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IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS FOR THE PROMOTION OF FOOD TOURISM IN THE REGION OF CRETE

Georgios Angelakis^{1*}, Christos Lemonakis^{2*}, Georgios Atsalakis³ and Constantin Zopounidis⁴

¹*Hellenic Mediterranean University, Department of Management Science & Technology, Crete, Greece
Email: angelakis@maich.gr*

¹*CIHEAM-Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Chania, Department of Business Economics & Management, Crete, Greece*

²*Administrative Economics and Decision Systems' Laboratory» – (AEDS), Email: lemonakis@hmu.gr*

³*Technical University of Crete, School of Production Engineering and Management, Financial Engineering Laboratory, Crete, Greece, Email: gatsalakis@tuc.gr Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2515-2823>*

⁴*Technical University of Crete, School of Production Engineering and Management, Financial Engineering Laboratory, Crete, Greece, Email: kzopounidis@tuc.gr Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1881-8786>*

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Corresponding Author: Georgios Angelakis, Christos Lemonakis
(angelakis@maich.gr, lemonakis@hmu.gr)

ABSTRACT

Food tourism is experiencing rapid growth in the last years due to the greater interest of visitors in seeking to taste local food products and to participate in food-related activities. The majority of the research on food tourism is focused on the demand side by exploring tourists' behavioral intentions but very few of them analyse the supply side. In this paper, stakeholders' perceptions from the Region of Crete are being investigated in order to prioritize the characteristics of the local agricultural products by using the Eisenhower matrix. The impact of the agricultural sector on tourism, the impact of food tourism on agriculture, and the main problems and obstacles that hinder the promotion of local agricultural products in tourism are discussed, as well as collaboration potentialities for the successful promotion of local agricultural products to tourists.

KEYWORDS: Food Tourism, Sustainable Development, Stakeholders' Perceptions, Marketing, Management.

1. INTRODUCTION

Food tourism has been receiving increasing preference from tourists and attention from academicians as an alternative and significant form of tourism in the last years.

Gastronomy has become one of the fundamental components in the selection of a tourist destination. According to Berbel-Pineda et al. (2019), among their main motivations in choosing their tourist destination, 15% of tourists are influenced by a place's gastronomy. A survey conducted by Hilton Worldwide (2014) found that roughly 36% of tourists visiting the Asia-Pacific region referred to food as a critical factor shaping destinations to which they would travel. Moreover, according to the World Food Travel Association (2020), visitors spend approximately 25% of their travel budget on food and beverages, which can be higher for food lovers and at expensive destinations.

According to the World Food Travel Association, 53% of leisure travelers are food travelers and 81% of travelers learn about food and drink when they visit a destination, while 59% of travelers believe that food and beverages are more important when they travel than they were 5 years ago (World Food Travel Association, 2020).

Those trends have given rise to another type of tourism, the so-called 'food tourism'. Tourists are identified into different groups such as comfort seekers, moderates and authenticity seekers, based on the degree of interest in the authenticity of local food and similar gastronomic activities (Özdemir and Seyitoğlu, 2017); depending on the preference of their gastronomic experiences, they are identified as survivors, enjoyers, and experiencers (Cruz et al., 2019). The group of individuals whose primary reason for traveling is gastronomy, who are highly involved in related activities, are called gastronomes or food tourists/travelers, who may even travel far away for the purpose of a food/gastronomic experience (Hendijania and Chern, 2014).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Food tourism is considered as an alternative form of tourism in comparison with mass tourism, attracting highly interested tourists (Douglas et al., 2001). According to Stewart et al. (2008), this type of tourism could act as the main attraction for visiting a destination. Food tourism plays a significant role in the development of touristic destinations as a way of supplementing tourism (Kumar, 2019) and in tourists' decisions, since around one third of tourists' budgets are dedicated to purchasing local food and beverages and participating in related food activities

(World Health Organization, 2015).

The choice of the food destination orientation depends on the tourists' motives (Afonso et al., 2018; Jia, 2020; Kim et al., 2019c; Kraftchick et al., 2014; Li et al., 2018; Lopez-Guzamn et al., 2014b; Rodriguez-Gutierrez et al., 2020). Destination food image (Chang and Mak, 2018; Chen et al., 2023; Durmaz et al., 2022; Gorji et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2023; Okumus and Cetin, 2018; Park and Widyanta, 2022; Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun, 2019; Ruiz et al., 2023; Seyitoglu and Ivanov, 2020) is created by the initiatives of stakeholders' networks (Francioni et al., 2017; Musso and Francioni, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2019) to attract tourists by the appropriate marketing actions (Jalis et al., 2014; Jerez, 2023; Nelson, 2016; Perez-Priego et al., 2023; Picazo et al., 2025; Praesri et al., 2022; Thompson, 2020) that promote the culture (Cheng, 2023; Fuste-Forne and Filimon, 2025; Lopez-Guzman et al., 2014a; Ng and Karim, 2016; Tanwar et al., 2018), history (Oktay and Sadikoglou, 2018a,b), and authenticity (Cai et al., 2021; DiPietro et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020a; Le et al., 2019; Osman et al., 2014; Ozdemir and Seyitoglu, 2017; Wang, 2025) of the destination, food service and local food products. Experiences (Cruz et al., 2019; Garcia-Perez and Castillo-Ortiz, 2024; Gomez-Carmona et al., 2023; Huang, 2017; Mora et al., 2021; Perez-Galvez et al., 2017a; Perez-Galvez et al., 2017b; Stone and Sthapit, 2024) could enhance satisfaction and consequently intentions to buy, visit and revisit a food service establishment and/or destination. Moreover, sustainable food tourism development could be attained, besides the increased and responsible intentions of tourists' behavioral outcomes, from sustainable policies (Bertella, 2020; Nave et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2019; Pellegrini et al., 2023; Roy et al., 2017; Star et al., 2020; Thomas-Francois et al., 2017) as well as by stakeholders for the enhancement of the economic, sociocultural and environmental benefits of the destination.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In the majority of papers, studies were made on the demand side, by examining tourists' behavior through local agricultural products (Angelakis et al., 2002). For a broader view, the supply side should be analyzed by examining the local stakeholders' view in order to have a more holistic approach for the sustainable development of food tourism in Crete.

The study was conducted during the period 2024-2025, focusing on the production and consumption of local agricultural products, as well as their promotion, in the tourism sector and tourism development. A well-structured questionnaire was

developed in order to contribute to the formation and completion of the decision-making tool by providing information on the various points through a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) for Crete. Through the questionnaire and in order to facilitate the collective synthesis of the opinions of all stakeholders, a prioritization of the individual parameters has also been made, in order to determine individual needs and find ways to promote food tourism in the Region of Crete.

The sample consisted of 155 fully completed questionnaires from different groups of stakeholders in Crete, active in the agricultural and tourism sector, as well as with stakeholders from the public sector and Academic Institutes such as:

- Educational/Research Institutes (Universities, Observatories, Institutes)
- Local and Regional Public Authorities (Regional Unities, Municipalities, Chambers of Commerce, Economic Chambers, Federations of Small and Medium enterprises)
- Agricultural Unions, Associations, Cooperatives, Networks, Centres, Partnerships, Organisations, Enterprises
- Unions, Associations, Federations of Touristic Accommodations, Managers & Employees, Enterprises, Self-Employees

Almost four out of ten stakeholders were from the agricultural sector, three out of ten from the tourism sector, two out of ten from public authorities and one out of ten from educational and research Institutes. Moreover, the sample was equally distributed among western and eastern Crete.

For the analysis of the questionnaires concerning the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, the Eisenhower matrix was used. The Eisenhower Matrix is an approach that supports decision-making, through 4 categories concerning the degree of urgency and importance: 1. Most

urgent, most important; 2. Most urgent, less important; 3. Less urgent, more important; and 4. Less urgent, less important.

"Important" refers to the importance of each characteristic of local agricultural products. "Urgent" refers to how immediately a measure should be implemented to improve the situation of the local agricultural products.

A Google Form was prepared and stakeholders were asked to rank the points according to their importance and urgency using a Likert scale, whereby 1 was "least" and 5 was "most" urgent or important.

4. RESULTS

4.1. SWOT Analysis

Concerning the results, it should be noted that some characteristics may be significant but not so urgent so as to take action; the Eisenhower Matrix prioritizes each characteristic of the local agricultural products, taking into account both significance and urgency. All of the characteristics of the agricultural products concerning strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats seem to be on the upper left quarter of the matrix (see Figures 1,2,3,4) which states that all of them are urgent and important, classifying them in a hierarchical way according to the regional stakeholders' perspective.

4.1.1. Strengths

Local agricultural products support the local economy, community and businesses, contributing to the economic and social sustainability of Crete; they have better taste and higher quality than non-local produce, due to the unique characteristics of the terroir elements of Crete. They concern fresh ingredients, minimally processed, with more natural elements, making them seem healthier and of higher quality compared to imported goods.

Table 1: Eisenhower Matrix Of Strengths.

STRENGTHS	Important	Urgent
• They support the local economy and jobs (S1)	4,55	4,34
• They have better taste and quality (S5)	4,62	4,21
• They support the community and local businesses (S2)	4,46	4,28
• They are fresh ingredients, minimally processed, with more natural ingredients (S4)	4,42	4,15
• There is a better connection and trust with local producers (S10)	4,32	4,22
• They are healthier and have more nutrients (S7)	4,33	4,1
• They are more authentic and unique (S9)	4,26	4,12
• The environmental impact or carbon footprint is reduced (S3)	3,96	4,14
• There is better food safety and traceability (S8)	3,9	4,03
• Prices are lower (S6)	3,01	3,44

Source: Author's Own Work

The connection with the local producers is direct, effective and based on trust; thus, there is more direct communication with the producer compared with

the situation for imported products, where most times it is very difficult to find the producer. Local products are more authentic and unique, meaning

that they cannot be found elsewhere. Furthermore, the environmental impact or carbon footprint is reduced since the CO2 emissions from transportation are lower, contributing to environmental sustainability. Moreover, there is better food safety and traceability since the production process is much clearer.

However, prices are not considered to be so low. In Crete, producers cannot achieve economies of

scale due to their small size. This is a disadvantage of local high-quality products and it is one of the reasons that some food establishments prefer not to provide local agricultural products in their establishments, replacing them with non-local/imported products that may be of lower quality.

Eisenhower matrix - strengths

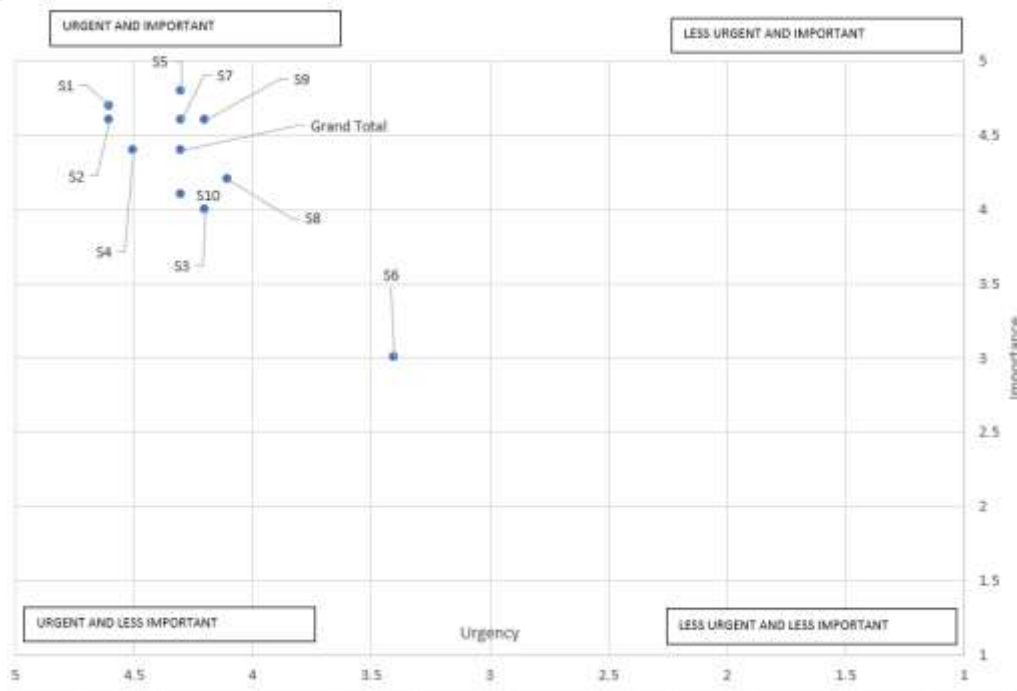


Figure 1: Eisenhower Matrix - Strengths. Source: Author's Own Work

4.1.2. Weaknesses

The main weakness of local agricultural products is the aging rural population. It is a fact that there is a lack of young people involved in agricultural sector, and hence fewer people that can support it. The lack of a labor force is evident, since most people,

especially locals, are reluctant to work in agriculture which has as a consequence on the abandonment of rural areas. The high production costs (i.e. energy, oil, fertilizers and animal feed) are a reality, especially given the prevailing global politics, which makes it very difficult for the farmers to cover their costs.

Table 2: Eisenhower Matrix Of Weaknesses.

WEAKNESSES	Important	Urgent
• Aging of the rural population and lack of young people (W3)	4,62	4,51
• Shortages of labor in rural areas (W2)	4,59	4,51
• High production costs, especially of energy, oil, fertilizers and animal feed (W10)	4,57	4,5
• Abandonment of rural areas (W4)	4,45	4,43
• Bureaucracy and administrative difficulties (W8)	4,41	4,34
• Lack of vocational training and information (W5)	4,33	4,34
• Lack of investment and infrastructure (W6)	4,31	4,28
• Unfair trade practices and limited access to markets (W9)	4,15	4,14
• Lack of know-how (W7)	3,96	4,01
• Small size of agricultural holdings (W1)	4,01	3,86

Source: Author's Own Work

Bureaucracy and administrative difficulties are also issues that farmers face and there should be fast-

track procedures to solve the issues that emerge. Farmers have a lack of vocational training, since most have no specialised education and they are not aware of some topics due to ignorance or indifference to find the information needed. Educational institutes should provide seminars to farmers in order to be better educated in agricultural topics and be

informed about the latest technologies and trends in the market. Lack of investment and infrastructure is another issue, which the government, through banks, could assist with, in the provision of low interest loans and subsidies.

Eisenhower matrix - weaknesses

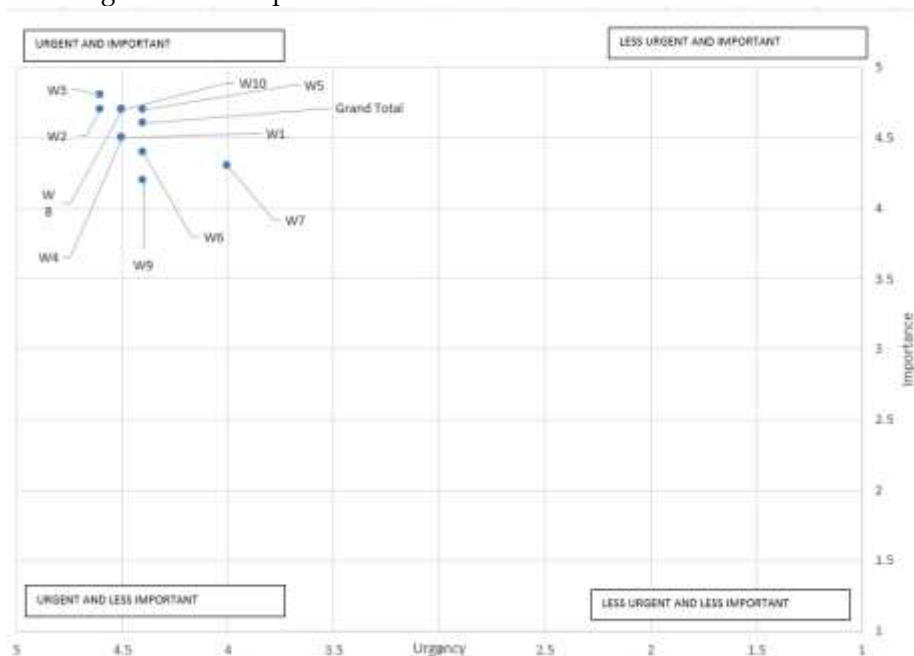


Figure 2: Eisenhower Matrix - Weaknesses. Source: Author's Own Work.

Unfair trade practices and limited market access are problems that the majority of the farmers face; thus, educational institutes could assist them with the provision of an efficient strategic marketing plan for better access to new markets. Lack of know-how is crucial, especially in new technologies; this can be alleviated with seminars provided by educational institutes. Finally, to overcome the small size of agricultural holdings, cooperation is needed among the farmers in order to enlarge their holdings and gain the benefits of economies of scale.

4.1.3: Opportunities

Tax incentives and financing to optimize source allocation between crops are on the agenda of the government, encouraged by suitable programs that

will support farmers and the economic sustainability of the sector. The connection between university research departments and agribusiness is also very crucial since it has been observed that farmers and agribusiness are not well informed regarding the latest evolutions in the agricultural sector at the national, European and international levels. Academic institutes could provide such information to them, bridging the gap between the connections of academic institutes with the agricultural sector by disseminating up-to-date knowledge. Environmental protection through the reduction of pollutant emissions will satisfy the environmental sustainability of the area, supported by the appropriate energy policies of the Region in the framework of the directives of the European Union.

Table 3: Eisenhower Matrix Of Opportunities.

OPPORTUNITIES	Important	Urgent
• Tax incentives & financing to optimize the allocation of sources between crops (O7)	4,39	4,37
• Connecting university research departments with the primary sector and agricultural enterprises (O6)	4,39	4,33
• Environmental protection, reduction of pollutant emissions (O4)	4,35	4,35
• Increase in employment (O2)	4,34	4,3
• Strengthening the investment activity and entrepreneurship of small and medium-sized enterprises (O5)	4,35	4,27
• Improvement and modernization of existing infrastructure as well as the creation of new ones (O10)	4,31	4,31

• Strengthening the competitiveness of enterprises (O3)	4,29	4,17
• Registration and certification of agricultural products and their standardization and marketing processes (O9)	4,26	4,18
• Balanced regional development with diversity of arable land (restructuring) (O1)	4,19	4,12
• Information, training, mobilization, introduction and reward of innovation through business competitions (O8)	4,04	3,89

Source: Author's Own Work

Employment will be enhanced in order to satisfy the multiple needs of visitors since there is a continuous increase in the number of tourists coming to Crete, especially since the Covid period. Strengthening the investment activity and entrepreneurship of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) should be a priority in order for

SMEs to survive and be competitive. The improvement and modernization of the existing infrastructures as well as the creation of new ones is a necessary condition in order to attract more visitors and better promote the local agricultural products.

Eisenhower matrix - opportunities

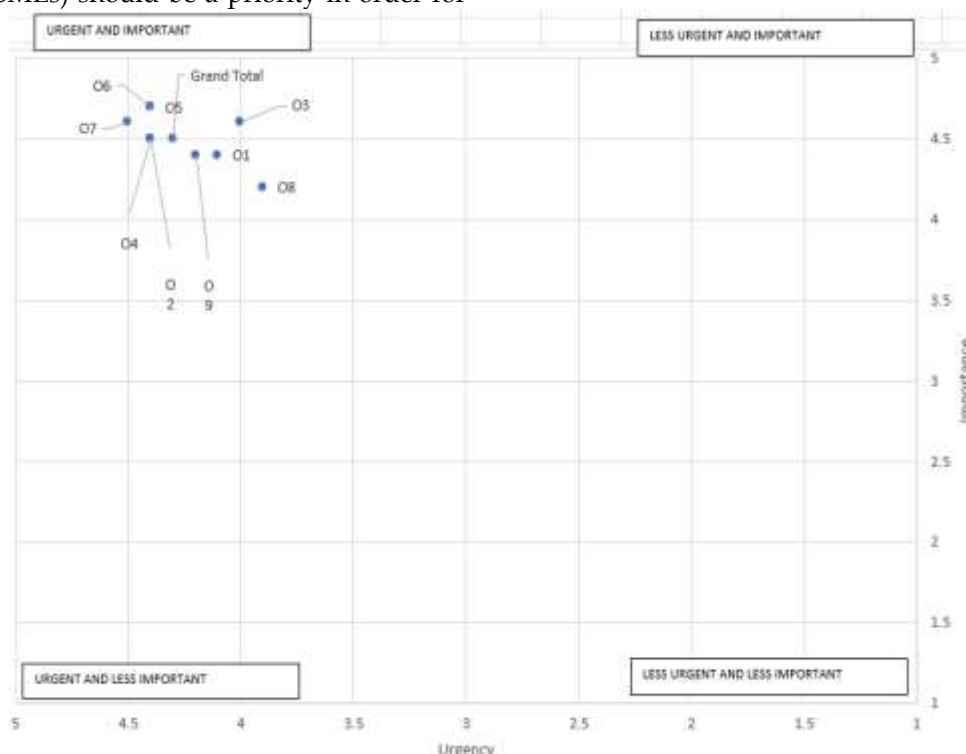


Figure 3: Eisenhower Matrix - Opportunities.

Source: Author's Own Work.

The competitiveness of enterprises will be increased by the participation of more companies in a wider network with a common target. Registration and certification of agricultural products and their standardization and marketing processes is on the top of the list of agribusinesses, with an opportunity to participate in the common brand name of "Crete". Balanced regional development with a diversity of arable land (restructuring) will take place in the next years since some crops should be replaced by others according to the market needs. Rewarding the most innovative business through competitions will be an opportunity for agribusiness in order to become more progressive.

4.1.4. Threats

Climate change is the number one threat that is most important and urgent, which is why appropriate measures have already been taken and will continue in the future, not only at the regional level, but worldwide. Inconsistent tactics in the implementation of subsidies, resulting in little protection and unequal treatment between regions and producers, is a topic that should be handled by the government by looking separately into each Region's real problems and unique needs. Increased Hellenization of important Greek products is a serious problem that distorts competition and quality, leading to producer mobilizations, as illegal imports with "smart" labels create unfair competition and harm the national and local economy, requiring stricter supervision by the authorities.

Table 4: Eisenhower Matrix Of Threats.

THREATS	Important	Urgent
• Climate change (T8)	4,41	4,42
• Wrong tactics in the implementation of subsidies, resulting in little protection and unequal treatment between regions and producers (T4)	4,37	4,37
• Increase in cheap imported agricultural products that distort competition (T1)	4,34	4,33
• Failure to adapt with the insurance regulations and the absence of elementary preparation for the increasing losses (T3)	4,23	4,28
• Imports of cheap low-quality agricultural products (T9)	4,23	4,24
• Irrational organization and management of agricultural plots (T7)	4,1	4,1
• Lack of elementary functioning of the banking system and lack of liquidity (T5)	4,1	4,08
• Marginalization of farmers, livestock farmers, cooperatives, groups, and processing from the possibility of using RES (T2)	4,06	4,08
• Changes in consumer standards (fast food) (T10)	4,01	3,98
• Failure to deal with bad loans of farmers, livestock farmers and poultry farmers (T6)	3,88	3,92

Source: Author’s Own Work.

Failure to adapt with insurance regulations and the absence of a plan to decrease the ever-increasing losses due to unpredictable environmental issues is a threat for farmers and posits a need to be well prepared. Imports of cheap low-quality agricultural goods is a serious threat because they replace local products, distort competition and deteriorate the brand image of the destination. Many farmers cannot optimize the organization and management of their agricultural land due to their small holdings; thus, they should be supported by the relative stakeholders. Sometimes, there may be a lack of basic

functioning of the banking system and a lack of liquidity, which prevents farmers from investing in their business. Farmers, livestock farmers, cooperatives, and producer groups have fewer possibilities of participating in programmes for Renewable Energy Sources, due to the fact that funds for such investments have been mainly oriented to the tertiary and secondary sectors. Finally, there is the possibility of failure to address the “red” loans of farmers, which will make it very difficult for farmers to survive in the field.

Eisenhower matrix - threats

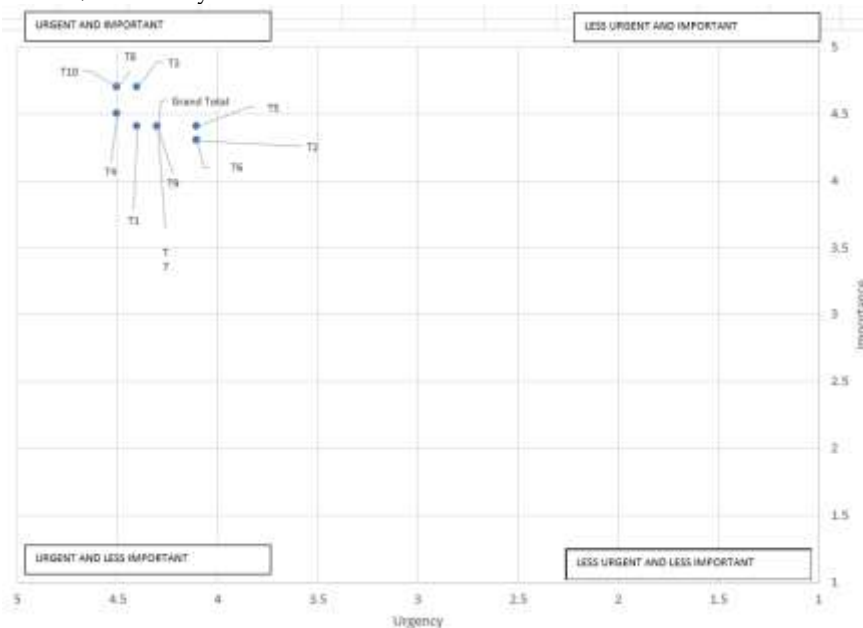


Figure 4: Eisenhower Matrix - Threats.

Source: Author’s Own Work.

It is also evident that fast food shops have spread worldwide, changing consumers’ and travelers’ habits and standards. This trend distorts the competition of the local agricultural products, since fast foods are made of cheap and most likely low-quality and low-priced products, which may make

them preferred over local gastronomy. This situation may also lead to the loss of Cretan gastronomic culture.

5. IMPLICATIONS

Concerning the impact of the agricultural sector

on tourism, it seems to be very crucial. Stakeholders stated that the natural environment and culture constitute a comparative food tourism and agrotourism advantage of the Region, while local traditions and culture and their connection with the food tourism of the Region together with the participation of local residents in food tourism development activities could contribute to the further satisfaction of tourists, highlighting Crete as a popular food tourism destination. The Cretan diet and the quality of local agricultural products contribute significantly to attracting tourists, while consumption of local agricultural products contributes to the development of knowledge and sociability as well as to the health of tourists. Regarding the extension of the tourist season, the existence of airlines during the winter months together with the appropriate promotion of food tourism and the participation of tourists in agrotourism and related activities (olive picking, grape growing, cheese production, etc.) could significantly contribute to this direction. On the other hand, it is stated that more agrotourism and food tourism activities in the area should be developed, and the infrastructure (road network, signage) and access, especially to some agrotourism firms, needs to be highly improved in the Region.

Moreover, according to the regional stakeholders, the impact of food tourism on the agricultural sector is very high and beneficial as well. Food tourism contributes to the sustainability of the Region to a high degree. Economic sustainability is achieved by the increase of sales of local agricultural products in the Region, so the regional income is increased at the same time; social sustainability is achieved by the increase of agricultural land use with the increase of employment for local residents of rural areas, acting as a deterrent to the abandonment of the countryside; cultural sustainability is achieved by the preservation of the culture of local residents; and environmental sustainability is achieved by the implementation of friendly production processes. Moreover, with the great potentialities of food tourism, there is an incentive for those who are actively involved in the agrotouristic sector to improve their level of knowledge, skills and competencies through their participation in educational programs/seminars that academic and research institutes provide in order to increase their competitiveness.

6. DISCUSSION

Over the last two decades, there is an increase in research concerning food tourism, but the majority of the articles are focused on the demand side (tourists)

rather than the supply (local stakeholders) side (Soontiens et al., 2018). Research shows that there is lack of cooperation among local producers (Francioni et al., 2017), lack of effective representation in decision-making at the societal level (Soontiens et al., 2018), inability for internalization of local food firms (Francioni et al., 2017; Musso and Francioni, 2015), absence of effective involvement of local residents (Xu et al., 2016) and of various agents and tour operators in food activities (Garibaldi et al., 2017; Millán-Vazquez de la Torre et al., 2017).

The involvement of local stakeholders is significant for the enhancement of sustainability. The creation of local networks of key stakeholders from different sectors with an efficient coordination is of utmost importance for the effective promotion of the local food products and the touristic destination through well-structured marketing techniques that could help SMEs to enhance their competitiveness. The network should be supported by the up-to-date knowledge provided about the agricultural and tourism sectors from academic/research Institutes, the encouragement of environmentally friendly policies by the Region to cope with climate change and the financial aid from the Government in the form of subsidies, tax incentives and low-rate loans, in order to have the liquidity needed to take up the required investments and increase the efficiency through innovation. This will lead to the improvement of the quality of agricultural products, the reduction of the prices due to the achievement of economies of scale, the exclusive promotion to the food establishments through special agreements based on relationships of trust that will restrict the import of low-quality products and the improvement of the destination's food image in the Region and the related behavioral intentions of tourists.

The main findings are also consistent with other surveys. Coordination, voice mechanisms, knowledge sharing, mutual understanding (Soontiens et al., 2018), trust and personal relationships (Roy et al., 2017) could contribute significantly to the internalization of small producers (Musso and Francioni, 2015), the enhancement of innovation in local food products (Szpilko, 2017) and the provision of solutions for proximity difficulties in an urban target market where the local industry is located in rural areas, which could act as a competitive advantage compared to other touristic destinations enhancing at the same time the sustainable development of the area.

Almost all the stakeholders agreed on the fact that small-medium tourism enterprises could collaborate in order to offer combined tourism packages,

providing a full package to tourists and increasing their income at the same time.

The sectors that could develop collaboration among them are mainly farmers with hotels and restaurants. Farmers could provide their high-quality products directly to hotels and restaurants and the hotels/restaurants could reduce the low-quality imported products from other countries. Other tourism and cultural businesses could act in a similar way to enhance the overall experience and satisfaction of tourists concerning the destination. Travel agents/agencies are also significant in order to suggest and provide the appropriate agrotouristic routes and activities to tourists. The role of academic and research institutes is very important and can act as an intermediary stakeholder in order to bridge the gap between theory and the real market, by providing to farmers all the necessary data, knowledge and information so as to better manage their products and promote them in the market.

Tour guides are necessary in order to enhance the knowledge and experience of tourists when they visit agrotouristic companies and/or are sightseeing. Municipal and public bodies should develop, design and apply policies that encourage and enhance the production of local agricultural products, by giving incentives to people to stay in the rural areas and enhance their income. Environmental companies and firms that are active in Renewable Energy Sources are also vital in order to prompt agricultural companies to use environmentally friendly methods of producing their products, by decreasing at the same time CO₂ emissions and being adaptive to the challenges of climate change. Finally, transportation companies such as buses and rental car companies should maintain their vehicles at reasonable prices in order to be more affordable to tourists to use them more days in order to visit agrotouristic companies in the region.

According to the regional stakeholders, local agricultural products should be promoted by having a label. Branding is very crucial for the promotion of the product. Local agricultural products should be promoted in catering and accommodation facilities, so that tourists could have the opportunity to taste and buy them. Creation of a platform where tourists can learn about local agricultural businesses and local agricultural products is of utmost importance, hosted on a formal prestigious website of the Region that should be continuously updated in order for tourists to get familiar with all the provided products and activities. Visits to farms, olive mills, wineries, dairies and generally to businesses of gastronomic interest should be well organized and provided by an

expert guide.

Advertising agricultural products with tourist content, advertising spots which are broadcast from time to time on well-known television channels, and the production of documentaries will lead to the successful promotion of the local agricultural products. Exhibitions can take place in Greece or abroad in order for the local agricultural products to become known outside of the boundaries of Crete. An institution can be created that will organise an annual agri-food exhibition to take place every year in Crete with the participation not only of regional farmers but also with entrepreneurs from other countries (international exhibition) in order to come to Crete, taste the local agricultural products and make deals directly with local producers through B2B meetings. Cooking lessons and competitions based on the island's local agricultural products could also take place not only at the regional level, but also at the national and international level, in order to promote the high-quality agricultural products and the popular Cretan gastronomy, which is very tasty and healthy.

Food tourism could contribute quite efficiently to the socio-economic development by promoting the cultural and historical attributes of a destination, by taking into account not only tourists behavior but also stakeholders' views, which is in line with Kumar (2019) outcomes. Taking into account the opinions of local stakeholders, the policy makers should promote alternative and local food systems together with conventional systems in the development of rural areas as O'Neill (2014) suggested.

A sustainable model of entrepreneurial initiative that reconstructs the territory in such a way that it could be beneficial not only for tourists but also for the local stakeholders and the residents, by respecting the environment, encouraging local youth employment, tightening social relations, maintaining natural resources and promoting cultural heritage could also be promoted based on Sanita (2016) analysis. Furthermore, according to Lee et al. (2015), the active involvement of local residents with tourists, offering experiential activities by the creation of food clusters with the appearance of strong leadership, could lead to the sustainable development of an area.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first survey in the Region of Crete in which quite a high number of key stakeholders from the tourism and agricultural sectors, together with academic/research institutes and public authorities, participated in order to pinpoint the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of local

agricultural products, through the use of Eisenhower matrix methodology, as well as prioritizing individual parameters in order to determine needs and find ways to promote food tourism in the Region of Crete through a collective synthesis of the opinions of the relevant stakeholders.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Food tourism is developing at a very fast growth rate in recent years. There are lots of travelers, foodies, food hunters and gastronomes, whose primary motivation is to visit a destination in order to taste the local agricultural products and/or take up related activities, to learn and explore local culture, history, and food authenticity, by acquiring memorable experiential activities, contributing to the sustainable development of the touristic destination.

A stakeholder analysis also took place in order to have a holistic approach by recording the opinions of regional stakeholders from the educational, public, agricultural, touristic and private sectors to determine the needs and find ways to promote food/gastronomic tourism in the Region of Crete.

Regarding the promotion of local agricultural products in the tourism sector, there seem to be some main problems, such as the lack of an organized network for the marketing and distribution of the products, lack of marketing techniques, and a lack of a coordinating body to manage that network, since there is a lack of cooperation and trust between local businesses. Some other problems are the limited supply of seasonal agricultural products, and the creation of agreements with other large businesses outside the region and territory, which results in the higher prices of the local agricultural products compared to imported similar ones.

Strengthening inter-sectorial linkages between the agriculture sector and accommodation properties will benefit the corresponding stakeholders and encourage youth employment, which could lead to sustainable tourism development as pinpointed by Nguyen et al. (2019). Moreover, the relationships among food producers and restaurant owners, attitudes (preferences, past experience), behaviors towards sourcing (order processing time), unique product characteristics and promotional materials play significant roles in willingness to pay (WTP) for local food as inputs among the value chain of restaurants, as noticed by Sharma et al. (2014), whereas the significance of personal relationships and trust among farmers, producers (sellers), food distributors, and food services (buyers) could contribute to the sustainability of food systems and the maintenance of competitive advantage at the

same time, as mentioned by Roy et al. (2017).

Understanding ongoing changes in tourist drivers over time is crucial and will assist policy makers in the implementation of the appropriate marketing tools that will enhance the satisfaction of tourists and stimulate their intentions to revisit and recommend the touristic destination. Based on the findings of the stakeholders' survey, successful marketing and management initiatives could be implemented through a well-established cross-sectoral Local Network that could lead to effective coordination, mutual trust and benefits among the stakeholders (De Rosa et al., 2017).

Regional successful marketing techniques of a destination are also in line with other surveys and can be achieved by the establishment of an official website for visitors where they could upload their impressions (Jong and Varley, 2017; Nelson, 2016); the creation of an official governmental Instagram account can support the new trend of food-stagramming which will advertise unique local food characteristics (Yu and Sun, 2019) that could also be very useful for tourists, since they could share food experiences, attitudes and impressions from a destination that could influence the travel behavior of their followers (Wong et al., 2019); annual events can be promoted with national traditional foods (Jalis et al., 2014); and the promotion of material emphasizing the unique characteristics of Cretan gastronomy could be combined with the culture and history of the area, linking it with the healthy beneficial properties of the Mediterranean Diet.

The existence of direct international flights during winter time and the improvement of the infrastructure, together with the active involvement of local residents with tourists by offering them experiential activities, could lead to the sustainable development of the Region of Crete by the extension of the touristic period, emphasizing the unique economic, cultural and environmental characteristics of local quality agricultural products, which is much in line with Lee et al. (2015).

Finally, the high quality of the local agricultural products of Crete is recognized globally, by the unanimous proclamation of Crete as a "European Region of Gastronomy 2026" by the "International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Arts & Tourism" (IGCAT). This could act as a unique opportunity for the Region to promote Cretan food culture at an international level through a well-established cross-sectoral network that will strengthen the image of the Region as a food tourism destination, enhancing sustainable tourism development by positively affecting tourists' behavioral intentions to consume

local agricultural products, and to revisit the destination and recommend it to others.

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APPENDICES

A. Questionnaire – Regional Stakeholders Survey

Swot Analysis

✓ Please select the importance and urgency of the characteristics of local agricultural products, from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much).

STRENGTHS

- They support the local economy and jobs

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- They support the community and local businesses

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- The environmental impact or carbon footprint is reduced

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- They are fresh ingredients, minimally processed, with more natural ingredients

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- They have better taste and quality

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Prices are lower

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- They are healthier and have more nutrients

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- There is better food safety and traceability

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					

Urgent					
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- They are more authentic and unique

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- There is a better connection and trust with local producers

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

✓ Please select the importance and urgency of the weaknesses in the production of local agricultural products, from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much).

WEAKNESSES

- Small size of agricultural holdings

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Shortages of labor in rural areas

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Aging of the rural population and lack of young people

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Abandonment of rural areas

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Lack of vocational training and information

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Lack of investment and infrastructure

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Lack of know-how

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Bureaucracy and Administrative Difficulties

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Unfair Trade Practices and Limited Access to Markets

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- High production costs, especially of energy, oil, fertilizers and animal feed

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

✓ Please select the importance and urgency of the opportunities for the production of local agricultural products, from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much).

OPPORTUNITIES

- Balanced regional development with diversity of arable land (restructuring)

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Increase in employment

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Strengthening the competitiveness of enterprises

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Environmental protection, reduction of pollutant emissions

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Strengthening the investment activity and entrepreneurship of small and medium-sized enterprises

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Connecting university research departments with the primary sector and agricultural enterprises

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Tax incentives & financing to optimize the allocation of resources between crops

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Information, training, mobilization & introduction and reward of innovation through business competitions

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Registration and certification of agricultural products and their standardization and marketing processes

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Improvement and modernization of existing infrastructure as well as the creation of new ones

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

✓ Please select the importance and urgency of the threats to local agricultural production, from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much)

THREATS

- Increase of cheap imported agricultural products that distort competition

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Marginalization of farmers, livestock farmers, cooperatives, groups, and processing from the possibility of using RES

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Failure to adapt with the insurance regulations and the absence of elementary preparation for the increasing losses

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Wrong tactics in the implementation of subsidies, resulting in little protection and unequal treatment between regions and producers

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Lack of elementary functioning of the banking system and lack of liquidity

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Failure to deal with bad loans of farmers, livestock farmers and poultry farmers

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Irrational organization and management of agricultural plots

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Climate Change

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Import of cheap low-quality agricultural products

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- Changes in consumer standards (fast food)

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					
Urgent					

- ✓ What do you think are the problems that hinder the promotion of local agricultural products in tourism?

PROBLEMS

- Lack of a coordinating body

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					

- Lack of cooperation and trust between local businesses

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					

- Lack of marketing techniques of products

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					

- Lack of an organized network for the marketing and distribution of products

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					

- Limited supply of seasonal agricultural products

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					

- High prices in relation to imported products

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					

- Creation of agreements with other large businesses outside the region and territory

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Important					

✓ Do you think that small and medium-sized tourism businesses could collaborate to offer combined tourism packages?

Yes

No

✓ If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, what sectors could these businesses be from? (multiple answers)

Farmers

Hotels

Restaurants

Travel agents/offices

Municipal/Public authorities

Academic/Research Institutes

Transportation/Rental vehicles

Tour Guides

Other Tourism/Cultural Enterprises

RES and environmental enterprises

✓ Would you be interested in participating in this type of network?

Yes

No

✓ How could local agricultural products be promoted to tourists?

Please select the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the promotion of local agricultural products to tourists:

- Exhibitions taking place in Greece or abroad

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Cooking competitions based on the island's local agricultural products

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Advertising agricultural products with tourist content

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- The creation of an institution, an annual agri-food exhibition, which takes place every year in Crete

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Documentaries for the promotion of local agricultural products

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Advertising spots, which are broadcast from time to time on well-known television channels

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Visits to farms, olive mills, wineries, dairies and generally to businesses of gastronomic interest

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Creation of a platform where tourists can learn about local agricultural businesses and local agricultural products

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Promotion of local agricultural products in catering and accommodation facilities

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Branding on all local agricultural products (label)

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

✓ IMPACT OF THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR ON TOURISM

Please select the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the impact of the agricultural sector on tourism:

- Crete is a popular food tourism destination

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- With the appropriate promotion of food tourism and the participation of tourists in agrotourism and related activities (olive picking, grape growing, cheese production, etc.), the tourist season could be extended to the winter months

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- The existence of airlines during the winter months could contribute to the extension of the tourist season

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- The natural environment and culture constitute a comparative food tourism and agrotourism advantage of the region

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- The Cretan diet and the quality of local agricultural products contribute significantly to attracting tourists

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Consumption of local agricultural products contributes to the development of knowledge and sociability as well as to the health of tourists

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Local tradition and culture and their connection with the food tourism of the region contribute to the highest level of satisfaction of tourists

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- There are a numerous of agrotourism and food tourism activities in the region

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Infrastructure (road network, signage) and access are at a satisfactory level in the region

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- The participation of local residents in food tourism development activities could contribute to further

satisfaction of tourists

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

✓ **IMPACT OF FOOD TOURISM ON AGRICULTURE**

Please select the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the impact of food tourism on the agricultural sector

- Food tourism contributes to the sustainability of the region

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism improves the income level of the region

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism increases sales of local agricultural products in the region

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism increases employment for local residents of rural areas

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism protects the environment by following environmentally friendly production processes

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism is an incentive for improving the level of knowledge, skills and competences of those involved

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism acts as a deterrent to the abandonment of the countryside

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism increases agricultural land use

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism has a positive effect on the culture of the local residents

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					

- Food tourism overall, benefits the agricultural sector of the region

	1: Not at all	2	3	4	5: Very much
Agree					