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Branding Strategies to Enhance the Appeal of Cultural Heritage Sites for International Tourists

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the application of branding in enhancing the attractiveness of cultural heritage sites for international tourists. It investigates the role of branding in shaping tourist perceptions, increasing revisit intention, and improving visitor satisfaction.

Design/method/approach – A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted using literature from Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar. Keywords like "branding," "cultural heritage sites," "tourist attraction," and "tourist perception" were used to select studies published between 2014-2024.

Findings – Effective branding strategies, including authentic brand images, experiential marketing, and emotional attachment through historical nostalgia, positively influence tourists' perceptions and satisfaction. Branding also contributes to local tourism growth and job creation. However, challenges such as information overload and commercialization, which may compromise cultural values, remain. Digital technologies enhance global visibility and cultural narratives.

Implications – The study underscores the need for balancing commercial appeal and cultural preservation in branding strategies. Policymakers and tourism managers should focus on authentic branding to attract and retain international tourists.

Novelty/Originality – This research offers new insights into how branding influences cultural heritage tourism, particularly regarding the role of digital technologies and the challenges of over-commercialization

Keywords: branding; cultural heritage sites; tourism attraction; tourist perception; experiential marketing



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1. Introduction

Cultural heritage sites are representations of history and national identity that have educational value for future generations, helping them understand the origins and journey of

the nation (Desai, 2021). In the era of globalization, these sites also serve as strategic assets in the tourism sector, attracting domestic and international tourists interested in local culture and history (Khan, Hassan, Fahad, & Naushad, 2020). In order to optimize the potential of these attractions, a structured and sustainable branding strategy is needed. Effective branding can not only raise the profile and attractiveness of heritage sites in the eyes of the world, but also strengthen people's appreciation of their value and heritage (Parga-Dans, González, & Enríquez, 2020).

Around the world, travelers' interest in authentic cultural experiences continues to increase, making cultural tourism a major trend in global tourism (Seyfi, Hall, & Rasoolimanesh, 2020). This increase provides opportunities for cultural heritage sites to maximize their appeal through branding strategies. Branding creates a strong and memorable identity, which not only extends recognition but also attracts international tourists (Kastenholz & Gronau, 2022). Effective branding connects local cultural values with the complex needs of the international market, thus helping to preserve the essence of culture while attracting more visitors (Daldanise, 2020).

In the tourism industry, branding is a key strategy capable of creating a unique appeal for cultural destinations (Tien, Dung, & Tien, 2019). Proper branding allows cultural heritage sites to stand out by offering differentiated experiences and building a strong image, which communicates historical stories and values to a global audience (Hay, Chien, & Ruhanen, 2022). In addition to being a promotional tool, branding also creates an emotional attachment between tourists and the site. With consistent and meaningful branding, cultural sites can increase their commercial value without losing their authentic essence, thus contributing to tourist attraction and the local economy (Wondirad, Kebete, & Li, 2021).

Branding of cultural heritage sites faces challenges such as management, stakeholder engagement, and market differentiation, which hinder branding and tourism development. These challenges are especially evident when branding UNESCO World Heritage Sites, where competition among local sites may threaten intangible cultural values (Hernández, 2019). In Murshidabad, an unorganized market makes brand differentiation difficult (Banerjee & Mukherjee, 2022). Engagement with stakeholders often overlooks the importance of intangible heritage (Radosavljević & Čulafić, 2019). Visitor awareness affects perceptions, and the impact of national and international heritage status varies (Dai, Li, Aktürk, & Jiao, 2022). These challenges can give rise to innovative strategies to increase community engagement.

To overcome these challenges, a new conceptual framework for branding cultural heritage sites is necessary. This framework should take into account not only traditional branding strategies but also modern technological and digital approaches to attract international tourists while preserving cultural authenticity (Mathras, Cohen, Mandel, & Mick, 2016). Recent research highlights that innovations such as mobile-based applications, digital storytelling, and interactive platforms can be leveraged to enhance branding strategies for cultural heritage sites (DaCosta & Kinsell, 2023). Successful heritage site brands boost the local economy and community engagement by integrating cultural identity. Civita in Bagnoregio, Italy, applied a people-centered approach and social media to create a sustainable brand image (Amer, Ginzarly, & Renzi, 2023). In Iran, historic place branding supports

economic growth (Yavari, Shafei, & Fatemi, 2022). Portugal engages stakeholders for meaningful visitor experiences (Nobre & Sousa, 2022), while digital strategies increase heritage visibility (Ibrahim Hassanein Ibrahim, 2022). The challenge between commercialization and preservation of cultural authenticity requires continuous dialogue among stakeholders.

Recent research shows that digital technology plays an important role in preserving and promoting Indonesia's cultural heritage sites. The development of web platforms and mobile applications improves visitor experience and awareness of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Permatasari, Qohar, & Rachman, 2020). However, the conversion of agricultural land into built-up areas hinders preservation (Widaningrum, Surjandari, & Sudiana, 2020). A legal framework to protect national cultural heritage is being established (Helmi, 2021). At Borobudur Temple, visitor values and expectations influence return visit intentions (Damanik & Yusuf, 2022). These findings emphasize the importance of integrating digital technology and visitor management to protect cultural heritage.

Research shows that cultural heritage sites face challenges in brand management, stakeholder engagement, and market differentiation, which can hinder branding and tourism development. Competition between sites, especially those with UNESCO status, can threaten the preservation of intangible culture, while visitor awareness affects perceptions and visitation intentions. While the success of an effective brand can boost the local economy and community engagement, challenges such as land use change remain. Therefore, further research is needed to propose a conceptual framework for branding cultural heritage sites that integrates traditional and modern marketing strategies, focusing on enhancing appeal to international tourists while maintaining cultural integrity.

2. Methods

In this study, the main objective was to explore the application of branding in enhancing the attractiveness of cultural heritage sites for international tourists through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The literature search process was conducted systematically using databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and DOAJ, with relevant keywords such as “branding,” “cultural heritage sites,” and “tourism attraction.” The main focus was on literature published between 2014 and 2024 to gain current insights into effective branding strategies. The initial search resulted in a comprehensive selection of articles, which were later refined through a screening process based on inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria included studies that addressed the relationship between branding and attractiveness of cultural heritage sites, as well as research that focused on best practices in cultural branding. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included studies that were not relevant to the topic or did not follow an appropriate methodology. At the selection stage, articles that meet the inclusion criteria will be evaluated in depth, and relevant data will be extracted manually, including key findings, methodology, and conclusions relating to the application of branding. A detailed explanation of the literature synthesis was conducted through thematic analysis, which involved categorizing the studies according to key themes such as branding strategies, cultural identity, and tourism engagement. The extracted data will be analyzed to

identify patterns, challenges, and opportunities in the application of branding as a strategy to attract international tourists to cultural heritage sites. Visualizations, such as tables, will be included to show the distribution of literature by time, research focus, and key findings, making the methodology more transparent. The procedure of this research can be seen in Figure 1.

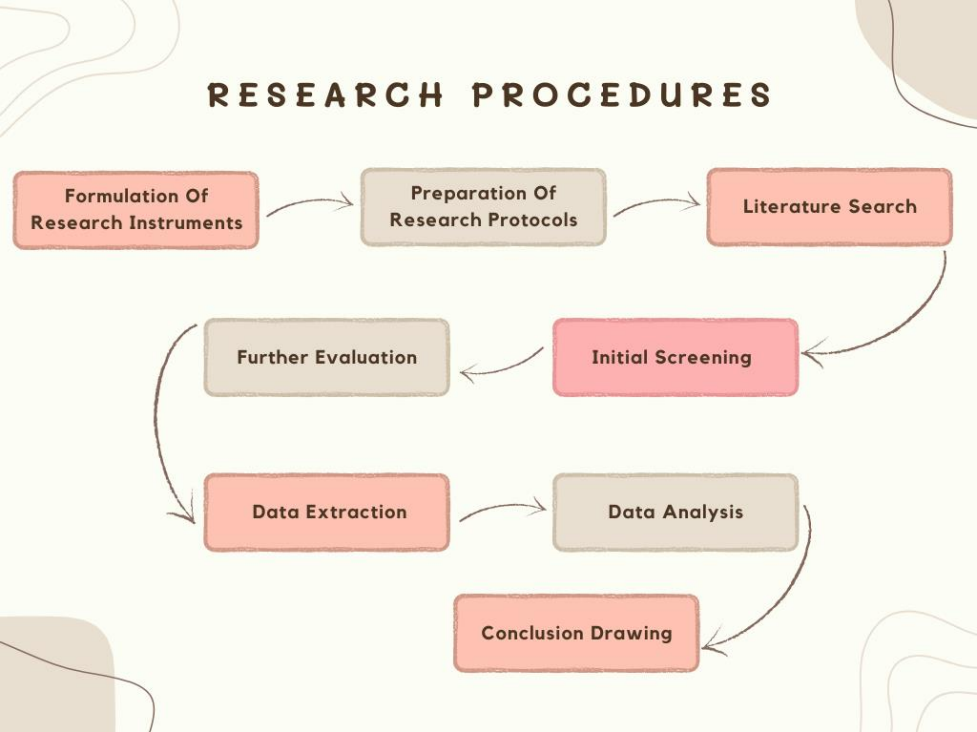


Figure 1: Research Procedure

Figure 1 explains the research procedure that begins with formulating a specific research instrument regarding the application of branding to increase the attractiveness of cultural heritage sites for international tourists. The next step was to develop a research protocol that included setting inclusion and exclusion criteria and identifying data sources from platforms such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and DOAJ. Literature was systematically searched with related keywords, such as “branding,” “cultural heritage sites,” “tourism marketing,” and “tourist attraction.” Search results were then filtered by title and abstract to eliminate irrelevant articles. Articles that passed the initial screening were reviewed in more depth through a full reading to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. Data from the articles were then extracted and analyzed to identify key findings related to the effectiveness of branding strategies, challenges, and opportunities in enhancing the attractiveness of cultural heritage sites. The results of this analysis will be used to provide recommendations for innovative and sustainable branding practices.

3. Result and Discussion

Based on the results of the literature search, several relevant research findings have been identified to support the focus and objectives of this study. This research can be categorized

based on several main focuses, namely: 1) effective branding of cultural heritage sites, 2) the influence of social media and digital platforms in increasing the visibility of cultural heritage sites, 3) the role of unique branding in attracting international tourists, 4) the impact of experiential marketing on visitor satisfaction, and 5) the importance of community involvement in branding strategies.

Table 1. Focus and Insight into Research Outcomes according to Eligibility Criteria

No	Field or Focus	Names of Authors	Research Insights or Variables
1	Branding and Traveler Satisfaction	(Mohammed <i>et al.</i> , 2022), (Chen, You, Lee, & Li, 2021), (Raja, Soundararajan, & Parayitam, 2023), (Maulina & Sofyan Fauzi, 2022)	Effective branding improves traveler perceptions, desire to return, and visitor satisfaction. Brand image, perceived quality, and value contribute positively to return intentions.
2	Experiential Marketing	(Fatemi, Shafei, & Yavari, 2023), (Robertson, 2014)	Experiential marketing strengthens loyalty and supports word of mouth. Historical nostalgia increases emotional attachment and brand authenticity.
3	Social Media and Digital Platforms	(Kalcheva, 2022), (Kurniawati, 2023), (Maietti, Medici, Bonsma, Lerones, & Ferrari, 2022), (Liang, Lu, & Martin, 2021), (Tina Rahmadayanti & Kholid Murtadlo, 2020)	The integration of social media and digital technologies increases the visibility and accessibility of heritage sites, enabling community engagement in heritage preservation.
4	Unique Branding and Brand Image	(Hassan <i>et al.</i> , 2023), (Clarke, 2017), (Madariaga & Asencio, 2019), (Hammouda, 2019), (Adie <i>et al.</i> , 2018)	The uniqueness of heritage site branding depends on the interaction between heritage values and branding strategies. A community-based approach creates a strong brand image.
5	Visitor Perception and Community Engagement	(Bris <i>et al.</i> , 2021), (Abdalla Elsayed Hassan, Zerva, & Aulet, 2021)	Understanding visitor perceptions and community engagement are essential for a sustainable branding strategy in the context of international tourism.

Table 1 illustrates the diverse focus and scope of the heritage branding field. Each touches on important aspects that contribute to the international traveler experience, whether from the perspective of effective branding, experiential marketing, or the integration of social media and digital technology. This research shows that successful branding depends not only

on brand image, but also on community engagement and understanding visitor perceptions. Thus, a holistic approach is needed to enhance the appeal of cultural heritage sites and encourage tourists' desire to return.

The Impact of Branding on Perceptions, Return Intentions, and Satisfaction Levels of International Travelers at Cultural Heritage Sites

Effective branding of cultural heritage sites increases international tourists' perceptions, desire to return, and visitor satisfaction through positive brand image and high quality of experience (Mohammed, Mahmoud, & Hinson, 2022). The role of brand image in shaping visitors' perceptions and experiences is paramount, as it directly impacts their expectations and emotional attachment to the site (Li, Ma, & Wu, 2023). Economically, branding supports local tourism employment and growth (Fatemi et al., 2023), while experiential marketing reinforces loyalty and word of mouth (Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021). Historical nostalgia also increases emotional attachment and brand authenticity, driving visitor satisfaction (Chen et al., 2021).

Research reveals that brand image, perceived quality, and value contribute positively to return intentions to cultural heritage sites, with safety as a moderating factor (Raja et al., 2023). This is aligned with theories of consumer behavior, where perceived quality and emotional connections to the brand are critical in influencing tourists' decisions to revisit heritage sites (Liu, Hultman, Eisingerich, & Wei, 2020). At Borobudur Temple, perceived value and expectations are more influential than satisfaction (Maulina & Sofyan Fauzi, 2022). In halal destinations, the tourism index affects experience quality and return intentions (Rahmawati, Oktora, Ratnasari, Ramadania, & Darma, 2021). Cultural centers shape visitor perceptions; positive experiences increase satisfaction, while negative ones damage the image (Zeng, 2017). These findings emphasize the importance of managing expectations and experiences to increase return visit intentions.

Research shows that effective branding significantly influences perceptions, revisit intentions, and satisfaction levels of international tourists at cultural heritage sites. A positive brand image and quality experiences increase visitor satisfaction, while negative experiences can damage the site's image. Thus, it is essential for destination managers to integrate brand strategies that not only enhance the site's image but also ensure a consistent and high-quality experience that meets visitor expectations. Tourists' return intentions are influenced by brand image, perceived quality, and safety factors as moderators. In addition, branding supports local tourism growth by creating jobs and encouraging word-of-mouth. Therefore, branding strategies should integrate these elements to achieve sustainable tourism goals.

The Role of Social Media And Other Digital Platforms In Increasing Visibility And Accessibility Of Cultural Heritage Sites Among International Travelers

The integration of social media and digital platforms is essential to increase the visibility of cultural heritage sites to international tourists by facilitating engagement and promotion of cultural narratives (Kalcheva, 2022). Social media such as Facebook and Instagram are effective in reaching audiences and promoting events (Kurniawati, 2023). Digital technologies also expand access through virtual tours and interactive content, which support

heritage branding (Maietti et al., 2022). However, information overload can obscure the unique narratives of heritage sites, diluting their authenticity (Baioni et al., 2021).

Social media and digital platforms increase the visibility and accessibility of heritage sites to international travelers and enable community engagement in heritage preservation (Liang et al., 2021). In Indonesia, stakeholders utilize digital interventions to promote the value of cultural heritage through websites and mobile applications (Tina Rahmadayanti & Kholid Murtadlo, 2020). Social media communication is also effective in promoting intangible heritage, such as Marrakech crafts (Hammou, Aboudou, & Makloul, 2020), and its analysis helps understand visitation patterns and supports the development of better management strategies (Ghermandi, Camacho-Valdez, & Trejo-Espinosa, 2020). These digital tools contribute to the preservation of global cultural heritage. These platforms also contribute to preserving both tangible and intangible heritage by enhancing global visibility (Selmanović et al., 2020).

Research shows that the integration of social media and digital platforms is crucial in increasing the visibility of cultural heritage sites to international travelers, as well as in facilitating engagement and promotion of cultural narratives. Social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, are effective in reaching audiences and promoting events, while digital technologies expand access through virtual tours and interactive content, although information overload can obscure a site's unique narrative. In Indonesia, stakeholders are utilizing digital interventions to promote the value of cultural heritage, and social media communications are also contributing to understanding visitation patterns and supporting the preservation of global cultural heritage. Challenges like over-commercialization of heritage narratives must be addressed to preserve authenticity.

The Uniqueness of Effective Branding for Cultural Heritage Sites in the Context of International Travelers

The uniqueness of heritage site branding lies in the interaction between heritage values and branding strategies that enhance the international traveler experience. The brand personality of a World Heritage Site (WHS) influences visitor preferences (Hassan et al., 2023). Community-based approaches, such as at Civita di Bagnoregio, create a strong brand image (Clarke, 2017). UNESCO brands increase visibility, but must reflect authentic local culture (Madariaga & Asencio, 2019). While the integration of cultural elements in branding creates a competitive advantage, there is a significant risk of over-commercialization that can dilute cultural expression and undermine authenticity (Hammouda, 2019).

World Heritage Site (WHS) status plays an important role in branding and attracting tourists (Hassan & Rahman, 2015), although its effectiveness has been questioned due to its limited impact on visitor motivation (Adie, Hall, & Prayag, 2018). Approaches that focus on people's needs, like community engagement and visitor experience, are considered more sustainable and better aligned with long-term tourism goals (Bris et al., 2021). Analysis of visitor perceptions identified four dimensions of cultural WHS brand personality: Sophistication, Sincerity, Competence, and Excitement (Abdalla Elsayed Hassan et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate the importance of understanding visitor perceptions and community engagement in heritage site branding strategies for international tourism.

Research reveals that the uniqueness of heritage site branding lies in the interaction of heritage values and branding strategies that enhance the international traveler experience. The brand personality of World Heritage Sites (WHS) influences visitor preferences, while the community-based approach creates a strong brand image. The UNESCO brand increases visibility, but must reflect authentic local culture. While WHS status helps attract tourists, its effectiveness in motivating visitors is questionable. Approaches that emphasize community engagement are more sustainable and important to support international tourism branding strategies.



Figure 2. Development of Research Variables

Figure 2 illustrates the development of the research variables regarding the effectiveness of the branding approach in increasing the attractiveness of cultural heritage sites for international tourists. Effective branding focuses on creating positive and authentic perceptions through a strong brand image, where elements such as brand personality (sophistication, sincerity, competence, and excitement) and experiential marketing strengthen visitor loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion. The uniqueness of local culture and heritage values are also integrated in the branding strategy to strengthen destination identity without compromising cultural authenticity. Digital platforms and social media play a role in increasing global visibility, although overuse risks obscuring the unique narrative of the site. On the other hand, the status as a World Heritage Site (WHS) helps attract tourists but needs to be supported by a community-based approach to be more sustainable. In addition to tourism impacts, branding of heritage sites also contributes to local economic sustainability through job creation and economic growth.

4. Conclusion

The results of the reviewed research on branding cultural heritage sites show that effective branding efforts have increased tourists' positive perceptions, desire to return, and visitor satisfaction. Successful branding relies on an authentic brand image, experiential marketing, and emotional attachment through historical nostalgia. In addition, this research highlights the importance of integrating modern digital technologies and social media into branding strategies, which have proven effective in increasing global visibility and engagement with cultural narratives. Social media and digital technologies also play a significant role in enhancing global visibility and strengthening cultural narratives. However, challenges such as information overload, which can obscure a site's unique identity, and the risk of commercialization, which may undermine local cultural values, remain. Furthermore, while community-based approaches and understanding visitor perceptions are critical for building a sustainable brand, there is a gap in research regarding the impact of over-commercialization and the effectiveness of digital technology in preserving cultural authenticity. Future research is recommended to explore more deeply the integration of digital strategies with traditional branding efforts, as well as examining the influence of commercialization and socio-cultural factors on visitor perceptions and engagement with cultural heritage sites. Practical implications for stakeholders include guidance for local governments in managing cultural heritage sites, ensuring that branding strategies are sustainable and culturally sensitive. Additionally, digital marketing strategies can enhance international branding, increasing global visibility and preserving the authenticity of the sites.

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