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# Community Branding and Participatory Governance: A Glocal Strategy for Heritage Enhancement

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**Abstract:** Cultural heritage plays a crucial role in strengthening local identity and fostering socio-economic development. However, its effective enhancement requires an inclusive decision-making process capable of integrating the diverse perspectives of stakeholders. This study introduces an innovative participatory governance model applied to the case of Taverna, Calabria. This study adopted a methodological framework grounded in co-design and co-evaluation, and the research examined the impacts and opportunities associated with a collaborative management process for cultural heritage. The proposed framework consists of five key phases: defining a strategic vision, analyzing the territorial context, co-designing enhancement strategies, implementing actions, and monitoring their impact. The findings highlight the effectiveness of this approach in shaping strategies grounded in local identity, inclusive community engagement, and long-term sustainability. The experience of Taverna's collaborative decision-making project demonstrates that an inclusive governance process can generate tangible benefits in terms of social innovation, economic growth, and heritage conservation.

**Keywords:** community branding; cultural heritage; participatory governance; place branding; sustainable development; territorial enhancement; co-design; co-evaluate; urban regeneration; territorial identity; multi-criteria evaluation

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## 1. Introduction

The valorization of cultural heritage has become central within European policy frameworks and academic discourse, increasingly recognized as a shared resource that reinforces collective identity and promotes social cohesion [1,2].

In this framework, cultural interactions offer a crucial lens to explore how tangible and intangible heritage affect individual well-being and strengthen community bonds [3,4]. These dynamics are tightly linked to the principles of social sustainability, aimed at fostering inclusive, human-centered development models [5]. Nonetheless, globalization introduces disruptive trends—such as gentrification, displacement, and cultural homogenization—that threaten the integrity and inclusivity of historic urban environments [6]. These trends frequently neglect local identities and overlook the need for integrated territorial policies grounded in intercultural dialogue and socio-economic specificities [6]. As a response, new urban paradigms emphasize culture, creativity, and social capital as pivotal levers for inclusive and sustainable regeneration [7–12].

Contemporary urban regeneration requires approaches that integrate intangible heritage, hybrid connectivity, and 'glocal' visions tailored to local assets [13–15]. This shift is accompanied by the rise of collaborative, knowledge-based economies, which challenge traditional growth models and encourage distributed, innovation-driven frameworks [15,16].

These transformations necessitate a flexible and transdisciplinary reconfiguration of the economy–society–territory nexus, emphasizing integrated strategies and participatory mechanisms as alternatives to compartmentalized technical approaches. Multimethodological frameworks are thus required, capable of engaging diverse stakeholders through co-design, collective visioning, and shared decision-making processes [17]. Cultural heritage evolves from a static object of preservation to an active driver of innovation, capable of stimulating new forms of citizenship and territorial governance [18]. Local specificities—material and immaterial—can thus become strategic assets for territorial branding, enhancing not only touristic and economic appeal but also talent retention and community resilience. This value creation relies on the synergy between endogenous initiatives and structured strategies, supported by hybrid, transdisciplinary tools [18,19].

This marks a shift toward holistic approaches, embedding cultural heritage within broader frameworks of territorial resilience and inclusive development [20,21]. Within this evolving framework, the present study introduces an original multi-methodological model that combines community branding and participatory planning to support the regeneration of small historic towns and marginal areas.

Its innovation lies in the integration of identity-based strategies with inclusive governance models, offering co-created tools to tackle the challenges of underrepresented territories.

As in business innovation, urban regeneration can emerge through new socio-spatial configurations, alternative governance models, and experimental practices of local promotion. From this perspective, the synergy between identity, territory, and community becomes a trigger for creative practices that enhance local distinctiveness while engaging with global networks [20].

The present contribution aims to advance the international discourse on place branding and cultural heritage by grounding theoretical insights in an empirical field experiment. It contributes to ongoing debates on co-creation, community agency, and glocal innovation, with a specific focus on small towns in Southern Europe.

In the contemporary economy, symbolic production—flexibility, branding, innovation—has become central to urban strategies and has emerged as a symbolic infrastructure of the knowledge economy, embodying shared identity narratives and territorial distinctiveness [21].

Territorial branding offers a strategic framework that fuses commercial, cultural, and civic dimensions in the representation and regeneration of places [22]. Across Europe, cities have embraced branding to reposition themselves globally, experimenting with identity-driven regeneration models [22,23].

Experiences from cities like Rotterdam, Hamburg, Turin, and Barcelona demonstrate how cultural heritage can be enhanced through projects focused on knowledge, culture, and innovation, including through the use of digital technologies and collaborative networks. However, this strategic use of branding remains underexplored in small towns and peripheral areas, which often lack the critical mass, visibility, and institutional capacity to activate such processes [24–26].

In these contexts, branding must go beyond mere marketing, becoming a tool for social innovation and collective empowerment, grounded in the real needs, identities, and aspirations of local communities [20–22].

Against this backdrop, the research presented here addresses the following overarching question: how can a creative and collaborative decision-making process be built to enhance cultural heritage, integrating place branding theories and participatory planning approaches?

To answer this question, the research sets three main objectives: (1) to define a multi-methodological model suitable for local contexts; (2) to test its effectiveness in an Italian historic center through a co-participatory process involving heterogeneous community actors; (3) to identify key outcomes and potential challenges for replicating the approach in similar contexts.

This paper presents a case study conducted in the historic center of Taverna, located in the 'Presila Catanzarese' area of Calabria (Southern Italy), which served as a pilot site for testing a community-based branding model integrated into a broader framework of participatory planning [25,26].

Taverna was chosen as a testing ground for the proposed model due to its emblematic representation of the challenges affecting many inner areas of Southern Italy—including depopulation, socio-economic marginalization, and the underuse of cultural heritage—while also offering concrete opportunities for regeneration. The presence of significant artistic and natural assets, an active civic network, and the implementation of the Integrated Project "Taverna Borgo delle Arti e delle Conoscenze"—funded by the Italian Ministry of Culture—made this context particularly suitable for testing an integrated approach based on participation, identity valorization, and collaborative planning.

Similar to other historic centers that have turned marginality into a resource by leveraging culture as a strategic and symbolic asset [25], the case of Taverna offers valuable insights into place-based regeneration processes. A visual analysis of the initiatives undertaken [26] extended beyond cultural infrastructure enhancement, positioning the town as a true social and cultural laboratory, fostering a multi-level dialogue between institutions, civic networks, and European urban contexts on the future of cultural policies [19,27].

This context also raised several key research questions: which cultural values can be activated from the territory? Who are the key actors, and what roles do they play in the valorization processes? Which methodological tools are most suitable to support evaluation, monitoring, and action?

An influential example is that proposed by Moilanen and Rainisto, who articulate the process into five main phases: (a) initiation and organization, (b) research, (c) identity definition, (d) strategic planning, and (e) implementation and follow-up [27]. Kavaratzis [28] emphasizes instead the importance of the participatory construction of the vision, from which actions related to the landscape, infrastructure, and economic development derive [28]. Hanna and Rowley [29] also propose an integrated reading of the various elements that constitute place branding and their interactions.

Building on these reflections, the framework adopted for our study is that of Govers and Go (2009), selected also for its openness to co-design and co-evaluation from the early stages. This model—also present in the knowledge-sharing platform "Place Brand Observer"—consists of the following steps [13,30]: (1) definition of objectives (vision, mission, goals); (2) analysis of the current brand (identity and perceived image); (3) design of the brand essence; (4) implementation of the new branding strategy; (5) continuous monitoring of the territorial brand.

Since the focus of the research is on the construction of a collaborative decision-making process for the valorization of cultural heritage, the theme of evaluation plays a central role. In the literature, three main approaches to measuring place brand have been identified [13]: a qualitative one, based on user-centered methodologies [27,28]; a quantitative one, based on standardized questionnaires [31]; and a mixed one, which includes tools such as network analysis [28], multidimensional scaling [32], laddering [33,34], conceptual maps [35,36], or the use of the Balanced Scorecard as a performance monitoring system [37].

Further indicators and models for measuring the image of cultural heritage have been developed internationally, such as the Country Brand Index, the Anholt GfK Roper

Nation Brand Index, the City Brand Index [38], and the Cultural Heritage Image Index (CHEI) [39,40].

Based on this analytical framework, the research team and local stakeholders jointly selected appropriate tools for each phase, aligning them with a collaborative urban planning approach [19,41]. The model was tested in the town of Taverna (Catanzaro, Italy), where a multi-actor and iterative process was activated to connect heritage enhancement with local development strategies.

The implementation of the research involved the use of QGIS software for the spatial representation of tangible and intangible heritage elements, while collaborative workshops with local stakeholders provided inputs for the mapping and branding process. The integration of qualitative data and spatial tools allowed for a comprehensive interpretation of the socio-cultural and environmental values of the study area.

The document is organized as follows. The methodological approach and case context are detailed in Section 2. Section 3 presents the results of the model's implementation, highlighting the strategies and actions selected for the enhancement of the local cultural heritage. Section 4 discusses the implications of the study and offers conclusions and suggestions for future research and applications of the model in other territorial contexts.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### *2.1. Methodological Approach and the Community Branding Process*

The methodological approach adopted in this research combines qualitative and quantitative techniques within a participatory action research framework.

The framework is cyclical and adaptive, enabling continuous feedback loops that integrate evolving community perspectives and emergent findings across different phases.

The research was conducted across several iterative phases from 2018 and 2024, each characterized by specific objectives and associated methodological tools. The principal methods encompassed participatory storytelling, the Delphi method, World Café workshops, the Business Model Canvas, and multi-criteria evaluation via PROMETHEE and DMCE. Empirical data were collected through direct observation, structured surveys administered through SurveyMonkey, and extensive stakeholder engagement sessions. Specific software tools were utilized to support data processing, spatial visualization, and comparative evaluation scenario analyses. Detailed descriptions of these methodological steps and their roles are provided in the corresponding results sections.

### *2.2. Participatory and Analytical Methods*

The participatory process to construct a shared territorial identity involved active interaction between economic actors and the local community, aiming to enhance project value and ensure sustainability. This integrative approach transcends traditional urban and social development frameworks by combining territorial valorization with management and marketing strategies [16–18,22,42]. It emphasizes a balance between conservation and innovation through synergies among place branding, relational marketing, and economic valorization tools such as resource-based theory and value chain analysis. Innovation and knowledge production are central, fostering connections across places, organizations, and individuals.

### *2.3. Classification of Methods and Tools*

Within this framework, the methods and tools are categorized as follows:

- Participatory qualitative methods:

- Storytelling and Walk About approaches capture experiential and intangible cultural values by engaging community members in narrative sharing and direct observation [43,44].
- The Delphi method (administered via SurveyMonkey) structures consensus-building among experts and stakeholders, notably used in Step 2 for identity and priority setting [45,46].
- World Café workshops facilitate inclusive dialogue and co-design by enabling rotating, thematic discussions among participants [47].

- Quantitative and evaluation tools:
  - PROMETHEE serves as a multi-criteria decision-making method applied in Step 3 to support transparent, participatory evaluation and ranking of alternative regeneration strategies [48].
  - Deliberative Multi-Criteria Evaluation (DMCE) integrates qualitative and quantitative data, facilitating complex impact assessments across economic, social, and cultural dimensions [49].
- Analytical and visualization software:
  - QGIS enables spatial mapping and integration of tangible and intangible heritage data, underpinning place-based analyses and scenario development.
  - SurveyMonkey is employed as a digital platform for administering surveys and collecting structured data, including Delphi rounds.
  - Business Model Canvas supports the strategic design of sustainable community initiatives by outlining value propositions, stakeholder relations, and economic models [50].

### *2.4. Methodological Process*

The methodology operationalizes urban regeneration by integrating community-based strategies, economic valorization, and systemic resource management across physical, human, environmental, and cultural dimensions. Culture, territory, economy, and community are interrelated, with the community itself acting as a key knowledge resource for cultural and urban heritage enhancement. This framework underpins the "Community Branding" model, designed to strengthen collective awareness and local self-organization through a glocal vision that combines physical and digital connectivity to foster synergy between tradition and innovation [12,13,51,52].

Community Branding is articulated as a multidimensional strategy integrating complementary tools and approaches, each contributing to a distinct function within the regeneration process:

- Place branding, for the management of territorial identity and offer;
- Place marketing, to structure demand and enhance territorial visibility;
- Community planning and the involvement of creative industries, to identify new opportunities for cultural production;
- Community Impact Evaluation (CIE) [53], to select valorization strategies and assess their impacts.

This methodological overview anticipates the analytical results by providing a structured understanding of the rationale behind each step, the tools employed, and their role within the overall logic of the process.

Based on this framework, the research was guided by a set of key questions—formulated during early stakeholder engagement sessions—focusing on the identification of cultural values, actor involvement, and effective tools for transformation. These questions directed the selection of methods and tools used throughout the process.

- Which cultural values emerge from the territory, and how can they be identified, recognized, assessed, and valorized?
- Is there an open network linking cultural activities to the surrounding context?
- Who are the actors involved in the regeneration processes?
- Which monitoring and operational tools prove to be most effective?

Drawing inspiration from the experiences of other historic cities—such as Matera—that participated in the candidacy process for the European Capital of Culture and launched new cultural policies and local development strategies focused on the enhancement of cultural heritage, the town of Taverna emerged as a meaningful setting in which to experiment with the community-led co-design of a place branding strategy.

The process, carried out between 2018 and 2024, was structured into five main phases each designed to progressively guide community engagement, from identity recognition to strategic evaluation:

1. Definition of the vision, mission, and strategic objectives (based on community discussion) [42].
2. Exploration of the territory using the "walk about" [43,54] method and assessment of perceived identity through the Delphi method [45,46].
3. Co-design of actions through participatory tools such as the World Café [47], Business Model Canvas [50], and PROMETHEE [48].
4. Financial evaluation and finalization of the "Taverna Sustainable Urban Laboratory" proposal.

Rather than replicating existing place branding models, this approach emphasized the community's agency in shaping its identity and strategic direction.

The methodology is articulated through steps aimed at constructing a renewed territorial offer, starting from the interpretation of collective aspirations and grounded in the relational dynamics between people and places.

In this sense, relationship-building becomes a transformative instrument: it redefines territorial identity; reinterprets local economies; and enables the convergence of different knowledge systems, rooted in local specificity.

The adopted approach is based on an adaptation of the Community Impact Evaluation (CIE) method [53], integrated with concrete field actions aimed at weaving connections among the multiple material and immaterial resources present in the territory. This enables not only a deeper understanding of the local context but also the activation of shared transformation processes.

Specifically, the methodological process is structured by combining the three core phases of the CIE—description, analysis, and evaluation—with the five stages of the place branding process, with the aim of identifying effective tools for both monitoring and the activation of transformative practices. The intersection of these two methodological frameworks makes it possible to construct an integrated vision, capable of linking evaluation, storytelling, and territorial design in a coherent and synergistic way.

Figure 1 summarizes the five steps of the Community Branding process, detailing for each step the objectives, adopted methodologies, and resulting outputs.

The use of stakeholder engagement sessions and brainstorming forums was chosen to foster a horizontal, inclusive dialogue, essential for capturing the plurality of visions and values within the local community. The Delphi method was selected for its capacity to build structured consensus among diverse expert and local perspectives, while the Walk About approach enabled an immersive, experiential analysis of place identity through direct observation. The World Café technique facilitated open, creative dialogue among stakeholders, while the PROMETHEE method was adopted for its robustness in supporting transparent, participatory multi-criteria decision making under uncertainty. The cost–

benefit and feasibility analyses were essential to assess the real-world applicability and financial sustainability of proposed actions, ensuring that community-driven proposals were grounded in economic viability. The combination of CIE and DMCE allowed the integration of both qualitative community feedback and quantitative evaluation metrics, aligning long-term monitoring with the project's participatory and place-based logic.

| Step | Objectives | Methodologies | Outputs |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Step 1<br>Definition of Strategic Objectives | To define the vision, mission, and strategic goals through community involvement and consensus-building. | Stakeholder engagement sessions, brainstorming, strategic discussion forums. | Shared vision and mission; strategic objectives co-defined with the community. |
| Step 2<br>Analysis Place Brand<br>Taverna | To explore the identity, image, and cultural perception of the town through expert and local perspectives. | "Walk about" method, Delphi method, storytelling, surveys. | Identification of perceived and designed images; narrative mapping of local identity. |
| Step 3<br>Co-Designing/Co-Evaluating<br>Taverna Community Hub | To design and assess potential interventions for the regeneration of the area. | World Café, Business Model Canvas, PROMETHEE multi-criteria analysis. | Action proposals for the Creative Community Hub; participatory evaluation. |
| Step 4<br>Financial Analysis<br>Taverna Creative Community Hub | To assess the economic feasibility and sustainability of proposed actions. | Cost–benefit analysis, stakeholder review, feasibility analysis. | Financial plan and sustainability strategy for the proposed hub. |
| Step 5<br>Monitoring and Evaluation<br>Taverna Place Brand | To define indicators and monitoring tools for evaluating long-term impacts. | Community Impact Evaluation (CIE), DMCE, impact assessment matrix. | Evaluation framework and indicators; roadmap for long-term place brand development. |

**Figure 1.** Steps of the community branding process: objectives, tools, and outputs.

Through the application of the phases outlined by the Community Impact Evaluation (CIE), the process employs a transdisciplinary methodological framework that intertwines tools from evaluation, territorial management, and strategic communication. This approach not only allows for an in-depth analysis of project interventions but also enables concrete action on the territory, grounded in direct experience and the active participation of local stakeholders.

The phases are interpreted within a deliberative multi-criteria evaluation framework, Deliberative Multi-Criteria Evaluation (DMCE) [54], which facilitates the comparison of different territorial vocations emerging during the process, exploring their potential and possible evolutionary scenarios. The goal is to construct a shared and transparent evaluation that captures the complexity of project choices through the interaction of expert knowledge, local insights, and community values.

The outlined approach ensured that each tool was not only methodologically appropriate but also contextually grounded within the cultural and spatial specificities of the Taverna case. The process unfolded as an iterative learning cycle, continuously integrating evaluation insights, community feedback, and strategic adjustments.

The approach built upon and complemented existing local initiatives—such as the integrated project "Taverna Borgo delle Arti e delle Conoscenze"—aimed at activating inclusive development processes through cultural-led regeneration.

The case of Taverna shares significant structural and cultural features with other historic towns in Southern Italy that have successfully applied community branding to support urban regeneration—particularly Matera and Pisticci. In Matera, the regeneration process has combined cultural heritage valorization, citizen engagement, and a strong narrative identity, transforming the city from a symbol of backwardness into a European Capital of Culture. Similarly, in Pisticci, community-led strategies have focused on enhancing local resources, fostering participation, and co-constructing a new territorial image to reactivate the historic center. These cases demonstrate how community branding, when grounded

in local identity and inclusive planning, can become a powerful driver of sustainable development and social cohesion in marginal historic towns [55,56].

## 3. Results

The application of the Community Branding methodology to the case study of Taverna unfolded through five interconnected phases, each functioning as a moment of collective deliberation and strategic orientation.

Taverna is a small historic town located in the Presila Catanzarese area of Calabria, Southern Italy. It is renowned for its cultural heritage, particularly as the birthplace of the baroque painter *Mattia Preti*. Despite its historical significance and natural landscape, Taverna has been affected by socio-economic challenges typical of many inner areas in Southern Italy, such as demographic decline, youth outmigration, and the underuse of its cultural and architectural assets. These structural conditions made it an emblematic case for testing an integrated approach to regeneration, combining cultural heritage valorization with participatory planning and place branding. The specificity of this context shaped both the methodological choices and the strategic priorities identified throughout the project.

Rather than following a linear path, the process evolved through iterative interactions between stakeholders, shaping a shared framework for cultural heritage enhancement. The results offer empirical validation of the research objectives, demonstrating that the integration of place branding theories with participatory planning and evaluation practices can lead to an inclusive, context-sensitive strategy for regeneration. This co-constructed approach provides a transferable model that may be adapted to other historic and marginal territories [13,19,44,57].

### *3.1. Step 1: Definition of Strategic Objectives*

The first phase focused on building a common strategic vision based on the recognition of Taverna's physical, cultural, and human assets. Drawing from collaborative workshops and context analysis, the town emerged as a site where traditions, landscapes, and social values intersect in ways that are both distinctive and generative. These insights guided the formulation of a shared identity for Taverna as the "Village of Arts and Knowledge", where heritage and innovation are not opposing forces but complementary dimensions of a sustainable local future [25,44,58].

Co-developed with local stakeholders, the mission emphasized the need to protect and enhance the territory's specificities through actions that are both inclusive and development oriented. Strategic objectives were therefore articulated to address several key priorities: improving the governance of human and environmental resources, preserving the historical urban fabric, fostering community-led initiatives that reinforce local identity, and cultivating opportunities for international dialogue on territorial challenges and prospects [19,42,59].

Taverna's characteristics—such as its limited scale, cohesive micro-communities, and strong artisanal and agrarian traditions—proved particularly conducive to experimentation. These attributes enabled the activation of innovative practices in territorial branding and participatory governance. In this light, Taverna may be regarded as a prototype for sustainable regeneration, capable of inspiring similar processes in other peripheral and culturally rich contexts [24,52,53].

### *3.2. Step 2: Analysis of the Current Place Brand of Taverna: Identity and Perceived and Designed Image*

Located in the heart of Calabria, Taverna presents a compelling case of a historic village rich in cultural and artistic heritage. The Place Branding process aimed to explore

the intersection between internal identity and external perception, while constructing a strategic image capable of mobilizing the area's cultural and social capital [13,19,22].

Despite its valuable assets, the town suffers from structural limitations such as demographic decline, infrastructure gaps, and fragmented governance, which have so far prevented the development of a coherent territorial identity [24,25,59]. However, Taverna's heritage—particularly, the legacy of Mattia Preti—and its community vitality offer a strong foundation for a renewed and participatory regeneration model [52,58].

The methodology adopted combined qualitative and quantitative tools to investigate the existing place identity and support the co-creation of a shared brand. On the qualitative side, urban storytelling workshops were organized with local inhabitants and associations to gather narratives, symbolic places, and shared memories. This participatory process led to the identification of five thematic vocations (V), which represent the multidimensional identity of Taverna:

- V1: Sacred and profane: spirituality and rituality, linked to religious architecture and devotional practices;
- V2: Culture and traditions: artistic heritage, local history, and intangible knowledge;
- V3: Landscape and biodiversity: the relationship with the natural environment, biodiversity, and sustainable tourism;
- V4: Hospitality and resilient: community cohesion, everyday life, and social inclusion practices;
- V5: Craftsmanship and creative density: artisan skills, contemporary reinterpretation, and cultural innovation.

These vocations emerged as interpretive clusters through dialogical and iterative processes involving different actors.

In parallel, a Delphi survey was conducted with 110 participants—residents, professionals, and external stakeholders—via both online tools (SurveyMonkey) and printed formats, to explore perceptions and future visions for the town. Responses were analyzed through word frequency mapping and tag cloud visualizations, highlighting shared imaginaries and emotional geographies. The integration of digital tools supported transparency and inclusivity, strengthening the link between community knowledge and strategic branding.

The cross-analysis of qualitative narratives and quantitative data allowed for the construction of a triangulated identity framework, articulated across three dimensions:

- the internal identity, rooted in memory, values, and place-based heritage;
- the perceived image, shaped by the feelings of openness, authenticity, and welcome;
- the designed image, oriented toward immersive, participatory, and creative experiences.

These findings provided the conceptual basis for the subsequent brand design phase, oriented towards enhancing the town's cultural distinctiveness and regenerative potential.

### *3.3. Step 3: Co-Designing and Co-Evaluating the Taverna Community Hub*

The third phase of the project focused on co-designing and co-evaluating a shared territorial strategy, which led to the conceptualization of the "Taverna Community Hub". This hub was conceptualized not merely as a physical infrastructure, but as a generative platform integrating cultural identity, community participation, and territorial innovation. Its development marked a transition from participatory visioning to the operationalization of regeneration pathways aligned with Taverna's social, spatial, and economic dimensions.

An essential aspect of this phase was the realistic assessment of the resources required to support the proposed strategies. Resources—including financial, human, and institutional—were mapped and discussed with stakeholders during collaborative workshops. Each proposed action was examined for its viability, considering availability over

time, stakeholder commitment, and operational feasibility. This process led to the selection of interventions that were not only innovative but also actionable with the current capacities of the community. Furthermore, existing initiatives and partnerships were evaluated as potential leverage points for implementation, ensuring that proposals were embedded in the local socio-economic fabric.

A crucial starting point was the mapping of local stakeholders and community needs. This process revealed a diverse and fragmented network of actors—ranging from cultural and tourism operators to public institutions, research bodies, artisans, families, and visitors—each contributing a unique perspective to the territorial fabric. These actors were engaged through a series of participatory workshops, where their knowledge and expectations informed the identification of shared priorities and strategic directions.

To guide this collaborative design process, two complementary tools were employed: the World Café methodology and the Business Model Canvas. The World Café facilitated inclusive dialogue in a non-hierarchical setting, where participants engaged in iterative thematic rotations, progressively refining collective inputs [47]. This method promoted the emergence of shared narratives, while reinforcing collective agency in the planning process. The Business Model Canvas [50], adapted for territorial contexts, served as a framework to articulate value creation, stakeholder relationships, and potential revenue models. Its visual layout helped clarify complex issues such as economic sustainability and social impact, making them more accessible to all participants.

Working groups were organized around three central themes: governance, community services, and economic viability. Participants were encouraged to adopt a holistic perspective on the interplay between cultural heritage, innovation, and inclusive growth. This dialogic environment supported the development of a cohesive vision, positioning the Taverna Community Hub as a living laboratory for sustainable development.

The outcomes of this co-design phase were consolidated into four thematic pillars: enhancement of tangible and intangible heritage; development of a digital platform for community interaction; creation of services for residents and visitors; and experimentation with co-governance models through formalized multi-actor agreements [60]. These pillars are summarized and operationalized in Table 1, which presents the Alternative Vocations Evaluation Matrix developed during the participatory process.

**Table 1.** Alternative Vocations Evaluation Matrix.

| **Experiential Variables** | **Strategic Vision** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | V1<br>Sacred and Profane | V2<br>Culture and Traditions | V3<br>Landscape and Biodiversity | V4<br>Hospitality and Resilient Community | V5<br>Artisan and Creative Density |
| A. Heritage enhancement | A.1 Restoration of rural churches and chapels | A.3 Mattia Preti—Civic Museum | A.6 Ecological Network and Biodiversity Gardens | A.8 Diffused Community Museum of Hospitality | A.10 Reactivation of Historic Artisan Workshops |
| | A.2 Narrative paths between the sacred and the profane | A.4 Mattia Preti—Gironda Palace | A.7 Project 'Cultivated Landscapes' | A.9 Center for Slow and Solidarity Tourism | A.11 Rural Creativity Hub |
| | | A.5 City of Sciences—Fata | | | |
| B. Digital platform | B.1 App for Interactive Spiritual Itineraries | B.3 Intangible Accessibility of Itineraries | B.7 Digital Map of the Ecological Network and Native Species | B.9 Hospitable Community Portal (events, hospitality, exchanges) | B.11 Online Hub for Local Craftsmanship and Maker Storytelling |
| | B.2 Digital Archive of Local Rituals and Symbols | B.4 Touristic Signage | B.8 Information System for Participatory Environmental Management | B.10 Experiential Tourism Platform | B.12 Digital Catalog of Local Productions |

**Table 1.** *Cont.*

| **Experiential Variables** | **Strategic Vision** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C. Services for residents and temporary visitors | C.1 Meditation Spaces<br>C.2 Equipped Pilgrims' rest area | B.5 Cultural Initiatives<br>B.6 Cultural Lab<br>C1. Pesaca–Torrazzo path<br>C2. Taverna Vecchia path<br>C3. St. Sebastian square<br>C4. Natuzza Evolo square | C.5 Services for Sustainable Hiking<br>C.6 Network of Community Gardens | C.7 Community Hostels in Disused Buildings<br>C.8 Shared Soft Mobility Services | C.9 Rural 'Fab Lab'—Shared workshops<br>C.10 Artist and Artisan Residencies |
| D. Co-governance models | D.1 Permanent Table for Sacred/Secular Dialogue<br>D.2 Civic Pacts for the care of Religious Heritage | D.3 Energy Saving and Cultural Innovation | D.4 Consortia for the Management of Green Spaces and paths<br>D.5 Forum for the Management of Energy from Renewable Sources | D.6 Village Assemblies and Local Solidarity Networks<br>D.7 Active Citizenship Regulations for Hospitality | D.8 Creative Community Cooperative (Craftsmanship, Design, Events)<br>D.9 Pact for Social Innovation and Artisan Training |

To assess the feasibility and community relevance of the proposed actions, a comprehensive evaluation framework was introduced. This included a set of macro-criteria (Hardware, Software, Orgware, Virtual Ware) and impact dimensions/criteria (economic, social, and cultural), which guided the formulation of sectoral objectives and enabled the measurement of both direct and indirect impacts across different community groups [61,62]. These dimensions are presented in Table 2, which offers a multidimensional impact matrix linking community goals with the experiential variables identified throughout the process.

The PROMETHEE method [48] was applied to support the co-evaluation process. This multi-criteria decision analysis tool enabled a structured comparison of alternative territorial vocations based on preference indices assigned collectively. Through its deliberative application, stakeholders were able to assess the potential of each scenario and converge toward the most promising trajectories for sustainable regeneration.

Among the identified alternatives, the vocation focused on the enhancement of culture and traditions emerged as the most coherent and impactful. It aligned strongly with community values, reinforced local identity, and offered clear opportunities for economic and social revitalization. This strategic orientation also reflected broader European frameworks that promote heritage as a lever for innovation and community resilience [24].

The conclusion of this phase marked a key milestone: the formalization of a territorial brand identity, "Taverna, Village of Arts and Knowledge", and the validation of a set of co-designed actions. Through the synthesis of participatory planning and multi-criteria evaluation, the Taverna Community Hub became a transformative platform bridging heritage, innovation, and civic agency.

**Table 2.** Impact matrix by sectoral objectives (excerpt enhancement of tangible and intangible heritage).

| Experiential Variables | Sectoral Objectives | Community Sectors | Hardware | | | Software | | | Orgware | | | Virtual Ware | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | E | S | C | E | S | C | E | S | C | E | S | C |
| Tangible and Intangible Heritage | Safeguard the heritage | Public Institutions | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Associations | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Schools and Universities | | | DC | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Enterprises and Artisans | IE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Young People and Families | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Tourists | | | IC | | | | | | | | | |
| | Increase the value of existing landmarks | Public Institutions | IE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Associations | IE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Enterprises and Artisans | IE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Young People and Families | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Tourists | | | DC | | | | | | | | | |
| | Increase the employment rate | Associations | | DS | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Enterprises and Artisans | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Young People and Families | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Increase the number of retail businesses | Young People and Families | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Enterprises and Artisans | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Tourists | | IS | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Raise the average income level (IRPEF) | Young People and Families | | | | | | | DE | | | | | |
| | Increase the number of enterprises | Enterprises and Artisans | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Public Institutions | IE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Raise the average property value | Young People and Families | DE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Public Institutions | IE | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Increase funding amounts from crowdfunding initiatives | Associations | | | | | | | DE | | | | | |
| | | Public Institutions | | | | | | | | DS | | | | |
| | | Young People and Families | | | | | | | | DS | | | | |
| | | Tourists | | | | | | | | IS | | | | |

DE—direct economic; DS—direct social; DC—direct cultural; IE—indirect economic; IS—indirect social; IC—indirect cultural.

### *3.4. Step 4: Financial Analysis of the Taverna Creative Community Hub*

Based on the selected vocation and the main funding sources for cultural and creative enterprises (as outlined in publications such as "Torino Creativa. I centri indipendenti culturali sul territorio torinese" and the report "L'Italia che crea, crea valore. 2° studio sull'Industria della Cultura e della Creatività"), the revenue streams of the Taverna Creative Community Hub were identified. These include self-financing, fundraising, collaborative platform, ticketing, service provision, and private investment.

Each stream was evaluated not only for potential profitability but also for the level of investment, risk, and institutional readiness required. This approach helped ensure that the financial model was grounded in the actual capacity of the local actors to implement and sustain the initiative. The integration of feasibility assessments into financial projections allowed stakeholders to validate assumptions and align expectations with realistic operational conditions.

The financial analysis estimated a total investment of EUR 7,497,821.00. Annual net revenue was projected based on expected income and associated costs. Long-term projections (20 years) estimate an initial annual net revenue of approximately EUR 500,000, with an average annual growth rate of 5%, driven by the expansion of services, cultural programming, and the consolidation of revenue channels. The projected Internal Rate

of Return (IRR) over the full period is 13.60%, indicating a strong economic return that significantly outweighs initial investments, thereby confirming the financial sustainability of the project.

This analysis also enabled the identification of potential coalitions and underlined the efficiency of the cost–revenue configuration for the PLUS hub. Furthermore, the stakeholder map helped to identify both tensions and opportunities, paving the way for the creation of urban contracts capable of reconciling divergent interests and fostering strategic alliances.

In summary, the economic analysis confirms that the PLUS hub not only promises an attractive financial return over a 20-year period, with revenues far exceeding the initial investments, but also generates positive social outcomes—particularly through the alignment of interests among stakeholders involved in the proposed urban contract for **Vocation 2**, centered on the enhancement of culture and traditions.

### *3.5. Step 5: Monitoring and Evaluation of the Taverna Place Brand*

To support the monitoring and evaluation of the final place brand of Taverna, a dedicated mind map was developed for the cultural and tourism hub. This map serves as a strategic agenda, organizing the actions proposed across the various projects within the local heritage enhancement plan.

Although this tool has not yet been implemented by the Taverna community, it is expected to be adopted as soon as the planned actions and interventions are completed. Its implementation will represent a critical step toward establishing an integrated monitoring system, capable of tracking the long-term evolution and impact of the project.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study presents a community branding model as an alternative, participatory approach to cultural heritage valorization in marginal contexts. The model was developed and applied over a four-year period (2018–2024) in the historic town of Taverna, Southern Italy, through a five-phase methodological framework that integrates co-design, co-evaluation, and multi-criteria assessment. The findings provide meaningful insights into early-stage community engagement and branding processes; however, they do not encompass the medium- and long-term transformations that such interventions typically require. Further research should include longitudinal monitoring and impact evaluation to determine the effectiveness, resilience, and adaptability of the proposed model over time.

The Community Branding model was implemented through a structured five-step process: (1) definition of strategic objectives; (2) analysis of the current place brand (identity, perceived and designed image); (3) co-design and co-evaluation of the community hub; (4) financial analysis; and (5) monitoring and evaluation of the brand. Each step produced specific outputs—strategic guidelines, shared narratives, spatial regeneration concepts, economic feasibility plans, and impact indicators—contributing incrementally to a systemic and participatory regeneration model. This structure not only demonstrates methodological coherence but also offers a potentially replicable model for similar contexts characterized by marginalization and cultural richness.

The integration of urban planning, cultural economics, and collaborative governance highlights the central role of local actors in fostering identity, sustainability, and territorial attractiveness—especially in underrepresented areas [22,63]. The Taverna case provides empirical evidence that intangible resources—such as collective memory and local knowledge—can serve as strategic levers for identity-based regeneration and branding. However, the specificity of this context may limit the generalizability of the results [13,28].

The model combines conventional urban tools with participatory innovations (e.g., co-designing, co-evaluation, deliberative MCDA), revealing synergies between physical

regeneration, cultural narrative construction, and inclusive governance [44,48,64]. The integration of physical and digital interactions reflects the ongoing evolution in urban regeneration strategies that prioritize inclusivity and sustainability [7,20].

The conceptual framework draws on the interrelation between creativity, cultural entrepreneurship, and territorial capital [7,8,11,65], underlining how branding processes can also generate new social contracts and governance paradigms [11,17,22]. As a whole, the community branding process emerges as dynamic, multi-stakeholder framework for local development, fostering synergies across planning, evaluation, and place identity construction [21,65]. The five-phase cycle enables continuous refinement through feedback loops and negotiated decision-making.

The methodological apparatus—rooted in experiential mapping, deliberative MCDA, and qualitative co-design tools—proved effective in translating local narratives and perceptions into shared strategies. Nonetheless, further validation across diverse contexts is necessary to assess scalability [45,46,59,66,67].

Despite its success in mobilizing civic engagement, the Taverna initiative encountered critical structural constraints—such as demographic decline, limited infrastructures, and funding gaps—highlighting the necessity of multi-level institutional support [22,53].

Additionally, brand ownership and trust-building require continuous community commitment and long-term cultural infrastructure development.

Given the single-case design, the study's transferability to other territorial settings must be approached cautiously. The socio-cultural specificity of Taverna, while illustrative, limits broad generalization. Further comparative studies are needed to test the robustness of this approach in varied geographical and socio-cultural contexts.

Future investigations should test the scalability of the model in urban or fragmented territories and examine how digital co-design tools and hybrid governance mechanisms can support replication [64,68]. Moreover, integrating cultural branding with environmental sustainability and climate resilience remains an open and promising research frontier [2,41,64].

In conclusion, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on culture-led regeneration by proposing a community branding model that integrates conservation with innovation. Although based on a single case and limited in time, the model highlights the strategic potential of local knowledge, participatory planning, and cultural entrepreneurship in fostering inclusive and place-based development. As demonstrated by the Taverna case study, such an approach can reinforce place identity and stimulate social innovation [63,69,70], in line with the principles of the Faro Convention [71]. In future studies, long-term evaluation and monitoring activities will certainly be planned to better understand the sustainability, adaptability, and long-term impact of the community branding process [72].

This study is based on a single case study—Taverna, a small town in Southern Italy—which offers a rich but context-specific foundation for the development and application of the Community Branding model. While the findings provide valuable empirical insights, the singular nature of the case limits the generalizability of the results. The model may be transferable to other marginal or peripheral contexts with similar socio-economic dynamics, including demographic decline, underutilized cultural assets, and strong civic identity. However, its application in more urbanized or fragmented settings would require significant adaptations.

The participatory methods employed rely heavily on the presence of an active and cohesive local community; therefore, replication in areas with weaker social capital or institutional instability may face constraints in terms of engagement and continuity. Future research should include comparative multi-case studies to validate and refine the model

across different cultural and territorial contexts, as well as longitudinal studies to monitor its medium- and long-term effects.

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