

Cultural Entrepreneurship in Imbros and Lesvos: A Comparative Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract: - This paper examines cultural entrepreneurship in Imbros and Lesvos. Two islands in the eastern Aegean Sea, close to each other but in different countries (Greece and Turkey), a difference that sets a distinct entrepreneurial, cultural, and historical environment for those islands, despite their proximity. Through interviews with local entrepreneurs, this research aims to investigate how they understand cultural entrepreneurship, how they use the unique advantages of each island, and how they respond to local barriers. The paper indicates that, beyond other characteristics, cultural entrepreneurship is understood as a way to preserve unique cultural elements for each island, strengthening bonds with diaspora and protecting local heritage.

Key-Words: - cultural entrepreneurship, island development, Imbros/Gökçeada, Lesvos, comparative case study, thematic analysis.

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1 Introduction

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, [1], [2], acknowledging the multi-layered nature of cultural entrepreneurship. While the quantitative component maps magnitudes and trends, the present

paper focuses on the qualitative strand, which is necessary for an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms that shape entrepreneurial activity in Imbros and Lesvos. Qualitative research in the social sciences enables the exploration of participants'

experience within their natural environment, producing data that are difficult to quantify, [3].

This study aims to foreground the voices of entrepreneurs and stakeholders and to clarify how differences arise from the two islands' distinct administrative, institutional, and cultural settings. To the authors' knowledge, this paper contributes to the existing literature related to cultural entrepreneurship. Its qualitative approach supplements the quantitative research available. It also analyzes cultural entrepreneurship as a comparative qualitative case study of two islands, in close distance, but in different countries, with unique cultural similarities but different institutional environments.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Epistemological Approach

The research design is grounded in an interpretive epistemological tradition. Interpretive research does not seek a single objective truth; rather, it examines how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific social and organizational contexts, [4]. In the case of Imbros and Lesvos, this lens is critical because it enables an understanding of how historical memory, geopolitical positioning, and local culture shape entrepreneurial behavior, [5].

To meet the study objectives, a Comparative Case Study strategy was selected, [6], [7]. The choice of Imbros and Lesvos is deliberate: both are island regions with comparable geographical features but distinct institutional and political-economic systems. Adopting a case study methodology, [8], [9], enables an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, while the comparative dimension highlights both convergences and divergences in cultural entrepreneurship trajectories.

2.2 Target Population and Sampling Strategy

Participant selection followed purposive sampling. This approach is appropriate when the goal is to select information-rich cases that illuminate the phenomenon in depth rather than to achieve statistical representativeness, [10]. The final sample consisted of twelve (12) participants (seven from Lesvos and five from Imbros). The sample size was considered adequate because theoretical saturation was reached, meaning additional data collection did not yield new themes.

Sampling combined the logic of critical cases and maximum variation sampling, [11]. Critical cases were selected for their institutional responsibility and specialized experience, including former government officials and municipal executives, as well as investors and diaspora actors, highlighting financing and outward orientation challenges. Maximum variation was pursued across three axes: (i) tradition versus innovation (from crafts and cooperatives to AR-enabled cultural startups), (ii) scale and motivation (profit-oriented ventures versus non-profit cultural preservation), and (iii) institutional context (Lesvos actors operating within Greek/EU governance versus minority entrepreneurs navigating Turkish administrative constraints).

2.3 Participants' profile

Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the profiles of participants in the qualitative study. Particular attention was paid to the risk of deductive disclosure, which is heightened in small, close-knit communities and specialized professional environments, [12]. Given Imbros's limited population and the distinctive public roles of participants on Lesvos, the table uses an abstracted presentation and omits highly specific identifiers that could enable indirect identification

Table 1. Profiles Summary - Lesvos

Code	Institutional role / capacity	Sector of activity	Type of entity
S1	Senior executive (cultural organization)	Arts	Private / NGO
S2	Former government official / expert	Cultural heritage	Institutional / political
S4	Municipal executive (culture)	Local government	Public
S7	Entrepreneur / agronomist	Agritourism	Private
S8	Cooperative executive	Crafts	Social economy
S9	Creative industries entrepreneur	New technologies	Private / innovation
S11	Organizer of cultural initiatives	Alternative tourism	Private

Source: Created by the authors.

Table 2. Profiles Summary - Imbros

Code	Institutional role / capacity	Sector of activity	Type of entity
S3	Diaspora representative	Administration	Association
S5	Hospitality entrepreneur	Gastronomy	Private
S6	Educator / board member	Folklore	Non-profit
S10	Overseas investor	Real estate asset reuse	Private
S12	Young entrepreneur	Hospitality / cultural venue	Private

Source: Created by the authors.

2.4 Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured telephone interviews. Semi-structured interviewing allows focus on key thematic axes while preserving flexibility to probe personal experience, [13]. An interview guide included demographics, introductory questions on perceived contributions of cultural entrepreneurship to local development, core questions supported by clarifying prompts, and questions on challenges and institutional context.

Fieldwork took place between August and October 2025. Given participant geographic dispersion and practical constraints, all interviews were conducted by telephone. While this limits observation of non-verbal cues, it can increase participants' sense of privacy and safety compared to face-to-face interviews, [14], [15]. Interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes on average and, with consent, were audio-recorded for accurate transcription and analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis

Interview material was analyzed using Thematic Analysis, [16]. Coding was inductive, meaning codes emerged directly from the data, allowing participants' voices to guide interpretation. Themes were examined both within each case and across cases, highlighting how meanings and practices differ under the institutional environments of Greece and Turkey.

2.6 Ethics and Research Quality

Before each interview, informed consent was obtained. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely with restricted access. Given the sensitive context of Imbros, a "do no harm" approach was

applied: questions were phrased to avoid political exposure and to prioritize participants' safety.

3 Results

3.1 Typology and Characteristics of Cultural Entrepreneurship

The analysis reveals a clear dichotomy in entrepreneurial character. On Lesbos, activity resembles classic and innovative Western-type business structures, while on Imbros it takes the form of existential action connected to the rescue of memory. Lesbos participants describe activities ranging from traditional processing and festivals to technology and sports tourism, framing cultural entrepreneurship as a tool for added value and internationalization.

"There are many, but if we want to talk about something with international appeal, I would say cultural events, such as festivals, have the potential to place the island on the global cultural map." (S1)
"We sell the cultural experience of olive cultivation, tastings, and the history of our place, packaged as a high-quality service." (S7)

"We create a commercial product that upgrades the cultural experience." (S9)

By contrast, Imbros respondents connect entrepreneurship to return migration and minority presence. Forms are mainly small, family-run hospitality and food businesses mobilizing emotional capital and heritage as survival resources.

"What I do is cultural entrepreneurship in practice. I do not just sell food and accommodation. I offer the experience of Romioi cuisine and hospitality. Every dish is also a story." (S5)

"This investment was not a simple purchase. It was an act of rescuing architectural heritage. We turned a ruin into a space of culture and hospitality." (S10)

S3 questions whether the term "entrepreneurship" applies in the same way to Imbros, underlining contextual complexity.

"On Imbros, the concept is very complex. You cannot talk about 'entrepreneurship' in the same way as in Greece." (S3)

3.2 Perceived Impact and Sustainability

Across both cases, participants view economic contribution not as mass wealth creation but as added value and the building of a micro-ecosystem that diffuses benefits through the local market and attracts higher-value visitors. On Lesbos, interviewees emphasize a "value chain" linking

primary production with hospitality, spreading income across small households rather than concentrating it in large tour operators.

“A value chain is created that starts from the farmer and reaches tourists. ... When a visitor comes for the olive oil, they will stay at the guesthouse, eat at the taverna, and buy other local products as well.” (S7)

“A museum that works well supports restaurants around it, souvenir shops, guides. It creates a micro-ecosystem.” (S2)

“That money goes directly to the small local business, not to big tour operators.” (S11)

Cultural entrepreneurship is described as a filter for attracting visitors who respect the place, spend more, and contribute outside peak season.

“We are not talking about mass tourism, but about higher-level visitors who come specifically for the festival, stay longer, and invest in the local economy.” (S1)

“We attract visitors who respect the place and do not come for mass tourism.” (S10)

Socially, initiatives are portrayed as catalysts for empowerment, youth return, and peaceful co-existence. Lesvos interviews highlight women’s cooperatives as mechanisms of psychosocial support and dignity.

“It is a one-way street, especially for women in the countryside. It gives an outlet, a supplementary income, but above all it gives dignity.” (S8)

“That empowerment, that change in her psychology, is for me the greatest success. It is more important than profits.” (S8)

On Imbros, the social dimension is framed as citizen diplomacy and community survival, creating bridges between the Greek minority and the Turkish population.

“When at one table an old Imbrian sits and next to them a group of Turkish students, and they co-exist harmoniously, that is the most meaningful sustainable development.” (S12)

“Our cultural actions are the glue that keeps us united. Without them, the community will dissolve.” (S6)

Sustainability is interpreted as active heritage rescue through use, privileging adaptive reuse and respect for landscape over static preservation.

“The act of restoration itself is sustainable development. You preserve heritage, you do not build something new that distorts the landscape. You give new life to the past.” (S10)

“We keep it alive; we do not close it inside a book.” (S7)

A core divergence appears in the definition of “development”: in Lesvos, it is linked to measurable

economic outcomes and tourism product sustainability, whereas in Imbros it is tied to demographic and cultural survival.

“For us, development is not only economic. It is the maintenance of the community, the return of young people.” (S3)

“Sustainable development for me is being able to keep my shop open next year too, and for my children to want to continue it.” (S5)

3.3 Institutional Context and Barriers

Barriers differ sharply between cases. On Lesvos, respondents stress fragmentation, lack of coordination and funding, and difficulties cooperating with public agencies.

“The number one challenge, without a second thought, is the lack of funding.” (S1)

“The challenge is coordination. There are many forces, but often they move in parallel rather than converging.” (S2)

“Procedures, for example, with the Archaeological Service, are often slow and rigid.” (S9)

On Imbros, barriers are described as political and institutional: politically controlled procedures, lack of equality, and persistent suspicion.

“We are talking about politically controlled procedures, permits that never arrive, constant inspections. It is a tool of pressure.” (S3)

“The challenge is everyday life. The paperwork, the permits, always being ‘the minority’.” (S5)

“I would not say there is support. Perhaps ‘tolerance’. They do not actively obstruct, but they certainly do not facilitate.” (S12)

3.4 Future Strategies

Future strategies reflect each area’s tools and target audiences. Lesvos emphasizes modernization, networking, place branding, and digital transition, while Imbros emphasizes authenticity and storytelling, with younger actors promoting a modernization of tradition.

“The biggest opportunity is networking. To finally create the ‘Olive Routes’ in Lesvos.” (S7)

“Technology makes culture attractive to an audience that otherwise would not come.” (S9)

“Through storytelling, we do not just sell rooms. We sell the story of Imbros.” (S10)

“By making it ‘cool’... we show that tradition is not museum-like, but something alive that evolves.” (S12). Table 3 provides a comparative overview of the core findings

Table 3. Comparative overview

Thematic axis	Lesvos (Greece)	Imbros (Turkey)
Nature of activity	Classic & innovative entrepreneurship; focus on added value and internationalization.	Existential action & memory rescue; focus on minority survival and emotional capital.
Dominant forms	Agri-food, processing, festivals, sports tourism, startups/technology.	Small family hospitality and food businesses; building restoration and adaptive reuse.
Economic impact	Value chain and micro-ecosystem; extension of the tourism season.	Livelihood to remain in place; a tool for return migration.
Social dimension	Women's empowerment; population retention in the countryside.	Social cohesion, citizen diplomacy, bridge of co-existence.
Understanding of sustainability	Landscape protection; quality upgrading of tourism product.	Restoration of architectural heritage; preservation of the community.
Institutional barriers	Bureaucracy, lack of funding/coordination.	Political controls, lack of equality, suspicion.
Future strategy	Modernization, networking, digital transition.	Storytelling, authenticity, and modernization of tradition.

Source: Created by the authors.

4 Discussion

The comparative examination of cultural entrepreneurship in Imbros and Lesvos highlights its multi-dimensional character and its dependence on institutional and socio-political context. Cultural heritage emerges not as a passive stock but as a dynamic resource enabling new economic and social activity, [17]. The core finding is the divergence of motivations and strategies adopted by entrepreneurs and stakeholders, interpreted through: opportunity versus necessity entrepreneurship, formal and

informal institutional constraints, and heritage as resilience.

Lesvos patterns align largely with opportunity-driven entrepreneurship, [18], supported by relatively stable institutions and EU-linked resources, where innovation and outward orientation shape tourism products and heritage-led entrepreneurial ecosystems, [19]. Imbros patterns align more strongly with necessity-driven entrepreneurship shaped by political uncertainty and minority status, [20], [21]. Here, necessity is not purely economic but existential, linked to diaspora entrepreneurship and return migration, and diaspora investments can function as social innovation interventions, [22], [23].

Institutional theory helps explain these trajectories. Formal institutions in Lesvos are broadly legitimate but often inefficient, generating bureaucratic delays; yet they allow cooperative and social-economy forms such as women's cooperatives, [24], [25], [26]. In Imbros, formal institutions are frequently experienced as uncertain or threatening; entrepreneurs compensate through informal networks, trust, and diaspora support, [20].

Cultural entrepreneurship also operates as resilience, [27]. On Lesvos, cultural events can support local morale and tourism recovery, [28], [29]. On Imbros, entrepreneurship sustains community presence and builds bridges of co-existence, turning heritage into a mechanism of social cohesion, [20], [30], [31].

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Cultural entrepreneurship in Imbros and Lesvos is meaningfully different, despite their proximity. In Lesvos, entrepreneurs focus on taking advantage of opportunities and transforming them into businesses. They introduce innovative initiatives and invest to create a powerful brand not just for themselves, but for the whole island. On the contrary, in Imbros, entrepreneurship is mainly based on people's need to link with the diaspora, maintain current activities, and preserve existing cultural elements.

These two approaches are benefiting local communities from different perspectives, and their impact is estimated under different criteria. Main topics on Lesvos are the creation of new jobs, extending the tourist period throughout the year, and supporting local communities through additional profits in relation to the tourism industry. On the other side, on Imbros, the main goal is to keep younger generations on the island and preserve social cohesion. In both islands, difficulties are related to the external environment, which in Lesvos is

interpreted as bureaucratic barriers and in Imbros as political pressure and inequalities.

Thus, proposed measures should adapt to each island's unique conditions. On Lesbos, the priority should be a concrete and coherent public administration, linking the island with other destinations, setting thematic touristic routes which will highlight local cultural heritage, and using innovative digital technologies for local entrepreneurs. At the same time, on Imbros, the main focus should be to strengthen locals' bonds with diaspora, to leverage funds from investors living abroad, and to legally protect local cultural elements which are unique and rich for the island.

This research was based on a qualitative analysis of local stakeholders on both islands and provided significant results. Future research may focus on overcoming the limitations of this research and reach a larger number of locals. Quantitative research based on a large sample of stakeholders could provide more insights and try to further analyze tools and opportunities that could support local communities.

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