

## MONASTERIES AS ELEMENTS OF CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. FROM TRAVEL TEXTS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP.

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### **Abstract**

*The texts of travelers, such as the descriptions of monasteries by Cristoforo Buondelmonti in the 15th century or Tournefort in the 17th century, contain valuable information about the architecture, the daily life of monks, and the spiritual role of monasteries. Travelers from Europe were often impressed by the location of the buildings, the natural beauty of the landscapes surrounding them, and the monastic life. The architecture also aroused their interest, such as Gerola, who was fascinated by the monasteries of Tzagarolon, Arcadi, Preveli, or Toplou. But the descriptions also give us information about a different aspect of the life of the monasteries, that of the development of some early form of economic activity.*

*This activity continues today in many of them and is an example that blends tradition with modern business strategy, which is now becoming necessary for their survival. The economic activities of the monasteries have important social implications as they contribute to sustainability by creating jobs, especially in rural and isolated areas, and often support, as their 'raison d'être' requires, charitable projects. Now days they are important tourist destinations, attracting visitors interested in history, nature, art and organic products and enhancing the economic sustainability of a place. The business initiatives of the monasteries serve as models of sustainable development.*

*The article presents Holy Monasteries through the writings of travelers and, with the help of a survey of a sample of 113 people, tries to approach the way in which Holy Monasteries bridge the past with the present and the innovative practices they engage in order to maintain a unique role in contemporary society by combining culture and economy.*

**Key Words:** *travel texts, travelers, monasteries, entrepreneurship, sustainability, tourism*

### **An introduction to the Sustainability**

Sustainability is a central issue in global discussions, as environmental degradation threatens humanity's viability. The United Nations defines sustainability as balanced development that considers both economic growth and respect for the environment and society. The Brundtland Report (1987) highlighted the need to address the environmental crisis, emphasizing that meeting present needs should not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their

own. This led to reforms and policies for environmental protection, while the Rio Summit (1992) reinforced the connection between development and environmental conservation, establishing institutions such as the Commission on Sustainable Development.

The concept of sustainability is based on three pillars:

- Social dimension: Promoting well-being and social cohesion for both present and future generations.
- Environmental dimension: Protecting and preserving natural resources.
- Economic dimension: Ensuring long-term economic growth while respecting society and the environment.

In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reaffirmed the fundamental role of sustainability in creating a fairer world.

### **Sustainable Tourism**

In the tourism sector, sustainable development is considered crucial, with Goals 4.7 and 11.4 emphasizing the importance of cultural heritage. According to researchers, tourism should adapt to local social, cultural, and environmental structures, especially as issues such as over-tourism and rural depopulation present challenges (Kokkossis & Tsartas, 2019; Kizos, 2018). Sustainable tourism promotes a balance between societies and the natural environment, while alternative tourism offers solutions that integrate environmental responsibility and local development (Kokkossis et al., 2011). At the same time, travelers seek authentic experiences, making strategic planning and the implementation of sustainable practices essential. The relationship between culture and tourism is considered significant for preserving traditions and ensuring the sector's long-term sustainability (Terkenli & Georgoula, 2022).

One form of alternative tourism is literary tourism, which provides a sustainable and authentic solution by promoting culture through literature.

### **Literature as a form of sustainable Tourism**

Culture serves as a mirror of human creativity throughout time and space, expressed through social activities and the production of material and intellectual values. Many tourists choose destinations based on their cultural significance. According to McKercher and Du Cros (2015), cultural tourism offers visitors the opportunity to engage with a place's cultural heritage, combining entertainment, education, and a more immersive experience. Literature, as one of the primary forms of cultural expression, plays a central role in this process.

Literary tourism is an emerging sector that merges a passion for books with exploration. Visitors seek locations associated with literary works, whether due to the presence of authors or the fictional worlds created in stories (Fawcett & Cormack, 2001). Manola (2019) notes that readers aspire to experience the world depicted in a book in a tangible way. This form of tourism enhances a place's uniqueness and promotes sustainable development. As highlighted by Della Spina & Giorno (2021), an interdisciplinary approach can offer new ways of understanding cultural landscapes and enhance their sustainability.

Literature has the potential to increase a location's touristic appeal, adding a new dimension to its cultural interest. Many areas have gained tourism popularity due to literary works (Manola, 2019; Tsatalbassoglou, 2019; Manola & Tsatalbassoglou, 2021; Manola et al., 2021). Literary routes facilitate the understanding of cultural heritage by connecting places with historical events and landmarks (Mitoula et al., 2008). Simultaneously, they enhance the attractiveness of destinations and contribute to their sustainability (Mitoula & Kaldis, 2018).

Additionally, literary works, including travel writings, offer an interactive experience, allowing travelers to follow in the footsteps of authors and literary characters, explore

landscapes, and participate in activities while maintaining respect for the environment. Technological innovations, such as virtual reality, open new possibilities for enhancing these experiences (Tsatalbassoglou et al., 2024). Travel literature is a distinct form of literary expression with a direct connection to tourism.

### **A special form of literature: “Travel texts”**

Greece’s geographical location at the heart of the Mediterranean has established it as a crucial hub for commercial and religious journeys, particularly towards the East and the Holy Lands. Recognizing its significance, the Venetians and Genoese set up supply stations in Greek ports to facilitate travelers. Many of these travelers wished to document their experiences, producing detailed narratives that evolved into early travel guides. According to Viggopoulou (2005), these texts blend personal impressions with practical information, serving as important historical sources despite containing subjective elements (Tsatalbasoglou & Manola, 2024a). Simopoulos (1999) highlights that these narratives preserve invaluable details that might otherwise have been lost, offering insights into the past of Greek society.

Greece’s strategic position at the crossroads of three continents makes it a convergence point of diverse cultural influences, shaping its image both in the West and the East (Manola & Tsatalbassoglou, 2020). During the Crusades, Crete functioned as a supply station but gradually emerged as a tourist destination. Under Venetian rule, interest in the island increased, with travelers recording their experiences and others sending reports to their superiors. These historical narratives contribute to shaping modern tourism by promoting sustainable routes and incorporating lesser-known sites into tourism planning (Tsatalmbasoglou & al., 2024b). The use of new technologies allows for the development of strong and balanced experiences that benefit local communities while addressing issues of overtourism, particularly in northern Crete.

Beyond their artistic value, travel narratives provide valuable insights across various academic disciplines. In an era of information overload, studying these texts can inspire sustainable tourism practices and support the development of strategic approaches for the future.

### **Travelers and Sacred Monasteries of Crete**

Sacred monasteries serve as focal points for travel, primarily due to their connection to religious sentiment. Pilgrimage is a way for individuals to seek a closer relationship with the divine, combining travel to a sacred place with a deeper spiritual experience. Through this process, the pilgrim distances themselves from material needs and daily life, striving for spiritual fulfillment. Thus, it is not merely a journey to a specific location but also an internal quest that often leads to travel-related activities (Timothy, 2002; Moira, 2003; Laclali & al, 2019). Religion and tourism are distinct concepts: pilgrimage focuses on religious experience and faith, whereas religious tourism perceives sacred sites as cultural monuments (Timothy, 2002). Although separate phenomena, both relate to human spirituality.

Significant interest has been shown in the sacred monasteries of Crete, which have played a major role in the cultural and daily life of local society. Travel writings also contain descriptions of these monastic sites. Some of the following are from the site “travelogue.gr” of the Aikaterinis Laskaridis Foundation:

- the drown of Pashley for the Tzagarolon Abbey

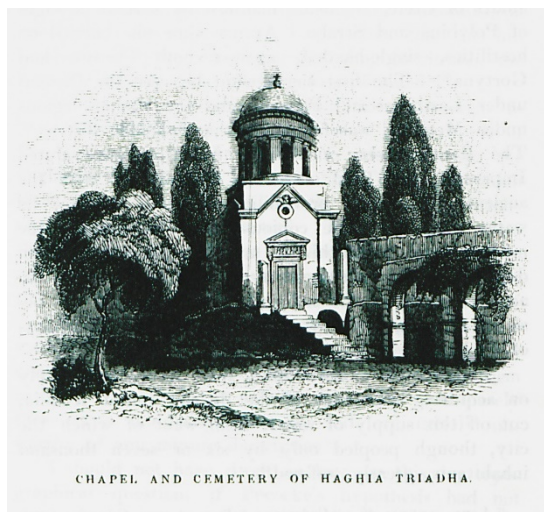


Figure nr 1: Pashleys' Moni Tzagarolon  
Resource: [travelogue.gr](http://travelogue.gr)

- William Stewart, in his work published in 1867, highlights that "Arcadi has been a symbol of the resilience and self-sacrifice of the Cretans; this monastery is not only a religious monument but also a symbol of Cretan freedom".



Figure nr 2: Arcadi Monastery  
Resource: [arcadimonastery.gr](http://arcadimonastery.gr)

- Toplou monastery was mentioned by many travelers as for example De la Croix, who in 1806 reports it "as a strong refuge, which has the capacity to withstand even the most severe attack"



Figure nr 3: "Toplou"  
Resource: [ikivotos.gr](http://ikivotos.gr)

- As seen in Boissonnas' photographs, activities to ensure self-sufficiency and support their social and charitable missions. He made many photos with the activities of the Monasteries and the villagers that they used to work at them



Figure nr 4: Olive harvest at Moni Prevelis by Boissonnas

Resource: [travelogues.gr](http://travelogues.gr) /Baud-Bovy, D., Boissonas, F.,

Historically, monasteries have functioned as centers of economic activity, managing assets and engaging in productive activities to ensure their self-sufficiency and support charitable initiatives (Kavvadias, 2024) by developing an early form of entrepreneurship.

### Entrepreneurship and Holy Monasteries

Entrepreneurship is defined as the process of identifying, developing, and leveraging opportunities to create value through innovation and resource organization, with the aim of establishing or expanding business activities (Spiliotis, 2017). Within the context of monasteries, entrepreneurship acquires unique characteristics, combining economic activity with a spiritual mission. In the modern era, monasteries continue to contribute to the economy through activities such as agricultural production, hospitality for pilgrims, and the publication of religious texts. Entrepreneurship within monasteries constitutes a complex phenomenon that integrates economic activity with spiritual and social missions, offering valuable insights for contemporary business practices.

Here is important to highlight that according to the Greek Orthodox religion it is necessary to maintain a balance between economic development and their spiritual mission, monasteries follow certain fundamental principles. First, their business activities are based on ethical values, avoiding practices that contradict Church teachings. Second, they strive for economic independence without seeking wealth accumulation, instead allocating their revenues to community needs and charitable efforts. Additionally, monasteries maintain strong ties to tradition by engaging in activities such as agriculture, beekeeping, handicrafts, and the publication of religious texts. At the same time, they operate with transparency to ensure the trust of the faithful. A significant portion of their profits is dedicated to social welfare, supporting vulnerable groups through charitable initiatives, education, and healthcare. Finally, labor within monasteries is considered an integral part of daily life, harmonized with prayer to avoid distracting monks from their spiritual path. (Ware 1993; Giovanoglou, 2020). So in some of the above points the Holy Monasteries seems to have a very modern prospective similar to the Corporate Social Responsibility because they can positively influence job creation and contribute to the overall well-being of local communities. Research indicates that corporate CSR activities add value to public and tertiary sector tools, strengthening their capacity to support economic and social development (Mitoula and Astara, 2012).

**Research and Results**

A total of 113 individuals were surveyed, all participants were adults and took part voluntarily and anonymously between July 13th and 20th of 2024.

The research employed a purpose sampling method, which was chosen because of the small sample with a mainly informative character with comparable characteristics [Durberry, 2020] from the city of SITIA, the nearest town to Toplou Monastery, one of the most famous of Crete. A structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions was used, and respondents were independent travelers, not part of an organized tour.

Sitia was chosen due to the fact that it is the closest city to the historic Holy Monastery of Toplou, which due to its religious and cultural importance, and the development of a particular business activity, indicates that the monastery is a multidimensional attraction. This means that the promotion of the Holy Monastery of Toplou can target different audiences, enhancing the attractiveness of the area for cultural, religious and gastronomic tourism, which makes it an ideal location for this preliminary research.

The study focused on exploring factors that shape tourists' perspectives on:

- The role of literature through travelers texts in promoting tourism in the Sitia region.
- Tourists' reflections on previous literary tourism initiatives.
- The possibility of achieving sustainable cultural growth in the area.
- The visitors' opinions regarding the development of entrepreneurship by monasteries, focusing on their perception of the role of monasteries in the local economy

Demographic data

- SEX: Regarding demographic data, from the sample 45 people has chosen male, 63 female and 5 chose 'Other'.

- AGE: At the ages of 12 they belonged to the 18-25 group, 22 to the 26-40 group, 27 declared themselves to be in the 41-60 group and 52 people declared themselves to be over sixty years old.

- EDUCATION: The largest percentage completed secondary education, specifically 49 people. 13 lower secondary, as well as 13 Training Institute, 25 university, 12 master and 1 PHD.

Below are some of the research questions of the descriptive statistic:

Question nr 6: Could the following reasons affect literary tourism?

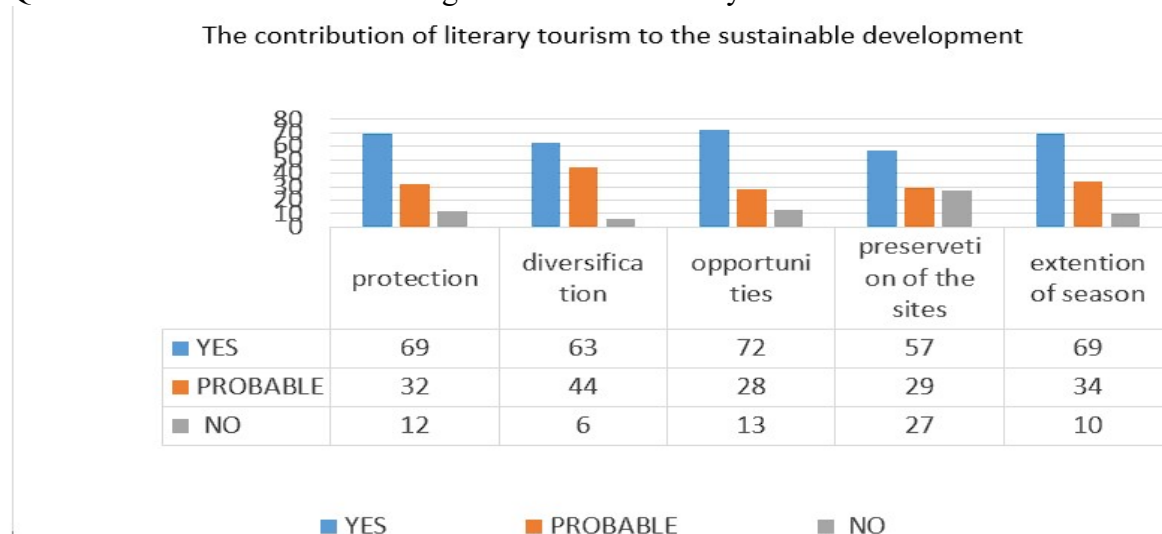


Figure nr 5: Chart 1- Literary tourism as a factor

The contribution of literature to the sustainable development of a place, according to the interviewees, depends largely on the opportunity given to differentiate a place from others, a choice chosen by 63 individuals. The development of new initiatives is chosen by 72 individuals, the protection of the environment (69), as well as of cultural heritage (57 persons), and the expansion of seasonality (69 persons)

Question nr 7: “How likely are you to follow travel texts from earlier centuries as a guide on your journey?”

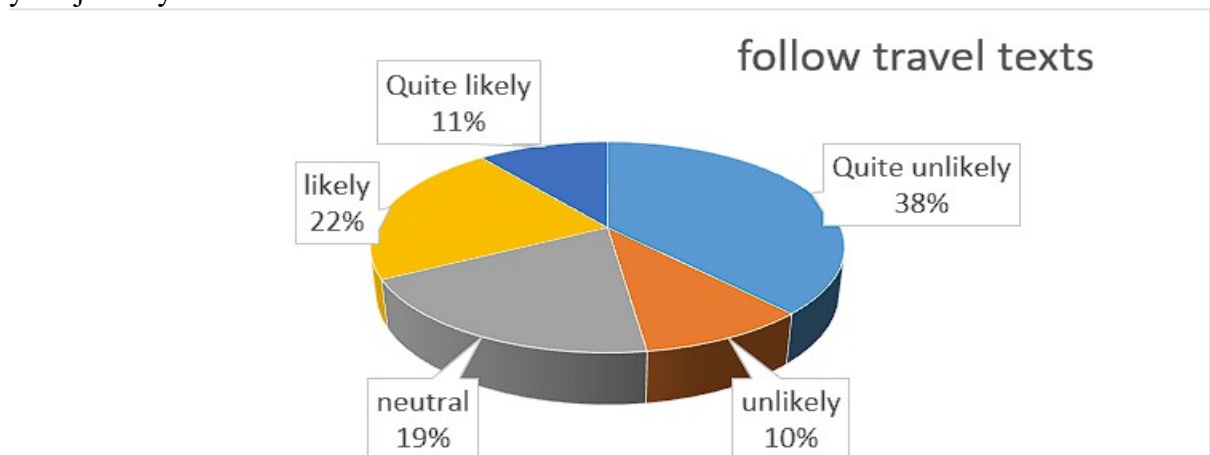


Figure nr 6: Chart 2- travel texts and selection of a place

Regarding the question about the possibility that the interviewee would show interest in following the travel texts, as can be seen from the diagram, a total percentage of around 33% (37 persons) responded positively, 19% (22 pax) is neutral, and a percentage of 38% (which is 43 persons) responded negatively.

Question nr 8: “What is the main reason you would probably not follow old travelogues on your travels?”

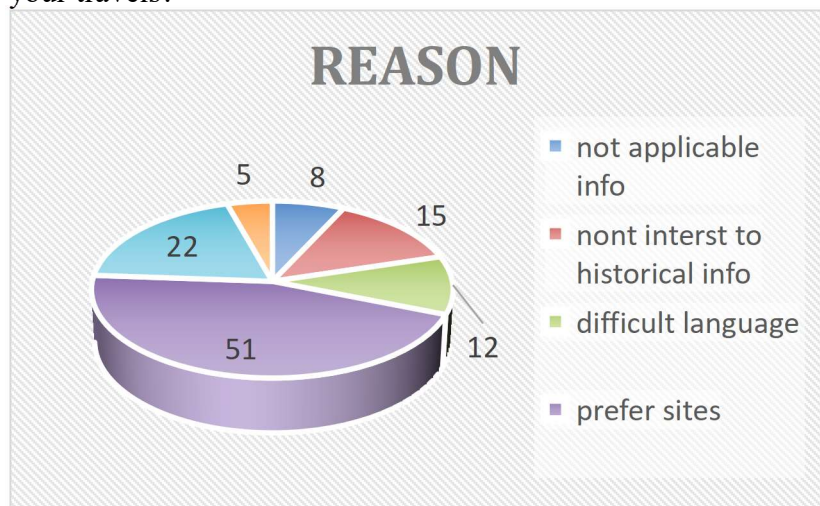


Figure nr 7: Chart 3- follow a travelogue

The next question concerns the reasons why interviewees would not follow a travelogue from another era. It is particularly interesting that most people consider as an important reason, as can be seen from the graphic, the fact that they prefer an "easy and fast" presentation from modern websites at a rate of 59% (51 individuals), followed by the lack of interest in

historical data at 18% (22), the difficulty in studying the language of another era , “never thought” was chosen from 27 persons and finally the lack of digital applications at a rate of 9% (8).

Question nr 9: “What is your opinion on the involvement of Holy Monasteries in business activities?”

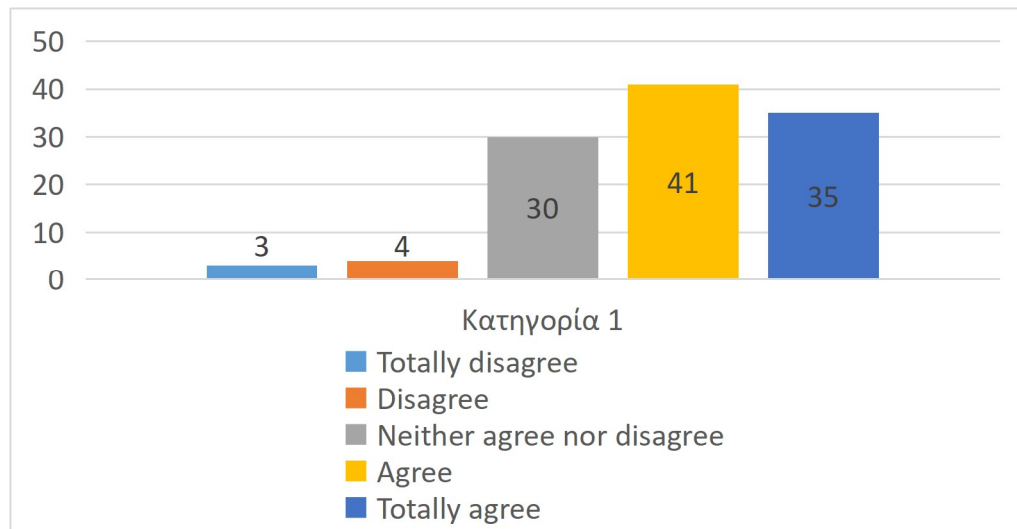


Figure nr 8: Chart 4- Monasteries & entrepreneurship

As can be seen from the chart, the option that wins the largest percentage is "agree" as it gathers 41 people. “Totally agree’ was chosen by 35 interviewees, 30 people chose “rather”, 4 “disagree” and 3 “totally disagree”.

Question nr 10: In your opinion, what is the role of monasteries in the economic development of local communities?

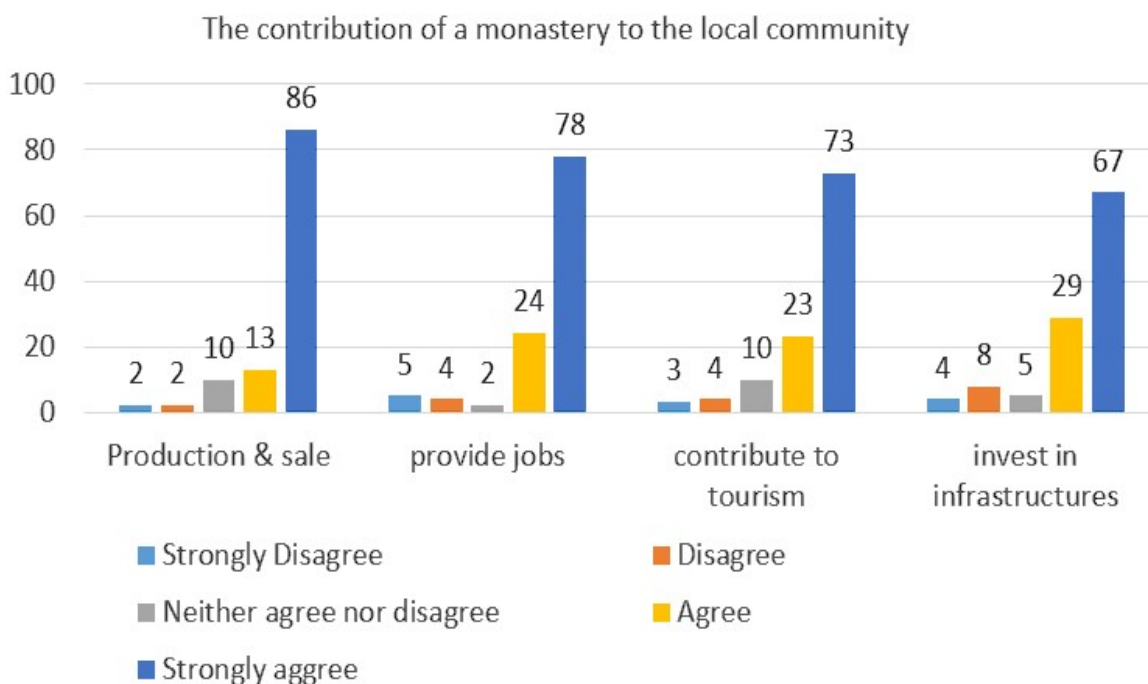


Figure nr 9: Chart 5- Monasteries & local community

As shown from the chart, for the answer “strongly agree” we have 86 persons for “Monasteries strengthen the local economy through the production and sale of monastic products (e.g. honey, wine, cheese) . The second choice with 78 answers is “ They provide jobs either directly or indirectly through cooperation with local producers” , then 73 person has given “They contribute to tourism, as they attract visitors who strengthen the hospitality and catering industry” and the fourth answer was chosen by 67 person “They invest in infrastructure and maintain traditional buildings, upgrading the area”.

Question nr 11: To what extent does monastic activity contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and local traditions?

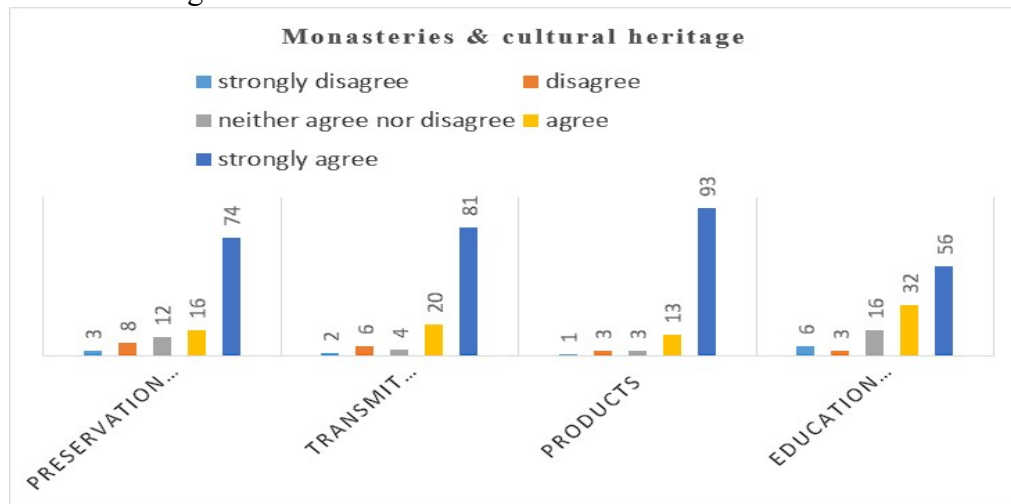


Figure nr 10: Chart 6- Monasteries & heritage

As shown from the chart the answer “strongly agree” was given for 93 persons for the choice “They support the preservation of traditional gastronomy through the products they produce”. The second place is taken by They transmit local tradition through iconography, music and handicraft” with 81 answers. As third choice given is with 74 persons “They preserve and restore historical buildings, archival material and relics” and with 56 answers “They function as cultural education centers, hosting seminars and events”

Question nr. 12: Are there opportunities to expand the business activity of monasteries beyond religious tourism? If so, what are they?

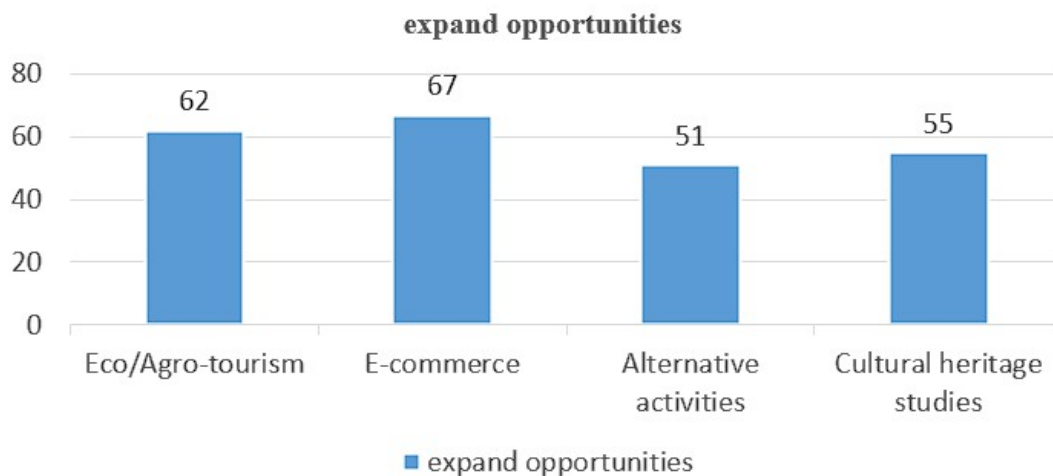


Figure nr 11: Chart 7- expand activities- The answer “strongly agree”

“Development of eco- and agro-tourism through organic farming and hosting visitors in traditional cells”, gave as an answer 62 persons. The “Creation of e-commerce” in order to to sell monastic products internationally gave 67 person. The answer “Development of alternative activities, such as handicraft workshops, botany and hagiography seminars” was the first choice of 51 person while “Cooperation with educational institutions for cultural heritage studies” was chosen from 55 person

Question nr. 13: «What are the factors that could influence your choice to buy a product from a Monastery?»

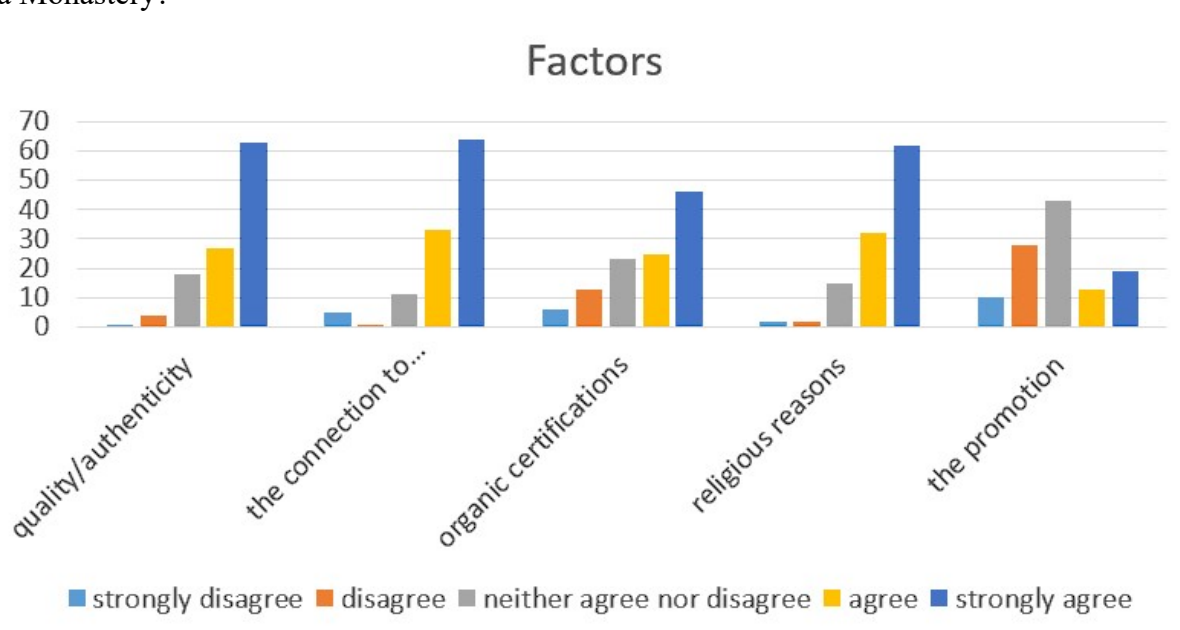


Figure nr 12: Chart 8- factors that could influence

The quality and authenticity of the products is a strong motivation, since 63 people from the sample answered “strongly agree”. The connection of the products with the tradition and history of the monastery is important enough, and we have 64 “strongly agree” and 33 “agree”. Ecological and biological certifications are a condition that should now be taken seriously by the authorities as it is also a guarantee for the quality of the products. “Strongly agree” was chosen by 46 people as a prerequisite. Emotional and religious reasons, as many products have been blessed is a “strongly agree” answer for 62 people while “agree” was given from 32 people, so it is a very strong motivation. The ‘Proper promotion and positioning’ is a strongly motivation for only 19 people.

### Discussion

The research findings indicate that the majority of respondents agree that monasteries play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity. This is because monastic activities contribute to the preservation of traditional arts, architectural monuments, and cultural practices, rendering monasteries vibrant centers of cultural heritage. Moreover, respondents expressed a willingness to engage in alternative forms of tourism, such as literary tourism, particularly in relation to travel literature, provided they were more familiar with these texts. It is important to consider the dynamic potential of travel literature when properly highlighted, as there is a lack of awareness regarding their existence and insufficient utilization through new technologies.

The responses further reveal that a significant proportion of participants recognize the positive contribution of monasteries to the local economy. This occurs through activities such as the production and promotion of local products, the attraction of tourists throughout the year, and the creation of employment opportunities.

Based on the findings, there appears to be considerable potential for expanding monastic activities into areas such as agritourism, sustainable production on a larger scale, and new initiatives like education in traditional arts. The positive reception from respondents suggests that the public is open to innovative approaches that maintain the monastic character while enhancing its economic dimension. However, this expansion must be grounded in authenticity, quality, and a strong connection to tradition, as these are key factors influencing consumer behavior. The findings indicate that consumers appreciate monastic products not only for their religious significance but also for their high quality and local character.

## Conclusion

The travel text could create new paths for an alternative form of tourism, even more so if combined with other practices such as the development of soft form of entrepreneurship. The utilization of monastic products in the tourism sector has the potential to yield significant benefits and strengthen the local economy. Through the implementation of processes such as certification, branding can be enhanced—an essential factor in the promotion of monastic products—as it contributes to the establishment of a strong identity and the strategic positioning of these products in the market. The fact that a large proportion of respondents consider branding important underscores the significance of storytelling and authenticity in shaping consumer perceptions. Entrepreneurship within monasteries represents a unique model of economic activity that integrates financial sustainability with spiritual and social missions. Developing a structured promotional strategy that highlights monastic production can increase brand recognition and attract a broader audience, thereby enhancing the competitiveness of these products.

Furthermore, strengthening monastic entrepreneurship requires the adoption of policies and strategies that support sustainable development and the outward orientation of monasteries. The positive stance of respondents confirms the necessity of state or private initiatives aimed at enhancing funding, visibility, and networking for monastic enterprises. The implementation of such policies, informed by further research, could contribute to the preservation of monastic tradition while simultaneously reinforcing the role of monasteries in both the local and national economy.

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