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Cultural routes: As a tourist attraction in the city of Elefsina

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of cultural routes and their potential as tourist attractions, using Elefsina—a city striving to redefine its identity as the "European Capital of Culture 2021"—as a case study. Its participation in European programs brings positive elements and hope for sustainable future development. The project aims to establish three cultural routes focusing on different thematic axes: cultural monuments dating from the year of the ECOC title, archaeological and religious monuments, and the industrial heritage of the city, aiming to showcase all aspects of its culture. A quantitative survey among Elefsina residents gathered insights into the utility of these cultural routes and the impact of the ECOC on their city.

Keywords: Cultural Routes; European Capital of Culture; Elefsina; Sustainable Development; Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

The cultural heritage of Europe, and particularly Greece, stands as one of the oldest and most significant drivers of tourism development (Richards 1996b; Thorburn 1986), maintaining its importance in European tourism today. The EU's commitment to European cultural diversity serves as an inspirational factor, with creativity redefining heritage through innovative and sustainable measures, ensuring the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage (Alberti et al. 2019). Cultural tourism is recognized as an economic and social catalyst in Europe (Richards 1996a), enhancing economic development, strengthening European identity, and promoting transnational cooperation. Various policies and strategies support cultural tourism, aligning with Article 167 of the Lisbon Treaty, which safeguards and enhances cultural diversity within the EU, promoting sustainability and local community participation while disseminating the history of its peoples. Funding programs support cultural actions, institutions, events, routes, and sites of interest, and this study examines these best practices.

2. Cultural routes

Aligned with EU values as declared by the Council of Europe in 1987, cultural routes allow visitors to experience 'living' cultural heritage in a united and inclusive manner (Council of Europe 2019). Routes are categorized thematically, historically, and multicultural, integrating various cultural sites to offer insights into diverse traditions (Avgerinou Colonia 1995). Planning cultural routes involves integrating attractions with existing infrastructure and meeting tourist needs, supported by local businesses providing products that satisfy participant needs (Mitoula & Kaldis 2018). Cultural routes attract new visitors, distribute economic benefits to local communities, and enhance the sustainability of cultural sites by integrating them with other attractions. They also have an ecological dimension by dispersing visitor traffic (Ikonomidou et al. 2024). Cultural routes are more productive and have a global impacts and penetration, when they are accompanied by actions on the Internet and exploitation of digital technologies. In these cases, they foster the local economic development for all, more sustainable and productive [44-50].

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3. Case study - Elefsina

Elefsina, a seaside town with a population of 30,000 located 20 km from Athens, possesses commercial power due to its port. The main tourist attraction is the archaeological site and museum, pivotal cultural heritage monuments. Unlike other Greek cities, Elefsina is predominantly associated with its industrial sector, a perception that requires correction. The city's claim as European Capital of Culture aims to highlight its cultural identity regionally, nationally, and internationally. Historically, Elefsina was one of the five holy cities, drawing pilgrims for 2,000 years due to the Eleusinian Mysteries (Mautis 2005). Today, thematic cultural itineraries focus on its industrial heritage, architecture, Roman elements, and the worship of Demeter, encompassing tours of the Hill of Antiquities and the city center museum. The Iera Odos, linking Elefsina to Athens, is a subject of ongoing research, while post-Byzantine churches serve as points of interest. Elefsina's participation in European programs brings positive elements and hope for sustainable future development. Its designation as European Capital of Culture 2021 redefined its identity from an industrial city (Gold & Gold 2005; Mercouris 1986; Mayerscough 1994).

4. Cultural routes in the city

Elefsina boasts a rich collection of cultural exhibits and artworks created for the ECOC celebration. This event presents an opportunity to create cultural routes highlighting various aspects of its heritage and preserving its unique cultural identity (Alexopoulou-Baya 2005). Cultural routes connect points of cultural interest, ensuring cultural preservation and fostering economic and sustainable development in cultural entrepreneurship (Maniou 2023, 2024; Mitoula & Economou 2014). Elefsina can continue to attract visitors through new infrastructure organized into cultural routes (Griva 2023) (Maniou & Mitoula 2024). The cultural route encompasses projects developed during the "Mysteries" festival program, designed to endure as tourist attractions. Points of interest associated with "ELEUSIS 2021" include:

5. First cultural route in Elefsina

5.1. City hall of Elefsina

A point of interest at the Elefsina Town Hall was the active exhibition installation featuring the selfless donation of cherished objects by the citizens. The work is called "Leave Something You Once Loved" and was placed in the courtyard of the old Town Hall of Elefsina, visible only during the year of celebration.



Figure 1 Glass Object Collection Facility

5.2. Ose garden - old railway station [1] of Elefsina

Another point of interest is a sculptural installation called "Crack" in the garden of the OSE - Old Railway Station of Elefsina. The crack is defined on the one hand as a trace of rupture and on the other hand as a flow of connection.



Figure 2 Crack

5.3. Elefsina's pier

On the seafront, an original work is the verses of Pirandello's novel *La Trappola* (*The Trap*) engraved on a pier. "The Surface" as it is called, described in [2], interprets the fluidity of human existence, linking life and death. It is an epigraphic work on a pier under the veil of a love scenario created by Timothy Lascarato and the Cultterra group.



Figure 3 The Surface

5.4. Women's whispers

Behind the above pier there is the work "women's whispers" described in [3] inspired by the feminist brochure published in 1984-1985.



Figure 4 Women's Whispers

5.5. The hatchery

The hatchery described in [4] is located in the Elefsina - Vlycha ship cemetery. It is a memorial sculpture for the ecological well-being of the sea waters of Elefsina.



Figure 5 The Hatchery

5.6. The old olive mill

The Old Olive Mill described in [5] is adorned with a multitude of artworks both inside and outside the site. In its courtyard, there is a colorful pattern imprinted on a paved surface made of ceramic tiles. Additionally, an optimistic approach is showcased by the luminous in situ installation, featuring a contradictory message at the Old Olive Oil Factory in Elefsina. The courtyard of the Old Olive Oil Factory has been renewed with paving mosaics representing the mural of the inactive factory of PYRKAL.



Figure 6 Luminous in situ Installation

5.7. The whale

In the same location, "Behind the Theatre," stands a composition titled "Auti" (The Whale) described in [6], in the Old Olive Tree parking lot. This luminous work, crafted from California marble, originated from the depths of the sea and now stands elevated, illuminating the city and symbolizing a transition from the underworld to the earthly realm.



Figure 7 The whale

Additionally, potential points of interest for the cultural route, with appropriate preparation, include:

- The mythological garden at the abandoned iris site
- The artistic frescoes on nicolaidou & draugumi street
- Various lighting installations
- Sign installations
- The complex of structures - ark, sphere, skate park, and an architectural archetype

6. Second cultural route to the ancient monuments of the city

Elefsina boasts a wealth of cultural monuments from various historical periods that could be organized into a second cultural route:

- **Archaeological area of the city:** Includes the Acropolis, where the first settlements of ancient Elefsina developed.
- **Temple of the goddess demeter:** Site of the famous Eleusinian Mysteries, surrounded by high walls with towers.
- **Roman courtyard:** This area features an altar known as the Eshara, the remains of western and eastern triumphal arches, and a fountain. Passing through the Great Propylaea and the Callichoron Fountain, you reach the Sanctuary Precinct. Further along are the Small Propylaea and the Plutonian Cave. The route concludes by crossing the Pompeian Way and arriving at the
- **Telesterion of demeter:** Its ruins are preserved, and adjacent to the harbor is a visible part of the Roman bath.



Figure 8 The Roman Bath



Figure 9 Church of Saint Zacharias

- **Saint zacharias:** Northeast in Heroes Square lies the post-Byzantine church surrounded by the foundations of the three-aisled ancient Christian church.
- **Roman bridge:** At the eastern entrance of Elefsina is the Roman Bridge, a monument that has been preserved in excellent condition for its kind.



Figure 10 Roman Aqueduct

- **The ancient roman waterway** where it crosses most of the eastern side of the city.

7. Third cultural route in the renovated industrial buildings

In the 1960s and 1970s, Elefsina experienced significant industrial activity with profound environmental impacts. For many years, it was regarded as an 'industrial city', unappealing to the public. The Municipality struggled to repurpose the disused factories to promote the modern industrial and technological history of the area (Theodoropoulou, 2017) (Papaggeli & Chlepa, 2011). The renovated spaces, now used for institutional purposes, should be preserved as a legacy for future generations, contributing to the sustainable development of the region (Sfyroera, 2005).

The following buildings represent the industrial heritage of the area:

- **Olive oil mill "charilaos and kanelopoulos S.R.O.** (1875-1960). The business closed in the 1960s and was redeveloped in 1995 to host 'Aeschylia'; it is currently owned by the National Bank of Greece.
- **Old Railway Station of Elefsina** (1884-2001). Recently handed over to the Municipality of Elefsina, it now hosts ECOC activities.
- **Wine and Spirits Company Harilaos and Co.** (1900-1974). Renamed "Hellenic Corporation of Wines and Spirits," known as "Votris"; the buildings remain dilapidated.

- **Company hatzikyriakou - zachariou and CO.** The first cement production factory, later named "TITAN". The Elefsina plant is still operational today.
- **Oinopneymatopoiia PLC (1922-1986):** The well-known 'Kronos' was one of the most modern factories of its time. Since 1991, it has functioned as a warehouse.
- **"IRIS" Chemical Paint and Varnish Factory - Menelaos Sakelariou and Company (1925-1970):** The first Greek varnish paint industry.
- **Elaurgy - central cooperative association of oil agencies of greece (1955-1980):** A complex of buildings, one of which is owned by the Hellenic Public Properties Co. and has been used for ECOC activities.
- **Naval shipyard of elefsina (1968-Present):** One of the most important shipyards in the Mediterranean.

It's worth noting that Elefsina's role as an industrial center led to the creation of numerous jobs, which empowered the local economy. After the Asia Minor Catastrophe, there was an influx of population and internal migrations, contributing to the city's multicultural character (Belavilas et al., 2011)."

8. Quantitative research and result

The questionnaire was distributed to 120 people in Elefsina during June and July 2024. The research aimed to identify interest in cultural events and public participation in a cultural route. The questionnaire included demographic questions to determine the profile of interested individuals, followed by questions examining impressions and impact of Elefsina as the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) on local development, potential participation in a cultural route, and the perceived contribution to Elefsina from the respondents' perspective.

8.1. Question 1: What is your age?

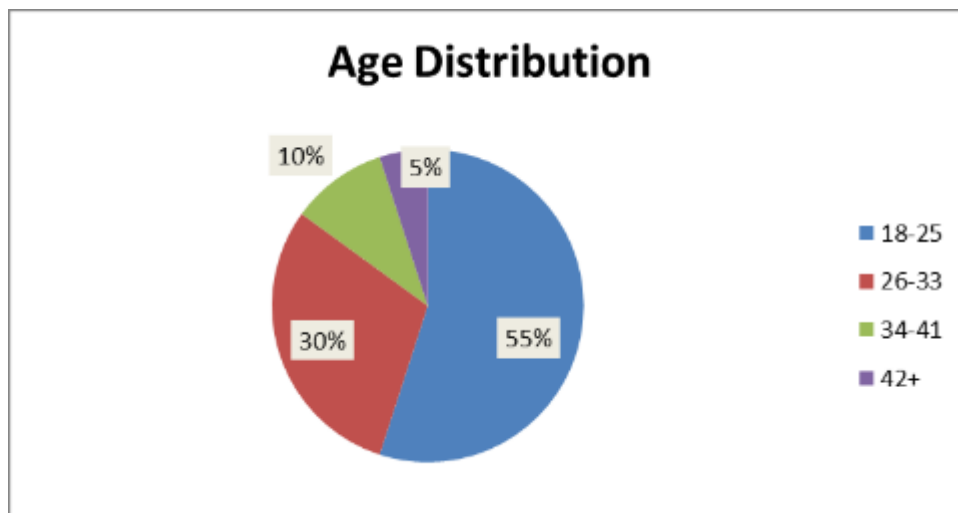


Figure 1 Age Distribution

The majority of the survey participants are young, aged 18-25 years, representing 55% of the sample. This may indicate that younger residents are more willing to participate in surveys or express their views on cultural events. Age groups 26-33 and 34-41 represent smaller percentages, while residents over 42 years old constitute just 5% of the sample.

8.2. Question 2: What is your gender?

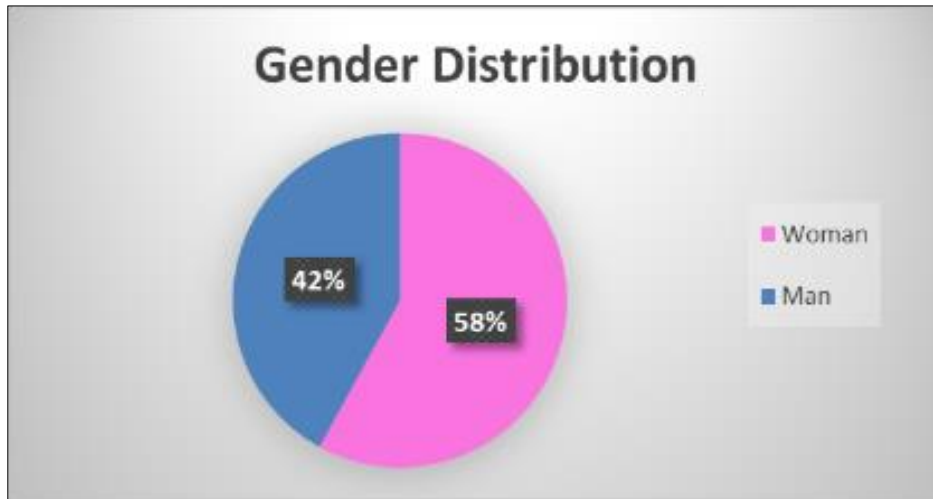


Figure 2 Gender Distribution

Women make up the larger part of the sample with 58%, compared to men at 42%. This difference may reflect a higher willingness among women to participate in social and cultural activities or surveys.

8.3. Question 3: What is your education?

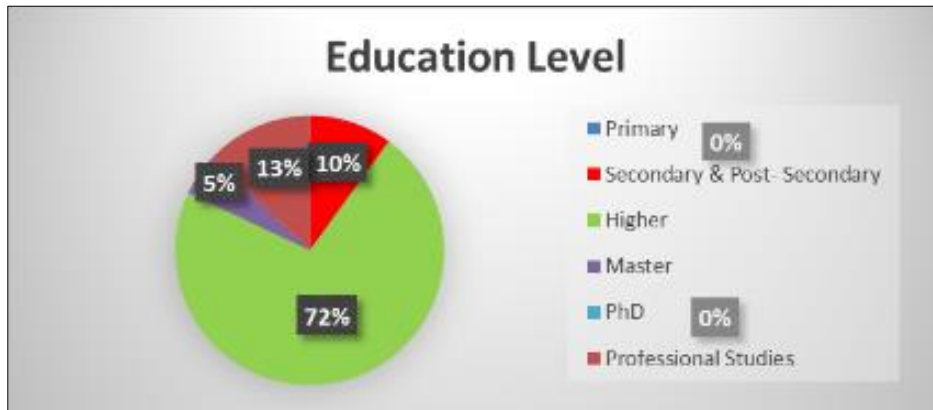


Figure 3 Education Level

The sample is primarily highly educated, with 72% having completed tertiary education and 5% holding a postgraduate degree. None of the participants have only primary education, while a notable 13% have attended vocational studies. This indicates that the participants are mainly individuals with a high level of education.

8.4. Question 4: What is your professional status?

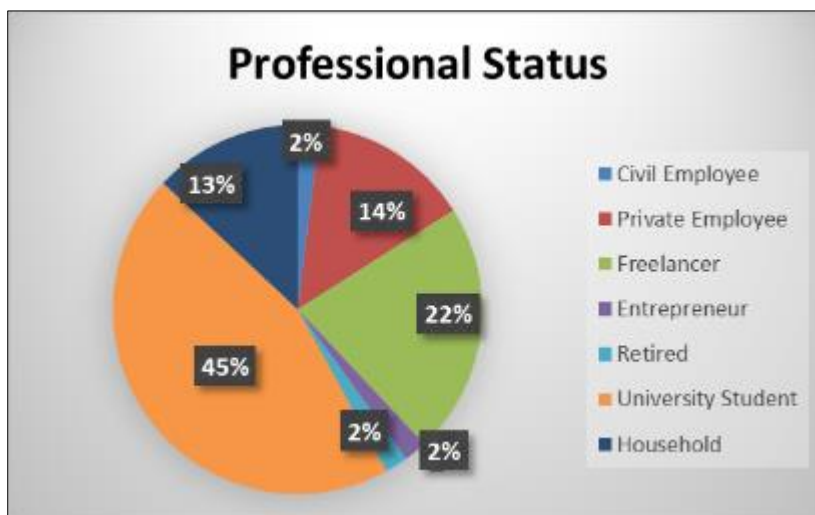


Figure 4 Professional Status

The largest percentage of participants are university students (45%), reflecting the young age of the majority of participants. Freelancers represent a significant percentage (22%), while private employees account for 14%. Public servants, entrepreneurs, and retirees have smaller percentages (2% each), and 13% of participants are engaged in household work.

8.5. Question 5: Do you think that the visitors' impressions of Elefsina Capital of Culture 2023 were good?

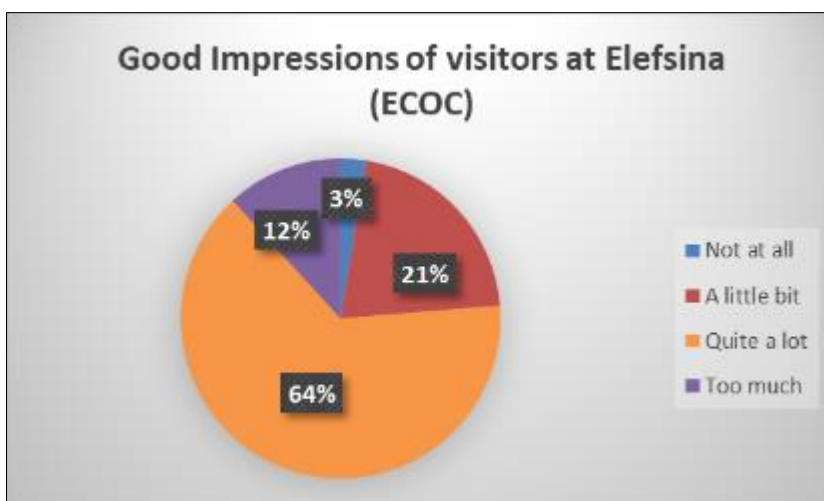


Figure 5 Visitors' impressions of Elefsina

The majority of residents (64.5%) have positive impressions of the Capital of Culture events, while a small percentage (2.6%) state that they had no positive impressions at all. This shows that the events were widely accepted and satisfied the majority of the audience.

8.6. Question 6: Do you think that there was interest from the world for the events of the Municipality of Elefsina in the context of Elefsina Cultural Capital 2023?

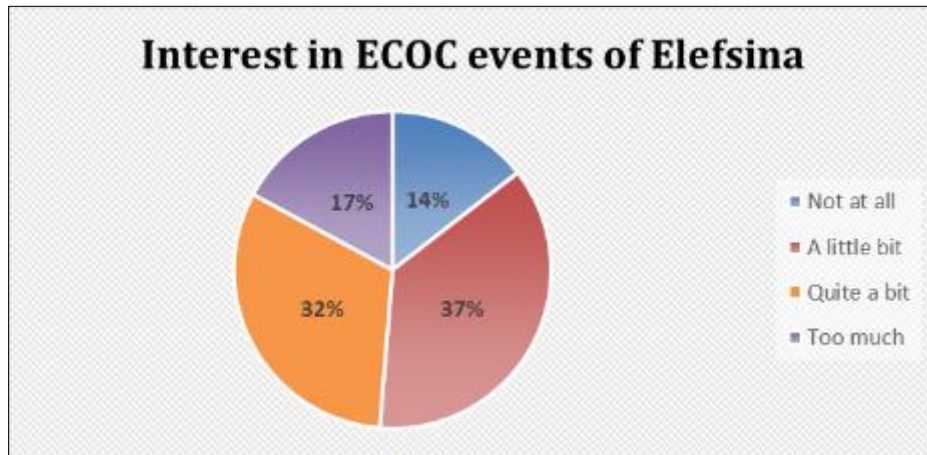


Figure 6 Interest in ECOC events of Elefsina

The results show that although a significant percentage (36.8%) believes there was little interest, a combined 48.7% (31.6% quite a lot + 17.1% too much) believe there was considerable interest from the public for the events. This indicates a division of opinions regarding the interest in the events.

8.7. Question 7: Do you think that the institution of the Capital of Culture helped in the local development of Eleusis?

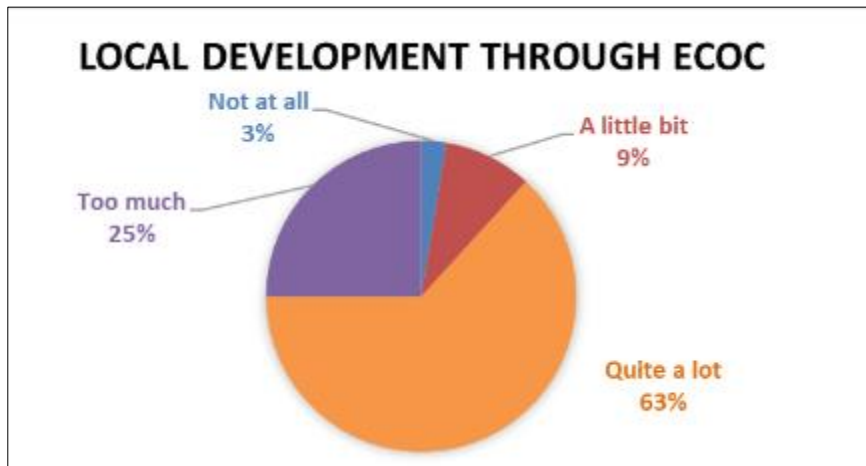


Figure 7 Local development through ECOC

The vast majority (63.2%) believe that the institution significantly helped local development, while an additional 25% believe it helped a lot. Only 2.6% believe there was no contribution. This demonstrates the widely positive perception of residents regarding the impact of the European Capital of Culture on the city's development.

8.8. Question 8: Today Elefsina has a large collection of cultural exhibits and works of art that decorated the city in preparation for the year of celebration of the ECC. Do you think this is an opportunity to create a cultural route within the city?

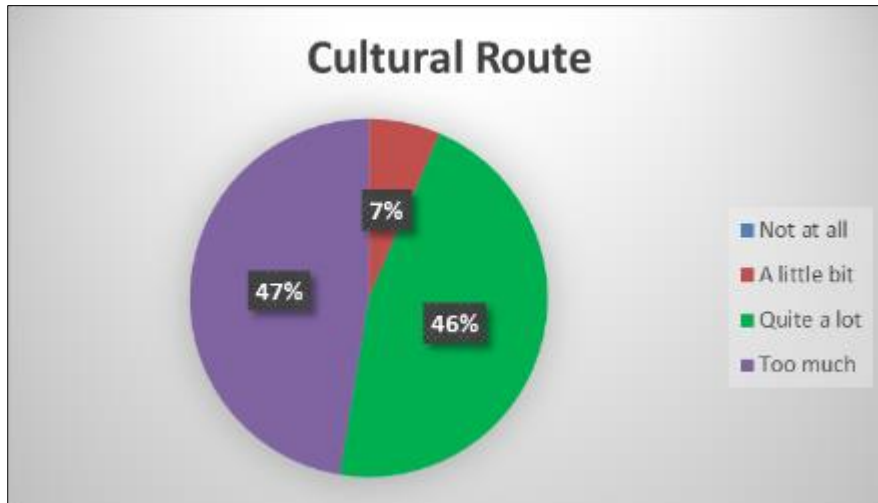


Figure 8 Cultural Route

Residents are almost unanimously in favor of creating a cultural route in the city, with 93.5% (46.1% quite a lot + 47.4% too much) believing this is a good opportunity.

8.9. Question 9: Do you think that the organization of the monuments of the Sacred Way and Elefsina on cultural routes helps to promote culture in the preservation of cultural heritage?



Figure 9 Promotion of Culture

The results are roughly similar to the previous question, showing that residents believe cultural routes will significantly contribute to the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage.

9. Conclusions

The sample of 120 residents of Elefsina seems to have positive views on the Capital of Culture 2023 events, the local development resulting from them, and the idea of creating cultural routes in the city. There is general acceptance and satisfaction with the cultural events and their contribution to the local community and cultural heritage.

Today, the promotion of cultural tourism in Elefsina is crucial for the economic development, social cohesion, and cultural understanding of its residents. The initiatives and programs of the European Union, which have been active

since its early years, now play a pivotal role in strengthening cultural heritage and promoting cultural tourism. Some of the programs that will involve European countries in cultural heritage include achieving the goals of the European Green Deal and the 2030 Agenda, digital transformation, high-quality architecture with the New European Bauhaus, and flagship cultural actions. Simultaneously, funding programs like Horizon Europe 2025-2027 for research and innovation towards a green, digital, and resilient future are being implemented (Bichisao et al., 2019).

It is thus reasonable to conclude that many of these programs complement each other's actions, with some evolving from previous policies. Others arise from current trends and will shape future applications, while the role of culture in achieving the EU's objectives and building a unified European community is non-negotiable.

In summary, Elefsina, through its status as the Capital of Culture, has had the chance to showcase its identity and export its culture to all of Europe. This has promoted intercultural understanding, the uniqueness of cultural diversity, and the sense of European unity. The infrastructure and cultural projects developed for the ECOC can be utilized and maintained over time through the creation of Cultural Corridors that blend the present and the past, further promoting tourism and cultural entrepreneurship in the city.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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