Where Alternative Tourists' Photo Stories Meet Greek Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: - The article examines the intertwining of the intangible elements of Greek cultural wealth with the photographic stories published by alternative travelers on social digital platforms. It focuses on the impact of these images on the reinterpretation of culture, travel experiences, and lifestyles, influencing cultural sustainability and alternative tourism. Research adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the role of photographic stories as cultural repositories and tools for communicating intangible cultural elements in shaping travel perceptions and intentions in alternative destinations, drawing on a religious local festival (panegyri) that took place on an island in Greece. The findings show that photographs on social media powerfully convey stories of intangible cultural heritage in a continuous flow and profusion, while actively participating in its evolution over time. They have the potential to promote alternative tourism and support the sustainable development of local communities in Greece.

Key-words: - Photography, Digital Storytelling, Alternative Tourism, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Travel Experience, Greek Culture, Religious Festival (Panegyri), Social Media, Photo Sharing

Received: March 11, 2025. Revised: December 4, 2025. Accepted: December 13, 2025. Published: December 31, 2025.

1 Introduction

Travelers nowadays increasingly seek experiences grounded in authenticity, participation, and cognitive enrichment, [1], beyond simply "seeing" a place. Thus, the essence of a place's culture becomes particularly significant. When visitors connect with living manifestations of tradition that transcend material boundaries and delve deeper into their understanding, an invisible dialogue emerges with the community's roots, preserved over generations. Through this interaction, the individual involved experiences a profound emotional awakening, triggering feelings of awe and satisfaction and responding to inner desires for meaningful engagement, [2], [3], [4]. Awareness of the value of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has a positive impact on self-identity, enhancing the overall travel experience, commitment, and loyalty to the destination, [5], [6], [7]. Such engagement supports cultural diversity and reinforces a place's unique image, supporting its position in global tourism networks. The preservation and creative promotion of intangible cultural heritage are key factors in ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism, [8], [9], especially in countries such as Greece, where traditional practices permeate everyday life. In this environment, photography plays a leading role in

recording and dissemination. It can capture the intangible more directly than any other medium, allowing alternative travelers to tell authentic stories that revitalize Greece's intangible heritage by transforming personal moments into collective memories, [10], [11].

Photographs that incorporate local customs and traditions transmit meanings and connotations that transcend social and linguistic boundaries, provoking an emotional impact on viewers, [12]. Often incorporating elements of intangible cultural heritage, they broaden their accessibility and range in the digital world, [13]. As bearers of lived experiences and data, they build audience trust. Through their circulation and reproduction on social media, [14], they promote a collective understanding of heritage and build intercultural bonds. This phenomenon is often fostered through "photo stories," a term used in this study to describe narratives of a standalone image or a coherent sequence that records practices, values, expressions, symbols, social relations, or, in general, themes related to a part of a place's heritage. It also includes visual material produced at a location but by different visitors, thus providing pluralistic testimonies. It concerns thematic aspects of the tourist experience that were recorded spontaneously, without professional pretentiousness, extensive digital alterations, or the use of artificial intelligence, and is considered as such by the ordinary observer. Consequently, in a country with a vast and diverse cultural landscape such as Greece, these photographic stories emerge as an integral mechanism for archiving, interpreting, comprehending, and promoting the characteristics of ICH, [15]. Photography, as a dominant medium of communication in our era, fosters deeper cultural immersion in the identities of historical and traditional regions, reconfiguring how culture is consumed, [16].

This research aims to bridge theoretical understanding with empirical evidence. It deepens into the intersection of photo stories by alternative tourists with Greece's intangible cultural heritage. At a time when the visual image is evolving into a dominant global language of communication, it focuses on assessing the extent of their involvement in both culture and tourism as carriers of information about intangible elements. The research examines the multidimensional interplay among travelers, visual narratives, and ICH through a mixed-methods design. This concerns qualitative approaches (analysis of photographic content on social networks) and quantitative methods (analysis of questionnaire data). Special emphasis is placed on exploring how tourists perceive, use, or conceptualize photographs that contain intangible cultural elements. Whether as recipients or producers of digital content. Providing evidence about the contemporary trend of photographic storytelling as a means of cultural awareness, collective cultural memory, and sustainable tourism development.

The significance of this study lies in the importance given to the storytelling of a place through photography, not as a simple record. But as an active mechanism of cultural transference and tourist regeneration. Investigating the traveler as a co-creator of place-based narratives, rather than a visitor who merely collects snapshots, enriches scholarly discourse. Contributes to understanding the value of photography in shaping cultural meanings within the contemporary alternative tourism sector. The findings are not limited to the description of travel preferences or attitudes. They offer valuable insights to stakeholders in cultural institutions, the tourism sector, and local communities to further understanding and planning for alternative tourism forms that preserve the remaining authenticity of historical and traditional sites in Greece.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Invisible Roots of Greek Culture

Intangible cultural heritage transcends the conventional definition as "non-tangible practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage", [17]. It operates as a bilateral network of semiotic ties between people and place. An "invisible substratum" that fosters coherence in experience, collective memory, and identity. Its integration into contemporary daily life is particularly crucial given the rapid pace of social transformation. In particular, globalization, which, as a multifaceted process, entails both risks of disarticulation of local cultural identity and opportunities for its preservation, revitalization, and international exposure, [18]. The digital age is bringing to the forefront dilemmas and contradictions in how Intangible Cultural Heritage is safeguarded and reproduced, such as the distortion of authenticity and the risk of losing the experiential nature of traditions, [19]. ICH is not a passive transmission but is activated through co-creation. A collective process that is transformed into experience through individual, social, and economic relationships and values, [20]. When this process runs uneventfully, it provides individuals with a stable core of identity and an antidote to alienation, while strengthening community cohesion and a sense

of belonging, [21], [22]. At the global scale, it encourages intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity in a competitive setting, [23].

Greece, having a multi-layered historical background spanning centuries of cultural continuity, is home to an invaluable repository of intangible heritage. The spectrum of this invisible body encompasses various manifestations of collective memory and experiential knowledge. Ranging from living traditions and local customs to culinary practices and emblematic landscapes. The official recording and inclusion of these elements in the National Register of ICH is an essential milestone in recognizing their significance as living vessels of identity and social cohesion, especially in an era marked by accelerating cultural transformations, [17], [24]. Greek sites are under intense pressure, either from overtourism, particularly on the islands, or from uncontrolled urban expansion that degrades the cultural landscape, [25]. The proper exploitation of ICH through alternative forms of tourism, such as slow tourism, that emphasize local engagement and community involvement, can contribute to the preservation and reinforcement of cultural values, [26]. Greece requires protection policy decisions that combine documentation, experiential transmission, and institutional support, avoiding unconscientious touristification.

The necessity to safeguard Immaterial Greek heritage is not confined to a cultural or ethical perspective. It encompasses broader implications, including social and economic sustainability. As a "visual and emotional map," ICH signifies the relationship between residents and their place. It empowers their sense of identity and resilience in the face of social or economic challenges. Cultural expressions are not just elements of identity, but also pillars of dynamics that strengthen the sense of "belonging", [27]. They can, under certain conditions, generate added value for both the place and the alternative tourism sector. However, this potential becomes vulnerable when it is embedded in uncontrolled economic and business activities of tourism. Intensive commercial/marketing development without a well-structured, feasible protection plan can lead to the denuding of heritage of its intrinsic substance. Converting it into a possibly attractive, but empty "spectacle" for consumption. The current scientific discourse emphasizes that the absence of meaningful participation by local communities in the design of relevant policies undermines cultural continuity and distances residents from the intangible manifestations of their heritage, [28]. Participatory, versatile, and socially integrated practices are required to ensure their proper transmission to future generations. Thus, it allows it to evolve without jeopardizing its semantic depth. A characteristic example of this approach is the effective exploitation of travelers' photo stories on social media because they can accommodate large amounts of immateriality at a time when images overwhelm human communication.

2.2 The interface between Alternative Tourism and ICH

Alternative tourism offers a theoretical and practical paradigm that is not confined to the mere consumption of places. It serves as a composite system of culturological encounter of perspectives, [29]. Profound experience, participation in the local community, and genuine contact with living forms of collective memory foster intangible heritage and differentiate it from tourist homogenization, [30]. Through activities that strengthen the visitor's connection with music, gastronomy, handicrafts, or storytelling, a sense of authenticity and proximity is formed that goes beyond the touristic surface, [31], [32]. The transition from cultural tourism to creative tourism was not random. It was a decisive turning point, as passing from monuments to the meanings and practices that animate them demonstrates travelers' desire to transcend the material and embrace the immaterial, [33], [34]. Through participation in these experiences, visitors become active agents in the continuity of living traditions, [35], while local communities are emboldened in narrating their identity, [36]. This attuned intertwining opens channels that connect the current experience with the place's origins. Involves alternative tourism in the living "web" that reveals the essence and stratification of each site, [37], [38]. Photographic records of visitors in these settings demonstrate this association, documenting unutterable moments and opening dialogues with the intangible. Dialogues that are displayed, fed back, and expanded as travelers share them on social media, [39].

Ranging from religious tours to interactive workshops on local arts, alternative tourism is now articulated as a composite scheme of experiential cultural contact. Inside, which intangible heritage emerges through practices that actuate collective memory, knowledge of craftsmanship, and affective resonance, [40], [41]. The cultural pathways and programs for reviving rituals and food practices, [42], serve not only as mechanisms for attracting tourists. They are also fields of cultural activation. Local festivals and celebrations, be they musical, gastronomic, or ritualistic, are not merely just spectacles. They create conditions for exchanging

emotions and embodied sensations, as well as informal spaces for sharing cultural knowledge, [43]. These expressions foster the arousal of emotions, the emergence of internal dispositions, and the experiential grasp of the place's intangible nature, while simultaneously highlighting the importance of direct, on-site social sharing outside the digital world, [44], [45], [46]. The gradual integration of technologies such as augmented reality attempts to digitally transfer the intangible aspects of culture, from local tales to the corporeal language of rituals, [47], [48]. Notwithstanding, the mediation of the intangible through technological platforms carries the risk of losing the direct physical sensation and authentic timing that are fundamental to the social and emotional meaning of culture, [49], [50]. Travel experiences that "transact" with the incorporeal in historical and traditional settings appear to acquire qualities that exceed surface interest. They activate journeys of esoteric inquiry, a sense of originality, genuine emotion, and personal fulfillment, [51], [52]. Events that rely on local identity nurture understanding, cultural sensitivity, and solidarity among residents and visitors, elevating communities into agents of cultural vision, [53], [54]. Within this landscape, travelers' visual testimonies are not merely souvenirs but become micro-archives of cultural observation and empathy. A channel that disseminates travel stories and, at the same time, reflects on what it means to encounter the culture of the “Other”.

The cultural dimension could be described not as “the fourth column of the sustainability edifice but as the edifice itself, because it is culture that defines how societies evaluate and implement sustainability, [55].” Whereupon the concept of sustainability, when linked to culture, goes beyond the ecological aspect. Adopts a human-centered approach, focusing on economic, social, and value factors that contribute to the flourishing of ICH. Alternative tourism, as a form of responsible development, has the potential to make a substantial contribution to this development. By promoting activities that sustain local identity, especially in remote traditional areas facing depopulation and economic stagnation, [56], [57]. Concretely, generating employment opportunities in the cultural production sector and reactivating marginalized practices rooted in intangible heritage can build a model of active cultural survival. A characteristic example of this is the project "Marche Food and Wine Memories " in Italy, which was based on the intangible heritage of the local community and, through visual digital storytelling as part of its promotion strategy, proved that when the invisible roots of a culture are properly exploited, they can enhance sustainable local tourism development, [58]. Understandably, stronger collaboration with local firms and improved professional skills are required.

When alternative tourism strategies are planned with respect for local culture and allow the participation of indigenous people, they become a mechanism for the regeneration of ICH, [59], [60]. Greece, as a classical cultural pole of attraction, attracts alternative travelers seeking historical continuity and vibrant tradition. Through local feasts, workshops, and community initiatives, participation and knowledge exchange are supported, transforming alternative activities into a field of social learning, [61], [62]. Harmonized with the environment during their experience, travelers often use the photographic shot not only as a means of recording but also as a form of cultural dialogue that reflects their participation and personal interpretation of authenticity, [63], [64]. Consequently, Greek intangible heritage as a 'good of value' extends beyond museums and stages. It becomes a collective experience nurtured by the visitors' presence, gaze, and narrative, blending the constant flow of the past with the forces of the times.

2.3 The “Immaterial” of Culture in Travelers' Photo Stories

In the digital landscape of late modernity, information is transformed from a passive means of transmission into an interactive field of events. Within it, the image transcends its mere evidentiary function and emerges as an effective act of narration and cultural synthesis, [65], [66]. Travel photo stories are not restricted to stable representations of experiences. They evolve into participatory performances of memory and identity, including both the creator of the image and the heterogeneous audience that construes it [67], [68]. The intangible elements of photography, such as symbols, ambiences, and subjective associations of place and sentiment, communicate “signals” that are dynamically activated in every digital reception, producing a network of meanings, authenticity construction, and connotations of cultural representation, [69], [70]. Photography does not only indicate “what exists”, but synthesizes multiple universes that translate “how it is meant”. It is a means of reflection and reinterpretation through traces of emotion, impressions, and personal meanings, [71]. The traveler who intervenes with the intangible element in historical or traditional settings tends to embody characteristics of authenticity, [72], awe, uniqueness, exploration, self-awareness, and fulfillment, [52], thereby reinforcing knowledge and

emotional experience. The personal gaze encounters the global circulation of information and transforms travel images into encoded digital narratives of cultural attribution, [73]. Such practices actively intervene in the image's geopolitics and the aesthetics of the post-tourist experience, renegotiating the sense of belonging, the act of seeing and sharing, [74], [75], [76], within a globalized, yet heterogeneous cultural reality.

Photo storytelling in the alternative tourism sector goes beyond the commonplace testimony: "I was here." It becomes a tool of mediation, facilitating the negotiation and reconfiguration of the relationship between the traveler and the place, [77]. The act of shooting dismantles the mainstream gaze, in which the visitor ceases to be a mere observer and becomes an engaged participant, [78]. Thus, the role of alternative travelers, who critique popular mass-tourist itineraries, proves vital as through visual recordings they bring to light the underlying intangible layers of local identity in less-visited areas, [79]. Their images depict the natural daily life of local communities, uncovering aspects that often escape sameness documentation, [80]. They focus on minutiae such as nuances, interactions, and fleeting moments of local beauty, [81], which are neglected by the average mass tourist's photographic way of seeing. Collecting “narrative treasures” far from popular attractions.

This storytelling approach isn't just about emotional feeling. It intrigues the viewer, generating new ways of seeing, contemplation, and acting. Whether as an impulse to visit the place, as a reinforcement of interest in local culture, or as a desire for more meaningful involvement in it [82], [83]. Thus, their visual accounts serve as a lens for understanding intangible heritage, offering access not only to the visible but also to the experientially essential. Social networks, from this perspective, can transcend their role as mere platforms for posting snapshots, serving as a living archive where the essence of immaterial cultural information is shaped between transmitter and receiver, [84], [85]. The use of tools such as Instagram stories, [86], or tourists' selfies on social media, [87], embodies a form of participatory curation, transforming the travel experience into a culturally performative expression, [88], [89], not as a passive consumptive fact, but as an open dialogue. Through these photographic testimonies, the alternative traveler not only presents cultural landscapes but also offers insights into them. They co-produce knowledge, creating spaces for reinventing the place beyond clichés and tourist commercialization, [8], [90], [91]. This perspective, rooted in an embodied, dialectical, and non-hegemonic approach to the cultural other [92], substantially enriches the photo stories of alternative travelers. More authentic, [93], and more capable of triggering cross-cultural forms of understanding, [94], in contrast to the unilateral, narrow narratives that often feature in more superficial approaches to tourist experiences. To some extent, these narratives can be said to constitute society's unconscious archives. This field can offer essential insights into the study of contemporary cultural communication, with photography serving as a narrator on social media, providing a bridge between the local and the global, the visible and the suggestive, personal experience and shared interpretation.

3 Methodology

The study mainly adopted a quantitative research design, with a complementary qualitative approach at the initial stage.

This preliminary phase aimed to collect additional exploratory data, enrich the understanding of the research object, and identify elements that would contribute to the quantitative methodological procedure. Based on content analysis that applied to visual material (photo stories) drawn from the Facebook posts of 12 alternative travelers following their participation in a traditional religious festival (panegyri) on the Greek island of Sifnos. After the researchers' request, the participants granted them access to their personal profiles. The total number of participants was 12, with six (6) of them being residents of Greece and representing domestic tourism. The remaining six (6) were international visitors and are classified under inbound tourism. The equal distribution of participants was knowingly chosen to ensure greater analytical balance and objectivity in the results.

The analysis was conducted on all photos posted by travelers on Facebook, both during and after the cultural event. Each case was examined in detail to identify images with plentiful incorporated intangible cultural features, as follows:

- Gastronomic Traditions and Local Food
- Ritual Practices and Religious Symbols
- Music, Dance, and Traditional Performances
- Social Interactions and Cultural Behavior
- Objects and Clothing with Cultural Value

Qualitative process served as a methodological basis for researching the nature of content posted along alternative tourist routes. The study does not intend to provide an extensive presentation of the quality characteristics from the material published by travelers immediately after

they participated in the “panegyri”. It analyzes the central intangible elements of photo content and, fundamentally, uses quantitative recording of their presence or absence. In this way, examine whether the social networks of alternative tourists function not only as spaces for self-promotion but also as a medium for the transmission of intangible cultural elements. The discussion and conclusions about the travelers' photos' profound expressive meaning are kept concise by purpose. Further interpretative depth and generalization are concerned in future research with a broader, more representative sample.

In the main phase of the research, a quantitative data collection method was used. It involves distributing a structured questionnaire to alternative tourists who have visited Greek destinations in the last 5 years.

Based on findings from the literature review and the qualitative analysis, a questionnaire was developed. The tool was deployed on the Google Forms platform and distributed online. Participants received an information note on the purpose and nature of the study. They were also encouraged to share the questionnaire with people in their network, resulting in a snowball sampling method, [95], which exploits social networks and interconnections to obtain a quicker, more targeted sample. A total of 143 valid responses were collected over 45 days. Before the questionnaire was widely distributed, a pilot test was conducted in collaboration with 10 alternative travelers. The pilot phase was intended to evaluate the clarity of the questions and led to final corrections and the optimization of the tool.

The questionnaire included 15 statements about the relationship between photo stories and elements of Greece's intangible cultural heritage throughout the travel experience. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). The statements focused on manifestations of intangible cultural heritage, the influence of photo stories, and how visitors encounter and interact with them. They also examine the relationship between the presence of intangible culture and the motivations for participation, engagement in the experience, and the meaning of the visit to an unconventional tourism activity. In addition, demographic data of the participants (gender, age, educational level, place of permanent residence) were collected.

The data were processed using SPSS. Descriptive statistical measures, such as means, standard deviations, and percentages, were used to examine the initial distributions of the parameters studied. Parametric statistical tests were applied to explore the potential effects of demographic characteristics on survey responses. Parametric tests enable scientists to compare means in responses between different subgroups of the sample, [96], [97]. Independent-samples t-tests were used to examine differences by gender (male-female), while a one-way ANOVA was used for age and educational level. The parametric tests were performed at a statistical significance level of $p<0.05$.

4 Results

4.1 Qualitative Findings

The results of the content analysis revealed the extensive presence of intangible cultural elements (ICH) in the photos that the 12 alternative travelers chose to post on Facebook after participating in the Sifnos festival. Specifically, among the 130 photographs, 75.4% depicted ICH elements, indicating a strong preference for showcasing cultural heritage over content that lacked any visually recognizable element of intangible cultural heritage, regardless of its type or form (e.g., self-portraits without cultural references). This preponderance reflects travelers' choice to share encounters that incorporate local traditions, enhancing the narrative of their travel experiences through "photo stories" that function as digital testimonials.

In analyzing the images for cultural elements, the most dominant elements in the visual stories of both Greek travelers and foreigners were dance and traditional music, combined with social interactions with locals, [98]. They reflect moments of interaction with the island's local community, customs, and traditions. The festivities were portrayed not as tourist attractions but as real-life experiences in which visitors actively participated and became united with the traditional sounds, local dance practices, and the other participants, local or otherwise.

The following notable thematic category involved photographic representations of local cuisine, [99], and culinary practices that were associated with old traditions and customs. Moments of food consumption or display were depicted, such as the Sifnian "revitada" (chickpea soup) and the ceramic objects (jugs, plates, etc.) that were served with it. The emphasis was not only on the product or the objects, but even more on the setting in which they were consumed, highlighting other informal forms of Greek hospitality, such as large communal tables where friends and strangers alike enjoyed one another's company. These images did not present food as an element encountered during a tourist visit,

but rather as a practice that connects the place and the special relationships that develop during the trip.

The photographs frequently depicted the ritualistic procedures of the festival, the gathering of the local community, the distribution of roles, and the participants' joint hike along paths to the churches. The collective dimension of these events, the community's active participation, and their repetitive nature are consistent with the fundamental characteristics of immaterial heritage and can be interpreted as ritual forms of social cohesion, [17]. They reflect the importance of the place's atmosphere and the event's participatory nature for the visitor. Depictions of personal experiences on social media promote an "image" of local values such as a sense of belonging, hospitality, and the preservation of traditional practices, revealing the role of alternative travelers as "cultural intermediaries", [100]. Concisely, visually identifiable expressions of traditional music (orchestra, musical instruments, etc.), traditional dance, local cuisine, music-dance interaction, ritual and customary practices, symbolic movements, social and expressive practices, intergenerational interaction, as well as every element of local culture were coded in the photographic material.

The high frequency of such images suggests that alternative tourists seek to demonstrate their connection to the place's unique characteristics, thereby reinforcing the role of their pictures as a means of communicating intangible cultural heritage. The present findings emphasize the importance of spontaneous, experiential photographic narratives that incorporate intangible elements of cultural heritage, whether or not the photographers are consciously aware of them. At the same time, the role of social media as a facilitator and custodian of cultural goods is emphasized, with broader impacts on cultural sustainability.

4.1.2 Quantitization of Qualitative Findings

The results of the qualitative content analysis are presented below as numerical data, both descriptively in the text and through tables, in order to clearly show the distribution of the coded categories (with or without intangible cultural elements) and to present possible correlations between the basic variables.

For each participant, the total number of photos posted after participating in the traditional religious festival (panegyri) of Sifnos was recorded, as were the number of photos depicting visually recognizable elements of intangible cultural heritage and those that did not contain such elements. For privacy purposes, participants were coded with alphanumeric symbols. E1–E6 for participants of Greek origin and F1–F6 for participants of other nationalities.

Concerning participants residing in Greece, the analysis of the photographic publications revealed interesting quantitative trends in the focus on elements of intangible cultural heritage. The first participant (E1) published 12 photos, including 9 (75.0%) that featured ICH, while E2 uploaded 7 photos, 5 (71.4%) of which focused on intangible aspects of the religious event in Sifnos. E3, although he submitted the highest number of photos in this group, with a total of 16, they focused on intangible elements of the traditional festival in 11 of them (68.8%), leaving the remaining 5 lacking such references.

In the subsequent participant (E4), 5 photos were recorded; 4 (80.0%) emphasized intangible cultural features. Noteworthy was the submission of E5, who published 3 photos, and all of them (100.0%) fell into this category. Finally, E6 stood out with 13 photos, 12 of which (92.3%) included elements of intangible cultural heritage, leaving only one without a relevant connection.

Correspondingly, differences in the prominence of intangible heritage were observed among participants from other countries. First foreign participant (F1) posted 4 photos, with a balanced distribution: 2 (50.0%) depicting such elements, while 2 (50.0%) did not. F2, from their perspective, shared 17 photos, of which 13 (76.5%) focused on intangible cultural characteristics. The highest number of posts from the festival came from F3, with a total of 24 photos, of which 19 (79.2%) incorporated its intangible characteristics.

Continuing, F4 posted 9 photos, 6 of which (66.7%) were related to intangible cultural manifestations from the “Panegyri” in Sifnos. A similar pattern appeared in F5, who shared 12 photos, 8 of which (66.7%) were about these aspects of the festival. Closing this group, F6 submitted 8 photos, 6 of which (75.0%) highlighted intangible traditional practices of the event.

The data from Greek participants (E1-E6) and international participants (F1-F6) highlight the direction of the tourist gaze of visitors seeking substantial contact with local everyday life, focusing on authenticity and cultural immersion beyond the dominant forms of mass tourism. They indicate that travelers participating in alternative activities tend to prioritize documenting local cultural practices in their visual content.

Table 1 presents the aggregated frequencies derived from the aforementioned analysis to

investigate the relationship between traveler origin and the presence of intangible cultural elements.

Table 1. Aggregated contingency table of traveler origin and the presence of intangible cultural heritage elements

Travelers' Country of Origin	Photos depicting ICH elements	Photos not depicting ICH elements	Total
GREECE	44	12	56
Other Countries	54	20	74
Total	**98**	**32**	**130**

Note: This table was used as a contingency table for the chi-square test of independence.

***Source: created by the authors*.**

To determine whether the origin of travelers, Greek or non-Greek, is related to the presence of intangible cultural elements in the photographs, a Chi-square test was performed. The results showed no statistically significant correlation between the two variables ($\chi^2(1) = 0.538$, $p > 0.05$). This result reinforces the study's findings. It demonstrates that the spontaneity or intentionality of depicting elements of intangible cultural heritage in the photographs of alternative travelers does not seem to depend on their nationality or geographical origin, nor on their degree of familiarity with Sifnos's cultural events.

It is also noteworthy that during cultural events, participants' photographic posts do not focus on self-representation but rather capture, to a greater extent, lived experiences and collective practices unfolding within the cultural and social life of the place.

4.2 Quantitative Approach

The questionnaire responses reflect a striking convergence. The vast majority of participants agreed ("agree" and "strongly agree") with all statements, far exceeding the number selecting the neutral or negative options. It is crucial to emphasize that, during questionnaire design, statements regarding the influence of photographs featuring intangible cultural heritage elements on the alternative tourist experience were deliberately included, with corresponding responses formulated on an agreement scale. This finding highlights the crucial role of published photo stories by alternative travelers in shaping tourists' decisions and experiences in non-mass Greek destinations with strong intangible cultural characteristics. This result is supported by recent research, [101], which highlights the influential role of visual representations in tourism choices. Photos on social media drive the decisions to visit places of remarkable cultural interest, [102], [103].

Participants clearly indicated that authentic images embedded with cultural meaning on social media are not just snapshots or tourist "souvenirs." Instead, they serve as powerful storytelling tools that transmit emotions, identities, and experiences, [104]. Through them, cultural destinations acquire a "voice" and connect with audiences on an experiential level, activating a profound personal reflection. It is a form of cultural participation that involves reflecting on moments in which the image becomes praxis, journey, and insight.

4.2.1 Demographic Data

The demographic profile of the 143 participants who filled out the questionnaire is presented in Table 2 (Appendix). Regarding gender, 39.9% of participants were male, and 60.1% were female. Based on this, it is evident that women (n=86) constitute the majority of the sample, suggesting that they may have a greater interest in culture or in participating in related research.

Regarding age distribution, the largest group was aged 46-60 years (n=66, 46.2%), who may bring more life experience to their views on cultural heritage and travel. Therefore, most survey participants were of mature age. That likely also reflects increased interest in cultural heritage, or that people of this age have more time or financial resources to participate in research or to explore alternative travel routes. Followed by those aged 31-45 years (n=43,30.1%), pointing out that the next significant age group participating in the survey was that of professionally and socially active individuals. Their participation in this survey shows that people in this age group are receptive to research and to alternative forms of tourism, and are open to the interpretation and understanding of intangible cultural heritage. The 61+ age group had the highest proportion of participants (n=22, 15.4%), while the youngest (18–30 years old) had the lowest representation (n=12, 8.4%). Their low participation is probably because younger people do not associate intangible cultural heritage as directly with the travel experience, or because they have less time or inclination to participate in surveys of this kind.

The vast majority of participants (n=76, 53.1%) were university or college graduates, while 31.5% (n=45) held a master's or doctoral degree. Their high level of education suggests they are likely to be more culturally sensitive, aware of the

importance of intangible cultural heritage, and open to participating in research or in cultural events. Lower percentages were recorded for secondary (n=14, 9.8%) and primary education (n=8, 5.6%).

The fact that the vast majority of participants (n=127, 88.8%) reside in Greece suggests that the survey results primarily reflect the perspective of domestic visitors. Greek participants, due to their cultural proximity, seem more willing to respond to intangible cultural heritage. The relatively low participation of foreign residents (n=16, 11.2%) may limit the inclusion of an international perspective. Still, it may also reflect how they approach the immaterial aspects of another culture because of a lack of identification with it.

Overall, the demographics indicate that the majority of travelers who give this feedback are middle-aged and older, highly educated, and permanent residents of Greece. The composition suggests that the questionnaire respondents are relatively mature individuals with cultural awareness and possibly a greater interest in intangible cultural heritage. Younger travelers and individuals residing abroad show lower involvement, which may reflect a different orientation or interest in the survey topic.

4.2.2 Descriptive Statistics

Regarding descriptive statistics, Figure 1 (Appendix) shows the mean responses to six Likert-scale statements, indicating high levels of agreement among participants (all >4.25). An exceptionally high mean (4.55) is observed in the statement regarding the importance of matching the photo stories published by alternative travelers to the actual situations, indicating disapproval of staged or manipulative images. At the same time, participants pointed out the contribution of photo storytelling to cultural learning and understanding (M= 4.38), as well as to shaping travelling choices through photographic research (M= 4.38). The influence of photographic narratives in enhancing the gastronomic exploration of local Greek cuisines (M=4.35) was also found to be highly important, as was the impact on the development of cultural awareness and appreciation through original images from social media (M=4.31).

Participants agreed that the personal capture of intangible cultural elements of Greece in their photographs positively affects their overall travel experience (M = 4.27). On the whole, the findings highlight the key role of alternative travelers' photographic stories in promoting not only tourism but also the viability of areas rich in intangible cultural elements. Figure 2 (Appendix) confirms convergent patterns regarding the role of photographic documentation in enhancing cultural experience, particularly by increasing awareness of the value of intangible characteristics of Greek heritage. The statement that appreciation of cultural elements can be supported through photographic narratives, even in the absence of a physical visit, received a high average agreement rating (M = 4.21). Responses regarding photographic records of interactions with residents, which seem to add to the feeling of fulfillment and authenticity of the experience, were at similar levels (M = 4.20), as with a focus on the photographic interest attracted by local handicrafts in contrast to the standardized, mass-produced souvenirs (M = 4.20).

Furthermore, the assertion about the value of guided tours when supported by visual material, which facilitates understanding of Greece's intangible cultural heritage, was particularly well received (M = 4.16). Finally, participants acknowledged — albeit to a somewhat lesser extent — that published photo stories featuring cultural elements are an essential factor in visiting alternative destinations, yet still achieved a consistently positive average (M = 4.08).

The current survey findings, as shown in Figure 3 (Appendix), indicate that although agreement levels appear slightly lower than in previous measurements, they remain high, highlighting the multifaceted impact of photo stories on travel behaviour.

The highest average agreement score (M = 3.83) in this set is found in the statement concerning the positive emotions derived from photo sharing and introducing culturally rich destinations to other users. This finding aligns with current research documenting the socio-emotional role of photo-sharing travel moments on social media in strengthening social identity and forming emotional bonds with the destination, [105], [106].

Equally important is the remark that the photographic narratives of alternative tourists depicting interesting local cultural festivals and events act as substantial motivators for experiential participation (M = 3.77). Concurrently, visual depictions of traditional Greek customs are associated with greater interest in further exploration before making a travel decision (M = 3.76), confirming the role of photography as a springboard for cultural inquisitiveness and involvement. Finally, authentic photographic content related to traditional Greek products, although it has a slightly lower but not negligible average agreement score (M = 3.73), appears to function as a factor in shaping purchase intention. This result is to be expected, as economic decisions usually require more conscious evaluation

and greater engagement than other aspects of the travel experience.

Overall, the results suggest the power of user-generated photographic content supporting alternative destinations, the polarized relationships it fosters with viewers, and the intangible nature of local heritage.

4.2.3 Parametric Tests

To explore possible differences between the two gender groups in mean response values, Independent-Samples t-tests were conducted. According to the findings presented in Table 3 (Appendix), statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were found in four statements concerning:

- Learning about Greek myths, customs, and traditions through visual stories
- Authentic photographs as cultural appreciation amplifiers
- Preference for the local handmade products over mass-produced ones, accompanied by the inclination to photograph them
- Appreciation of the Greek cultural heritage through photographic records, regardless of a direct visit to the respective places

In all these statements, which mainly focused on how photo stories help tourists interact with intangible cultural elements, women displayed higher levels of agreement than men, suggesting a more positive orientation towards visual material with cultural content. These results are consistent with those of [107], who argued that women are more likely than men to include cultural and historical elements in their photographs. This correlation highlights the role that women play in the photographic documentation of intangible heritage, both as creators and as viewers.

Data in Table 4 (Appendix) were analysed using a one-way ANOVA to investigate possible differences in participants' responses across age categories. The statistical analysis revealed significant differences ($p < 0.05$) across all five statements examined, indicating that age is a differentiating variable in the perception and evaluation of photographic content by alternative tourists regarding intangible Greek culture. Significant differences were identified across five scale items, suggesting a relationship between the stated beliefs and demographic variables. In more detail, the 31–45 age group consistently presented higher means in four of the five statements, with the most significant deviations in the following cases:

- The impact of published photo stories by alternative travelers
- Concerning the intangible cultural heritage of Greece as a motivation to visit
- Enrichment through learning cultural elements from visual narratives
- The perceived "authenticity" of users' photographs featuring elements of intangible heritage as a means of enhancing cultural awareness and appreciation
- The preferences for local handicrafts and the intention to photograph them

The distinct predominance of the 31–45 age group, which essentially corresponds to Generation Y (Millennials), shows the highest levels of agreement with statements about the appreciation of photographic narratives as a tool for promoting intangible cultural heritage. This finding can be interpreted through the generational features of this group, which, according to recent studies, [108], [109], characterize Generation Y as the first to become familiar with new technologies, exhibiting greater intention to explore innovative travel and stronger interaction with local intangible culture.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the importance of photographic stories in excavating and activating processes for recording intangible heritage in Greece. Alongside, they display their contribution to the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage. Despite the widespread acceptance of photographs as powerful tools for shaping a destination's image and for leveraging marketing efforts, [110], current research reveals that authentic representation of a place's intangible aspects also contributes significantly to all phases of the travel experience.

Photographic stories that spontaneously capture intangible cultural elements from alternative destinations in Greece play an essential role in travelers' decision-making. They deepen emotional engagement and increase the desire to explore. This is consistent with a recent study, [43], which indicates that the desire for cultural immersion was a significant factor influencing tourists' decisions to attend local events in Greece, as they were primarily motivated by photographic archives of others' experiences. Our research also found that both Greek- and non-Greek-origin alternative tourists tended to post a similar number of images featuring intangible cultural content on their social media after their trip. This set of findings further highlights the powerful connection between intangible cultural presence and photography in user-generated content. The meaning-making processes shape tourists'

interests, intentions, and interactions with a destination.

Travelers appreciate the embedded "cultural truth" in other users' uploaded photos, especially those that have inspired them to visit a destination. After they have been persuaded to be found there, they seek features that align with the expectations those images have created. When this occurs, their overall satisfaction is enhanced. Therefore, not only does authenticity in intangible cultural identity significantly contribute to tourists' fulfillment and loyalty, [111], but also authenticity in its photographic representation. The trajectory culture - tourism - photo is continuously moving in an infinite reflection of itself in everyday life. Thus, the visual transmission of a sense of a genuinely cultural landscape is essential to the formation of the destination's distinctive image, [112].

In other instances, pre-travel visual representations deviate from the lived experience of the destination. This discrepancy derived from visual displays may lead to disappointment or stigmatize the depictions as misleading constructions, [113]. It simultaneously creates a prejudicial or superficial impression of a region's essence. That's why users often prefer content generated by travelers on alternative routes that reflects fleeting interactions with the cultural environment. This highlights the power of visual stories to impart the value of intangible cultural heritage, adding both meaning and substance to the visitor experience, [114]. From this perspective, in a national economy heavily dependent on tourism, as in Greece, it becomes clear that staged images, with a unilateral, premeditated intent, as typically observed in economically oriented practices, cannot contribute to sustainable tourism development and the preservation of the country's cultural continuity.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from the findings is that local culinary traditions are a defining component of intangible cultural heritage, [115], in Greek regions, contributing to a deeper understanding of the alternative tourist "path". This insight aligns with surveys, [116], [117], [118], which underscore the role of authentic local food in shaping tourist preferences, whether as a significant criterion for destination selection or as an essential dimension of travel satisfaction. Data from the current research show that original visual stories posted by alternative travelers on social media increase the desire for vicarious culinary experiences in Greek traditional areas, thereby communicating cultural authenticity to a broader audience, [119]. Therefore, such local food depictions can attract food-focused visitors. Enhancing sustainable tourism development by promoting local products, promoting underrepresented tourist communities, and safeguarding intangible heritage through digital dissemination.

When authentic photo testimonies from travelers are intertwined with Greece's intangible cultural heritage, visual content consumers show a strong inclination to explore or exploit them. It is their core conduit through which they are exposed to and gain knowledge of customs, traditions, and crafts, which gradually builds a broader cultural understanding and impression capable of shaping tourist standards. This establishes an interdependent relationship between alternative tourists (whether producers or recipients of photo travel content) and intangible cultural heritage, enabling the exchange of messages of promotion, exploration, and deep engagement.

Tourists who are averse to the mass-tourism mentality first explore the destination digitally, seeking a meaningful connection to its cultural identity, [1], [10], [71]. However, once in the field, they offer new perspectives and interpretations of intangible heritage. The study's findings also reflect this, underscoring their strong interest in both digitally tracing traditional events and local products and recording them on the ground. Photographs serve as repositories for this relationship, which is often not documented in official archives.

By photographically narrating intangible aspects of Greek sites, the visitor not only feels excitement at capturing a memory but also a deeper satisfaction, as they inwardly participate in the transmission and thus the re-naturalization of its intangible cultural heritage at an international level, [120], [121]. In this setting, tourism stakeholders can exploit travelers' generated photos as an empirical field of investigation through a combination of content analysis and ethnographic approaches. This engagement can open the possibility of redefining how intangible cultural practices are presented and experienced. Shifting the focus from typical tourist promotion to more authentic and participatory forms of cultural experience. That could also strengthen cooperation with local actors, aiming to promote and enhance understanding of intangible cultural dimensions in their natural social context.

This insight underscores the importance of these specific groups for targeted data processing in the context of tourism strategies. This finding affirms the need for diversified approaches to tourist marketing, [122], in which visual content serves not only as a promotional tool but also as a mechanism for cultural identification and for visitor interaction with the destination.

6 Conclusions

This research sheds light on the profound impact of alternative tourists' photo stories on the evolutionary trajectory of intangible cultural heritage. Derived from real travel experiences, images of Greece go beyond simple souvenirs or promotional tourism tools and become powerful expressions of cultural co-creation, [123]. As visual testimonies, they exert a decisive influence on visitors' choices and actions, while shaping the destination's image, [124]. They forge immaterial ties, connecting the travel experience with the cultural flow.

Alternative travelers' gaze often shifts from a consumer perspective to a participatory one, reconfiguring intangible heritage from a subject of observation into a field of interpretation and engagement. Factors such as the authenticity of the photographic image or the age and gender of its creator contribute significantly to the dissemination of intangible cultural elements along travel routes. Consequently, their photographic narratives have the potential to function not only as evidence of experience but also as catalysts of cultural mediation in social media. They become an entry point to a place's intangible heritage. A medium that serves as a potent mechanism of connection, influence, and constant re-creation within an era of visual dominance and diffusion.

7 Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The analysis of the photographic content was limited to recording basic elements of intangible cultural heritage and identifying the presence of intangible cultural expressions. This approach limited the depth of the qualitative interpretation. However, it can serve as a basis for future, more extensive research. Although the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods provided reliable data and interpretive insights, it does not fully capture the diversity of perceptions among alternative tourists, especially those visiting Greece and those from abroad. The integration of local community perspectives could be the subject of future research, contributing to a more comprehensive assessment of the combination of intangible cultural heritage and photo stories.

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Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)

Tsilimpokou V.: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Formal analysis; Vlassas V.: Project administration, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing; Maniou F.: Data curation, Resources; Karampelas K.: Visualization, Resources; Kontos K.: Funding acquisition, Validation; Ntalianis K.: Writing – review & editing

Sources of Funding for Research Presented in a Scientific Article or Scientific Article Itself

Special Account for Research Grants of the University of West Attica (UNIWA)

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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APPENDIX

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=143)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	57	39.9
	Female	86	60.1
Age Group (years)	18–30	12	8.4
	31–45	43	30.1
	46–60	66	46.2
	61+	22	15.4
Place of Residence	Greece	127	88.8
	Abroad	16	11.2
Educational Level	Primary education	8	5.6
	Secondary education	14	9.8
	University / College	76	53.1
	Postgraduate / PhD	45	31.5

Note. n indicates the number of respondents per demographic category. All percentages are based on the total sample (N = 143). The dataset contains no missing values. "Abroad" refers to permanent residents outside Greece.
Source: created by the authors.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test Results Based on Gender

Statement	Gender	n	Mean	p-value
I enjoy learning about the myths, customs, and traditions of the Greek locations I visit through visual narratives.	Male	57	4.1228	**0.001**
	Female	86	4.5581	
I believe that "authentic" photographs (whether professional or amateur) that highlight intangible elements of Greek culture play a decisive role in raising my awareness and appreciation of Greece's cultural heritage.	Male	57	3.8772	**0.000**
	Female	86	4.6047	
I find Greek local handicrafts and handmade products more appealing than mass-produced souvenirs, and even if I don't purchase anything, I will take pictures of those that attract my attention.	Male	57	3.9298	**0.002**
	Female	86	4.3837	
Influenced by various photographic records, my appreciation for the cultural elements of Greece's historical and traditional areas has deepened, whether or not I have personally visited them.	Male	57	4.0526	**0.031**
	Female	86	4.3140	

Note. N = 143 (n = 57 for males, n = 86 for females). N denotes the total sample size, while n denotes subgroup sizes (gender). All p-values are two-tailed.
Source: created by the authors.

Table 4. One -Way ANOVA Results Based on Age

Statement	**Age Group**	**n**	**Mean**	**p-value**
Photographs of distinctive Greek traditional customs or artifacts can influence my decision to travel to the places where they occur.	18–30	12	3.0000	**p < .001**
	31–45	43	4.0698	
	46–60	66	3.9091	
	61+	22	3.7500	
	Total (N)	**143**	**3.7552**	
I enjoy learning about the myths, customs, and traditions of the Greek locations I visit through visual narratives.	18–30	12	4.1667	**0.006**
	31–45	43	4.7209	
	46–60	66	4.3030	
	61+	22	4.0909	
	Total (N)	**143**	**4.3846**	
I believe that “authentic” photographs (whether professional or amateur) that highlight intangible elements of Greek culture play a decisive role in raising my awareness and appreciation of Greece’s cultural heritage.	18–30	12	3.6667	**0.007**
	31–45	43	4.5814	
	46–60	66	4.3333	
	61+	22	4.0909	
	Total (N)	**143**	**4.3147**	
I find Greek local handicrafts and handmade products more appealing than mass-produced souvenirs, and even if I don't purchase anything, I will take pictures of those that attract my attention.	18–30	12	3.3333	**0.001**
	31–45	43	4.4419	
	46–60	66	4.2727	
	61+	22	4.0000	
	Total (N)	**143**	**4.2028**	
Festivals and events in Greek traditional areas are a significant draw for me, particularly when others' photographic archives inspire me to visit and participate in these moments personally.	18–30	12	3.1667	**p < .001**
	31–45	43	4.3023	
	46–60	66	3.7727	
	61+	22	3.7273	
	Total (N)	**143**	**3.7692**	

Note. n represents the number of respondents per age group. Mean values are based on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Reported p-values are derived from one-way ANOVA tests.
Source: created by the authors.

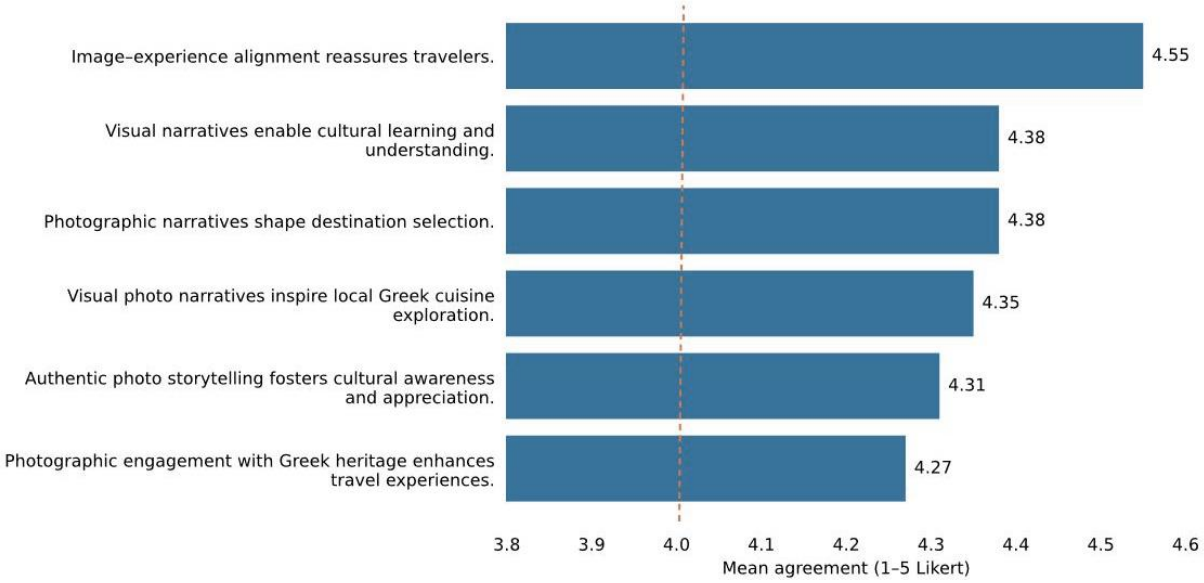

Fig. 1. Mean Likert-scale responses illustrating respondents' agreement regarding the role of photographic engagement and visual narratives in enhancing cultural awareness, destination choice, and travel experiences related to Greek heritage.
Source: created by the authors.

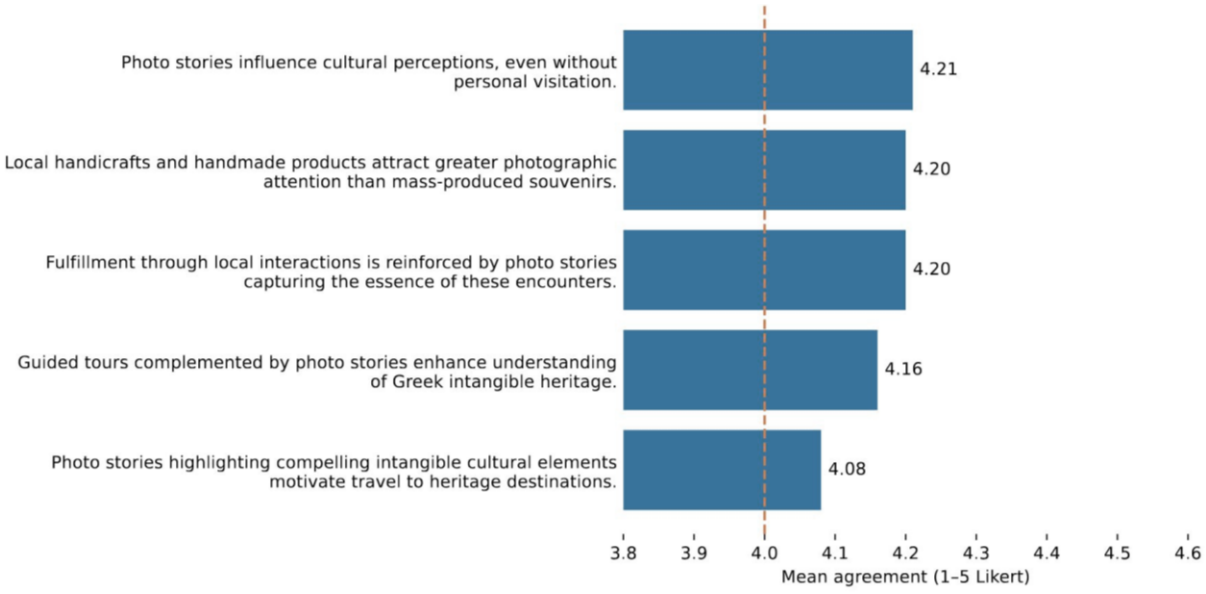

Fig. 2. Mean Likert-scale responses reflecting respondents' agreement on the influence of photo stories and visual representations on cultural perceptions, learning, and motivation to engage with Greek intangible cultural heritage.
Source: created by the authors.

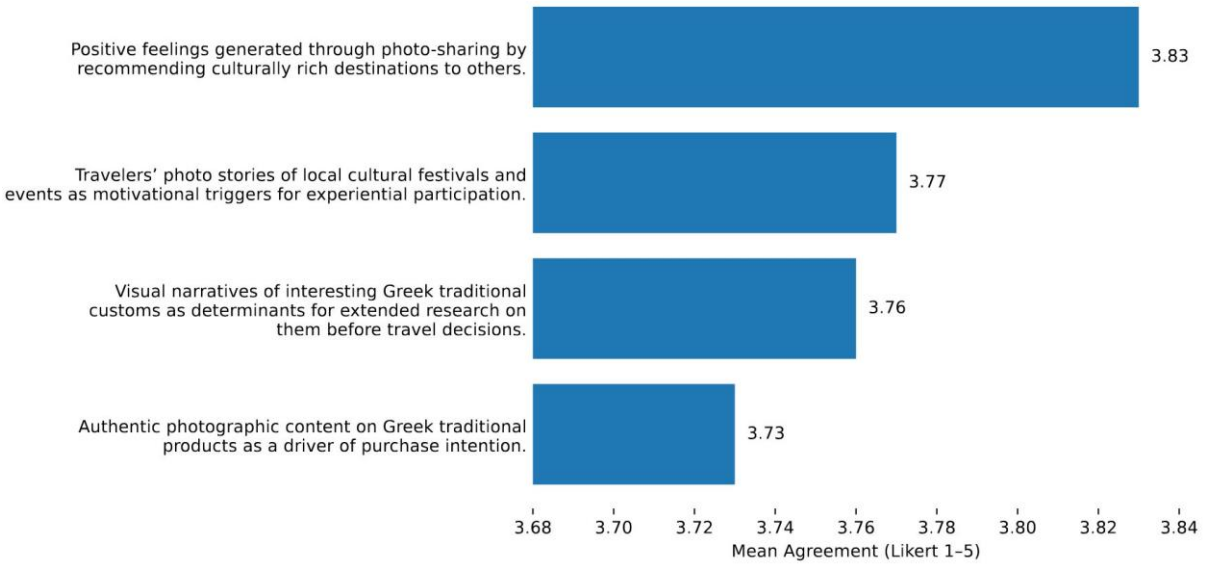

Fig. 3. Mean Likert-scale responses indicate levels of agreement among respondents
Source: created by the authors.