

CULTURAL TRADITIONS, HERITAGE AND URBAN SUSTAINABILITY: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF RESIDENTS' CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS IN KALAMATA, GREECE

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Abstract

Cultural traditions, local heritage and civic participation in cultural life constitute foundational pillars of sustainable regional development. This study investigates how the cultural perceptions of urban residents, shaped by their engagement with local traditions, heritage infrastructure and cultural practices, contribute to the sustainability of a medium-sized Mediterranean city. Drawing on primary quantitative data (n=517) collected in Kalamata, southern Greece, the research examines residents' participation in cultural activities, their satisfaction with cultural infrastructure, and the ways in which traditions and heritage intersect with social cohesion, environmental awareness and local economic development. The findings confirm that cultural perception functions as a measurable, cross-cutting indicator linking local traditions and tangible/intangible cultural heritage with all three pillars of sustainability, social, economic and environmental. Cultural festivals, architectural heritage and intangible cultural assets (traditional music, gastronomy, silk craftsmanship) are identified as strategic resources for sustainable urban governance and community resilience. Spatial, gender and educational inequalities in access to cultural life are documented, underscoring the need for inclusive regional cultural policies. The study contributes an empirical framework for integrating cultural indicators, aligned with UNESCO CDIS and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4, 8, 11, 15, 16), into local development planning, with implications for regional cultural policy across Mediterranean urban contexts.

Keywords: *Cultural Traditions, Cultural Heritage, Cultural Perception, Sustainable Regional Development, Urban Sustainability, Mediterranean City, Cultural Indicators*

1. Introduction: Cultural Traditions, Heritage and Urban Sustainability -Theoretical Background

In recent years, the discourse on urban sustainability has emerged as a central pillar of national and supranational development, social cohesion and climate change mitigation

strategies (UN-Habitat 2020). According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and specifically Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), there is a pressing need to promote environmentally resilient, socially just and culturally active urban spaces (United Nations). In this context, sustainability is not limited to environmental or economic dimensions, but extends to governance, active citizen participation, social integration and cultural dynamics in order to acquire real content and effectiveness at the local level (Surampalli et al., 2020; Glass & Nweing, 2019; Dempsey et al., 2011; Bitsani, 2002; Bitsani, 2014). Understanding residents' perceptions of urban sustainability can be a key tool for developing evidence-based policies (Mirzaei and Hemati, 2023) that enhance social acceptance and promote environmentally and socially responsible behaviour (European Commission, 2025).

More crucially, cultural traditions and heritage are increasingly recognised as an equal and constitutive dimension of sustainable development alongside the economy, the environment and society (Sabatini, 2019). Cultural infrastructure, festivals rooted in local traditions, symbols of collective identity and forms of cultural expression contribute significantly to shaping community bonds, strengthening social cohesion and building trust between citizens and institutions (Rutagand, 2024; Bitsani, 2016; UNESCO, 2022; European Commission, 2023). The preservation and living transmission of local traditions, from artisan craftsmanship to music, gastronomy and vernacular architecture, represent forms of cultural capital that not only anchor identity but also generate sustainable economic value through cultural tourism, the creative economy and place-based branding.

Nevertheless, the empirical assessment of how cultural traditions and heritage contribute to the overall sustainability of cities remains limited, especially at the level of quantitative analysis. There is an urgent need for regional policies to pursue a horizontal integration of the cultural sector, including its traditions and heritage dimensions, into all dimensions of sustainability (Bitsani, 2002; Bitsani, 2004; Bitsani, 2014).

This research focuses on the city of Kalamata, a medium-sized city in southern Greece with a rich and historically documented tradition of cultural investment, with a twofold objective: first, to record the current level of cultural activity and residents' engagement with local traditions and heritage, second, to analyse the contribution of cultural perception to the sustainability of urban space. Cultural development is regarded not as a marginal aspect of social life but as a strategic factor that strengthens urban dynamics and represents a key form of cultural capital with developmental potential (Landry, 2000; Bitsani, 2004). The research addresses critical questions: how cultural institutions and festivals rooted in local traditions contribute to the city's development, how residents evaluate the preservation and use of cultural heritage, what role local government plays in supporting traditions, and how intercultural dialogue has developed locally.

The city of Kalamata provides a particularly apt case study for this inquiry. Its socio-economic development during the 19th and early 20th centuries was inseparable from the cultural vitality of the period¹. Over successive decades, the city cultivated a distinctive urban culture: its squares became centres of social and civic life², and in the 1980s it emerged as one of the most refined urban centres in the Peloponnese³. Cultural development became a

¹ During the last two decades of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, intellectual and cultural associations were established in Kalamata, including the Messinian Association (1884), the Philological Association (1893) and the People's Society (1901) (GAK, Anastasia Militsi-Nika, Secondary Education in Messinia).

² Bitsanis (2023) documents that an early 1952 presentation on the urban development of the city was delivered by architect Ioannis Stamboltzis at a meeting of the Technical Chamber in Kalamata

³ In June 1996, Kalamata was awarded the Europa Nostra prize for the preservation of its historic centre and the restoration of listed buildings following the 1986 earthquakes

municipal priority, the creation of the Municipal Cultural Enterprise, the Municipal Regional Theatre (Bitsani, 2002; Bitsani, 2004), the flourishing of cultural associations, the launch of the internationally recognised Kalamata International Dance Festival, and the city's candidacy for European Capital of Culture 2021 all reflect a sustained commitment to cultural traditions and heritage as engines of local development (Bitsani, 2014; Skia, 1992; Spiliopoulou, 2012; Spiliopoulou & Kouri, 2020; Solaris, 2014)⁴.

The following table presents the demographic evolution of the Municipality of Kalamata between 1951 and 2021.

Table 1. Population of the Municipality of Kalamata

Year	Population of the Municipality of Kalamata
1951	38,463
1961	38,714
1971	39,462
1981	42,075
1991	43,625
2001	61,373
2011	69,849
2021	72,906

Source: Hellenic Statistical Authority

Over the last two decades, Kalamata has invested in major urban regeneration projects, extending cycle paths, pedestrianising the waterfront and historic centre, and developing its airport and port infrastructure, which have significantly enhanced the city's profile as an open, tourist-friendly Mediterranean city⁵. The acceleration of urbanisation globally, with 68% of the world's population expected to live in cities by 2050 (UNDESA, 2018), makes the sustainable governance of urban space critical. Agenda 2030, and in particular SDG 11, emphasises that the harmonious integration of cultural, social, economic and environmental factors is essential for a high quality of urban life (UN-Habitat, 2020).

2. Cultural Traditions, Heritage and the Cross-Cutting Dimension of Sustainable Urban Development

2.1. The Crosscutting Role of Culture and Traditions in Sustainability

The integration of culture, and specifically of cultural traditions and living heritage, into sustainable development strategies repositions culture not merely as an element of conservation but as a fundamental driving force permeating and reinforcing the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability (Stephenson, 2023; García, 2004;

⁴ Cultural enterprises established in this period include DEPAK (1985), DIPETHEK (1982) and DETAK (1991). The Kalamata International Dance Festival was launched in 1995.

⁵ According to the Hellenic Ports Association, 31 cruise ships arrived in Kalamata in 2015, compared to just 6 in 2013. The new Athens–Kalamata motorway, delivered in 2014, reduced travel time to under 2.5 hours.

Kangas et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2017), making sustainability both holistic and human-centred (Bitsani, 2002; Bitsani, 2014; Soini & Dessein, 2016).

In this framework, cultural traditions and heritage function as connective tissue linking human, natural and economic capital (Bitsani, 2020; Soini & Dessein, 2016; Bacchini & Valentino, 2020). Local traditions can effectively transmit scientific knowledge regarding social injustice, gender inequality, biodiversity and food security, while promoting sustainable development goals and social well-being (Bitsani & Anselmi, 2021; Bacchini & Valentino, 2020). The theory of cultural sustainability (Järvelä, 2023) emphasises that the preservation and living transmission of cultural practices and values enhance participation, social cohesion and communities' capacity to assess the long-term impacts of human activity.

Table 2. Cultural Traditions, Heritage and the Three Dimensions of Sustainability

Dimension of Sustainability	The Role of Traditions and Cultural Heritage	Sources
Environmental dimension	Local cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge contribute to the rational management of natural resources and the promotion of sustainable land-use practices	(Stephenson, 2023; Kangas et al., 2018)
Social dimension	Cultural traditions strengthen social cohesion, civic education and participation through shared values, collective memory and heritage practices	(Bitsani, 2004; Bitsani & Anselmi, 2021; UNESCO, 2017)
Economic dimension	Heritage-based cultural entrepreneurship, cultural tourism and the creative economy grounded in local traditions promote economic development without depleting natural resources	(García, 2004; Soini & Dessein, 2016; Bacchini & Valentino, 2020)

Source: Authors' own elaboration

2.2. Cultural and Sustainable Development Indicators

The integration of cultural indicators , including those that measure the vitality of local traditions and heritage practices, into research practice allows for a multidimensional approach to cultural development, enhancing comparative analysis between regions (García, 2004; Soini & Dessein, 2016). UNESCO, through its Culture for Development Indicators (CDIS) framework, has developed a measurement system covering quantitative and qualitative dimensions in education, cultural participation, economic contribution, social equality and cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2017). Similar frameworks have been developed by the European Union and the Council of Europe, acknowledging culture and traditions as catalysts for social cohesion, innovation and sustainable regional development (Council of Europe, 2021).

These indicators are directly linked to key SDGs: quality education (SDG 4), decent work (SDG 8), sustainable cities (SDG 11), protection of the natural environment (SDG 15) and strengthened democratic governance (SDG 16). They demonstrate that cultural indicators, particularly those capturing the status of local traditions, heritage recognition and participation, function as strategic tools for decision-making, cultural policy planning and evaluation, supporting social participation, the creative economy and a more holistic, people-

centred approach to sustainable regional development (Soini & Dessein, 2016; Council of Europe, 2021; UNESCO, 2017).

3. Research Methodology

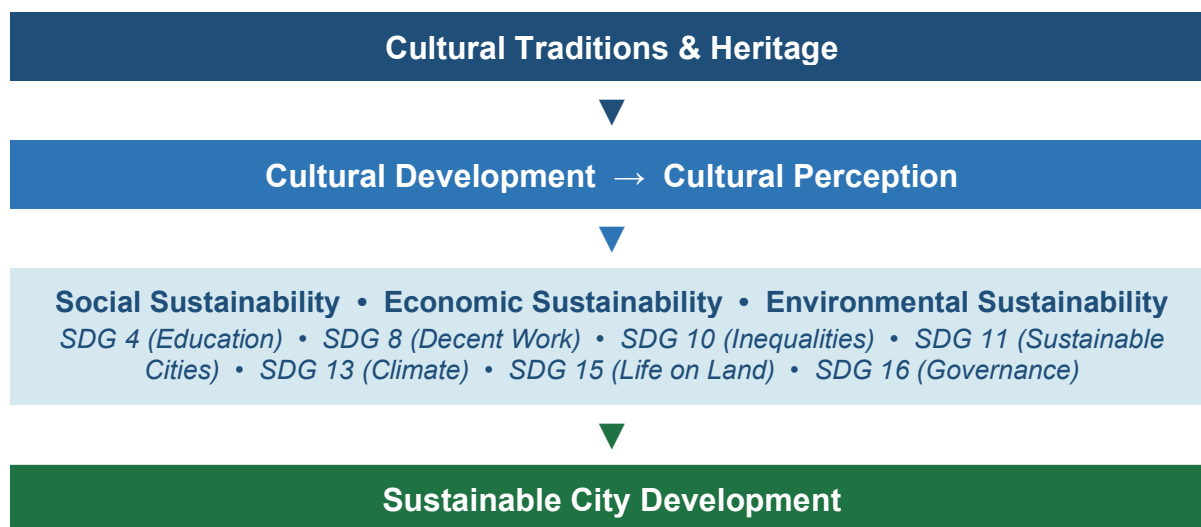
This research is part of a broader study on the cultural life of Kalamata and its contribution to the city's development during the period 2000–2020⁶. The quantitative methodology focuses on recording and interpreting residents' perceptions and attitudes regarding cultural development, including their engagement with local traditions and heritage, in relation to urban sustainability and quality of life.

The study was conducted from March to December 2022. A questionnaire was administered following a pilot phase in which the instrument was tested with forty (40) postgraduate students of the master's Programme in Public Administration and Local Government, Department of Business and Public Administration, University of the Peloponnese. Following revision, the questionnaire was distributed to a broader sample of 550 residents from all neighborhoods of the city. A total of 517 questionnaires were collected, yielding a response rate of 94.0%.

The instrument comprised sixty-five (65) questions, combining closed Likert-scale items with open questions, covering: (a) demographic and socio-economic data; (b) comprehension questions on cultural concepts and traditions; (c) cultural infrastructure; (d) festivals and traditional cultural events; (e) satisfaction with cultural structures and activities; (f) sustainable urban development; (g) social sustainability and accessibility; (h) urban mobility and environmental conditions; and (i) EU citizenship perspectives.

Data were analysed using factor analysis and correlational methods. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test examined normality; the Kruskal-Wallis criterion compared groups; Spearman's rho tested inter-variable relationships; and linear regression with the stepwise procedure identified independent predictors of satisfaction with cultural infrastructure. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed). Analysis was conducted with SPSS 26.0.

Figure 1. Link between Cultural Traditions, Heritage, Cultural Perception and Urban Sustainable Development in relation to the SDGs



Source: Authors' own elaboration

⁶ The research is part of a doctoral thesis being prepared at the Department of Business and Organization Administration of the University of the Peloponnese.

4. Analysis and Interpretation of Results

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of Residents

The sample comprised 517 residents of Kalamata (mean age 43.4 years, SD=14.2). Women represented 67.5% of respondents. Participants were distributed across all city neighborhoods: 21.7% western, 19.7% northern, 21.1% central, 18.4% eastern and 19.1% southern. Of respondents, 59.4% were married and 34.6% had two children. Regarding educational level, 26.3% were university graduates, 19% were technical college graduates and 70.6% had knowledge of a foreign language. Almost all participants (96.3%) were Greek citizens, 72% were employed, with 38.8% working in the private sector.

4.2. Perceptions of Cultural Traditions - Degree of Participation in Cultural Activities

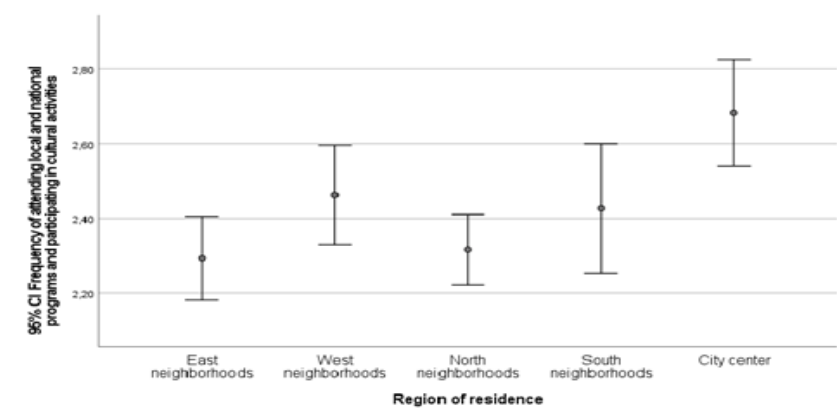
When asked to define “culture”, 55.5% of respondents associated it primarily with the customs and traditions of a place, the highest single selection, followed by museums, archaeological and historical sites (54.9%) and all material and spiritual values created by human activity (54.7%). This result is significant: it demonstrates that for Kalamata's residents, culture is first and foremost synonymous with local tradition and heritage, rather than institutional high culture.

Institutions receiving the highest frequency of visits (>20 visits) include the Public Central Library (13%), the Kalamata Public Library (12.8%) and the Municipal Conservatory (11.2%). Regarding monthly family expenditure on cultural activities, 63.1% spent €1–50, 16.6% spent €51–100 and 8.6% spent over €100. For 65.2%, financial circumstances affected participation in cultural activities, 61.7% believed that the utilisation of cultural heritage is essential for local development and the promotion of the city.

Awareness of traditional cultural heritage was high: the Castle Amphitheatre was recognised by 98.8%, the Dance Hall by 96.7% and Ancient Messene by 93.8%. The International Dance Festival (93%), Choir Festival (68.5%) and Peloponnese Documentary Festival (56.7%) were considered to contribute to economic development, tourism and city promotion. Actual participation in Dance Hall events remained more limited (7.7–15.6%). Women participated more frequently in cultural activities than men. After Bonferroni corrections, residents of the central neighborhoods participated more than those in eastern and northern areas ($p < 0.001$). Higher educational attainment and employment were also associated with greater participation.

The graph shows the frequency of participation in cultural activities according to area of residence.

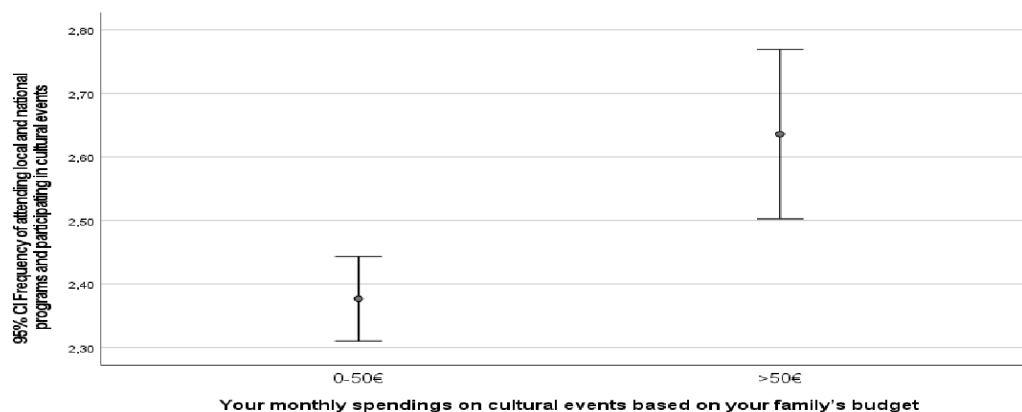
Figure 2. Frequency of Participation in Cultural Activities by Area of Residence



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Next is the graph showing the frequency of participation in cultural activities according to monthly family budget.

Figure 3. Frequency of Participation in Cultural Activities by Monthly Family Budget [chart in original]



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The table below shows Spearman's correlation coefficients for the frequency of participation in cultural activities with age, number of children, assessment of cultural heritage utilisation, satisfaction with development, and frequency of use of electronic media to find information about cultural events. As with the frequency of visits to cultural sites and institutions, the frequency of participation in events was positively correlated with the view on the utilisation of cultural heritage for local development and the promotion of the city, and satisfaction with development. Furthermore, more frequent online searches for cultural information were also associated with greater participation in such events.

Table 3. Spearman Correlations: Frequency of Participation in Cultural Activities

Variable	Spearman rho	p-value
Age	-0.01	n.s.
Number of Children	0.00	0.536
Cultural heritage essential for local development?	—	<0.001
Satisfaction with city's development	0.22	<0.001
Frequency of online cultural information search	—	<0.001

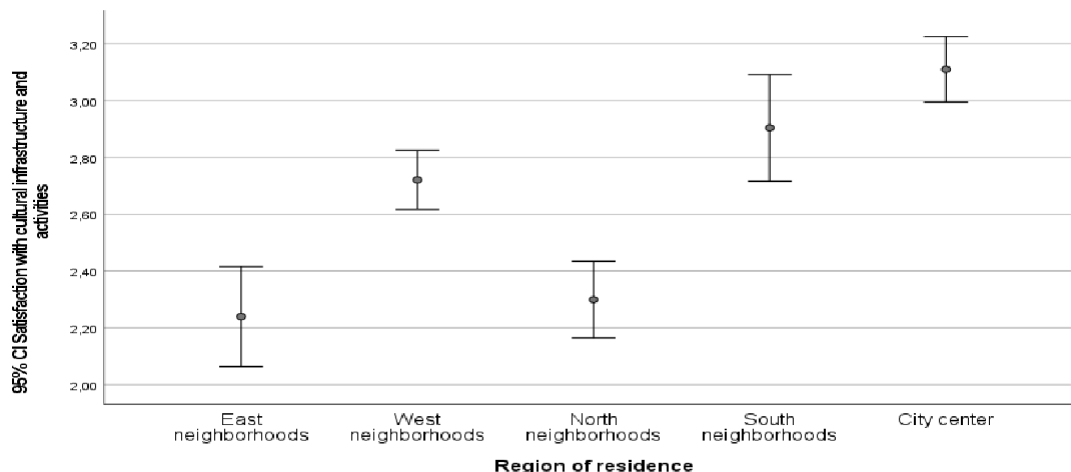
Source: Authors' own elaboration

4.3. Degree of Satisfaction with Cultural Infrastructure and Activities

Higher satisfaction with cultural activities was recorded among women, unmarried respondents, employed individuals, foreign language speakers and those spending more than €50 per month on culture. Respondents who affirmed freedom of expression, universal access and adequate online cultural information also reported more positive assessments. After Bonferroni corrections, spatial inequalities were evident: residents of eastern, western and northern neighborhoods and those with lower educational levels reported significantly lower satisfaction compared to central/southern residents and more educated cohorts.

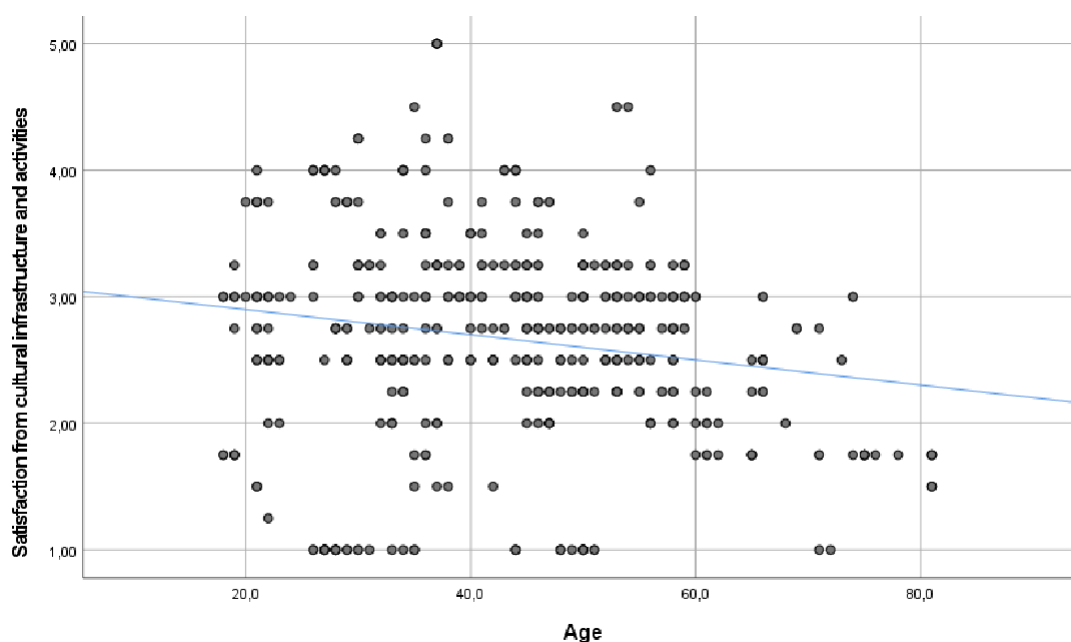
The following graph shows satisfaction with cultural infrastructure and activities according to area of residence.

Figure 4. Degree of Satisfaction with Cultural Infrastructure and Activities by Area of Residence



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 5. Correlation between Age and Satisfaction with Cultural Infrastructure and Activities [chart in original]



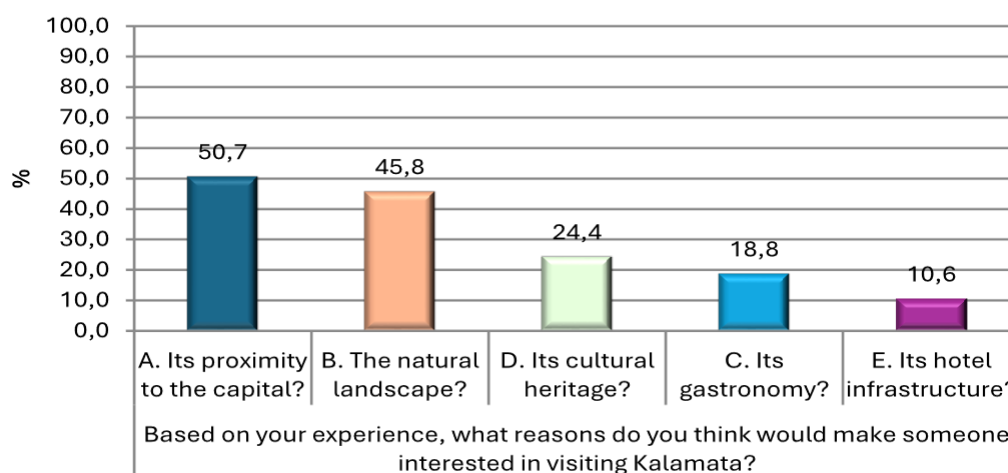
Source: Authors' own elaboration

4.4. Urban Sustainable Development and Heritage Valorisation

Only 38.1% were quite satisfied with the city's development, with a mere 4.1% being very satisfied. Among reasons for visiting Kalamata, proximity to Athens ranked highest (50.7%), followed by the natural landscape (45.8%), cultural heritage (24.4%) and gastronomy (18.8%). Respondents also identified significant intangible cultural traditions as exploitable assets: agricultural products (50.9%), traditional music and dances (27.9%), local history (25%), Kalamatiano silk scarves (22.6%) and urban myths (19.7%). These findings highlight the

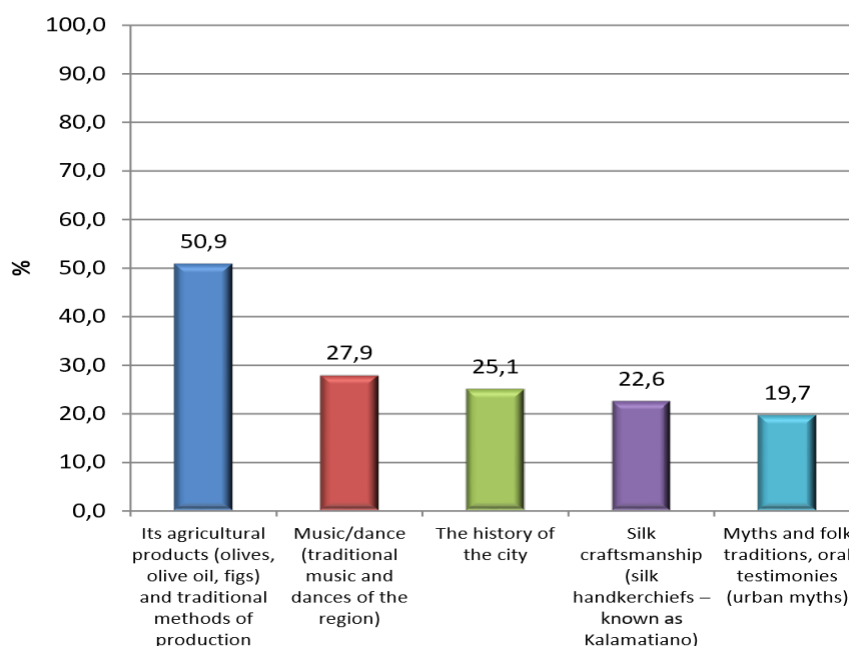
perceived value of local traditions and intangible heritage as drivers of sustainable cultural tourism and place-based regional development.

Figure 6. Place Attractiveness Determinants of Kalamata as Perceived by Residents



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 7. Residents' Assessment of Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Sustainable Development Resource



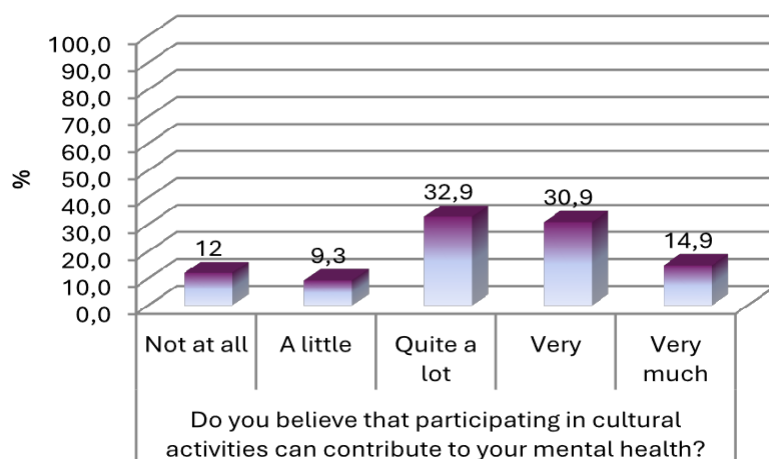
Source: Authors' own elaboration

4.5. Social Sustainability (Health – Social Welfare – Education – Equality – Integration)

Only 2.7% were very satisfied with health services, 34.4% believed that structures exist to support vulnerable social groups, 36.8% considered that such groups benefit from cultural participation, and 30.9% viewed cultural activities as very beneficial for mental health. Integration of cultural and heritage activities into formal education was reported by only 6.8% as extensive, with 42.4% responding “somewhat”. Notably, 86.8% would participate in cultural events organised by people from other countries, a positive indicator for intercultural

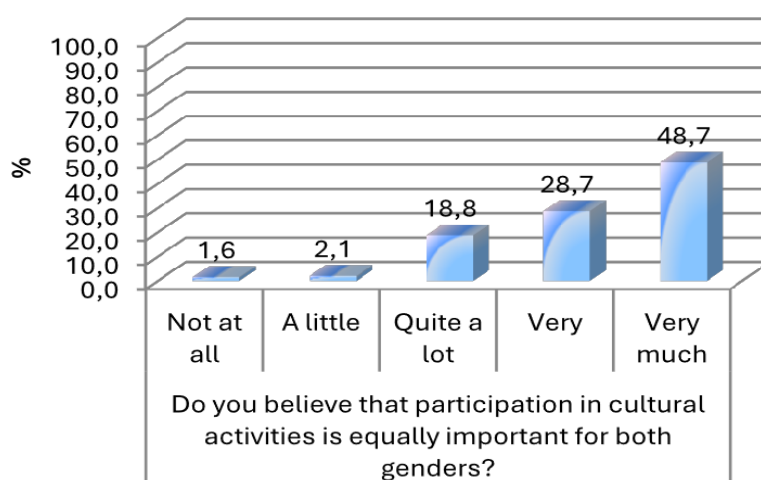
dialogue rooted in local traditions, and 48.7% considered such participation important for gender equality. However, only 12.2% were members of a voluntary group or citizens' network.

Figure 8. Residents' Assessment of the Impact of Cultural Activities on Mental Well-being



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 9. Perceived Gender Equity in Access to and Benefits from Cultural Activities



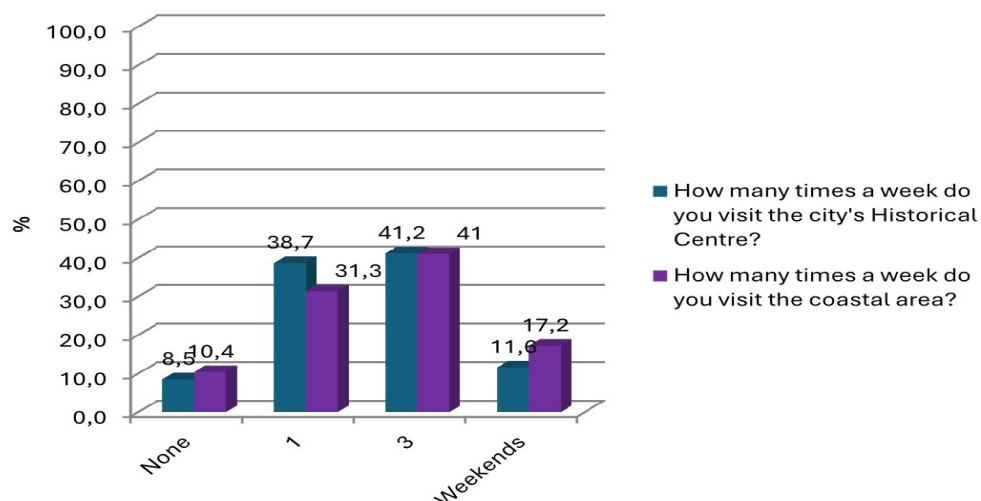
Source: Authors' own elaboration

4.6. Urban Mobility – Urban Regeneration – Environment

Participants reported frequent visits to the historic centre and coastal zone (41.2%: 3–5 times/week), high ease of movement (77.4%), but low satisfaction with urban transport (16.1%) and strong awareness of traffic problems (80.5%). While 38.1% use bicycles, only 28.2% consider the cycle network safe. Satisfaction with public green spaces was expressed by 53.4%. High awareness of neoclassical heritage buildings and support for regeneration projects linked to cultural heritage promotion were recorded. Nonetheless, participation in social consultation on redevelopment was low (16.1%) and urban planning was not considered to enhance social cohesion by 95%. Residents' priorities included accessibility of municipal infrastructure (87.2%), creation of parking spaces (83.8%), valorisation of cultural heritage (64.6%) and quality municipal information (64%). Main challenges identified:

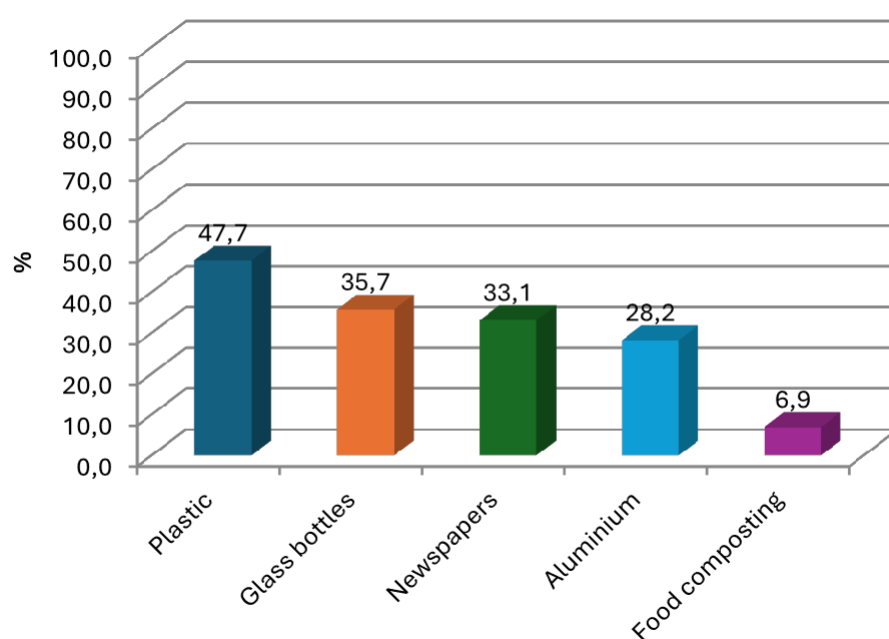
inadequate housing (36.6%), sewage and waste management (32.1%) and demographic ageing (30.2%). Despite these challenges, Kalamata was rated as a safe city (88.9%) with high recycling awareness and participation (89.9%).

Figure 10. Residents' Frequency of Use of Key Urban Public Spaces and Heritage Areas



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 11. Residents' Participation in Recycling Practices and Environmental Awareness



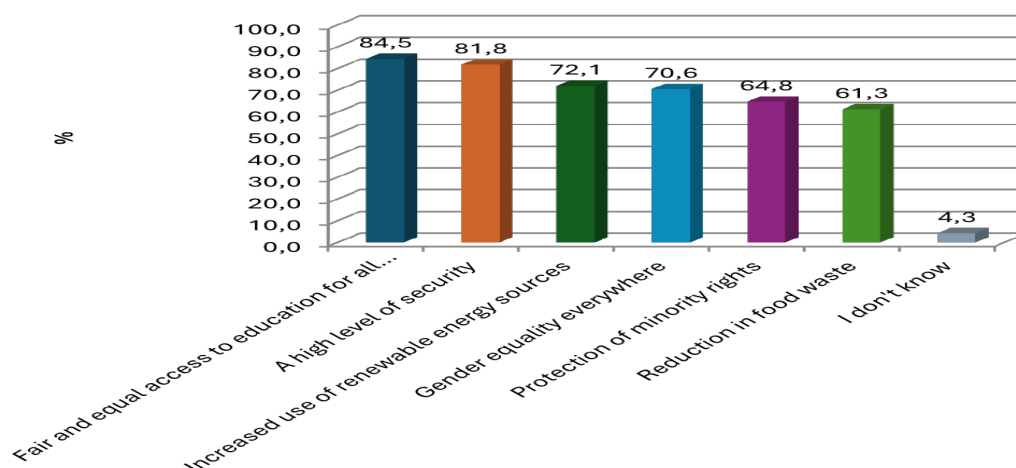
Source: Authors' own elaboration

4.7. European Union - Sustainable City

Satisfaction with EU funding and policies in Kalamata was extremely low across all indicators: only 1.4% were very satisfied with EU project funding, 1.9% with border security provisions, 2.7% with EU monetary union membership. Only 5.6% felt strongly that they were EU citizens, 1% felt Greek citizens' voices were heard in the European Parliament.

Conversely, 72.5% agreed that inequality between European countries is significant — a finding that resonates with the marginalisation experienced by peripheral Mediterranean regions in EU regional development policy. Future EU expectations centred on fair educational access (84.5%), high security (81.8%) and gender equality (70.6%).

Figure 12. Citizens' Vision for EU Policy Priorities: Social Equity, Security and Governance



Source: Authors' own elaboration

5. Discussion

The results of this survey demonstrate that the prevailing tripartite model of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental, becomes truly comprehensive only when cultural traditions and heritage are incorporated as a cross-cutting and constitutive fourth dimension.

In the case of Kalamata, the proliferation of cultural organisations committed to local traditions, the vitality of major festivals and the city's architectural heritage collectively reinforce collective identity, social cohesion and cultural promotion. The research demonstrates that cultural satisfaction is positively linked to key indicators of social sustainability: residents recognise the contribution of cultural activities — and especially those grounded in local traditions, to mental health, socialisation and heritage familiarity. The recognition of cultural heritage as beneficial for vulnerable social groups further underscores its social value. Satisfaction with cultural infrastructure and digital access to cultural information enhances accessibility and transparency.

However, significant asymmetries are evident. Low satisfaction with health and social welfare infrastructure reveals persistent imbalances between the cultural sector and other dimensions of social sustainability. Low participation in voluntary networks and urban regeneration consultations indicates that cultural engagement does not automatically generate active social capital. Infrastructure deficits in transport, cycling safety and urban planning signal that sustainable regional development requires a systematic alignment of cultural life with the everyday infrastructural conditions that make such participation possible.

The extreme dissatisfaction with EU policies and funding, particularly striking in a city that has sought EU support for cultural heritage projects, highlights a structural deficit in the relationship between peripheral Mediterranean cities and European regional development frameworks. This finding calls for more targeted, traditions-sensitive cultural policies that

recognise the specific heritage assets and development needs of mid-sized southern European cities.

It is recommended that active resident participation in decision-making be institutionalised, that periodic assessments measuring the integration of traditions and heritage into sustainability strategies be conducted, and that UNESCO CDIS indicators be adopted as a standard framework for regional cultural policy monitoring.

Table 4: Validation Matrix: Alignment between Conceptual Framework and Empirical Evidence

Theoretical Framework	Research Findings	Connection
Sustainable development = 3 pillars + cultural traditions/heritage as cross-cutting dimension	Residents associate cultural development and traditions with economic development (tourism, creative industries), social cohesion and environmental protection	The survey measures precisely how citizens perceive the role of traditions and culture across the three sustainability dimensions
Cultural traditions = identity, collective values, participation, intergenerational transmission	Residents define culture primarily as customs and traditions, museums and heritage, and report that cultural participation enhances socialisation, learning and mental health	Residents' perceptions confirm the theoretical centrality of traditions in cultural identity
UNESCO CDIS / EU / Council of Europe: cultural indicators as measurable tools for heritage, participation and equality	Questionnaire (65 items) measuring participation, satisfaction, access and heritage knowledge	The research design follows the logic of cultural development indicators
Cultural participation, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue → bottom-up governance and participatory policy design	High recognition of cultural festivals; participants affirm that traditions-based activities improve cohesion and intercultural understanding, but participation gaps persist	The research records both the positive impact and the structural limitations of cultural participation

Source: Authors' own elaboration

6. Conclusions

This research confirms that cultural traditions and heritage act as cross-cutting forces for sustainable development, as empirically documented in the perceptions of Kalamata's residents. The concept of cultural perception emerged as a measurable indicator capable of linking local traditions and heritage with sustainable regional development prospects, translating into empirical parameters the axes that international literature identifies as critical for cultural sustainability (UNESCO, 2017; Soini & Dessein, 2016).

The findings demonstrate that residents directly associate cultural traditions and heritage with economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability — fully responding to the theoretical framework of the three pillars. The strong recognition of local cultural infrastructure, festivals rooted in tradition, and intangible heritage assets (music, gastronomy, silk craftsmanship), alongside the positive impacts on cohesion, education and intercultural understanding, confirm that cultural perception functions as a catalyst for social dynamics in Mediterranean regional contexts.

The research fully validates the theoretical positions developed in the literature review, demonstrating that cultural traditions and heritage are not peripheral but fundamental factors in sustainable urban and regional development. The concept of cultural perception offers a research instrument that can be integrated into the strategic planning of regional cultural policies and support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level. It demonstrates how citizens introduce tradition and heritage into their daily lives, giving material substance to what would otherwise remain abstract sustainability objectives.

For SDCT's research community, this case study from Kalamata offers a replicable methodological framework for assessing the contribution of cultural traditions and heritage to sustainable regional development in Mediterranean and southern European urban contexts - contexts characterised by rich but often under-valorised intangible heritage, structural regional inequalities and an urgent need for traditions-sensitive cultural governance.

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