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The Role of Sustainable Restaurant Practices in City Branding: The Case of Athens

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the role that restaurant practices play on tourists' choices and specifically on city branding. It examines whether sustainability practices are considered by customers to be part of what they perceive as overall quality, leading to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and repeat business. It examines whether sustainability practices become part of the customer experience and perceived quality, and if they could work as another key predictor of customer dining satisfaction effecting their decisions to revisit a destination. Several studies focused on sustainability practices from the restaurant owner's perspective, but there is no study investigating the viewpoint of international tourists and consumers of common restaurants, and the influence of green practices on visiting a major European capital during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research was conducted using a sample of 204 international consumers after completing meals at local restaurants in Athens. This study offers insights on the role that sustainable and green practices of restaurants play in customer satisfaction as it relates to a potential re-visit of a destination; however, it still shows a path worth investigating. Restaurateurs, tourism experts (DMO), and local government should monitor what influences the satisfaction of potential global tourists while taking their sensitivity on sustainability issues into account when shaping their branding strategy during the COVID-19 era.

Keywords: restaurant experience; perceived quality; sustainable practices; gastronomy tourism city branding; COVID-19 Athens Greece

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1. Introduction

In a rapidly changing world socked by the COVID-19 pandemic, traveler and consumer behavior, including food and eating habits, change in an effort to adopt to a new reality. Having invested a lot of expectations on local food and gastronomy for destination branding, it is very important for all destinations to re-evaluate how the tourism experience is influenced during the pandemic, trying to better prepare for the next day.

Food and service were traditionally considered to be the most important factors determining quality during a restaurant experience. Nowadays, sustainability practices, in production, preparation, and provision of meals also seem to be a new important part of what contemporary diners consider "total perceived quality". This means that services should holistically meet the needs of customers in nutritional, hygienic-sanitary, social, and also cultural aspects [1,2]. It is important to realize that some human actions cause negative environmental and economic impact during all stages of meal production, ranging from field production, transportation, receiving, storage, production, and distribution of the meal [3,4]. In order to understand the need and usefulness of sustainability practices in professional catering industry one must understand that meal production starts in the fields, away from the restaurants and it has two components: food production, including growing raw material in farms and cooking at the restaurant and the service process that could include the process of bringing a product from another space, and the actual service of meals at the restaurant [5].

There are several green practices and resource management strategies in the restaurant business that are used to improve the sustainability of operations, including purchasing seasonal produce, obtaining certain percentages of organic and local food, purchasing green materials, and sustainable foods. Other methods include improving energy efficiency, water conservation, pollution prevention, re-use, recycling, reducing food waste, utilize green designs of buildings and use of eco-friendly material in infrastructure construction and facilities [6]. However, there are also several negative environmental impacts that are related to restaurant and food industry operations, such as excessive energy consumption that is associated with carbon footprint build-up, food waste, excessive plastic use, and misuse of products [7–10]. To realize the significant contribution of the global food sector financially, it is important to note that it has a value of US$ 3.4 trillion [11], making up about 40 percent of the global food and agriculture industry. Regarding global pollution, restaurants alone are accountable for almost 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions [7,12,13], while they make a considerable contribution to the world's food waste [14]. Therefore, the lack of sustainable practices in food production and services can have a substantial environmental impact with regards to the generation of waste, the inadequacy of the disposal of products and packaging, the use of chemicals, and the use of large amounts of water in various stages of the meal production process [7]. It is obvious that hospitality and restaurants play a crucial role in environmental deterioration, as operated in recent years.

As important as it is to train food catering professionals to practice sustainability, it is also important to train customers to appreciate, demand, and practice sustainable practices themselves. This can only be achieved through continuous education and by establishing firm actions aiming at the conscious, sustainable use of natural resources (energy, water and produce) [15]. Consequently, this strategy will lead to the financial efficiency of all involved and even better meal quality [1].

In recent years, place branding has become part of the political agenda of most cities, regions, and countries [16]. It has been documented that food and overall food experience bring a sense of exclusivity to a destination, representing its identity and culture [17], while Cohen & Avieli [18] suggest that travel food experiences can influence how tourists perceive a destination, serving as a channel to attract future visitors. Jin et al. [19] found that tourists' dining motivations and restaurant experiences dramatically influence their perceived destination image. It seems that food experience has the ability to form an emotional connection between a tourist and a destination, which can then influence the overall satisfaction of a trip [20].

Having noted all of the above, the aim of this study is to investigate and analyze the role that restaurant sustainable practices play on tourists' choices and city branding. There is no study investigating the viewpoint of international tourists and consumers of common restaurants and the influence of their green practices on visiting a major European capital during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, 204 international consumers were interviewed after completing meals at restaurants in Athens. The aim of this study was to identify and analyze consumer perception, intentions, and choices through a comprehensive approach, which includes an evaluation of the influence of green and sustainable practices of restaurants on international visitors. This is an attempt to investigate and evaluate the degree that these practices could work as strong motivators on tourists of different origin facilitating health and sanitation issues and concerns, but also as a destination attraction during COVID-19 operational environment besides traditional customer criteria, such as flavor, service, and food quality.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Hospitality and Catering Sector

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the worst health events that the global community has faced. Travel restrictions, home isolation, and social distancing were among the measures that were taken by governments to control the spread of the pandemic [21]. The hospitality industry was among the first industries affected by the pandemic, and

it seems that it will be of the last to recover from it [22]. According to World Tourism Organization UNWTO [23], international tourist arrivals declined 65% in the first half of 2020 over the same period of the last year. In Europe, international tourist arrivals were down by 66% in the first half of 2020, which translated to a loss of 213 million international arrivals through June. Specifically, Southern Mediterranean Europe (−72%) recorded the second largest declines in international arrivals following North-East Asia (−83%). Analytically, Spain ranked as the No.2 tourism destination globally in 2019, welcoming 83.7 million visitors, but in 2020 the change over the same period of the previous year was −72.4%. Italy received 61.6 million visitors in 2019, but in 2020 arrivals decreased by 34.4%. Turkey lost 22.2% of its international tourist arrivals when compared to 2019. Finally, Greece in 2019 welcomed 31.1 million visitors, but, in 2020, the change over the same period of the previous year was −78.8% (Table 1).

Table 1. International Tourist Arrivals Southern/Medit. Europe Region (2020).

Region	2019 Rank	Global Visitors in 2019 (millions)	2020 Arrivals, % Change over Same Period of the Previous Year
Spain	2	83.7	−72.4%
Italy	5	61.6	−34.4%
Turkey	6	51.2	−22.2%
Greece	13	31.3	−78.8%

Source: UNWTO.

Specifically for Greece, a woman who had traveled in Italy was reported as the first COVID-19 case on 26th February. A month later, Greece had 93 cases and 12 deaths. Without a vaccine or a specific antiviral treatment, Greece's Prime Minister announced a total lockdown, following the example of other countries with several non-pharmaceutical methods. The measures included a closure of schools, shops, restaurants and hotels, social distancing, required home isolation (quarantine), obligatory wearing mouth and nose covering, the postponing of events and conferences, bans on gatherings of people over certain numbers, and restrictions on the number of passengers on public transportation, in public movement, and the closure of Greek borders. The first quarantine period in Greece lasted until the 4th of May, when Greek authorities started the first phase of the restarting of the economy. The restarting of the tourism sector started on the 1st of June focusing on domestic tourism and on the 15th of June the first foreign tourists arrived in Greece. On the 30th of June, 3409 cases and 192 deaths from the COVID-19 were reported in Greece, with most cases being reported in the region of Attica [24].

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, academic research worldwide has focused intensively on the possible responses of the hospitality and catering industry in the new environment [25]. The reasearch thematology focuses on the comparison of the present pandemic with previous health crises, the measurment of the impact of the COVID-19 on the hospitality sector, and the discussion for the best possible resumption of activities during and after the pandemic.

For instance, Gössling et al. [21] explored the possible socioeconomic changes in tourism that were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to previous health crises. Menegaki [26] explored the possible preferences of tourists in the post-COVID-19 era based on the knowledge from prior health crises on tourism destinations. Nevertheless, the size and dynamic of the novel coronovirus cannot be compared with the others epidemics/pandemics that affected the tourism industry in the 21st century. It is estimated that the hospitality sector has lost almost 30% of employment [22], and the loss of revenues could reach $15.2 billions in famous tourism destinations [27].

All of the necessary measures that have been taken to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus had a substantial negative economic impact on businesses [28]. In the catering sector, entrepreneurs are pessimistic about their business future. They point out that, if the COVID-19 health crisis lasts over four months, it will not be easy to stay in business [29]. Countries are fighting against the pandemic for almost a year now. It is

not surprising that restaurant owners/managers seek alternative financial measures and operational regimes to ensure the needed revenue stream and be prepared for the post-COVID-19 era [30]. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the restaurants customers' food and drinks preferences. Jain [31] suggests that, in the post-COVID-19 era, restaurants will have to maintain distances between tables, increase the insurance of food hygiene and safety, and the restaurant staff will be trained in new sanitation procedures. As a quick answer to the customers changing preferences due to the increased perceived threat, restaurant owners/managers could focus on offering their dining experience in private dining tables or rooms [32]. Everything mentioned earlier points to the fact that it will decrease the demand in restaurants, either due to the customers' perceived fear or due to the social distancing restrictions. Well-designed and sustained financial measures are needed for the hospitality and catering sector [29].

2.2. Evaluation of Restaurant Quality

In today's restaurant market, operators and managers have to offer quality food, quality customer service, price fairness, and favorable ambiance to gain a competitive advantage [33]. In this context, there is an increasing research interest in the expectations of restaurant customers [34–38].

Food quality is at the core of a restaurant experience and it affects customers' satisfaction [39]. However, Edwards [40] argues that the eating-out experience is more than simply eating the food, and the situation under which consumption will take place affects that experience. According to the author, the physical surroundings are also an essential component of the eating-out experience. Soriano [33] names as "Place" the appearance and the ambiance of a restaurant, which is included in the consumers' reasons to return to a restaurant. Pecotić et al. [41] include ambient lighting, color, music, and space layout of restaurant atmospherics. However, they argue that furniture comfort is the most important factor in the interior design of a restaurant. Moreover, Ha & Jang [36] argue that the higher the customer's perceptions of atmospherics in ethnic restaurants, the higher their satisfaction and loyalty will be. Among the different factors that influence customer loyalty in chain restaurants was the location and their environment, according to Hyun [34]. Additionally, Haghighi et al. [42] claimed that the restaurant environment affects customer loyalty and recommends that restaurant managers provide a calm and relaxing restaurant environment. Cleanliness was found to be a strong determinant factor for the student satisfaction using college food services [43]. The cleanliness, the location, and the interior decoration, as part of the restaurant's interior elements, were at a good level when the restaurants' quality was examined in Lithuania and Poland [38].

Service quality, an essential point where customers typically interact with the employees, is one of the most significant elements in the restaurant experience [35]. Parasuraman et al. [44] argue that service quality is a strategic tool of competitive differentiation and business successes. They developed a five-dimensional instrument (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empath), named "SERVQUAL", to help service providers to assess their customers' expectations and improve their service quality. In the restaurant industry, service quality refers to the level of service that is provided by employees. Ha & Jang [36] claimed that there is a positive relationship between service quality and customers' satisfaction and loyalty. Likewise, according to Namkung & Jang [37], customers' high satisfaction was related to service qualities, such as employees' promised service, willingness to help, and competency.

As mentioned before, food quality is at the core of restaurants' experience. There are different food quality requirements necessary to satisfy customers' needs and expectations. Of those, Peri [45] includes the safety, nutritional, sensory, production, and ethical requirements. Especially, the production requirements appeal to consumers' "how", "where", and "when" the food was produced, and the ethical requirements refer to organic agriculture and the environmental protection procedures, which can be associated in the sense of sustainability. However, the perceived food quality is the most critical factor in customer's

choice of restaurant [38]. The quality and price-valuable food are the reasons for customers repeating their visit in a restaurant [33,42] and they can affect customers' satisfaction levels [37]. It is obvious from the literature that restaurants nowadays must provide tasty, excellent prepared, and presented food, which prove to the customers that it is worth more than the amount they are being charged [46].

The present study attempts to examine and evaluate restaurant quality factors (food quality, service quality, and interior elements) during a health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming at how the restaurant industry could modify their operational environment according to their customers' new expectations to satisfy them. For the purpose of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What restaurants' interior element qualities are most important for customers in the post-COVID-19 era?
2. What restaurants' customer service qualities are most important for customers in the post-COVID-19 era?
3. What restaurants' food qualities are most important for customers in the post-COVID-19 era?

2.3. City Food Branding and Restaurants Sustainable Approach

In the last decades, in quality's equitation was added the evaluation of restaurants' sustainable practices [38] due to the growing environmental awareness of consumers [47]. Empirical studies have shown that there are different factors related to environmental concerns that influence consumer behavior. For example, local ingredients and reusable cutleries are the most important sustainable approaches for Polish and Lithuanians when choosing a restaurant to dine out [38]. Baldwin et al. [7] identified five ways that restaurants could reduce their environmental impacts without additional cost to answer customer demand. According to the authors, restaurants could focus on responsible food purchasing (including buying food from local and environmentally responsible sources), on energy and water sufficient management, on waste reduction and control, on responsible operational supplies (including using environmental cleaning and paper products instead of plastic), and, finally, on environmental sensitive organizational planning, including employees training on environmental topics. Adopting such approaches, restaurants can reduce their environmental impacts and gain customers' trust [48].

Food is among the aspects that influence the destination image [49,50]. A destination brand is multidimensional, consisting of facilities, such as restaurants, hotels, and intangible elements, such as service delivery and quality [51]. According to Ab Karim & Chi [52], there is an essential relationship between the destinations' food image and a travelers' intention to visit a destination. Nowadays, increasing destinations promote their local cuisine to affect tourists' intentions and increase their tourism flows and earnings [53]. Culinary destinations must use all of their food aspects to commit and increase tourists' revisit intentions and loyalty [54]. Event-based strategies, core and competence strategies (e.g., UNESCO's Cities of Gastronomy), and various spatial strategies have been employed to brand the city's food image [55]. It is argued that promoting local food could attract investment in agriculture [56].

Tourists are the largest consumer of local food. Tourists' search for local food stems from their need to try local specialties in farms, regional food at restaurants [57], and eat like locals, creating an authentic experience [58]. Restaurants and chefs use local produce in their menus for their quality difference and storytelling opportunities [59]. In this way, tourists gain better access to tastier and healthier products, and chefs are proud of their offerings. On the other hand, the increased local food demand creates employment opportunities and increases production output and revenues for local producers and retailers [56]. Thus, promoting local or regional food offers opportunities for sustainable regional development [57,60].

Local cuisine is considered to be a local cultural element and, for that reason, is used to differentiate destination brands, while local restaurants give access to the local culture [50].

Restaurants are important, because they give meaning to the social activity of eating. For tourists, the food experience brings a sense of exclusivity to a destination, representing its identity and culture [17]. At the same time, consuming local cuisine at local restaurants could offer a unique learning and memorable food experience. This experience seeking could work as a pull factor [61]. However, also as a push factor, creating a motivation to travel [62].

Additionally, tourists are more likely to return to the same vacation destination if they were satisfied with their food experiences, according to Dimitrovski and Crespi-Vallbona [63]. Jin et al. [19] found that tourists' dining motivations and restaurant experiences did influence their perceived destination image. At the same time, Crockett and Wood [64] support that a destination brand image could be partly influenced and dependent on the type and quality of restaurants available.

Local food affects tourist behavior and, for that reason, it can be used as a branding tool [65,66]. Authentic culinary experiences are related to the food image of a destination [66]. Street food markets [49], local produce with protected designation of origins [67], and food events [56] have been successfully used in destination branding. The appearance, the presentation, and the unique ways of cooking the food enhance the destinations' food image [53], and they could positively affect converting a negative destination image [68]. Consequently, the local food industry should preserve its authentic origins of raw materials, its local style of the served food, and the traditional production processes that can enhance a destination's unique image [69]. In addition, destination marketers need to identify the aspects of gastronomy and meals that directly and indirectly influence the unique image of a place [55].

Previous studies have argued that niche segments under food tourism [70,71], food festivals [72], regional food programs [73], and restaurants [74–77] have a positive impact on place branding. Most of these studies refer to the importance of using local and seasonal commodities by various stakeholders in the food chain as the most efficient way of promoting food tourism in destinations. In the restaurant context, practicing sustainability may be a source of competitive advantage [78]. Although customers are not well informed regarding the restaurant operation's environmental impact, they are willing to pay more if a restaurant follows sustainable practices [79]. Referring to the restaurants' role in place branding, Batat [75] claimed that it depends on the chef's personality and his/her attachment to the destination. Jang et al. [80] highlighted the importance of promoting local sourcing ingredients in restaurant menus in the different segments of food tourists. Namkung and Jang [81] assert that green brand equity depends on restaurant type. Upscale casual restaurants should focus on using local ingredients in their menus, according to their study. On the other hand, casual dining restaurants should focus on their environmental practices to strengthen their green image. Meneguel et al. [76] argued that it is complex but essential to use Michelin-starred restaurants in promoting the destinations' food tourism, due to its cultural, economic, and environmental impact on the destination. Güneş [77] recommended that green restaurants should offer local and organic food to their customers, improve water and energy efficiency, have efficient waste management, use green cleaning products, and contribute positively to the local economy. According to the author, it is important to promote the practices that are followed by green restaurants for the sustainable development of food tourism in a destination. However, to our knowledge with respect to the literature, there is no other research on a topic that is related to the relationship between the restaurants' sustainable practices and the city food branding in a major European capital during a health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, from the viewpoint of international tourists. Hence, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Restaurants' sustainable approaches will influence the city's food branding in the post-COVID-19 era?*

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Survey Questionnaire

The questionnaire that was used in the present study was designed based on previous research (Appendix A). The questionnaire was sent to an academic to review, some grammatical changes made the statements easier to understand and gave them more credibility. The applied questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part consists of the participants' sociodemographic details. The second part consists of 43 questions that are related to evaluating a restaurant's different features (interior design, customer service, food quality, and sustainability approach) and questions regarding the city's food branding.

The data were carried out in Athens and they were mainly collected among foreign restaurant customers. Athens was chosen, as it is a major European capital and the biggest Greek city, the Greek city with the most awarded restaurants with a Michelin star, and the city where new consumer trends come to the surface before they spread around the country. The data were collected between June 2020 and October 2020. Participants were randomly selected outside the city's restaurants and they were informed about the purpose of the research. The participants completed the questionnaire in the interviewer's presence, so that they could ask additional questions at any time or ensure that the content of the question was properly understood. Two hundred and eight questionnaires were collected, but four of them were not complete. The completed questionnaires (n = 204) were analyzed. It must be mentioned that customers were randomly selected so there was no discrimination with regards to ethnic origin, gender, or age.

3.2. Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 2 presents the characteristics of the responders (n = 204). Most of the responders visited Greece for the first time (53.9%), most were male (67.2%), between 25–50 years old (61.8%), and married (56.9%). The majority of the responders have a college or university degree (75%) and they live in a city with over 100,000 inhabitants (76%). Responders from 14 different countries answered the questionnaire, 31.4% from Britain and 19.1% from the U.S.A.

Table 2. Socio-Demographic Profile (n = 204).

Variable	*Category*	*Number of Responders*	*Percentage*
N	204 (100%)		
Gender	Male	137	67.2%
	Female	67	32.8%
Age	18–25	11	5.4%
	26–50	126	61.8%
	51–70	61	29.9%
	71+	6	2.9%
Marital Status	Married	116	56.9%
	Single	88	43.1%
Education	High School Diploma	22	10.8%
	Technical Certification	18	8.8%
	College/University	153	75.0%
	Postgraduate	11	8.8%
Dwelling Place	Village	9	4.4%
	City up to 100,000 inhabitants	40	19.6%
	City 100,000–500,000 inhabitants	72	35,3%
	City over 500,000 inhabitants	83	40,7%

Table 2. *Cont.*

Variable	*Category*	*Number of Responders*	*Percentage*
Nationality	Bosnian	1	0.5%
	Canada	6	2.9%
	Chinese	18	8.8%
	Dutch	22	10.8%
	English	64	31.4%
	French	8	3.9%
	German	20	9.8%
	Greek	8	3.9%
	Italian	9	4.4%
	Portugal	1	0.5%
	Romania	1	0.5%
	Spain	6	2.9%
	Sweden	1	0.5%
	American	39	19.1%
First visit in Greece	Yes	110	53.9%
	No	94	46.1%

Note: The percentages were rounded up to one decimal point. Therefore, the percentage may not add to 100.0 because of rounding errors.

3.3. Data Analysis

The statistical analysis of the results was performed using SPSS (IBM, v.21.0, Manchester, UK, 2018) and AMOS (IBM, v.23, Manchester, UK, 2013) Independent *t*-tests and Exploratory Factory Analysis (EFA) were used. One-sample *t*-tests were used to better understand the factors affecting the consumers' opinion about the interior elements in restaurants, the service, and the quality of meals. EFA was used for the aspects of the evaluation of the sustainability approach. Using the EFA, the large datasets of the restaurant sustainability approach were transformed into a smaller one that contains most of the information in the large set and it can be used in the subsequent analysis and determined the number of items of latent factors in the dataset [82]. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was employed to test the goodness of fit of underlying dimensions of the sustainability approach that was derived from EFA and the construct of "Food Branding".

4. Results

4.1. Evaluation of Quality of Restaurants in Athens

The literature review has identified several features as the elements that significantly influence the choice of catering establishments of consumers. The responders were asked to rate a seven-point Likert scale (1 = less important, 7 = most important) on the quality of the service in terms of interior elements, customer service, and food quality [38]. Table 3 presents responders' evaluation of their experience in Athens' restaurants based on the results from the one-sample *t*-tests.

Customers of Athens restaurants rated the interior elements, the service quality, and the food at a good level in the post-COVID-19 era, as shown in Table 2. More specifically, responders found the cleanliness (5.99) to be the most important item of the interior elements of the restaurants, the staff professionalism (6.10) as the most important item of the customer service, and the local and authentic cuisine representing the destination (5.85) as the most important item in food quality evaluation.

The present study confirms previous findings. In particular, according to [83], cleanliness is an important factor of restaurants that influences customers' pleasant, feeling of trust in the service, and the prestige attribution. Furthermore, according to [84], staff quality can be assured by employing professional personnel, ensuring the restaurant's quality, and customer loyalty. Finally, according to [69], authentic and local food has an

essential role in creating a sustainable tourism experience because it influences customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Table 3. Evaluation of Quality of Restaurants in Athens.

Element	Factor	Mean	Std	Median	Sig
Interior Element in Restaurants	Location	5.10	1.16	5.0	0.000
	Open hours	5.07	1.30	5.0	0.000
	Interior decoration	5.34	1.18	6.0	0.000
	Cleanliness	5.99	0.85	6.0	0.000
Customer Service	Way of welcoming clients	5.69	1.02	6.0	0.000
	Effective service	5.94	0.85	6.0	0.000
	Staff professionalism	6.10	0.83	6.0	0.000
	Staff effective communication skills	5.74	1.06	6.0	0.000
	Knowledge of service about meal & wine	5.85	1.03	6.0	0.000
Food quality	Created by celebrity chef/skillful personnel	5.19	1.39	6.0	0.000
	Price: value for money	5.59	0.95	6.0	0.000
	Familiar taste to me	5.06	1.58	6.0	0.000
	Local and authentic cuisine	5.85	0.82	6.0	0.000
	Large portions	5.26	1.30	5.0	0.000
	Variety of meals	5.39	1.44	6.0	0.000

Note: n = 204. Results from one-sample t-test, test value = 4.

4.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis on Restaurants' Sustainability Approach

The evaluation of sustainability approach of the restaurants was measured with 17 items. A principal axis factoring analysis was conducted using varimax rotation to provide simplicity and clarity of factor loadings to explore the sustainability factor's structure. The number of factors to be extracted is based on the following criteria: (i) minimum eigenvalues of 1.0 and factor loading of individual items with a minimum loading of 0.5 or higher; (ii) the total item variance explained by the retained factors should be high, with 60% as a minimal target [85]. An examination of the interitem correlations showed that one item ("Bx19") needed to be dropped. Before conducting the factor analysis, KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity were tested to measure the sampling adequacy for data structure detection. The KMO test may vary between 0 and 1, with numbers ranging between 0.80 and 0.90, which supports the use of factor analysis. Hair et al. [86], regarding the test of Bartlett's test of sphericity, suggest that a probability level (i.e., Sig.) of <0.05 indicates that sufficient correlations exist among the variables, which determines the appropriateness of factor analysis. Table 4 shows that KMO was 0.872 and Bartlett's test of sphericity p-value was <0.05, which supported proceeding with EFA.

Table 4. KMO and Bartlett's Test.

Kaiser–Meyer–Okin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		**0.872**
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx Chi-Square	2832.829
	df	120
	Sig.	0.000

Eigenvalues that were greater than 1.0 suggested four factors explained 79% of total item variance. Table 5 shows the factor loading. Factor 1 represents "Environmental Practices", and the items ranged from 0.75 to 0.86. Factor 2 represents "Sustainability Mindfulness", and the items ranged from 0.64 to 0.88. Factor 3 represents "Environmental Friendliness", and the items ranged from 0.56 to 0.77. Finally, Factor 4 represents "Food Locality and Seasonality", and the items ranged from 0.82 to 0.86.

Table 5. Rotated Factor Loading for Sustainability Approach.

Items	*Factor Loading*			
	Environmental Practices	**Sustainability Mindfulness**	**Environmental Friendliness**	**Food Locality and Seasonality**
Bx22	0.858			
Bx21	0.852			
Bx20	0.818			
Bx23	0.769			
Bx25	0.750			
Bx32		0.880		
Bx30		0.834		
Bx31		0.798		
Bx29		0.642		
Bx28			0.772	
Bx24			0.610	
Bx18			0.579	
Bx26			0.573	
Bx27			0.559	
Bx16				0.856
Bx17				0.869

Note: n = 204. See Appendix A for item wording.

Eventually, the internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) was estimated for each of the four dimensions of the restaurant sustainability approach. Cronbach's alpha was 0.94 for Environmental Practices, 0.88 for Sustainability Mindfulness, 0.86 for Environmental Friendliness, and 0.88 for Food Locality and Seasonality. The reliability of all four measures was high (0.86 to 0.94) and it exceeded the minimum desired reliability of 0.70 [85].

4.3. Measurement Model "Sustainable Approach and Food Branding"

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the hypothesized model between the restaurant sustainability approach and food branding. The construct of "Food branding" was measured as a latent variable that was predicted by four items that were taken from previous studies (Appendix A). The model evaluation test was conducted using IBM AMOS v.23. The model had some modifications, in which five items were deleted because the measures did not achieve the recommended values [86]. Furthermore, after testing the discriminant validity index of the proposed model, the results did not have acceptable values [86] and, for this reason, the "Environmental Friendliness" construct was deleted. Thus, the model fit the data and all goodness of measures fit indices achieved the recommended values.

Table 6 presents the model fit results. The overall model fit with the hypothesized model was accepted. The proposed model yielded a relative chi-square CMIN/df = 2.279 that is below the cutoff point of 3.000, as proposed by Hair et al. [86]. Other fit measures were also used: the comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98 (>0.95), the overall good fit index (GFI) = 0.94 (>0.90), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.079 (<0.08). Further, the results have also met the requirements for Unidimensional (CR > 0.6) and Validity (AVE > 0.5) of the Measurement Model [87].

The discriminant validity exists when the proposition of variance in each construct exceeds the square of the coefficient that represents its correlation with other constructs, according to Fornell and Larcker [88]. All of the AVE values were greater than the squares of the correlations between constructs, as shown in Table 6. Hence, the discriminant validity was satisfactory for all constructs. Therefore, the results of the indices showed the model of goodness-of-fit indices, in which the final model fit the data so we could conduct the SEM analysis.

Table 6. Results of Standardized factor loadings, Discriminant Validity Index, CR, AVE.

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	CR (>0.6)	AVE (>0.5)	FLS	EP	SM	FB
Food Locality and Seasonality (FLS)	Bx17 Bx16	0.879 0.898	0.882	0.790	**0.790**			
Environmental Practices (EP)	Bx22 Bx21 Bx20	0.887 0.946 0.848	0.923	0.800	0.392	**0.800**		
Sustainability Mindfulness (SM)	Bx32 Bx30 Bx31	0.878 0.891 0.954	0.934	0.825	0.352	0.534	**0.825**	
Food Branding (FB)	Bx37 Bx36	0.955 0.970	0.962	0.926	0.261	0.120	0.747	**0.926**

Note: n = 204, CMIN/df = 2.279, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.79. FLS = Food Locality and Seasonality, EP = Environmental Practices, SM = Sustainability Mindfulness, FB= Food Branding. Bold AVE values are along the diagonal. Squared correlations are below the diagonal.

4.4. Structural Model

The structural model was estimated to provide a more conservative and nuanced exploration of the relations between the three factors of restaurant sustainability approach and the food branding. Figure 1 delineates the proposed model.

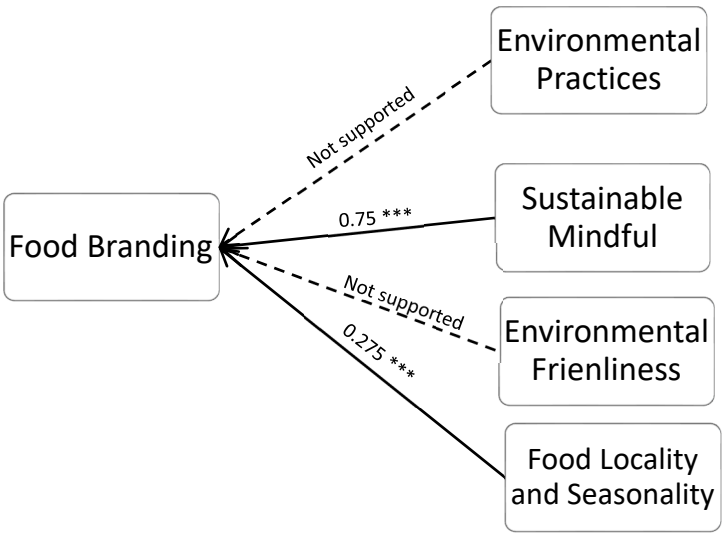

Figure 1. Structural Model. Note: n = 204, *** $p < 0.000$, CMIN/df = 2.279, CFI= 0.98, GFI = 0.94 and RMSEA = 0.79.

The goodness-of-fit statistics of the structural model indicated that the model fits the data satisfactorily: CMIN/df = 2.279, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.94, and RMSEA = 0.79. This served as a satisfactory foundation to examine the relationships between the proposed constructs. The results support a significant and positive relationship between Food branding and the Sustainable approaches of Athens restaurants. Using a principal axis factoring analysis, the measured items of the sustainability approach transformed into four factors (Environmental Practices, Sustainability Mindfulness, Environmental Friendliness, and Food locality and Seasonality). One factor (Environmental Friendliness) was deleted from the further analysis, because it did not achieve the recommended values of discriminant validity [86].

Sustainability Mindfulness (β = 0.75, $p < 0.001$) and Food Locality and Seasonality (β = 0.28, $p < 0.001$) were positive and significantly related to the city's food branding, as

shown in Table 7. The relationship between Environmental Practices and Food branding was insignificant ($p > 0.05$) and it could not be supported.

Table 7. Analysis of structural model (paths) per factor.

Parameter.	β	Std. Error	*t*-Value	*p*	Result
ER → FB	0.126	0.053	1.713	0.087	Not supported
SM → FB	0.750	0.057	12.489	***	Supported
EF → *FB*	Not achieved the recommended values of discriminant validity				Not Supported
	0.275	0.038	3.568	***	Supported

Note: *** $p < 0.000$.

5. Discussion

The present study investigated restaurant quality (food quality, service quality, interior design, and sustainable practices) and the city's food branding. The relationship between restaurant sustainable practices and a city's food branding from the customers perspective is not well documented in the existing literature. This study helps to fill the gap and proposes an integrated model that fits the data well; thus, the findings leads to the following conclusions.

This study provides a novel contribution to the discussion on the importance of restaurants' qualities, and the relationship between restaurants' sustainable procedures and city's food brand during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results offer several theoretical implications. This study enriches and offers insights to the hospitality and catering literature by examining the importance of restaurants' qualities, from the customer perspective, in this unprecedented pandemic. The findings provide evidence for the significant influence of the current pandemic on customer perceptions regarding to restaurants' qualities. Regarding the interior elements, cleanliness was found to be the most crucial factor. This result is not surprising, because cleanliness can be easily be related to the notion of health safety. Especially if we consider the strict health protocols by the Greek authorities for the restaurant industry [89]. Staff professionalism was evaluated as the most important factor in the restaurants' customer service. This result is in line with previous literature claiming that professional customer service is an essential operational factor that affects customers' trust and satisfaction [34,84,90]. Despite the impact and changes that are caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, staff remains one of the most important factors in overall perceived restaurant quality that ensured safety through sanitary operational and executional procedure. Finally, from the food quality evaluation, the results show that it is essential that the restaurants must adopt a more "local and authentic" philosophy, which is strongly related to the notion of sustainability [78] and simultaneously with security extensions.

Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective, this study revealed that the restaurants' sustainable procedures can be explained by four factors, the "Environmental Practices", the "Sustainability Mindfulness", the "Environmental Friendliness", and the "Food locality and Seasonality". A significant relationship between the restaurants' sustainable procedures and the destinations' food branding was found. Two factors were found to be significant in this relationship. The "Sustainability Mindfulness" had the strongest influence on the destination food branding, and "Food locality and Seasonality" was the second influential factor. In a difficult period, as the period of restarting the tourism economy after the first wave of the COVID-19, food and food experiences can be used as an effective tool for attracting tourists [52].

Additionally, the findings offer useful practical implications. First, the study explored the multidimensional opinion of customers about restaurant quality (food quality, service quality, and interior elements) in the post era of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this era, restaurants need to adjust to the "new normal" and the new demands of their customers, in order to avoid all of the pandemic's negative impact [28]. According to the result, customers rated the restaurant's quality at a good level. Specifically, regarding the interior elements, cleanliness was found to be the most crucial factor regarding the interior

element. Restaurant operators and managers need to elevate their in-store cleanliness effort. It is rational to expect all of the other required measures, such as cleaning surfaces, door handles, chairs, and tabletops at regular base, preventing the spread of the coronavirus. Hence, their customers perceived higher health safety through cleanliness [91], affecting their satisfaction and loyalty.

Moreover, staff professionalism was evaluated as the most important factor in the restaurants' customer service. Operators need to understand that employees enhance their customers' experience, and staff should be continuously trained and encouraged to provide excellent service to their customers. Finally, the food quality evaluation reveals that consumers are seeking a local and authentic food experience that is in line with previous literature [66]. The foodservice industry is recognized to have a high negative environmental impact. Some of the reasons are the transportation needs due to the availability demand of the raw material and extensive use of cultivation and conservation pesticides. Research has shown that restaurants could lower their raw material operational costs through the transport expense limitation and increase the price that the customers are willing to pay when using local ingredients [7]. Hence, authentic food is widely recognized that influences customer satisfaction and loyalty [69] while strengthening the destination's food image [66]. Thus, it is proposed for restaurant operators and chefs to prefer local qualitative producers for their purchases in response to the customers' "new" demands. It is also recommended that traditional recipes and technics should be used in preserving the "authentic taste" of each destination. Meanwhile, innovative approaches in food cultivation, preparation, and service could be adopted on new reality, so the served food is further improved.

Second, the analysis of customer evaluation of the sustainable producers followed by the restaurant was interesting. The present study suggests that an environmental mindful should be integrated into the corporate identity and in restaurants' staff training programs that are based on those factors. For example, for Environmental Practices, restaurants should implement appropriate procedures to reduce food waste while increasing recycling. For instance, as proposed by Trafialek et al. [38], a way for reducing food waste could be to encourage customers to take their restaurant leftovers home for future consumption. The suggestions are endless. Furthermore, regarding the Food locality and Seasonality, restaurants should use local and seasonal raw materials, which influence customers' perceived food quality, as mentioned before, but also reinforce their sense of security through local producer specificity and traceability, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, additional future research is needed on those factors, so the best operational practices will be developed to enhance customers' satisfaction and loyalty.

Finally, from the customers' perspective, a significant relationship between the restaurants' sustainable procedures and the destinations' food branding was found. In a difficult period, as the period of restarting the tourism economy after the first wave of the COVID-19, food and food experiences can be used as an effective tool for attracting tourists [52]. The present study provides useful insights that can be used by restaurateurs, tourism experts (DMO), and the local government to promote the destination's food image. For example, proven restaurant sustainable practices can be used to elevate customer trust and intentions to visit the destination, because their very existence operates as another level of quality and health assurance. Consequently, it is recommended that the use and the encouragement of such green practices through incentives (e.g. tax deduction grands and recognition) and the implementation of effective sustainability operational standards could be developed that could award restaurants that adopt and implement sustainable policies. Eventually, restaurants should be "encouraged" by the government and the public to use local and seasonal produce to increase destinations' perceived food quality and attractiveness while promoting the sense of safety, especially if the destination has successfully handled the COVID-19 pandemic, as in the case of Greece, where local produced food is considered as at least potentially contaminated.

6. Conclusions

Living in the "new normal" era that has been caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the present study aims to examine the factors affecting the perceived quality of restaurants from the customer perspective with conclusive implications regarding destination branding. The present study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we argue that cleanliness, as for the interior elements, staff professionalism for service quality, and local and authentic food for food quality, are the most important factors in overall perceived restaurant quality. Second, in the context of restaurants sustainable procedures, the study reveals four factors, named as "Environmental Practices", "Sustainability Mindfulness", "Environmental Friendliness", and "Food Locality and Seasonality". Third, a significant relationship between two factors (Sustainability Mindfulness and Food locality and Seasonality) and City Food Branding were found.

With a second wave of the COVID-19 worldwide and travel restrictions remaining in many countries, future research could focus on the customers' perspective on restaurant quality in combination with safety and security issues. The revealed sustainable factors could also be examined related to other factors, such as customer satisfaction, future intentions, and destination loyalty. Initially, restaurant operators and manager perspectives should be examined to understand the difficulties that are met in their efforts to adopt sustainable procedures and gain customers' trust.

Finally, the present study has several limitations despite contributing to the knowledge regarding the role of restaurant quality and the effects of the sustainable procedures on the destination's food image. The study was focused on a major city, and larger scale research using representative sampling around Greece is recommended so the results could generalize. Additionally, the sample size is small but adequate for the type of analysis undertaken. It was the fear related to the spread of coronavirus and all of the necessary social distancing measures that made it challenging to approach a larger number of participants in the research.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Item Code—Reference.

Variable	Item Code	Corresponding Variable-Question of the Study	Reference
Interior Elements	Bx1	Location	[33,38]
	Bx2	Open hours	[33,38]
	Bx3	Interior decorations	[34,41,42,92]
	Bx4	Cleanliness	[42,43]
Customer Service	Bx5	The way of welcoming and say goodbye to clients	[35,37,38,44]
	Bx6	Effective service	[35,37,38,44]
	Bx7	Staff professionalism	[35,38,44]
	Bx8	Staff effective communication skills	[38,44]
	Bx9	Knowledge of service about & wine (including its relationship to destination)	[36,38,44,93]

Table A1. *Cont.*

Variable	Item Code	Corresponding Variable-Question of the Study	Reference
Food Quality	Bx10	Created by celebrity chef or skillful personnel	[33,38]
	Bx11	Price: Value for money	[38,46]
	Bx12	Familiar taste to me	[94]
	Bx13	Local and authentic cuisine representative of destination	[37,38,45,94]
	Bx14	Large size portions	[37]
	Bx15	Satisfactory variety of meals (including vegetarian, allergic free and children choices)	[37]
Sustainability Approach	Bx16	Emphasis on local ingredients	[7,38]
	Bx17	Emphasis on seasonal produce (seasonal menu)	[7,38]
	Bx18	No highly processed products	[7,38]
	Bx19	Use fresh produce instead of frozen	[7,33,38]
	Bx20	Using BIO products on menu	[7,38]
	Bx21	Practicing recycling for employees and customers minimizing food waste	[7,38]
	Bx22	Using renewable energy	[7,38]
	Bx23	Using reusable cutlery-dishes	[7,38]
	Bx24	Environment friendly certifications	[7,38]
	Bx25	Practicing responsible sourcing policy	[7,38]
	Bx26	Plastic free	[7,38]
	Bx27	Restaurant has its own garden	[36,37]
	Bx28	Restaurant filters water serving in reusable bottles (no one time use plastic or glass bottles)	[7,38]
	Bx29	Use of electronic menus (tablets) instead of paper menus for more info and 0 waste	[95,96]
	Bx30	I am willing to pay more for sustainable practices and food	[38,46]
	Bx31	A restaurant improves overall quality & reputation by using sustainable/green practices	[97]
	Bx32	I trust a restaurant using proven sustainable methods more than one that does not	[38,48]
Food and City Branding	Bx33	Food and gastronomy affect the image of a city	[52]
	Bx34	Food is an important way to communicate the key characteristics of a city to its visitors	[52]
	Bx35	Food and gastronomy help me feel and understand a destination better	[52]
	Bx36	Food and gastronomy influence my decision to visit a destination	[52]
	Bx37	Food and gastronomy can make me revisit a destination	[38,42]

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