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Online Interweaving of Sense of Place and Local Heritage: Challenges and Implications for the Digital Instantiation and Negotiation of Local Identity in Two Cretan Villages

The article examines the concept of "sense of place" in the context of the increasing use of new communication technologies, particularly within social media platforms like Facebook. It focuses on two villages in Eastern Crete, Greece, Sissi and Vrachassi, which have been experiencing significant changes since the late 20th century, primarily under the impact of tourism. The study leverages online and offline research to explore online conceptualization of the natural and socio-cultural environment and shaping of a common local collective identity, utilizing the terms sense of place and "digital placemaking." It investigates how sense of place is attributed and extended in virtual/online environments by considering the online construction and representation of local heritage. Additionally, it explores whether and how local communities in online environments select, emphasize, and utilize some heritage elements, often imbuing them with special interest, significance, and sometimes intense idealization and nostalgia.

Keywords: sense of place, local collective identity, heritage, online representation, social computing

Онлајн преплитање осећања места и локалног наслеђа: изазови и импликације за дигитално опредмећење и обликовање локалног идентитета у два села на Криту

Чланак испитује концепт „осећања места" у контексту пораста употребе нових комуникационих технологија, посебно друштвених медија као што је Фејсбук. Фокусира се на два села на истоку Крита (Грчка), Сиси и Врахаси, која су пролазила кроз значајне промене од краја 20. века, пре свега под утицајем туризма. Студија користи онлајн и офлајн истраживање како би испитала концептуализацију природног и социокултурног окружења и обликовање заједничког локалног колективног идентитета на мрежи, користећи се терминима „осећање места" и „дигитално стварање места". Рад испитује како се осећај места приписује и шири на виртуелне/онлајн просторе промишљајући конструкцију и репрезентацију локалног наслеђа на интернету. Додатно, рад истражује да ли и како локалне заједнице у дигиталним окружењима бирају, наглашавају и користе неке елементе наслеђа, често у њих учитавајући посебну занимљивост, значење и понекад интензивну идеализацију и носталгију.

Кључне речи: осећање места, локални колективни идентитет, наслеђе, онлајн репрезентација, друштвено рачунање

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the concept of sense of place within technologically mediated settings. The study of human-environment relations, known as sense of place, has been explored across various disciplines and contexts, ranging from rural and remote areas to complex urban locations. Moreover, emerging new technologies, increasing social networking, pervasiveness and immersive digital environments as well as the use of geospatial tools expand the concept of sense of place to the online world, thus encompassing both digital and physical aspects.

In this context, sense of place may refer to the ways in which people interact, behave, create meaning and develop identities within virtual/online environments that are not necessarily connected to physical locations. From hybrid or online communities to virtual worlds, sense of place is becoming central to contemporary human experience.

Based on the ethnographic case studies of two villages of Eastern Crete, Greece, and using the existing theoretical frameworks of sense of place and digital placemaking, we will analyze sense of place as expanded into online experience. Initially theoretical approaches on sense of place and digital placemaking will be discussed. The second part will be about the particulars of the case study, examining the two villages as physical locales and cultural entities and as representations in online environments. A categorization of the online sources will be attempted in terms of form, content and purpose. Examples will be selected that best suit the scope of this study.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: SENSE OF PLACE AND ITS INSTANTIATION IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

The term "sense of place" was coined on two components, sense and place, based on the complex link between people and their environment in its natural and socio-cultural aspects. Generic conceptions of place as "space imbued with meaning" (Vanclay 2008, 3) or as "a form of meaningful space" (Malpas 2008, 202) draw on this complexity of material and immaterial bonds, of investment with meaning and value on socio-cultural, political, and spiritual/symbolic terms (Vanclay 2008).

To Agnew (2011) sense of place is one of three dimensions of place, the other two being place as location and place as series of locales-settings for activities. As each place is unique and distinct ("singular"), a strong sense of belonging whether consciously expressed or implicit in locally emplaced everyday activities signifies sense of place (Agnew 2011, 327). Malpas (2015) also connects "sense of place" –as *genius loci*– to the singularity of places. He further attributes to the term a double reference to a sense of the character/identity of locales and to a sense of people's identity as shaped within those locales (Malpas 2008).

This complex interaction between people and place is captured in a wide range of terminology, such as place attachment (Low & Altman 2000), place belonging, place meaning, place dependence (Kudryavtsev et al. 2012). Other relevant terms are *topophilia* used by Tuan (1993) for coupling emotion and *topos*-place in an "affective bond" between people and places (Tuan 1990, 4), place identity, place familiarity or place awareness, place attachment (Vanclay 2008). Related is the notion of place-making, of converting space into place (Vanclay 2008) which builds on human agency and happens at multiple levels, involving symbolic investment and sometimes even landscape change.

Sense of place is central to debates on globalization and the global/local dynamic, where accelerated communication, interconnectedness,

disembedding, and deterritorialization (Eriksen 2007) are key concepts. Pervasive digital technologies like mobile phones, web applications, social media, and the Internet of Things are rapidly reshaping our thoughts, actions, communication, and connections, altering spatio-temporal dynamics and our sense of place. Malpas (2008, 198) describes this change as the "spatial, temporal and topographic transformation" or as "the 'dis-location' and 'dis-placement' of culture and of experience".

As digital and physical environments become increasingly intertwined, the term "digital placemaking" describes an emerging field that explores how digital technologies can be used to create meaningful connections between people and places. Halegoua and Polson (2021) examining how digital media foster a sense of belonging and community in both virtual and physical worlds offer a key description: "At its core 'digital placemaking' describes the use of digital media to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others– to embrace digital media affordances in order to cultivate or maintain a sense of attachment to place" (Halegoua & Polson 2021, 574).

Digital placemaking approach is also relevant to the heritage sector where technology is employed in the form of serious games, digital storytelling, immersive environments and historical digital simulations. Often associated with "edutainment," this approach combines learning with entertainment (Basaraba 2021). Recent studies of 'digital placemaking' focus on cityscapes researching mediated communication through social media, while paying less attention to the rural and remote locations (Basaraba 2021).

Accordingly, digital placemaking is not simply a contrast between digital/analog or online/offline. Instead, it represents a complex intertwining of the two within a nexus of "materiality, sociality and agency" (Atteneder & Lohmeier 2024). Polson (2013) uses the term "digital emplacement" to describe integration of digital technologies into physical spaces and face-to-face communication to create new forms of spatial experience. Hybridity characterizes this type of process, blending online and face-to-face interactions, with a particular emphasis on the latter.

Dai and Liu (2024) proposed a tripartite conceptual model to picture sense of place in the digital era: physical sense of place (through direct interaction between people and places), the digital one (referring to the interaction between individuals and virtual or digitally created spaces), and hybrid sense of place (intertwining the physical and digital).

In this paper, the term sense of place online or hybrid will be used interchangeably with digital placemaking to denote digitally negotiated sense of place by a community.

THE PLACE CONTEXT AND ISSUES OF METHODOLOGY

Our ethnographic cases are Vrachassi and Sissi, two villages belonging to the municipal unit of Vrachassi in the north-western part of Aghios Nikolaos municipality, Eastern Crete. The choice of the villages is based on the emic view, of their collective imagination, that they share common past, sense of heritage and identity. Moreover, long-term familiarity with the place instigated the research.

Methodologically, traditional ethnography with on-ground observation, interviews and face-to-face interaction was employed along with research within web-based environments. In the sense of multi-sited connective ethnography (Hine 2015; Kokolaki 2023) the approach may contribute to a better understanding of the interconnection between the situated/spatial and the de-territorialised/virtual communities in a region where the core of sociality is found within physical contexts rather than in use of social media (Kokolaki 2023). For categorizing the sources and the material, content analysis was used.

Main aim of this paper is to picture links between place, people and local heritage as mediated by digital technologies. Specifically, capturing how the cosmos of the villages and change are represented in web environments, what elements are chosen to be represented and if a unified version of the local heritage and identity is implied.

As far as the villages are concerned, the oldest mention of both their placenames, Vrachassi and Sissi, comes from a 1391 manuscript of the Chandax Venetian Duchy archives (Spanakis 2001). In Stavrakis' (1890) statistics brief of 1881 census in Crete Vrachassi appeared having a population of 1,333 being the seat of a homonymous municipality and had a public primary school, while Sissi was mentioned only as a small bay with no inhabitants. Currently, the old village of Vrachassi, has a permanent population of 321. It is situated on the southern slope of mountain Anavlochos, to the east of Sellinari gorge.

Sissi is a tourist destination of 1001-inhabitant bay on the north coastline of Crete, seven kilometers from Vrachassi. Being a natural harbor, it is still used for safe anchorage by small fishboats. In the 19th and early 20th century it was used as a commercial port, so it had also a custom house. Many warehouses for storing and trading local harvest destined for exports (mainly locust beans and olive oil) were situated there, which local people refer to as '*magatzedes*'. In the 19th century, during the revolutions against the Ottomans, the port was used for transportation of ammunition to the rebels (Spanakis 2001). In the Second World War the

access to the sea was restricted and the area was mined, initially by the Italian and then by the German troops.

Sissi's touristic importance was discovered in the 1980's, when it also started developing residentially, while Vrachassi was declining. Nowadays, tourism and agriculture are the main sources of income in the region, however they operate often within a context of multiple employment: mainly agriculture (olive cultivation that was expanded from Vrachassi to Sissi and much less viticulture and beekeeping) has become subsidiary to most households' income, while there is also the seasonal occupation in the tourist industry (Kokolaki 2023; Spyridakis 2005).

DRAWING THE COSMOS OF THE LOCAL ONLINE RESOURCES

Use of the internet and social media is well embedded in everyday life of both villages, especially for the younger generation and people involved in the touristic business. It is used for chatting and communicating and facilitates long-distance relationships with family members and friends living elsewhere. The use of social media and advanced geospatial technologies (although user-friendly) is not equally trusted: is less prevalent among older individuals due to low or no digital literacy, while, additionally, access can be limited by the cost of equipment and services, or even by illiteracy (Kokolaki 2023; Madianou & Miller 2013). However, although people above sixty find it hard to follow technology, they use Facebook.

Moreover, there is a great variety of online environments such as blogs and websites, Facebook groups and pages with reference to both villages. In an initial classification of those resources, we may differentiate between top-down, one-way directional and centrally controlled (etic) approaches and environments versus bottom-up, collaborative, participatory, inclusive and emic approaches and environments (Basaraba 2021).

Top-down types are the official websites and/or social media accounts of the local political and religious authorities as having formal character: of the Aghios Nikolaos Municipality, the Vrachassi Municipal Compartment ("*Vrachassi Community*") and the Bishopric of Petra and Herronisos. The local media-informational websites situated in the Municipality such as the 'Anatoli' newspaper having an online (anatolh.com) and a daily printed version or the 'Fonien' (fonien.gr) are also top-down in structure.

In top-down types we also include the websites of the excavations in Sissi and Vrachassi serving scientific purposes: "*Anavlochos Project*" (https://anavlochos.hypotheses.org/) and "*The Sissi Archaeological Pro-*

ject Sarpedon" (https://sarpedon.be/). Excavations in Sissi by Université Catholique de Louvain and the Belgian School at Athens made significant discoveries from the Early and Middle Bronze Age near the Boufos beach in the location Kephali, while in Vrachassi on the mountain Anavlochos top the French School at Athens discovered significant remains from an Early Iron Age settlement. Moreover, the website of the public primary school of Sissi has educational character and publishes information on selected school activities.

Bottom-up types are more participatory web environments mainly of Web 2.0 (blogs/social media). Starting with the blogs, *Nostimon-imar* (nostimon-imar.online) could be characterized as informational, publishing news, stories, views, comments, photos and articles of local interest. The owner, N.V., lives and works in Athens; however, he retains strong bonds with both villages. He has also created several Facebook accounts and pages where he makes reposts.

The blog *Vrachassi House* (vrahassihouse.blogspot.com) was created in 2011 for promoting a private folk exhibition of Maria and the late Aikaterini Lembidaki in their restored traditional house in Vrachassi. In 2017 a homonymous Facebook page was created (for supporting the static blog) now having 636 followers and publishing multimedia material not only from the exhibition and its visitors but also from both villages.

There are two inactive informational blogs, the old blog of the *Cultural Society of Vrachassi-Anavlochos* (oanavlochos.blogspot.com) and one called *Anablohos* belonging to a local creator (anablochos.blogspot.com).

Facebook groups and pages, public or private (apart from the individual accounts of the villagers and local migrants) are broadly used for dispersing local news and cultural information in a more interactive, bottom-up and horizontal way. Their scope and content vary from archaeological/scientific to cultural (religious, folk, athletic, reminiscent) and professional (mainly touristic).

Facebook groups of archaeological nature are run by the excavations projects in Sissi and Vrachassi (*Sissi excavations* private with 2,400 members and *Anavlochos Project* public with 959 members) where pictures from the sites, the teams, their daily life and fieldwork as well as the course, findings, research materials and results of the excavations are posted. The groups are connected to the official websites of each project and their administrators are the excavations' lead investigators, which makes them more rigid and less interactional.

The Facebook pages of the local cultural societies (namely the *Developmental Society of Sissi* and the *Cultural Society of Vrachassi-Anav-*

lochos) have rather cultural and folk content. They publish local news and information about cultural activities along with videos and pictures. Other local Facebook groups and pages like *Anavlochos* share material from the village showing nostalgia. We may also mention here the official page of the Athletic Club of Vrachassi posting news about the football team.

Finally, there are numerous Facebook pages and accounts professional, advertising and touristic in scope and nature: of local businesses, real estate, stores, restaurants, cafes and bars. Most hotels in Sissi have both Facebook pages and their own websites, being also advertised through online travel sites-agencies.

However, some Facebook groups and pages of local residents that relate to the tourist industry are not exclusively advertising in nature: some provide touristic information about the place, while users are encouraged to post their views and experiences from their visit or stay. For example, in the group *Sisi Crete Info 2024* we may read in the welcome message of the owner: "Our group was specifically created to provide a platform for travelers, just like you, to add their unique holiday experiences in Sisi Village."

Adopting a bottom-up approach in representing the local discourse means examining place-specific online environments with interactive and collaborative character centering on community driven individual or collective narratives rather than official top-down built websites and projects. Accordingly, cases for this article were selected on the basis of activity, interactivity, interconnectedness, adoption of an emic approach and bottom-up structure: one blog (*Nostimon-imar*) and its related Facebook accounts, pages and groups mainly with reposts from the blog (the accounts of *N.V.-Nostimon Imar* with 2,7 thousand followers, *Nostimon-imar* with 1056 friends and *Vrachassi Lasithiou* with 373 friends and the pages *Anavlochos Vrahassi Sissi Milatos Sellinari* with 1700 followers and *Vrahassi* with 234 followers) and the Facebook accounts of the *Developmental Society of Sissi* with 1500 friends and of the *Cultural Society of Vrachassi-Anavlochos* with 1800 friends. Also, *Ta karavakia tou Sissiou* is a public group having 5 administrators and 245 members publishing on the Sissi port and the small boats anchoring there.

THEMES IN THE ONLINE REPRESENTATIONS OF PLACE

The implementation of digital technologies by a growing public has increasingly influenced the way the villages as actual places and their change over time are perceived and represented online. People interacting within social networks, online and offline, perceive, fantasize, create,

represent, engage with, share and appropriate their locale according to their personalized interests and viewpoints.

"Social computing" referring to social networking environments gained immense popularity with the advent of smart devices, new apps (especially location-aware ones), pervasive wireless networks, and user-friendly interfaces: users may easily create, personalize, upload and share content and information through multiple communication channels and multimodality (Kokolaki 2023). This is an interesting shift in people's perspective as it reshapes roles of expertise –allowing ordinary people acting as experts– and transforms power relations (Hine 2015). People assume active role, becoming both users/consumers and producers/creators of content (Papageorgiou 2019). Moreover, facilitated by geospatial technologies, for transgressing physical boundaries, blending actual locations and virtual experience, their sense of self and belonging, individual and collective identities are leveraged and renegotiated (Applin & Fischer 2011; Dai & Liu 2024).

Participation and interaction of the users depend on the nature of the web environment –e.g. Facebook is more interactive than blogs– and may range from non-participating to clicking a reaction icon, using emojis or writing comments and text messages or uploading/sharing material (Papageorgiou 2019).

Within Facebook people can show or gain public influence and power through the number of friends, followers, and responses to their posts (Kokolaki 2023) and this could explain why local creators link their blogs or websites to Facebook and make reposts. According to a local creator, however, the fluidity of Web 2.0 environments integrating interactivity and hypertextuality, allowing readers to navigate back and forth through links in a flexible and dynamic way, enhances users experience, permits feedback, reflexivity and renewal.

We may find a rich variety of means and tools of communication within local social media, ranging from the use of emojis and simple comments to more complex forms of multimodal texts, storytelling, folk and historical narrations related to places and people, pictures, videos (stories and reels) representing locations or events of collective or individual importance. Visual elements such as photographs along with comments (of the users and the content creators), captions and more complex multimodal texts are mainly used and proved particularly important for the ethnographic recording and representation (see also Papageorgiou 2019).

In this respect, novel spaces of interaction and participation are created where exchange of knowledge and experience takes place remotely,

multi-spatially, in a synchronous and/or asynchronous connection, while new behaviors emerge, forming a real 'place' within the 'non-place' of the Internet (Applin & Fischer 2011).

Furthermore, we could discern five broad categories in recurrent key themes-references in texts and pictures of online posts concerning the villages, that will provide the axes of our further discussion:

    a) Physical locations including built environment, natural landscapes and sites of historical or archaeological importance, endowed with socio-cultural meanings

    b) Activities of private and collective nature related to local heritage and tradition (e.g. feasts and rituals)

    c) Experiences place based (memories, reflections, nostalgia and feelings)

    d) Change and contrast between past and present, history included

    e) People (ordinary and important people from the area)

In the light of the above and following Lefebvre's (1991, 33) triad of spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces, sense of place may be understood in terms of human engagement with place, in a variety of dimensions implicit and explicit, of individual and collective nature, within political, socio-cultural or historical contexts: from feelings and emotional bonds to symbolic meanings, representations and values, discourses, counter-narratives, processes, interactions and counter-actions. It touches also on the notions of tradition, heritage and local traditional knowledge implying continuity as being shared within a community and transmitted inter and intra-generationally, and being powerful, enabling and agentic (Kokolaki 2023).

DISCUSSION: HERITAGE, IDENTITY, CHANGE AND SENSE OF PLACE WITHIN ONLINE/OFFLINE REPRESENTATIONS

On the local online resources, the sense of place is represented with man-made and natural landscapes, as well as sites of historical, architectural and archaeological importance. In an area where activities of private and collective nature are important for the shaping of collective identity, places endowed with socio-cultural meanings such as the places for meeting, socializing, communicating and strengthening relations (squares, coffeehouses, churches, alleys and even the cemetery) or places where significant events of social and cultural nature take place are intermingling with the online, "networked," technologically mediated forms of interaction.

Most common online posts (texts and images) involve the Sissi port with its small boats and the sunset as well as the churches of the area (such as the church of Saint John in Sissi), the archaeological sites of Sissi and Vrachassi as well as the function of the private folk museum in Vrachassi. As also remembered by my informants and repeated online, the gathering place of both the old and the young in Sissi was the small coffeehouse of Petrogiorgis with tamarisk trees above the port. Such a gathering place in Vrachassi was the fountain with the oak tree (*platanos*).

Here we may mention occasions for public gatherings of religious, ritual or secular character (such as cultural festivals and local religious feasts) featuring in the posts of the two local societies (of Vrachassi and of Sissi). In Sissi public feasts are organized by the Developmental Society in the car park beside the school (being also used as playground and as an open marketplace), while in Vrachassi cultural festivals (e.g. folk music, concerts, poetry recitation) take place mainly outside the church in the schoolyard, care of the Cultural Society.

Such activities take place mostly during the summer, when the villages receive more visitors. However, many are organized throughout the year (e.g. for Christmas and Carnival). As pointed out by a male informant their content mainly revolves around the annual religious cycle (in both formal and folk religious/ritual contexts) being an important element of traditional life. The activities are usually publicized online to gain visibility and participation and are reviewed afterwards, sharing pictures or videos for committing to collective memory and revealing the village assets to the broad public.

Offline interactions or activities and their online representations play a very important role in the life and invigoration of the villages as they are used for projecting and promoting local particularities and culture not only as a touristic product but also as a point of common reference for local people and returning internal migrants. It could be said that on a symbolic level the sense of place, of belonging, is represented, performed and reconstructed experientially, through such ritual mechanisms, and reinforced further through online networking (Dalkavoukis 2012; Papageorgiou 2019).

Fischer and Kokolaki (2013) talked about the power of new technologies to "open-up" places through virtual networks acting as facilitators and being complementary to face-to-face communication. In this respect, ubiquitous connectivity may attribute increased value to real world places by enhancing and distributing knowledge about their specific and unique character but also by reshaping awareness of and facilitating connection

with places. Pervasive technologies are progressively penetrating daily experience, forming part of people's identity, as an "extension" of the physical being and experiencing, often blurring the lines between the virtual and the physical (Hine, 2015; Kokolaki 2023).

Accordingly, the online environments we examine mostly constitute communities that mediate between the actual and the virtual world, uniting the territorialized and de-territorialized versions of community (Dalkavoukis 2012). Wieczorek (2019, 4) emphasizes fluidity of places as shaped by social interaction, people's emplaced (but not trapped in places) actions, active negotiation of sociocultural meanings, identities/territory attachments. It is an active process of negotiation that builds on human agency and happens at multiple levels, involving symbolic investment and change (Vanclay 2008).

As suggested by Applin and Fischer (2011), people engaging with pervasive technologies create and use virtual spaces to accommodate both their real life/place and online/non place behaviours and cultures. This means that a new communication culture is introduced, within physical and multiplexed technologically mediated spaces and ubiquitous time. As the creator N.V. stressed: "the blog forms a community which unites people even if residing in different and faraway places. *Nostimon imar* implies memory, nostalgia, homecoming." So, the community is holistically constituted and performed twice: once in the actual offline networks and once symbolically in the networked universe.

Intertwining childhood memories with the present image of both villages are presented and discussed online. Nostalgia and sentimentality for a lost past along with the awareness of and agony for the disruption and degradation of local heritage are evident for instance in the texts with mostly old photos of G.L., a female contributor of *Nostimon Imar*, posted in the blog and reposted in Facebook where people can comment (e.g. "Legends and traditions of Vrachassi-The upper school of Vrachassi" on 17-2-2025 and "Yesterday's Vrachassi_Epigrammatic geography" on 4-2-2025).

Heritage is emically perceived by the local communities mainly in the form of tradition, which is locally based and implies memory, continuity, sharing collective knowledge and acquiring bonds with a common past. On the contrary, modernization and change are related to discontinuity and oblivion (Kokolaki 2023). Papageorgiou (2019) researching the Facebook group *Patras Photos Old Special* finds that though online participation and interaction "digital" memory is performed seeking to create and maintain coherence and sense of belonging to a locality.

Expressions that reveal memory and nostalgia and touch on the issue of change due to tourism (mostly negative) can be found in the blog and Facebook pages. This is shown for example in the phrase posted under a photo of the old village "A photo that evokes many memories of a Sissi that no longer exists…" Another such instance is the caption from a photograph from the Sissi port "Sissi once…Without the hotels on the west side of the port… An image that takes us back to the 1970s-1980s…" posted in *Nostimon-imar* and reposted in other Facebook pages.

Nostalgic and idyllic images of course are idealized projections on the past, which is conceived embellished and authentic, with the goal of strengthening collective memory and re-shaping local identity or augmenting community socio-cultural unity. However, people's conceptualization of Vrachassi's prosperity and power and statements that "life in the past was pure, beautiful and authentic, whilst now everything is polluted" are often contrasted by their descriptions of the picture of life in a rural area, with harsh living and working conditions especially for the poor families.

Papageorgiou (2019) noticed a similar trend for the online reconstruction of Patras image through selective emphasis on the city's aspects of prosperity, that reproduce a hegemonic (top-down) and embellished version. We might even say that often in their multiplication through networks, nostalgic recollections and narratives become dominant and often silence different voices and approaches.

This relates to the ambivalent disposition towards new technologies: although they may bear positive impact on how people engage with their surroundings, offering novel perspectives and allowing for intriguing, creative and innovative ways of representation, simultaneously they are viewed as disruptive, generating uncertainties or alienation (Kokolaki 2023).

Accordingly, Relph (2021) warns about a "digitally poisoned" sense of place, found in the disorienting experience of place through digital technologies, data overburdening or even exclusions. Atteneder and Lohmeier (2024) observe that digital placemaking does not inherently prioritize community involvement nor does it uniformly enhance the quality of life. On the contrary, it often involves shifting power dynamics for perpetuating existing disparities. Additionally, there is the risk of commodification, shifting focus from creating meaningful interaction to generating distorted views of economic nature such as prioritizing profitability and turning places and their heritage into commodities within touristic industry with further implications for the local cultural and physical capital sustaina-

bility. Relatedly, local contributors emphasize that they attempt to directly or indirectly contribute to the common good and encourage people's agency, not only underlining the "positive" elements but also pointing to the negative aspects and probable dangers.

The contemporary abundance of goods, modernization and tourism has not left the area untouched. Indeed, it is a common observation and worry of the local population expressed in their face-to-face conversations that the young tend "to lose or alter cultural identity" and that both villages "change to the worse": Vrachassi is depopulated and abandoned, while Sissi suffers from touristic development and unregulated construction.

Change and contrast between past and present statuses may be viewed as distinct and fundamental in the shaping of a sense of place online, although it may relate to the categories of physical/constructed locations and of place experience. Change is very important to the local people featuring both in online posts and in the face-to-face discussions of people in the area.

The course of Vrachassi towards neglect and the effort of its inhabitants to reinvigorate their village's life and reconstruct its image and status are their main concerns penetrating discussions offline and online. Neglect is evident to the visitor when viewing the deserted houses and the half-demolished buildings everywhere. As indicative representation of this emic concern, we could mention here a photo of an abandoned house with its door and window closed, posted in the blog *Nostimon-imar* and reposted in Facebook having as title "All what's left" and as a comment "Ordinary image. A door closed in a house in retreat..." As an informant stressed, having visited his family's abandoned houses (one in Sissi and one in Vrachassi), houses must be inhabited to endure, otherwise they fall apart.

Critical to Vrachassi's decline was the construction of the northern road axis of Crete and the "Vrachassi tunnel" after 1968, bypassing village. This according to my informants was a milestone to its historical course, as until then Vrachassi was an important hub of the economic and cultural life in the area: it is described as an old "*kefalochori*" (big village). Online, the issue was touched in a lengthy article about the old road (February 10, 2025) by N. V. in *Nostimon-imar* (reposted in Facebook) with archival photos from early 20th century and aerial maps for depicting the then and the now of the area. Accordingly, the post starts attesting that "Vrachassi has associated its prosperity and decline with the road that connects it with the rest of Crete to the west and east."

Pict. 1: "All what's left"
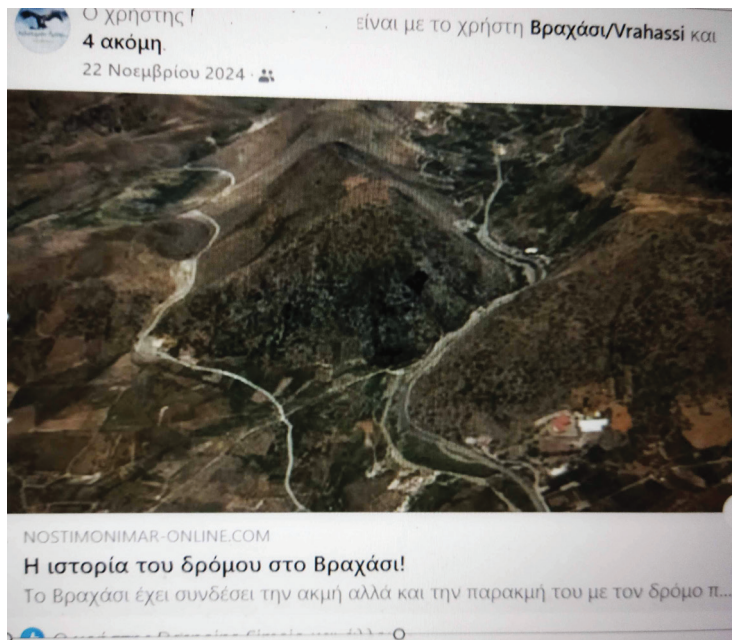
Pict. 2. Repost to Facebook: "The story of Vrachassi road"

Other factors for Vrachassi's abandonment were the mountainous terrain, the difficulty in accessing the highest parts of the village, the inadequate road infrastructure, the cost of reconstruction of the old houses and population movement within the context of urbanization. Moreover, changes in the economy of the area related to the broader EU agricultural policies (olive mono-cultivation) and touristic development of Sissi, prompted Vrahassiots to move to Sissi plain, where construction as well was easier ("it is flat" as an informant commented).

On the other hand, Sissi being near the sea acquired fast touristic interest. So, the residential development (initially, constructing summer residencies) along with the tourist business growth abruptly altered the physical landscape. The place of people's childhood memories is almost now unrecognizable, as it is often stressed offline and in online posts.

Pict. 3. Landscape change in Sissi within 55 years (repost)

However, this growth was not matched by adequate infrastructure improvements to support the villagers' welfare and sustainability, such as sewerage systems and street planning. Villagers frequently discuss the neglect by local authorities in face-to-face interactions, highlighting long-standing issues such as lack of town planning, poor cemetery maintenance, inadequate transport connections, and hygiene problems (e.g. lack

of biological treatment and inadequate waste removal services). These issues are particularly problematic during the tourist season in Sissi, where the village significantly contributes to the municipality's revenue. A current concern is the reconstruction of the long-destroyed jetty ('*molos*') in Sissi, which affects the safety of boats and buildings, especially in winter. Those issues were identified and put forth not only informally but also in public gatherings (such as the meeting of 19-10-2024 in Vrachassi with the Mayor and the local council) and further posted in the local blogs and Facebook pages.

Pict 4. Facebook repost: The jetty of Sissi

Related is the modern revaluation of places, indicative to the projection and processing of the excavations in Sissi and Vrachassi by the local community: they are largely publicized in local blogs, social media and newspapers and this is indicative of an online re-shaping of a collective identity through heritage.

The findings of the excavations are considered very important for the villages' image and collective self-esteem: by connecting the present to antiquity they transform both villages into hubs of cultural and historical significance, essential for building a local collective identity. Moreover, the

inclusion of local workers in the projects and community's embrace have strengthened the bond to local heritage and collective identification with the past and the place. The emphasis on the excavations can be understood in relation to the formation of prestige and a "Cretan" local identity, within the broader context of Greekness, diachronic and uninterrupted over the centuries. Herzfeld (2003, 283) notes that modern Cretans emphasize their Minoan past to highlight their island's contribution to Greek and Western culture.

Accordingly, Dear and Wolch (1989, 7) visualize locales as a fusion and interaction of agents, objects, patterns, and processes within geographical and chronological contexts which they term the 'time-space fabric.' In this sense, the place is constantly changing and renegotiated, imbued with new meanings and representations.

The sense of cohesion and collective identity among the villages is shaped by the conceptualization of space within the local sociocultural and political framework and power relations. This involves historical demarcation and symbolic delineation of boundaries by place names, surnames, traditions, churches and sacred places, shared offline and online. Notable examples are Saint George *Vrachassiotis* 15th-century monastery and Saint George church in Sellinari gorge, famous pilgrimage site, opposite to the grave of the *Aghiasmenos* ("sanctified") monk who according to local tradition built the church. Moreover, (as also stressed by my informants) highlighting not only prominent figures from Vrachassi (such as I. Sfakianakis, a politician who significantly contributed to Crete's fight for liberation and union with Greece) but also ordinary people, delineating their ethos and lifeways through obituaries, chronicles and memory articles, contributes to the formation of a shared symbolic cosmos with references to common past and shared identity.

Moreover, within the local frameworks of authority and antagonisms for economic and political power, cohesion was bolstered by the coalition of the two villages with nearby Milatos against their inclusion in Neapolis municipality under Law 2539 of 1997. The establishment of the independent community of Vrachassi in 2006 (Law 3448/2006) was seen as a victory, enhancing local sentiment. Remnants of this are some painted declarations on stonewalls around the area. One of those featured in a photo post on March 21, 2024, of *Nostimon-imar* (reposted in Facebook) with the caption "Under the slogan 'Resistance to the end… two gates were revealed'."
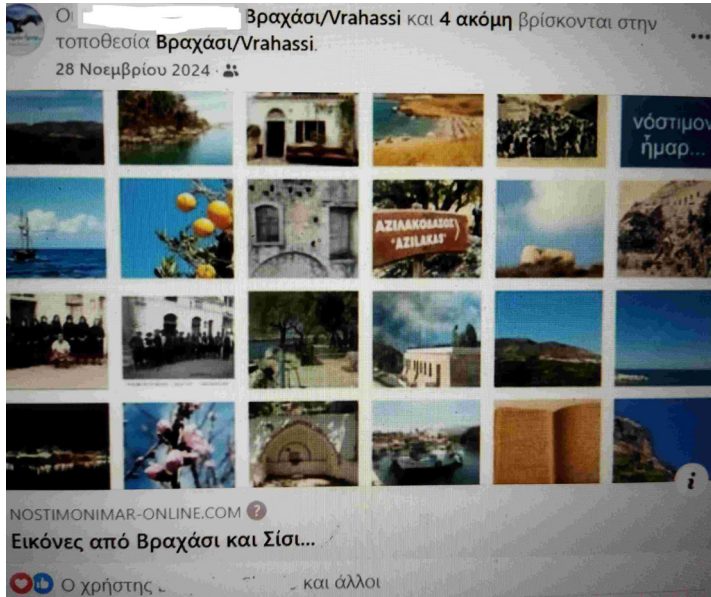
Pict. 5. Pictures from Vrachassi and Sissi (repost)

In conversations with the villagers and content creators, it is implied that Vrachassi remains the "metropolitan center" that unites both villages with historic bonds. Although ever since the 1960s the two villages belonged to two different parishes and started different courses, they acted and felt like one community. In the words of a male informant (G.K.):

Sissi was founded by people of the metropolitan village, Vrachassi […] Most of them have their references to Vrachassi, that is, since it is the place where they grew up, regardless of whether they have moved to Sissi […] They often come up to the village. Another factor that binds this wider society is the cemetery where the corpse of each villager is deposited, whether he stays in Vrachassi or in Sissi […] In essence, they all have a reference point up in our village (Vrachassi), as their people are buried there. In other words, this is a factor that binds the society. But above all, history. And you know, there is no competition between the two – it is one society at its core, there is essentially no competition. Everything evolves naturally.

Building on the notion of land as a text and place as a palimpsest which carries traces of the past, revealing the complexity and interdependence of human/environment relation (Corboz 1983) as well as in the tripartite

sense of perception/ownership-experience-geography – or, as Attened-er & Lohmeier (2024) state, "convergence of perception, appropriation, and experience"– within both online and physical contexts, we could say that the process of digital placemaking utilizes, presupposes, builds or in-scribes on previous instantiations of placemaking in the real world and, as it progresses also, on such notions and practices in the digital world. This constant re-writing turn places into "living archives" that are fluid and continuously transforming within current and past/historical con-texts while by leveraging digital technologies, people can re-shape their places as inter-connected, inclusive, and meaningful.

EPILOGUE

People establish their identity through their connection to their locale, with "pieces of geographical space" (Soja 1971). They develop awareness and familiarity, encompassing place as a whole of a lived space, with its natural resources and extending to emplaced, symbolic and deterritori-alised social interactions, cultural, economic, and political relations, atti-tudes, perceptions, feelings, histories, memories, and experiences.

Sense of place is crucial in suggesting a multi-level connection be-tween people and the place they inhabit, which is culturally shaped and imbued with multiple meanings, shared feelings, and experiences. It al-so encompasses local identity construction and the agency of the local population, particularly as they perceive and promote place through rep-resentations, narratives, and memories. Experiences of people dwelling in both villages, mainly permanent residents or local internal migrants, cov-er views, reflections, representations and feelings concerning the locales as well as specific values they attach to them. This also includes nostal-gia, place-based memory, common heritage and the making of collective identity shared by the two villages.

Accordingly, representation of the sense of place is explored as gen-erated online in the local networked world, especially with regards to the process of change due to tourism. Digital practices intertwine with place-making processes through a hybrid (online/offline) participation, where online environments are used as complement and mediate face-to-face interactions, offering a hybrid experience (Kokolaki 2023).

Within this context, sense of place is extended and ascribed in virtu-al environments, with online focus on representation and often reminis-cence of distinct elements of natural and cultural heritage such as the archaeological findings, the natural port, the place-names of the villages and so on. Local communities choose, emphasise and utilise those ele-

ments that they endow with special interest, significance and value, often with intense nostalgia and (sometimes conscious) idealisation. Including within the digital place-making framework a rural area in the process of transformation, it is also expected to contribute to a relatively under-researched parameter (Basaraba 2021).

As the growing realm of ubiquitous pervasive technologies is increasingly permeating quotidian experience, diversifying the sense of space-time and social relations, a new communicational universe is created. In the light of the fast technological advances and their integration in people's lifeworlds (metaverse, Internet of Things, artificial intelligence) and considering the fluidity of terminology, the concept of digital placemaking and digitally mediated sense of place remains open for further discussion and research.

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