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Place Branding through Resource Integration and Gastro-Cultural Experiences: A Transnational Perspective

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Abstract: Place branding often builds upon gastro-cultural features. Yet, the convergence point between gastro-cultural place identity and the experience on offer could (and should) further benefit from contemporary studies in emerging fields, such as value co-creation and the identity-based approach to place branding. This study contributes towards this direction by examining the practices of relevant actors with main place branding authority. Drawing from their online information and presence, a thematic analysis of relevant brands in Greece and Turkey illustrates that operand and operant resource integration reflect the synergies developed between the gastronomic culture *in*, *for*, *of* the place. Further, actors' intention to co-create the brand influences *and* is influenced by the brand. Theoretical and practical insights are derived from this study, which may direct future research and inform policymakers about sustainable, inclusive approaches.

Keywords: food tourism; gastronomic experiences; place identity; destination branding; culture

1. Introduction

Given the characteristics of place identity [1], the role of gastronomy for place identity emerges as conceptually relevant [2,3]: Food is a symbol, an indicator of social connectedness, a socio-economic differentiator, and an umbrella for geographical or social belonging [4]. The integration of gastronomy into the place branding initiative is prioritized especially in rural areas which are striving to compete with their urban counterparts, by polishing their own distinctive identity and integrating it into their proposition for visitors and residents alike [3,5,6]. Gastronomic tourism builds on the premise that specific areas/communities attract visitors and enhance the tourism experience thanks to their gastronomic resources [7,8]. Such experiences can become more memorable when gastro-cultural branding initiatives embrace locals and engage residents in respective tourism product development [9].

Branding strategies that engage multiple actors, and prioritize value co-creation are more likely to be sustainable in any tourism context [10,11]. According to Vargo and Lusch [12], in any transaction, value is co-created by various actors involved in either staging, offering or experiencing the transaction. However, co-creation in place branding is a challenge, given (1) the particularities of the place brand [13], (2) limited coordination between central/regional governmental branches and their local counterparts [14], and (3) the usually partial intertwining of institutional projects and individual actors [15]. Such challenges lead to recent calls to explore how co-creation can be inspired for culture and heritage destinations [16], and how actors attribute and negotiate the meaning of place branding activities [15], by participating in the development of holistic, inclusive and sustainable brand propositions, initiatives and strategies.

Towards this end, this study examines food tourism and place branding through a study of Greek and Turkish culinary destinations. Building on the value co-creation logic, the purpose of this research is to explore whether place branding strategies, when focusing on gastronomic characteristics, are holistic, inclusive and sustainable. The first objective

examines whether the gastronomic identity of the place reflects resource integration. To address this objective, we consider both *operand* resources, which mostly reflect tangible assets and physical resources, and *operant* resources, which refer to intangible assets, such as personal and cultural resources [17]. Integration between operand and operant resources shapes a holistic and inclusive place brand experience proposition [18–20]. The second objective investigates actors' intention, initiative and opportunity to participate in co-creating the gastro-cultural place brand experience proposition [21], in line with the identity-based approach to place branding [2].

This study contributes to a better understanding of the role of culture, or more specifically, its gastronomy-related subdomain, as this is reflected in the culture *in*, *for* and *of* the place (as in [22]). Culture and the place as an ecosystem include a variety of elements and dimensions, some of which may be place/community/local-group specific, whereas others may be national or transnational. All such elements of culture in, for, of the place may have, at the end of the day, a distinct importance for the identity-based approach to place branding and the sustainable development of gastronomic tourism.

2. Literature Review

As gastronomic tourism develops, more gastronomy-related activities are on offer and more gastronomy-related tourism businesses create active, participatory experiences [23,24]. However, such activities and businesses may not be well-tuned with the effort to reflect the place brand identity and heritage [25], nor jointly build and communicate a holistic gastronomic experience. This might be because, in the context of place branding, the resources and features of the branded place take precedence over brand elements (e.g., logos or slogans) in the eye of the beholder [26]. In this perspective, place brand holders may fear that the commercialization and communication of gastro-cultural characteristics of the place may potentially become harmful for the broader context of culture, other place attributes and the effort to appeal to various travel segments and internal actors. Another reason might be that the local actors have yet to realize the importance and applicability of branding a food destination in a manner centered around the identity-based approach to place branding.

2.1. The Role of Culture, Food and Gastronomy for the Identity-Based Approach to Place Branding

Extant studies emphasize the importance of various actors, the experiential value, the holistic nature of gastronomic experiences and the potential of such experiences to unite people [27,28] and the local, regional and national brand [2]. Integrating actors and respective resources is crucial in order to maintain the competitiveness of a destination product with the coordination of all place actors, the balance of actors' satisfaction and the sustainability of local resources [3,10]. Researching what is (or can be) on offer also results in the positioning of the physical attributes of places (such as food heritage gastro-cultural resources, superstructure, infrastructure, political will or other 'internalized' characteristics of the place) as operand resources. On the other hand, mostly intangible, personal and cultural characteristics (such as skills and knowledge) are considered predominantly as operant resources [29].

Actors own, use, or have access to tangible and intangible, operand and operant resources when branding the place. Effectively, place brands result from cognitive processes of the amalgams created by the associated use, actual and represented attributes [30]. Local actors' perception of their place is paramount to the brand creation process [31]. Kavaratzis and Ashworth [22] suggest that cultural resources and culture per se should be viewed as a process that links locals to a particular place. The potential effects of a branding initiative on this connection is a vital aspect for minimising potential social tensions. Besides, cultural heritage includes tangible structures, institutional complexes and practices, and carries emotional value and a value deriving from the sense of belonging and of shared cultural connotations [31]. Food and gastronomy, specifically, have the potential to build social bonds through authentic gastro-cultural experiences that reflect and embrace local, minority,

ethnic and national traditions [27,28,32]. In this context, it is of paramount importance to underline gastronomy as an important domain of culture that is also interconnected with other cultural counterparts. In an attempt to define various functions of gastronomy, Jiménez-Barreto et al. [33] suggests that food and gastronomy can also be considered as a symbol reflecting social connectedness, leading socio-economic differentiation, or acting as an umbrella for geographical or social belonging.

Areas and communities can utilize their gastronomic features as a potential tool to increase visitation [7], and to enhance the tourism experience [8]. The physical and social characteristics of a place interactively shape the sense of place [1,30]. This sense echoes authentic gastro-cultural experiences [28], and is consolidated in the identity-based approach to place branding. Places and gastronomy continuously evolve, disqualifying living cities and gastronomy from being evaluated as static products from a marketing perspective [4,34,35]. The identity-based approach to place branding asserts that the embedded gastronomic culture both influences and is influenced by place identity [36].

The articulation and offer of place value propositions (such as those referred to in [35]) often build upon cultural elements in an attempt to integrate the identity-based approach to place branding with destination branding. Culture and gastronomy are a sensitive area, which place actors might perceive differently, thereby leading to varying perceptions and evaluations of the role of gastronomy and to 'hijacking' culture (to follow [22]'s wording). Within these lines, Kavaratzis and Ashworth [22] developed a framework to better understand the link that culture provides between locals, their place and its brand, just like gastro-cultural experiences can facilitate social connectedness [33]. We argue that integrating [22]'s framework with gastro-cultural experiences logic can help us better understand the role of culture with a focus on gastronomy as well.

2.2. Gastro-Cultural Experiences in Places in a Tourism Context

Tourism experience is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped both by visitors' personal characteristics and by the tangible and intangible characteristics of the host place [37]. This results in positioning the physical attributes of places as operand resources, whereas different actors and their characteristics are considered predominantly as operant resources [29]. Needless to say, gastro-cultural experiences can embrace both tangible and intangible characteristics as reflected in both operand and operant resources.

The consumer is an active element of experience creation [12]. In the tourism domain, experience is a differentiating factor for visitors throughout their travel process (i.e., pre-travel, during travel, and post-travel), and is relevant to all elements culminating in 'memorable tourism experiences' [38]. As Tung and Ritchie [39] assert, the positive experiences of visitors lead to a higher level of identification with the place which, in turn, lead to higher levels of intention to revisit and recommend the place in social circles. In this context, a useful differentiation is between the experiences that can be replicated in different geographies and the ones that are specific and authentic to particular localities [2]. In [39]'s terminology these are 'footloose' and 'place bound' products, respectively, with 'place bound' products being tied to higher experiential value. What destination and place branding actors can further do to facilitate such high experiential value is connected to co-creation [10].

The co-creation view asks us to zoom out beyond dyadic exchange encounters (e.g., the resident-visitor co-creation of value presented in [40]) and to view experiential value as being created in (eco)systems of service-for-service exchange [10]. At the heart lie actors and how they form networks, institutions and institutional arrangements, in which gastro-cultural resources are integrated and exchanged to co-create value. Operant and operand resources have inherent value; still, higher added-value comes with resource integration [41]. Integration and the co-creation element enhance memorability and perceived authenticity [42–45], hence promote an 'out of ordinary' experience, bond actors and boost social cohesion [27,32].

2.3. Conceptual Model

This paper assesses culture through its gastronomy-related reflections and experiences in a given place and its gastro-cultural identity (see Figure 1). There are numerous examples of predispositions in the gastronomical attributes of a place or a community. One example of this is the fact that the regulators in countries with a predominant Muslim population display different approaches to alcohol consumption and the sale of pork, on the spectrum between regulation and abolition. Within this framework, it would be wise to differentiate between national contexts (and preconceptions) and local divergences that may be observed within national borders. The gastronomic identity of a community is heavily influenced not only by the geographical peculiarities of a region but also by its cultural (e.g., history, religion, traditions) characteristics [17].
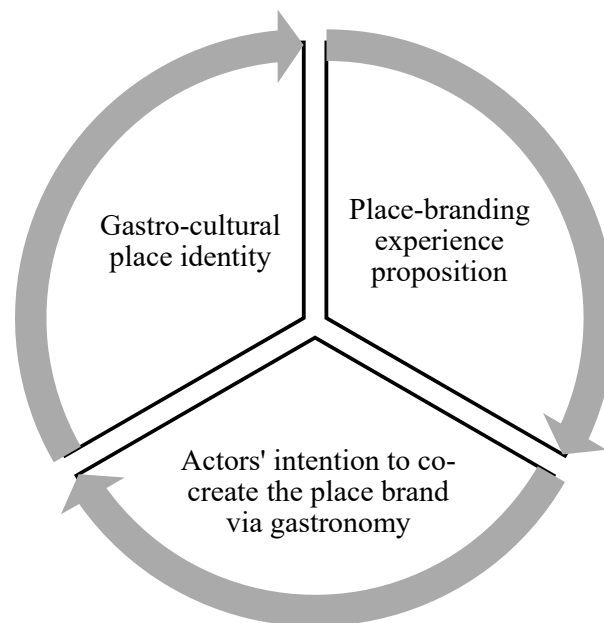

Figure 1. Initial conceptual model.

For specific places as well as national contexts, Kavaratzis and Ashworth [22] identified the significance of synergies when culture in, of, and for the place is incorporated in place branding. When focusing on the gastro-cultural experience, culture in the place could include cultural elements considered by the 'event hallmarking' technique, such as well-known food festivals. Similarly, culture for the place refers to food museums or cooking classes, and culture *of* the place refers to gastro-cultural characteristics and food customs that bring local actors together as a community.

This paper suggests that uniqueness of resource integration, and elements of this uniqueness, could and should be reflected in the place branding strategy and the available food experience. The gastronomic culture and respective place brand are set and experienced by locals and visitors, just like any element that contributes with social and cultural functions to the respective place brand [13]. Yet, each individual and group may prefer different settings and experiences and be satisfied based on different factors [46]. Culture, gastro-cultural characteristics and the place as an ecosystem embrace various elements and dimensions (place-specific, national or transnational ones) [2]. Resource integration refers to the various methods which actors employ to collaborate and co-create, and form different experiential and behavioral outcomes. Actors' knowledge and skills, coupled with their motivation and intentions, lead to resource integration [41]. Among the factors that have an impact on the level of active participation in food-and-wine tourism experiences are experience co-creation, operant resources, and the interaction between tourists, local residents and frontline tourism employees [47].

More specifically, the following research hypotheses explore actors' intention to participate in place branding co-creation [21]:

Hypothesis 1. *The gastronomic identity of the place reflects resource integration of operand and operant resources [17], and shapes the experience proposition of the place brand [18,19].*

Hypothesis 2. *The gastro-cultural identity and relevant experience proposition relate to actors' intention to co-create the place brand [2,48].*

In the place ecosystem, dyadic relationships (e.g., the one between visitors and residents) develop not only within a specific place, but also within national and transnational contexts. The following section provides more details on the methodology.

3. Methodology

In order to address the research hypotheses, this study seeks to develop a unifying theoretical framework that clearly identifies the elements of gastro-cultural identity and the role of such elements in the place brand experience proposition. This exploratory study aims to research the gastro-cultural identity and the place brand experience proposition by touching upon actors' intention to co-create an inclusive and sustainable brand. This work, therefore, helps us understand those elements of the gastro-cultural identity which are reflected, initiated or supported by public actors.

Gökçeada (officially named *Imbros* in the past) in Turkey, and Crete in Greece were selected for the field work. Each island is the largest one in its respective country, and they are both located in the Mediterranean Sea. There is a significant difference in the size of the islands, their number of permanent residents and involved actors. The proximity of the two countries is reflected in cultural similarities (as also highlighted by [49]'s cultural dimensions). Still, different national priorities and macro-environments mirror their diverse country and destination perceptions [50].

This paper uses thematic analysis to transform and explain qualitative information, such as website discourse. Both Greece and Turkey carry out most place branding activities through strategies, plans and projects that at least one public actor (e.g., the Ministry of Tourism, local or regional bodies) leads or participates in. The islands are not subject to the authority of an established destination management organization (DMO) [51]. Thus, initially we recognized all public actors that have some branding authority, and developed an inclusive list of all available official websites of such public actors at the national, regional and local level (e.g., Ministries of Tourism, Developmental Agencies, regional and local municipalities and prefectures). In total, data analysis incorporated information of 39 such websites.

Public actors in Gökçeada primarily manage or are involved in 13 websites. These websites lead to the identification of 16 documents (e.g., strategic/developmental/action plans, evaluation reports, projects) and 26 webpages. Respectively, in Crete, a total of 26 official websites lead us to eighty documents and 100 webpages. Analysis included the aforementioned documents and webpages (of festivals, projects, events, associations and organizations driven by public actors) which connect to the initial 39 websites through hyperlinks. Data include both written and visual information (e.g., photos and videos). Some information was available only in Turkish, Greek or English, whereas other pages included a language option. In case of the latter, we read information in all existing languages, but analysed only the most informative page option.

Following data collection, two independent coders processed data using thematic analysis [52,53]. First, each researcher individually scanned the collected data to develop a broad understanding of it. Second, each researcher analyzed the data and tried to identify initial thematic categories based on first- and second-order theoretical level themes deriving from the conceptual model (Figure 1) and literature in gastro-cultural operand/operant

resources, and culture in, for, of the place [22,47,54]. Third, researchers manually performed thematic, axial and selective coding.

In order to form initial thematic categories that align with the conceptual model (Figure 1), we independently broke down relevant data reflecting operand and operant resources. We then analyzed, compared, categorized and assembled all data. The a priori understanding of gastro-cultural experiences builds on [48]'s recent work on experience co-creation in food-and-wine tourism and the identified importance of terroir products for the destination brand experience [55]. Employing the identity-based lens to place branding, Warnaby and Medway [36] further highlight the importance of recognizing the significance of those products that the place, local history and culture identify oneself with. Synergies when incorporating the culture in, of, and for the place in place branding [22] suggest considering other identity-related aspects, such as customs and attributes which bond those involved in the gastro-cultural experience [27,56,57].

Axial coding helped us group emerging topics into interrelated themes by copying, re-organising, comparing thematic categories, and by refining the data under each theme in order to identify sub-categories [58]. Finally, elaboration on key areas was possible through selective coding. Selective coding helped combine sub-categories with the initially identified themes (Figure 1) to validate relationships, enhance and advance thematic categories [59].

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Gastro-Cultural Place Identity in Gökçeada and Crete

Online and downloaded data describe gastro-cultural identity in the way it is presented on each island. Some similarities are evident, as both Gökçeada and Crete (1) promote healthy eating, organic and free-range farming, local herbs (some also used in alternative medicine) and products (e.g., honey, olive, dairy, grape and wine-related products), and (2) embrace recipes described as '*local*' or '*traditional*'. Such recipes may include products other than the aforementioned ones, such as fish and seafood (mostly communicated in the case of Gökçeada) and carob and *paximadi* (hard bread) in the case of Crete. Other similarities may refer to intangible characteristics of the local gastro-cultural identity. For instance, in both cultures, food settings represent customs relevant to religious customs [59], hospitality and a chance to bond [27]. Reference to the importance of specific production methods (e.g., harvesting) for the local cultures is evident as well.

Cittaslow Gökçeada is an initiative which seeks to embrace historical elements, religion and culture (as previously also argued by [56,57]). The initiative is the only one that clearly refers to gastronomy related to the *Rum* community (i.e., the Greek Orthodox population that primarily inhabited the island since antiquity but shrunk into a local minority in the last 60 years). Top-down management websites and documents in Turkey refer to the need to avoid causing adverse effects on nature, culture and social structure as well [59]. Yet, investment and funding concerns seem to overlook products (e.g., wine) and traditions more affiliated to the Greek culture and favour other cultural priorities more closely reflecting the Turkish culture [60]. For instance, the Gökçeada municipality highlights its social responsibility with seperate webpages on the distribution of *aşure* and the organization of *iftar* dinners (i.e., respectively: a dessert porridge served especially during Maharram, the first month of the islamic calendar; the evening meals with which Muslims break their daily fast at sunset during the month of Ramadan).

Cretan actors' initiatives also highlight specific cultural elements in their effort to support the identity-based development of the local gastronomy brand. For instance, the 'Mediterranean Diet: When brand meets people' Project and the Cretan Gastronomy Center, founded by the Region of Crete, both prioritize the living gastro-cultural identity and its role in the Mediterranean and healthy diet. The central role of *panigiria* (*panayır* in Turkish, i.e., the centuries-old traditional and cultural festival organized to celebrate the patron saint of the place) affirms the relationship between food and religious customs. Yet, such initiatives by local and regional actors seem more inclusive in Crete, as they exhibit:

(1) The maturity to embrace gastro-cultural elements of the past; for example the Cretan Gastronomy Center has hosted culinary events commemorating or led by Cretan Turks (i.e., the Cretan Muslim minority who had to migrate to Turkey towards the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century), whereas the Region of Crete and municipalities refer to the Minoan diet (i.e., the Bronze Age Aegean civilization flourishing in Crete from c.3000BC to c.1450BC) or even co-organize relevant activities (also involving other local actors).

(2) A more holistic understanding of the Cretan gastro-cultural identity, thereby adding traditional ways to preserve, cook or serve food to the brand narrative as well as links to other cultural elements, such as food-related *mantinades* (i.e., Cretan rhyming couplets).

4.2. Gastronomy and the Place Branding Experience Proposition

The place branding experience proposition represents many gastro-cultural elements which reflect the place identity. Corresponding exhibitions and museums (e.g., the Museum of Cretan Ethnology) host examples of such tangible, more traditional assets. The inclusion of relevant photos as well as the wording, and language development of webpages and documents put forward qualitative experiences with intangible assets (e.g., hospitality and bonding in dining settings) [27,56]. The relationship between gastro-cultural place identities and the place branding experience propositions is clearly evident in the role of food for religion-related experiences: For example, in Gökçeada, people are invited to gather for *iftars*, whereas, in Crete, *panigiria* and religious ceremonies (e.g., weddings) are referred to as the meeting-points. Another central aspect of the place branding experience proposition relates to the projection of a specific lifestyle. On both islands, official websites communicate a healthy lifestyle and invite people to experience it. However, in the case of Gökçeada, this lifestyle almost exclusively relates to free-range poultry and agriculture (organic farming and eating), whereas recently Crete even acknowledges street food with the organization of a Street Food Festival since the summer of 2020.

In both cases, the place brand experience proposition aligns to a large degree with [47]'s recent work on experience co-creation in food-and-wine tourism. Actors put forward food preparation (in the case of Crete in more traditional ways too), local food tasting (e.g., the Cretan Gastronomy Center organises olive oil tasting; both Gökçeada and Crete often facilitate such tastings at local festivals), cooking classes, attending food festivals and shopping at farmers' markets. Farmers' markets are particularly important in the case of Gökçeada, with emphasis on the Organic Food Market (and until recently the Earth Market, with the latter supported through the Cittaslow Gökçeada Earth Market Project by regional and local actors (i.e., the Northern Marmara Development Agency, Gökçeada Municipality, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, and Gökçeada School of Applied Sciences)). Although such online information on Gökçeada primarily targets visitors (i.e., taken the wording or language used), experiences also seek to involve local residents and groups (e.g., pupils) up to a certain degree. In fact, Gökçeada emphasizes more residents' education on local gastronomy than Crete. Yet, extant official information does not provide much detail as to the material and recipes used and the extent to which such classes reflect decades- or centuries-old traditions, and related Cittaslow activities are no longer applicable since the initiative appears to be on pause.

In Crete, wine culture and relevant experiences complete the place brand experience proposition. In line with [47], the Cretan gastro-cultural experience proposition includes harvesting grapes, visiting wineries, participating in the wine making process and the promotion of wine festivals. However, there is no official information indicating the availability of more 'adventurous' and active experiences, such as riding a grape picker, hiking/cycling/hot-air ballooning over vineyards [47,60]. The Wines of Crete network has also developed a map and presents some wine routes available on the island [61]. Extant information presents local varieties, but there is only a brief reference to PDO wines (Protected Designation of Origin), and additional 'official' communication of award-winning wines is not available.

Along the same lines, Gökçeada is geographically included in the TROY North Aegean cultural and thermal tourism development zone. The zone foresees, among others, the creation of an *Olive Corridor*, therefore a *corridor* with corresponding experiences could be relevant. According to the Ministry of Culture & Tourism of Turkey [59] (p. 52), the region is to be "developed as a destination for health and gastronomy tourism". Yet, the strategic plan does not explicitly refer to the island, thereby excluding, at first assessment, relevant local actors. On the other hand, in a more inclusive mood, Agrocrete positions local actors on an actual map, thereby facilitating the experience with Cretan Diet-certified culinary, food and experience providers.

4.3. Actors Intention to Co-Create the Place Brand via Gastronomy

Thematic analysis illustrates actors' intention to co-create the food place brand in a tourism context. Both countries support gastronomy and relevant tourism and place brand development. Still, central government seems to be more directive in Turkey than in Greece, and experiences on offer in Turkey are less participatory and active: For Gökçeada, the national strategy underlines the importance of local populations, historical, cultural and artistic assets [59]. Thus, on paper, there is a clear support of local products, gastronomic, cultural, health, eco- and agro-tourism for the region [59,62]. One would, therefore, expect initiatives that would boost co-creation of relevant actors (e.g., local residents, restaurants) at the local and regional level [10,63]. Consequent analysis of local and regional websites indeed matches this interpretation of the policies. Yet, more in-depth analysis of documents retrieved from the local and regional websites indicates that local and regional actors (e.g., residents, farmers, hospitality entrepreneurs, Gökçeada Municipality, Northern Marmara Development Agency) are more on the receiving end of funding or participating in relevant activities, rather than active collaborators in the creation of the food place brand. Still, there are some specific projects which illustrate top-down actors' good-will to co-create the place brand with locals. For example, Gökçeada Municipality joined Cittaslow International in 2011 [64]. Similarly, since 2014, the Region of Crete is a partner in the project 'Mediterranean Diet: When Brand Meets People'.

In general, Cretan public actors appear more supportive of longer-term initiatives: For instance, the Prefecture of Heraklion provided the initial impulse for what would later develop into the Wines of Crete (i.e., the Cretan winemakers' network, which is tasked with the consolidation of the wine-touristic power of the Cretan wineries [65]). The Region of Crete also initiated Agrocrete, i.e., the Agro-nutritional Cooperation, originally developed as the Cretan Diet initiative. Agrocrete then created and consolidated the brands 'Crete-land of values', 'Cretan cuisine', 'Cretan grocery', 'Open wineries', and more recently 'Cretan brunch', in an effort to serve farmers, manufacturers, merchants, craftsmen and the local community.

4.4. Integrating Operand and Operant Gastro-Cultural Experience Resources

Based on the study findings, we were able to develop a framework which illustrates how the elements included in the gastro-cultural place identity and the place branding experience proposition reflect operand and operant resource integration, according to the actors' intention to co-create the place brand via gastronomy (Figure 2). As reflected on Figure 2, various operand and operant resources build the place-branding experience proposition and reflect the gastro-cultural place identity. [22]'s terminology of culture of, in, for the place can help organize and label these resources. As emerged through official information available online, the convergence of the gastro-cultural place identity and the offered experience proposition is, in fact, the result of resource integration and actors' co-creation efforts.
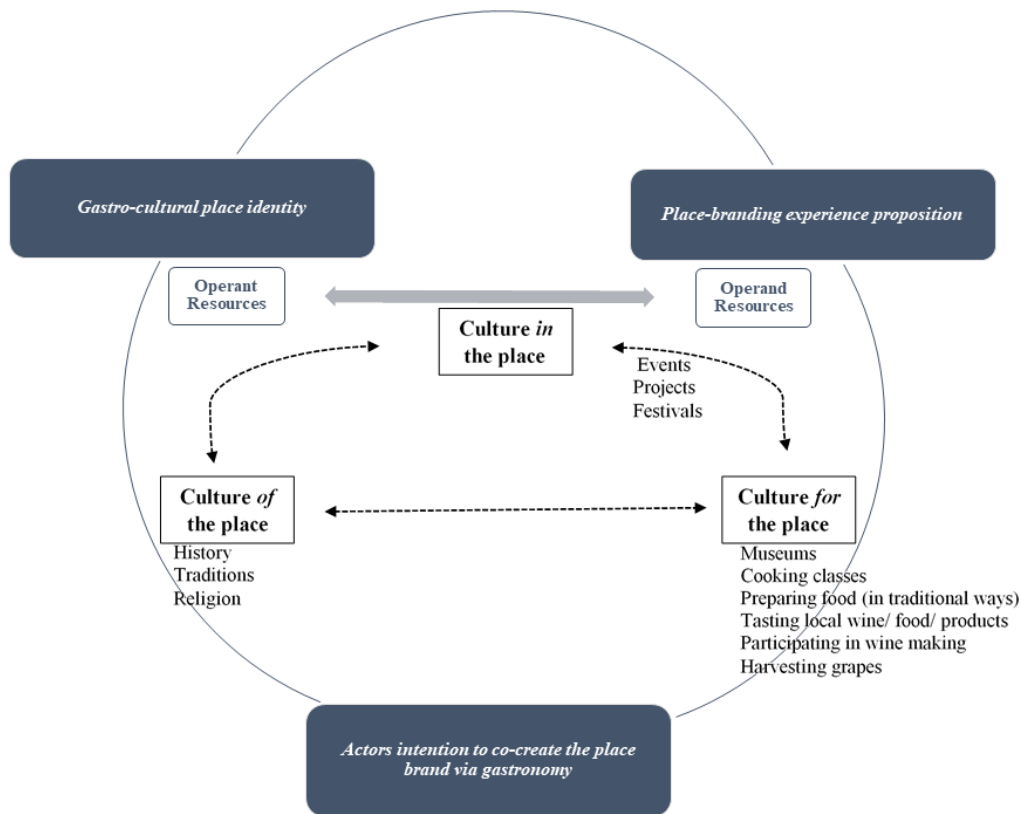
Figure 2. The gastro-cultural identity & experience proposition framework.

Skills, knowledge and culture (hospitality, openness, inclusiveness), as reflected in various projects and initiatives, emerge as the most important operant resource which adds value to most projects and initiatives. Such operant resources are relevant to the gastronomy and culture of the place and other resources (e.g., the gastro-cultural history of the place, local traditions, religion and customs). In both islands, actors believe that gastro-cultural operant resources link them together as a community and therefore prioritize them when promoting culture in the place by developing events, festivals and projects (e.g., Cittaslow in Gökçeada, the project 'Mediterranean Diet: When Brand meets people' in Crete, local food markets in both Crete and Gökçeada). As our analysis progressed, more general and country-specific operant resources (such as the aforementioned ones referring to hospitality, openness and inclusiveness) seem relevant to actors' intention to co-create the place brand and can be integrated with other resources included both in culture in and culture for the place. For example, inclusive projects and initiatives as well as well-known food and wine festivals and activities (e.g., local food/wine tasting, harvesting grapes) emerge as elements primarily used for promotion (i.e., culture in). Alternatively, some resources seem more participatory, include cooking classes, food preparation (in traditional ways or not), and seek to foster cultural exchange, thereby representing the culture for the place. Last, we identified specific operand resources that show culture for the place (e.g., folklore museums, the Cretan Gastronomy Center). In both islands, the examples of culture in and for the place appear to embrace selected resources of the gastronomy and food culture of the place, primarily to support the place branding experience proposition.

5. Conclusions

Currently there is limited academic attention on how the identity-based approach to place branding can help to successfully build the gastro-cultural experiential brand of a place. The aforementioned analysis of the cases of Gökçeada and Crete lead us to conclusions that help us to develop "a new perspective to view the existing canon of

the place marketing literature" [66] (p.415), and to better comprehend the importance of experiencing gastronomy and food tourism in line with the identity-based approach to place branding.

In response to the first research hypothesis, the gastro-cultural identity of both islands reflects some resource integration of operand and operant resources [17]. Discussion on culture in, for, of the place [22] helps us recognize how synergies among resources facilitate the (partial) integration of the gastro-cultural identity of the islands in the respective place-branding experience proposition. The example of the Cretan Gastronomy Center hosting an event on culinary memories, led by a Cretan-Turk, can showcase resource integration. In this example, the Center employs different operant resources (e.g., cooking skills), some of which also reflect part of the culture *of* the place (e.g., food habits and traditions as maintained and enhanced by a population who left the island approximately 100 years ago). The Center addresses visitors and locals by integrating such operant resources with operand ones (i.e., a specific event hosted in its premises) in order to create a specific experience proposition. Still, both islands seem to have a long way ahead before they successfully follow the example of those places which demarcated a regional culinary identity within the nation-state (e.g., such as in the case of Barcelona [67]).

According to the second research hypothesis, the gastro-cultural identity and experience proposition of the place brand relates to actors' intention to co-create the place brand via gastronomy. Staying in the same example for reasons of clarity, cooking events organized on both islands seek to bring together visitors and locals, and shape part of the place brand experience proposition [18,19]. This means that the aforementioned event hosted by the Cretan Gastronomy Center is not unique. Yet, country-specific operant resources (e.g., inclusiveness) and the gastro-cultural identity of each island may—or may not—reinforce projects and initiatives (which analysis identifies and classifies in the culture in and for the place). This, in return, influences the fraction of the gastro-cultural identity that will be 'on offer' as an experience proposition. In the case of this particular event and in line with [10], Cretan actors embraced part of the local gastro-cultural history and developed a value-creation mechanism to brand the gastro-cultural experience in the destination context. Yet, Cretan efforts towards value creation also come with some limitations. To name one, information to more clearly communicate wine experiences and link the quality of such experiences with PDO and award-winning wines are practically non-existent at an 'umbrella' Wines of Crete level.

This study offers insights that help understand the synergies when building the experiential food brand proposition. It carries significant implications that may inform scholars and policy makers. To be specific, the experiential gastro-cultural brand builds largely upon some of the intangible characteristics of the local and national culture which both islands have in common (e.g., hospitality and social bonding through dining and food experiences as in [33]). This offers a convergence point for studies that emphasize the experiential value [27], the importance of relevant culture, customs, traditions [57], and the identity-based approach to place branding [36]. Operand resources and tangible products are also necessary to complete the gastro-cultural branded product. Specific terroir products [56] seem relevant to the gastro-cultural identity of the islands and the brand experience on offer, although not all terroir products (e.g., grape/wine) are to this point equally embedded in the experience proposition. This might be attributed to each island seemingly being at a different stage on its 'gastro-cultural product' life-cycle. Other skills and characteristics (e.g., inclusiveness) may, in return, also interrupt the branding process and eliminate elements of culture *of* the place. Primary research illustrated that neither island has considered all available gastro-cultural experiences when building its brand.

Implications for practitioners at the island level vary and provide different insights for practitioners located in other places: (1) Preparing food in traditional ways in the example of events on the Minoan cuisine in Crete, (2) tasting local food products and olive oil at the Cretan Gastronomy Center, (3) a cooking class with a (currently migrated and therefore absent Cretan-Turkish) minority descendant at the Cretan Gastronomy Center,

and (4) participating in the wine making process and harvesting grapes in Crete, illustrate a more holistic approach to branding the gastro-cultural experience on this island. Such an approach is similar to wider movements prioritizing the local and regional within the national context. On the other hand, Cittaslow, i.e., the more holistic initiative on Gökçeada, seems to be, in practice, currently inactive. The factors hereby analysed provide some explanation for this phenomenon. Someone could think that restricted funding may also play some role. Yet, [47]'s work helps us identify several low-cost food experiences which none of the islands has sought to develop, namely fruit and vegetable picking, riding a grape picker (or other farm equipment, we argue), visiting farms and traditional products production units. Integrating such additional operand resources has the potential to further enhance the gastro-cultural brand by adding to the synergies among culture in, for, of the place.

There is no clear evidence illustrating a strong will for Gökçeada to benefit from inclusive or cross-border synergies. For instance, Cittaslow is the only official online information that infers a connection to Mediterranean cuisine and diet. This approach of Gökçeada might be a step towards locality-based movements which emphasize terroir products [2,68]. On the other hand, official websites of Gökçeada do not refer to wine-related experiences, which showcases an example of the difficulty the island is facing when transforming its terroir into a tourist destination [68]. Institutions and the prioritization of organic food might justify such approaches [68,69]. It is also possible that Gökçeada, disengaged from its Greek minority past, still has to elaborate more on its gastro-cultural experience proposition, unlike other destinations with a clearly communicated cuisine and food heritage [3,67]. Integrating relevant resources could help the island benefit from experiences more aligned with the identity-based approach to place branding [36], and build economies of scale and international gastro-cultural corridors and synergies. Yet, first the island needs to re-connect to its unique sense of authenticity and locality [67].

There is no indication that the offered food experience on either island has responded to COVID-19 challenges. The pandemic has had a great impact on the hospitality and tourism sector and the gastro-cultural experiences on both islands. Cooking classes, food festivals, weddings and other gatherings had to be cancelled or postponed; life itself has been adapted. Yet, the only indication that the experience-on-offer is somehow different is the Street Food festival in Crete. Previously, there was no clear attempt to embrace street food in the gastro-cultural brand of the island, and it is not clear whether this festival will remain an integral component of the place brand proposition. Understanding the distinction between conceived, perceived, and lived dimensions of the place brand [13] is necessary in order to keep the brand alive and in constant formation. One can assume that place managers are reactive (rather than proactive) in their planning of the gastro-cultural brand experience, and fail to realise the impact of the pandemic, modern lifestyle and time-space flow in its full extent [48]. Referring to the example above, street food does not mark a completely new lifestyle in Crete, but identity movements potentially trigger an institutional gap or change [34]. We therefore recommend interviewing local actors in a future study. Such a study could, among other thing, help evaluate whether street food festival planning reflects practitioners' more strategic understanding of the role of the pandemic and institutions for identity-based place branding.

In order to better understand how local actors and their gastro-cultural branding efforts respond to the pandemic and identity movements, additional research methods are necessary. Future projects can analyze offline material and employ additional data collection methods (e.g., interviews or focus groups) and online information of non-official branding authorities. Employing such methodologies can help us overcome limitations of the present research. This study limits itself to websites, and therefore excludes public actors' information or efforts communicated through social media. Embracing local residents' and visitors' perspectives and experiences can add to the insights related to both the island identity and the relevant experience proposition [3]. As a result, following such future research guidelines can help confirm the findings of this study and explore whether they

are transferable in other destination contexts within Greece, Turkey and beyond—or the local dynamics are, indeed, too strong to inform generalizability. Analysing data from non-public actors might also reveal unofficial branding efforts which are more inclusive of local minorities and different place (food) cultures.

On the grounds that resource integration and the synergies between the gastro-cultural place identity and the place-branding experience proposition under the co-creation perspective was missing from the research agenda, this study offers a foundation for enriching knowledge in this field. Most importantly, this paper builds on inclusive data collection, and thereby provides a solid conceptual background which could feed into efforts for scale development [70] and subsequent factor and structural analysis.

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