree of agency in negotiating with external forces as a result of cultural cohesion and small scale (Baldacchino, 2006). The findings support this. Locals resisted unwanted development such as wind turbines and were sceptical of outside investors. This is consistent with McElroy and Parry (2010) who suggest that local resistance influences sustainable pathways on small islands. From the UNESCO Toolkit lens, this can be read as local stewardship and risk awareness, where community values shape what types of development are socially acceptable and culturally sustainable.

Municipal tourism governance is seemingly weak. Participants said the municipality was uninvolved or reactive. Hybrid pathways for sustainability Weaker institutional governance is being mixed with stronger informal governance. This hybrid dynamic makes conventional models for sustainable tourism (based on state coordination) more difficult to use. The UNESCO Toolkit would interpret this as a capacity gap: participatory governance exists socially, but formal planning, monitoring, and coordination mechanisms may be insufficient to address visitor pressure, infrastructure needs, and long-term sustainability objectives.

7.5. Commodification, Authenticity and Politics of Representation

The findings show new commodification pressures. External representation through influencers and Blue Zone media encourage the symbolic image that may or may not be consistent with local lived realities. Authenticity is a topic in tourism studies that is contested. Cohen's (1988) classic typology is a distinction between staged and existential authenticity. In Ikaria, festivals have continued to be existential to locals to whom they are reserved, but risk becoming staged during the peak season for visitors due to

overcrowding that affects intimacy and participation. UNESCO Toolkit guidance on interpretation and visitor experience is relevant here: safeguarding living heritage depends not only on "promoting" culture but on managing tourism so that cultural practices remain meaningful for residents and not reoriented primarily toward visitor expectations.

Authenticity is also related to control. Locals retain ownership of cultural spaces, which is a slow process of commodification. Taylor (2001) argues that authenticity is maintained if host communities maintain power to control cultural production. However, the risk of commodification is increased when the representation moves to external actors. This reflects Urry's (2002) tourist gaze framework where tourist gaze 'eats' staged images rather than local realities. The UNESCO Toolkit similarly emphasizes community control over narratives, representation, and decision-making as a foundation for sustainable tourism, especially where cultural heritage is a key asset.

Commodification concerns also have to do with dynamics of price. One local stated that visitors are low spenders and one repeat visitor noted inflation and development in high-end accommodations. This bifurcation is resonating with the concept of tourism gentrification (Gotham, 2005). Although there has been no large scale gentrification in Ikaria, there are early signs. In UNESCO Toolkit terms, this relates to ensuring that tourism benefits remain locally distributed and do not undermine community wellbeing through affordability pressures and uneven development trajectories.

7.6. Social Sustainability, Inter-Generational Dynamics and Local Quality of Life

Social sustainability in tourism rests in keeping the community well, and keeping their identity and social cohesion intact (Sharpley, 2014). Ikaria has a high level of social sustainability, which is attributed to the network of solidarity and cultural integration. However, summer peak stress is challenging social sustainability. Older residents reported avoidance behaviours in August in preference to the festivals in June. This substantiates results on the impact on intergenerational tourism whereby the senior feels more negative impact of tourism due to a disruption of familiar rhythms (Valls et al., 2019). The UNESCO Toolkit frames resident wellbeing as a core sustainability outcome; these seasonal avoidance behaviours signal a threshold where tourism intensity begins to

reduce local access to cultural and social life.

Quality of life issues such as traffic stress, overcrowding and price increases. These are consistent with resident attitude research in the field of tourism research (Ap & Crompton, 1993). There is heterogeneity of perceptions in Ikaria. Younger locals were tolerant or enthusiastic about the intensity of tourism, whereas older locals were frustrated. Resident attitude differentiation is common in tourism transitioning destinations (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). In UNESCO Toolkit terms, such differentiated perceptions strengthen the case for participatory monitoring and ongoing community consultation, so that management responses reflect multiple resident groups rather than a single "community voice.

7.7. Economic Sustainability and Multi-Livelihood Strategies

Economic sustainability entails balancing income generation while being resilient and vulnerable to a minimum. Tourism is not the sole dependence of Ikaria. Locals have diversified income strategies that are based on agriculture, construction, seasonal business and family support. Diversified systems of livelihoods are common among small island economies (Baldacchino, 2006). This diversification limits vulnerability to the tourism seasonality. This aligns with the UNESCO Toolkit's emphasis on local economic benefit and resilience: sustainable tourism should support livelihoods without creating overdependence on a single seasonal market.

However, business owners had observed tax pressures, inflation, and low off-season demand. Tourism is of economic importance, but not enough for stable incomes. This concurs with the view that sustainable tourism cannot substitute as an economic sector in peripheral communities (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015). From a UNESCO Toolkit lens, this points to the need for integrated destination planning that strengthens year-round value creation and improves the viability of local enterprises beyond peak-season demand.

7.8. Sustainability of the Environment and Material Limits

Environmental concerns were not as articulated as cultural and social concerns within interviews, but that was not the case in terms of infrastructure discussions. Waste, sewage and transport pressures are indications of environmental vulnerability. Butler (1999) states, because environmental sustainability challenges often appear downstream

from the growth of tourism. While the people coming to visit may not express environmental issues explicitly, infrastructural stress may be converted into environmental deterioration in the long run. The UNESCO Toolkit explicitly links infrastructure strain to environmental risk and encourages destinations to monitor waste, water, sewage, and mobility pressures as part of environmental sustainability—particularly in island contexts where systems have limited capacity.

Resistance against wind turbines (environmental governance complexity) Local opposition in connection with protection of cultural landscape and distrust of outside energy actors. This is similar to Mediterranean island battles between renewable developments and local identity and environmental values (Farneti & Pennisi, 2020). In UNESCO Toolkit terms, this illustrates the intersection of environmental management with cultural landscape values and governance legitimacy: sustainability requires trust-building, transparent decision-making, and meaningful participation when development affects culturally significant environments.

7.9.   Current State of Ikarian Tourism

Drawing these findings together, the UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Toolkit helps clarify that Ikaria currently demonstrates strong foundations for sustainable tourism on the cultural and social dimensions. Cultural identity, mutual aid practices, and locally controlled cultural spaces—especially *panigyria* and everyday forms of hospitality—function as a form of informal governance that sustains authenticity and reinforces community wellbeing. At the same time, the analysis suggests that this cultural resilience is increasingly being tested by external tourism imaginaries (e.g., the Blue Zone narrative and influencer promotion) and by the temporal concentration of demand in August. From a UNESCO Toolkit perspective, the current state of the destination can be described as culturally robust yet institutionally and infrastructurally vulnerable: community stewardship remains high, but the destination's capacity to manage visitor pressure and protect community access to cultural life is under strain during peak periods.

In terms of what still needs to be done, the UNESCO Toolkit highlights the importance of moving from informal resilience to more coordinated and adaptive destination

management. Priority areas include strengthening inclusive governance mechanisms that connect grassroots initiatives with municipal planning, establishing monitoring and indicator-based assessment for visitor pressure (e.g., congestion, festival crowding, waste and sewage load), and implementing visitor management measures that protect cultural practices from being reshaped by peak-season demand. Addressing infrastructure and environmental capacity—particularly transport safety, parking, public mobility, and waste management—is essential to prevent cumulative degradation that could eventually undermine both the visitor experience and local quality of life. Finally, the findings indicate that economic sustainability would benefit from diversified livelihoods and seasonal balancing strategies, reducing dependence on a short peak season while ensuring that tourism benefits remain locally distributed. In this sense, promoting sustainable tourism development in Ikaria is less about increasing tourism volume and more about strengthening community-led stewardship with planning capacity, so that cultural preservation and community wellbeing remain at the center of the island's tourism future.

8. Conclusions

8.1. General Summary of Main Findings

This thesis examined the relationship of culture, tourism dynamics, seasonality, governance and sustainability in Ikaria. The empirical results proved that the cultural identity and solidarity networks of the island are at the core of the social cohesion and can be considered as an informal basis for sustainable development. Tourism has become more intense in recent years especially in August, generating pressures on infrastructures, mobility, waste management and the quality of life of the locals. One of the reasons is that Blue Zone narratives, social media promotion and a changing visitor profile have repositioned Ikaria as a lifestyle space rather than an alternative space in a niche. Despite all these transformations, locals have shown a significant level of agency and informal governance capacity.

8.2. Answering Research Questions

The first research question asked, "what impact growing tourism has on cultural heritage and community in Ikaria?". The study revealed that cultural sustainability is a

fundamental factor in social resilience on the island. Festivals, music, hospitality, and solidarity networks function as an infrastructure of belonging that both attracts visitors and sustains community cohesion among locals. This finding aligns with the literature on cultural sustainability, which identifies culture as a core dimension of sustainable development (Soini & Birkeland, 2014; Duxbury & Jeannotte, 2012). In Ikaria, cultural practices do not operate as an add-on or adjunct to tourism; rather, they actively moderate the intensity of tourism by setting informal boundaries on acceptable behaviour and safeguarding cultural meaning from external distortion. These findings provide empirical evidence supporting the argument that sustainable tourism success depends on strong community agency and cultural vitality (Richards, 2018).

The second research question examined, "how sustainable tourism development can be promoted in Ikaria in a way that preserves cultural identity and community wellbeing?", by assessing the effects of tourism growth on social, economic, and environmental sustainability outcomes. The findings indicate complex, non-linear interactions across these dimensions. Social sustainability remains relatively strong due to high levels of solidarity, cultural participation, and community cohesiveness; however, peak-season congestion is increasingly degrading quality of life for some residents, particularly older locals. This reflects existing research on heterogeneous resident attitudes toward tourism development (Valls et al., 2019). Economic sustainability presents a mixed picture. While tourism generates important income during the summer months, pronounced seasonality and short business windows limit the long-term economic viability of the sector, consistent with what Baum and Lundtorp (2001) describe as peripheral seasonality. Environmental sustainability concerns were less explicitly articulated by participants, yet infrastructural pressures related to waste management, sewage, and transportation reveal underlying vulnerabilities.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the need to understand sustainability as a multidimensional process shaped by scale, governance, and cultural context (Sharpley, 2014), and suggest that preserving Ikaria's cultural identity and community wellbeing is central to promoting genuinely sustainable tourism development.

8.3.   Contribution to the Academic Literature

This research makes contributions to various areas of the literature. First, it contributes to the existing literature on cultural sustainability by giving empirical evidence from a Mediterranean island where cultural identity is a regulatory force instead of a consumable asset. While often studies are done on the commodification risks of culture (MacCannell, 1999; Cohen, 1988), fewer are carried out on case studies that explore the impacts of culture on tourism pathways through informal governance.

Second, the study adds to the literature on the topics of slow tourism and alternative tourism. Ikaria is a good example of slow tourism which is characterised by immersive participation, low-commercial cultural experiences and authenticity (Fullagar et al., 2012; Heitmann et al., 2011). Yet recent intensification of tourism shows how slow destinations can become hybrid between local and global branding and lifestyle narratives. The Blue Zone phenomenon shows how symbolic capital is able to reposition peripheral destinations without any local planning, extending Milano et al. (2019) research on external tourism imaginaries.

Third, the study contributes to the knowledge of the governance of small island tourism. Ikaria has a mixed form of governance where there is weak formal governmental planning and very strong informal community norms. Island studies scholars suggest that small island communities have special agency in the construction of tourism (Baldacchino, 2006; Ioannides and Petridou, 2016). The findings support this view and provide some nuance to it by indicating how informal governance helps in mitigating the risks of commodification despite the external promotion.

8.4.   Implications for Policies and Local Governance

The case of Ikaria seems to imply that sustainable development in small islands cannot be based on tourism planning alone. Instead, development strategies should take the role of cultural capital and community agency as central resources. Policy frameworks that   support seasonality extension, small scale entrepreneurialism, cultural preservation and mobility improvements would strengthen sustainability. Butler (2001)

states that seasonal extension helps to decrease overtourism intensity and increases economic stability; it is possible to see the potential for this type of extension at Ikaria but it is not coordinated.

One major constraint is infrastructure. Transport, waste, sewage and health services need to be downgraded to cope with peak seasonal inflows. Investment in non-automobile mobility, better signage, and improved public transport would help reduce congestion and risks of accidents, which would support sustainable mobility principles suggested in   the island context by Hall (2019). Governance might be enhanced by participatory tourism councils or cultural boards which institutionalize certain of the informal mechanisms without undermining local agency. Recognizing the outside nature of   tourism imaginaries, the municipality may also find benefit in monitoring or influencing representation so as to avoid distortive branding.

8.5. Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, the qualitative sample was small and tilted towards locals, repeat visitors and young seasonal tourists. A larger sample that included tourism businesses, healthcare workers and municipal officials would have helped to offer wider perspectives of sustainability. Second, the study took place at a time of high and middle tourism intensity. A longitudinal design would capture the seasonal differences in the impacts of tourism and the attitude of residents. Third, environmental sustainability was not highlighted as much in participant comments as were cultural or social aspects, possibly reflecting low salience, or possible limitations in measurement. Quantitative   environmental indicators such as waste volume or water use or traffic counts were not collected. Future studies could adopt a mixed method design to increase ecological   validity. Furthermore, a key challenge during the research process was the limited availability of reliable, destination-specific tourism statistics for Ikaria in particular. I was unable to access consistent longitudinal data that could document the island's tourism transition in measurable terms, such as the number and type of tourism-related businesses operating in the current year compared to five or ten years ago, or how the service landscape has changed over time. In the absence of such baseline indicators, the analysis depended largely on interview accounts from local residents and

repeat visitors who could draw on lived experience to describe change and compare current conditions with earlier periods. This also meant that, prior to entering the interview stage, I had only a partial empirical overview of Ikaria's tourism infrastructure, which influenced the extent to which my assessment could be grounded in quantitative destination metrics. To add on that, I attempted to engage the mayor and other elected municipal representatives, with the support of locals, to determine whether a current tourism management plan or related strategic initiatives were in place. Despite repeated efforts, I was unable to establish contact with municipal officials, and no formal input from the municipality could be obtained for this study.

8.6.   Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this research can be extended in several ways in future research. Comparative studies with other Mediterranean island destinations like Amorgos or Tinos could indicate whether hybrid informal governance is unique to Ikaria or a general pattern. Research on Blue Zone branding effects could focus on the influence of the narratives of lifestyle in reshaping tourism demand, commodification pathways and wellness tourism transitions. Quantitative studies could be used to measure environmental carrying capacity more precisely, which will enhance the sustainability assessment framework.

Longitudinal studies of resident attitudes would help to explain whether or not tourism intensification changes community identity or solidarity over time. Finally, an area for research on cultural policy and municipal governance could be to establish how informal cultural systems can be brought into sustainable development frameworks without bureaucratisation of cultural practices.

8.7.   Final Reflections

The empirical material and analysis has shown that Ikaria is a complex and dynamic tourism destination which is defined by cultural sustainability, community agency, external representations, and infrastructural constraints. The island has managed to prevent the worst commodification or cultural displacement despite the growing tourism demand. This is not accidental but a result of solidarity, cultural participation

and informal governance. Sustainable development in Ikaria is not based on economic parameters or environmental control, but on the continued vitality of a culture and negotiated community control. This particular case clearly highlights the value of culture as a resource for sustainability, and the complexity and need for context-specific sustainable tourism strategies.

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