

International Tourism Branding in Knowledge Economy: Challenges, Opportunities, Strategies, and Role of Stakeholders

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the challenges, opportunities, strategies, and the role of stakeholders in international tourism branding within the context of the knowledge economy. Moving beyond outdated, advertisement-based paradigms, modern tourism branding requires dynamic knowledge and effective management to achieve global competitiveness. This study utilizes thematic analysis of qualitative-exploratory research and is informed by interviews conducted with 14 prominent experts in the fields of branding and marketing. The reliability of the coding process was confirmed through a test-retest method, yielding a coefficient of 89.33%. The findings revealed substantial potential in areas such as digital technologies, indigenous knowledge production, community engagement, knowledge-based brand cluster formation, and the integration of emerging technologies (e.g., AR/VR and data analytics) to strengthen competitive advantages. However, several barriers remain. These include insufficient data and technology infrastructure, difficulties in converting knowledge assets into brand value, weak brand governance, and resistance to innovation among conservative stakeholders. Strategically, the paper supports knowledge-based brand governance models built on a tripartite collaboration between government, academia, and industry. Most importantly, this study emphasizes the critical role of digital training for local labor forces and the implementation of knowledge-based metrics for brand evaluation. It redefines the role of stakeholders: tourists are reframed as knowledge prosumers, universities as brand documenters, and governments as facilitators of smart governance. Ultimately, this paper proposes an innovative framework that views the tourism brand not as a promotional tool, but as a dynamic, evolving structure embedded in knowledge ecosystems.

KEYWORDS

Tourism, Brand, Knowledge Economy.

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Introduction

The globalization process in today's rapidly changing world has made international tourism branding a strategic necessity, especially within the context of the knowledge economy. As global tourism grows in scale and complexity, branding is no longer simply a marketing tool; it has become essential for positioning destinations in competitive environments and attracting sustained economic, cultural, and infrastructural investments (Gnoth, 2015). In this evolving paradigm, the knowledge economy—driven by innovation, digital technologies, and the rising importance of intangible assets—has introduced both new opportunities and complexities to tourism branding (Munar, 2009).

The integration of information and communication technologies (ICT), the proliferation of digital platforms, and accelerating globalization have revolutionized how tourism brands are built, communicated, and experienced. Currently, tourism branding goes beyond creating a desirable image; it focuses on fostering interactive, value-based relationships between destinations and international audiences. This shift represents a broader movement from mass communication towards co-created narratives, where travelers, residents, and stakeholders collectively shape the identity and perception of destinations (Munar, 2009).

These developments, though promising, are still faced with big challenges. Among the most urgent ones is the digitalization of the tourist experiences and the development of virtual communities that have transformed the power relations in the branding process. Tourists have become the key players in brand construction and tend to re-write or challenge authoritative accounts, re-framing the territories of destination management and local players (Munar, 2009). Moreover, the tourism industry has to balance the desire to grow economically and the increasing needs to be environmentally and culturally sustainable. In this respect, intellectual property (IP) instruments, including trademarks, patents, and geographical indications, are becoming increasingly significant as mechanisms that allow protecting heritage, as well as fostering innovation (John et al., 2024). In the knowledge economy, intangible assets such as reputation, trust, and relational capital are increasingly seen as critical drivers of competitiveness and value creation (Jamporzmeý et al., 2024).

In addition, the smaller tourism operators, especially those in rural and regional settings, experience structural challenges in developing coherent and effective brand identities. Lack of coordination and fragmentation in small businesses, as well as a weak message, can often destabilize destination positioning in foreign markets because of inconsistent messaging (Perkins et al., 2020). On top of that, the incorporation of the national identity, cultural symbolism, and brand authenticity into branding strategies are not developed well in most cases, often due to funding, marketing expertise, and institutional support constraints (Ramona et al., 2009).

However, such barriers are offset by strong opportunities. The tourism industry is growing worldwide, and the destinations that have their own unique and well-

maintained brands are becoming better placed to attract tourists who are willing to have meaningful, culturally rich and unique experiences (Alejandria-Gonzalez, 2016). With the emergence of digital branding ecosystems, more personalization, live engagement, and storytelling that touches particular target groups become possible. Simultaneously, the development of business tourism has become one of the most effective forces of knowledge sharing, innovation, and economic interaction. International exhibitions, trade fairs, and conferences are also good platforms to share ideas, build networks and increase the presence of destination brands globally (Vetrivel et al., 2024).

To conclude, branding of international tourism in the environment of the knowledge economy is in a state of dynamic tension between problems and opportunities. With the adoption of digital innovation, exploitation of intellectual and cultural capital and the consideration of the current structural constraints, tourism destinations can develop strong, adaptive brands that are not only in line with the global trends, but also maintain the local identities. Hence, the present article discusses the dynamic environment of tourism branding in knowledge economy terms to give an understanding of strategic directions of sustainable and competitive brand development.

Taking into consideration the radical changes in the contemporary world of economy and the increasing role of knowledge, innovation, and digital technologies in the remodeling of branding and marketing strategies, the objective of this paper is to analyze the issues and possibilities of international tourism branding in the environment of the knowledge economy. In the current study, the author is interested in investigating the role of knowledge-based assets, technological infrastructures, and cultural dynamics in forming, developing, and positioning tourism brands in the global context. Based on this, the core research question behind this investigation is: What are the major challenges and opportunities of international tourism branding in the knowledge economy and what are the strategies that can be used to improve the competitive positioning of tourism destinations in the global markets? Based on the analytical methodology and with references to the latest scholarly research, the article attempts to present a conceptual framework that can help policymakers, scientists, and practitioners in the tourism industry to understand and act in response to the changing patterns of destination branding in knowledge-based settings.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Tourism Branding

The theoretical background of tourism branding can only be understood through an in-depth analysis of the theoretical frameworks and research studies that have influenced the area of tourism branding. The focal point of this area is the destination branding concept that combines the principles of branding with the creation of destination image. In this regard, the general image of a destination serves as an intermediary between brand associations (cognitive, affective, and unique) and behavioral intentions of tourists (revisit and recommendation) (Qu et al., 2011). Symbolic components of

branding such as the name of the destination, destination logo, and tagline also play a significant role in the perception and decision-making of potential tourists (Chan, 2022).

In parallel, place branding has grown into a multidisciplinary practice that takes into consideration the contribution of host communities and various stakeholders in developing the image of destinations (Cai et al., 2009). This transformation is associated with the abandonment of promotional approaches, as it is also a recognition of expanded socio-cultural and economic aspects. An all-encompassing place branding model underlines the mutual relationship between the place image and place reputation, as well as acknowledge, the role of national culture, and infrastructure in shaping the perception of a destination brand on the global level (Foroudi et al., 2016). Strategic place branding underscores the significance of a long-term approach and integrated marketing efforts to boost the attractiveness of a destination (Bayraktar & Uslay, 2016). Additionally, cross-sectoral branding, which sees tourism branding intersecting with various economic sectors, presents an opportunity to establish a cohesive national brand; however, it is not without challenges stemming from conflicting interests among stakeholders (Therkelsen & Halkier, 2008).

The empirical knowledge also supports the significance of stakeholder cooperation in the creation of genuine and unified destination brands. Effective branding will need to involve the alignment of destination marketing organizations (DMOs), the local community, and the private sector actors (Ilieş & Ilieş, 2015). Specifically, sporting events have become one of the powerful means of destination branding, improving brand awareness and generating socio-economic gains, particularly in developing or emerging markets (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2019).

On the tactical level, the strategic application of such branding components as logos, slogans, and names of destinations is still critical in building the powerful and memorable brand identities (Chan, 2022). In addition to this, the combination of relationship marketing, cluster development and network-based approaches has been found to enhance the results of branding efforts (Žemla, 2009). Although the concept of destination branding has been widely used, it has been criticized on theoretical consistency and implementation. Researchers state that the absence of a coherent theory may lead to disjointed or ineffective branding activity. The solutions to these shortcomings would require bringing in interdisciplinary thinking and greater dependence on empirical data to buttress the theoretical foundation of the discipline (Žemla, 2009).

Following the recent events, especially the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, new research directions have been identified. The turn to the psychological and symbolic construction of destination perceptions due to the crisis has shown the importance of the social constructionism and semiotic analysis in tourism branding communication (Bladen & Callinan, 2022). There also seems to be a post-pandemic interest in investigating the relational and spiritual attributes of destination brand experiences that are becoming increasingly critical to establishing emotional and

identity-based relationships with sites (Ngwira et al., 2023). Lastly, a multidisciplinary and holistic view (that is based on marketing, tourism studies and sociology) has been suggested to enhance stakeholders coordination, as well as to enhance the knowledge on destination brand identity formation (Konecnik Ruzzier & de Chernatony, 2013).

Knowledge Economy and Its Implications for Tourism

Knowledge economy has also led to a huge change in the tourism industry as it has led to innovation, increased competitiveness and sustainable development. The most important effect is observed in the sphere of innovation and competitive advantage. The acknowledgment of knowledge, as one of the key economic resources, has made it one of the sources of organizational renewal and strategic differentiation in tourism ventures. Sustainable competitive advantage requires efficient management of knowledge, especially in dynamic and globalized tourism markets (Cooper, 2014). Moreover, the use of technological innovation in tourism practices will be possible due to the knowledge-intensive processes, which can affect tourist behavior and spending. Nevertheless, this association does not always follow a straight line, with some research claiming that in specific circumstances, the connection between the development of knowledge and tourist expenditure can be characterized by adverse tendencies (Rigelsky et al., 2022).

Moreover, it is important that knowledge management and network-based cooperation play a central role in the development of innovative capabilities in tourism. In networked tourism systems, knowledge management improves the absorptive capacity of organizations in terms of its ability to incorporate and exploit external knowledge to innovate and develop services (Binder, 2020). On a larger scale, the international scientific collaboration networks (SCNs) of the tourism and hospitality academia have shown a positive influence on the performance of innovation, which highlights the significance of cross-country collaborations and knowledge sharing (Wang et al., 2024).

The knowledge economy also aids optimization of the economy and structure of the tourism industry. It stimulates development of high-value services, encourages sectoral convergence, and a more knowledge-based structure of the industry. Such structural change enables more flexibility and infiltration of tourism into other realms of the economy (Wang, 2015). The most illustrative example in this matter is business tourism which plays a critical role in the transferring of the knowledge and economic growth. Business tourism helps in spreading ideas, technologies, and skills worldwide through the use of activities like international conferences, trade fairs, and exhibitions (Vetrivel et al., 2024).

The other significant influence is the incorporation of the cultural and creative aspects. The combination of the cultural and creative industries with tourism improves the experiences of customers, value addition to tourism services and quality of services. Empirical results emphasize that interactive marketing in cultural tourism results in greater customer satisfaction and greater returns on investment (Wang, 2018). In addition, local knowledge and cultural heritage can be utilized to enhance tourism content and achieve sustainable destination branding without compromising regional

identity (Jedeejit et al., 2017). Lastly, the knowledge economy encourages human capital formation and development of education tourism. With education as an international commodity, education tourism has been experienced as a cultural and economic phenomenon in many regions (e.g., ASEAN). This type of tourism helps to increase GDP since it brings foreign students and promotes knowledge mobility. In order to maintain this impetus, it is important to establish sound training systems and knowledge management infrastructures. These are done to guarantee the constant upskilling of the tourism personnel and the sustainability of the industry in terms of competitiveness in the long run (Khan et al., 2020). The transition from 3G to 4G enabled mobile booking systems and location-based services, while the emergence of 5G technology provides unprecedented opportunities for revolutionizing the entire tourism value chain (Fasanghari & Asarian., 2024).

To sum up, the knowledge economy has a revolutionary impact on the tourism sector in various aspects- covering innovation, structural change, economic growth and cultural integration. In order to maximize such advantages, tourism organizations and policymakers should invest in successful knowledge management practices, build effective networks, and focus on human capital development. These are the necessary steps towards ensuring that tourism will have a sustainable and competitive future within the global knowledge economy.

Methodology

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative-exploratory research design to deeply investigate the complexities and dynamics of international tourism branding within the knowledge economy framework. Given the multifaceted and context-specific nature of tourism branding, especially in a globalized and knowledge-driven environment, an interpretivist paradigm was deemed most appropriate. This approach facilitated the exploration of subjective meanings, stakeholder perceptions, and emergent strategic themes through rich qualitative data.

Data were gathered via in-depth semi-structured interviews with 14 carefully selected experts. The purposive sampling strategy was guided by stringent inclusion criteria: participants must possess a minimum of 10 years of experience in tourism branding at academic or practical levels, demonstrate active involvement in tourism development through research, policy-making, or consultancy, and have exposure to branding initiatives in knowledge-based economies. The participants represented a diverse spectrum of professional backgrounds, including academia, government tourism agencies, private-sector brand strategists, and cultural policy consultants, ensuring a broad and multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon.

The sample was geographically diverse, comprising experts from Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, thus enhancing the international relevance and transferability of findings. Interviews were conducted over a six-week period in early 2025, either face-

to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms.

Thematic saturation—a point where no new themes or insights emerge—was reached by the 11th interview, aligning with qualitative research benchmarks (Guest et al., 2006). To reinforce the robustness of the thematic structure, three additional interviews were conducted, which confirmed data adequacy and thematic consistency.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) rigorous six-phase thematic analysis process: familiarization with data, initial coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analytic narrative. NVivo 14 software was employed to facilitate systematic data coding and theme organization, improving the transparency and replicability of analysis.

To ensure methodological rigor and enhance the trustworthiness of findings, multiple triangulation strategies were implemented:

Inter-coder Reliability: Two independent coders analyzed the transcripts. A test-retest reliability check was conducted on three interviews with a ten-day interval, achieving an agreement rate of 89.33%, indicating high coding consistency.

Peer Debriefing: Emerging codes and thematic interpretations were regularly discussed with two senior qualitative researchers outside the research team, allowing critical feedback to mitigate bias and validate findings.

Member Checking: Three participants reviewed preliminary interpretations related to their interviews and confirmed the accuracy and authenticity of thematic representations, thereby strengthening credibility.

We acknowledge the limitations inherent in purposive sampling, including potential selection bias. To mitigate this, strict criteria were applied, and efforts were made to include diverse geographical and institutional perspectives. While the sample size may be limited for broad generalizability, it is consistent with qualitative standards focused on depth and richness of data (Guest et al., 2006). Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study, with the research team regularly reflecting on their positionality and potential biases influencing data collection and interpretation.

Table 1
Inter-Coder Reliability Test (Test-Retest)

Row	Interview Code	Total Codes (both rounds)	Agreements	Reliability (%)
1	T1	104	46	$(2 \times 46) / 104 = 88.46\%$
2	T2	96	43	$(2 \times 43) / 96 = 89.58\%$
3	T3	100	45	$(2 \times 45) / 100 = 90.00\%$
	Total	300	134	$(2 \times 134) / 300 = 89.33\%$

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Based on the applied formula, the final test-retest reliability was calculated as 89.33%, which indicates an acceptable level of agreement across repeated coding instances in this study.

Table 2
Demographic Information of Interview Participants

Row	Age Range	Gender	Academic/Professional Background	Current Role	Years of Experience
1	45-50	Male	PhD in Tourism Marketing	Professor, Intl. Tourism Branding	20
2	50-55	Female	PhD in Cultural Policy	Government Policy Advisor (MoCT)	25
3	35-40	Male	MSc in International Marketing	Brand Consultant (Private Sector)	13
4	40-45	Female	PhD in Media & Destination Communication	Associate Professor, Tourism Faculty	17
5	55-60	Male	PhD in Strategic Management	Executive Director, Tourism Innovation	30
6	30-35	Female	PhD in Digital Branding	Lecturer, Hospitality School	8
7	50-55	Male	PhD in Knowledge Economy Studies	Senior Tourism Analyst	27
8	45-50	Female	PhD in Tourism & Cultural Diplomacy	Researcher, National Branding Institute	22
9	35-40	Male	PhD in Innovation Policy	Assistant Professor	11
10	40-45	Female	MBA in Destination Development	Consultant, Regional Tourism Projects	15
11	30-35	Male	MSc in Travel Tech & AI	CEO, SmartTourTech	9
12	60-65	Male	PhD in International Relations	Cultural Attaché (retired)	35
13	35-40	Female	PhD in Tourism Sociology	Assistant Professor	10
14	45-50	Female	PhD in Public Diplomacy & Tourism	Senior Lecturer	19

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Findings

For the analysis of the research data, thematic analysis was employed. In the first stage, the texts were thoroughly reviewed multiple times to achieve familiarity and a deep understanding of their content. In the second stage, sentences containing significant and key points were extracted from the texts and organized into a table. From these sentences, keywords termed "key concepts" were identified.

Table 3.
The Initial Coding Sample

Indicator Code	Initial Codes	Key Interview Statement
A1	Leveraging indigenous knowledge in redefining the competitive advantages of the destination,	The native knowledge is the special strength of our destination. We have identified that we cannot be sustainable by merely copying what is happening in the world in terms of tourism. Rather, we have the capacity to produce unique experiences that visitors cannot find elsewhere by getting to know our local wisdom, traditions and practices well and incorporating them into the experiences.
C1	Increasing the visibility of local services through smart markets,	We think that smart markets are an outstanding means of addressing the problem of the invisibility of local services. Previously, small and local businesses particularly those that deal with less popular locations had a major challenge of accessing the potential customers. Conventional advertising was very expensive and in most cases ineffective.
D3	The opportunity to design immersive and inclusive digital travel experiences through Augmented and Virtual Reality	We are living in the time when the Augmented Reality (AR) and the Virtual Reality (VR) technologies have generated the unprecedented opportunities to reinvent the travel experience. This is not anymore about games, we are able to develop immersive experiences using these tools.
E1	Regional synergy through inter-institutional cooperation	We think that local guides and artists are the core of any cultural identity of a destination. Not just the custodians of our traditions and stories, they can also become the greatest advocates of our cultural brands.
F2	Weakness in local regions' access to smart and analytical technologies	Access to smart and analytical technologies is one of the main issues we have in the local areas. It is a complex matter which has major influence on our growth and competitiveness.
G1	The inability to transform intangible heritage into a discernible competitive advantage for global tourists	The inability to convert our intangible heritage into a discernible competitive advantage to the global tourists is one of the most serious issues we are grappling with in our regions.

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

According to the model of Braun and Clarke (2006), the codes were then revisited and after removing the duplicates and collapsing the codes, 108 basic themes were arrived at. These fundamental themes were then categorized according to similarities and this came up with 28 sub-themes. As a result, 7 overarching themes were identified, and a thematic network was formed, which allowed a comprehensive presentation of data through the interpretation of organizing themes. This process of analysis has helped the researcher to identify correctly and explain patterns and semantic relationships among the themes.

Table 4.
Findings

Sub themes	Main themes	Global Theme
Leveraging indigenous knowledge in redefining destination competitive advantages, The potential for creating unique content based on cultural and scientific narratives, Transforming the implicit knowledge of regions into international brand narratives, Developing authentic brands with distinct knowledge-based identities,	Knowledge as a Key Brand Capital	Opportunities
The Opportunity for Globalizing Small Brands Through Digital Tourism Platforms, Increased Visibility of Local Services Through Smart Marketplaces, Reducing the Cost of Entry into foreign markets through connection to the sharing economy, Brand diversification by leveraging the advantages of blockchain and open data	The Platform Economy and Facilitating the Entry of Local Brands into the Global Market	
The opportunity to design immersive and inclusive digital travel experiences through augmented and virtual reality, The potential for personalizing brands based on tourist behavioral data, Utilizing smart tools for brand reputation and identity management, Enhancing tourist engagement in the pre-trip, During-trip, and post-trip phases	The Role of Technological Innovation in Enhancing Brand Experience	
The opportunity to create knowledge-based brand clusters in collaboration with universities, startups, and businesses, Regional synergy through inter-institutional collaboration, Accelerating brand innovation through the development of learning ecosystems, Growth of specialized brands through experience transfer networks	Knowledge Networking and the Creation of Brand Clusters	
The opportunity to strengthen cultural brands through the active participation of local guides and artists, Fostering a sense of ownership towards the destination brand within the local community, Increasing authentic content on social networks by local residents, Creating a collaborative and credible brand image in the minds of international tourists	Active Participation of the Local Community in Brand Knowledge Production	
Lack of infrastructure for collecting and sharing spatial and behavioral data, Weaknesses in local areas' access to smart and analytical technologies, Misalignment of technology infrastructure with the needs of knowledge-driven branding.	Infrastructural Gap in Data and Technology	
Failure to convert intangible heritage into a competitive advantage comprehensible to global tourists, Loss of local identity within global narratives, Lack of appropriate tools for localizing content across international channels.	Inability to Translate Knowledge Assets into Brand Competitive Advantage	
Fragmentation in destination brand management and the absence of a unified strategic authority, Failure to formulate knowledge-based policies for national and regional brands, Conflict of interests between traditional stakeholders and the development of smart and	Weakness in National/Local Tourism Brand Governance	

Sub themes	Main themes	Global Theme	
digital brands.			
Limitations in presenting brand narratives and stories in global languages, Lack of local communities' mastery over principles of intercultural digital storytelling, Absence of native multilingual platforms for showcasing knowledge assets.	Limitations in Producing Multilingual and Intercultural Content		
Resistance of tour operators and traditional agencies to new branding technologies, Lack of understanding regarding the value of knowledge assets in brand building, Distrust towards the involvement of universities and experts in the branding process.	Resistance of Traditional Institutions and Stakeholders to Innovation		
Establishing a coordinating body with a knowledge-based approach for national and local brands, Defining a participatory decision-making structure among government, academia, and industry, Utilizing smart real-time brand image monitoring systems.	Designing a Knowledge-Based Brand Governance Model	Strategies	
Designing advanced training courses in branding, storytelling, and innovation, Developing capacity for content creation and data analysis within local communities, Empowering local brand ambassadors in global networks.	Empowering Local Workforce Through Knowledge-Based Branding Education		
Formulating content strategies for digital platforms based on cultural knowledge, Designing brand experiences through integrated digital channels, Utilizing analytical tools to monitor tourist brand perception.	Digitalization Roadmap for Branding		
Formulating content strategies for digital platforms based on cultural knowledge, Designing brand experiences through integrated digital channels, Utilizing analytical tools to monitor tourist brand perception.	Establishing a Sustainable and Meaningful Brand Identity Based on Knowledge-Driven Narratives		
Designing knowledge metrics such as "percentage of local content participation" and "digital brand memory index," Integrating quantitative and qualitative data in brand evaluation, Dynamic monitoring of brand image using social media data.	Developing Brand Evaluation Metrics in the Knowledge Economy		
Playing a role in documenting destination knowledge and designing brand identity, Training local brand writers/creators (brandographers), Holding workshops on branding content production for tourism stakeholders.	The Role of Universities and Research Centers in Brand Documentation and Narrative Creation		The Role of Stakeholders
Playing a role in the development of brand-centric digital services, Connecting local brands to global markets through innovation, Designing AI-powered brand analysis and monitoring tools.	Interaction of Tourism Entrepreneurs with Innovative Platforms (Startups and Marketplaces)		
Acting as a facilitator in the creation of data-driven infrastructure and intellectual property rights for brands, Providing financial support for the development of local knowledge-based brands, Establishing international regulations for the protection of cultural and knowledge-based brands.	Governmental Participation in Smart Brand Policymaking and Facilitating the Digital Environment		
Acting as a brand content producer in travel (prosumer), Transferring knowledge-based experiences from the destination to the world through personal narratives, Participating in brand identity improvement through real-time feedback.	The Role of the Tourist as a Knowledge Contributor		
Facilitating the exchange of brand knowledge among countries, standardizing knowledge-driven branding metrics, Strengthening local brands through international tourism networks.	International Collaboration for Brand Knowledge and Experience Exchange		

(Source: Researcher's Findings)

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study, which relies on the combination of destination branding theories and knowledge economy strategies, has revealed that international tourism branding is moving away from an old-fashioned advertising-driven branding to a networked, interactive, and knowledge-based branding. In this new paradigm, knowledge is a strategic intangible resource, which has a central role in the development of brand identity, sustainable competitive advantage and the development of meaningful experiences for tourists. The results imply that the opportunities provided by the knowledge economy encompass such aspects as digitalization of branding processes, development of indigenous-knowledge narratives, active involvement of the local communities in the content production process, development of knowledge brand clusters, and application of new technologies (including augmented reality, data analytics, and blockchain). These can result in the improvement of the uniqueness of brands in the global markets. On the other hand, core issues that have been cited as structural barriers to the process of implementing knowledge-based branding are deficiency of data and technological platforms, inability to convert knowledge resources into brand power, lack of coordination among the traditional stakeholders and new institutions, insufficient multilingual platforms, and cultural opposition to innovation. Strategically, the need of developing a knowledge-based brand governance framework that is dependent on tripartite partnership between government, academia and industry was noted as a pre-condition to the development of a sustainable and innovative branding system. Moreover, empowerment of local capabilities in digital storytelling, specific training of branding, and determination of indicators of evaluation on the basis of knowledge data (including the "Brand Digital Memory Index" and the "Percentage of Local Content Contribution") are regarded as the most important steps to go over to knowledge-based branding. A multi-layered stakeholders role, which includes tourists as knowledge prosumers and universities as the institutions of brand knowledge production and documentation, proves that tourism branding in the knowledge economy could be possible only by means of synergetic effects of various actors and collaborative management.

The study cuts a niche by carefully revising the available literature on tourism branding and the knowledge economy with focus on the existing research gaps. Despite the previous discourse surrounding various aspects of destination branding, including the role of technology in tourism and the impact of the knowledge economy across diverse industries, no comprehensive study has yet successfully examined the challenges, opportunities, strategies, and stakeholder roles pertaining specifically to international tourism branding in the context of the knowledge economy in a holistic and thorough manner. This is the main difference and the center of innovation of the current study. Additionally, the past research was mostly dedicated to such concepts as destination image (Qu et al., 2011), symbolic brand elements (Chan, 2022), or the importance of local communities in the context of brand storytelling (Cai et al., 2009).

The study is the first to examine tourism branding in a consistent knowledge economy context, and it brings in knowledge as a primary brand capital. This methodology is not limited to the classical advertising or destination imaging theory to explain the contribution of tacit knowledge, indigenous heritage, and emerging technologies to the development of brand competitive advantage. Regarding the innovation of the study, the research provides a comprehensive model of understanding tourism branding as a knowledge system instead of being used as a marketing tool. Previous research predominantly utilized quantitative methods, specifically employing questionnaires to assess brand image, as highlighted by Konecnik Ruzzier and de Chernatony (2013).

With the help of semi-structured interviews with multidisciplinary professionals and the use of thematic analysis with the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), this study has managed to outline a profound and multidimensional system of insights, experiences, and knowledge-gaps in the branding of tourism based on knowledge. Moreover, this paper presents the qualitative research based on the experience of the true experts in the field of branding, and its validity is guaranteed by means of triangulation, peer review, and test-retest reliability. Although the overall significance of intangible assets in branding was previously discussed (Gnoth, 2015), the role of indigenous knowledge, cultural-scientific narratives, and intellectual assets, as the main sources of value creation and differentiation in international tourism branding, is discussed specifically and centrally in this study. The shift of paradigm of a simple image to the core of the brand, which is authentic knowledge and content, can be regarded as a new strategy that broadens the current literature.

Numerous research studies are limited by the lack of details to be provided concerning the implementation of the recommendations. In addition to providing certain targeted strategies (like drafting an intellect-based regime of governance, mobilization of local labor force, and a digitalization plan), this research advances the discourse by clearly and precisely articulating the roles of all significant stakeholders—specifically, universities, entrepreneurs, the government, and tourists, who serve as prosumers—in the successful implementation of these strategies. Such degree of differentiation and practicality constitutes a unique point in this research, echoing practical needs of the knowledge economy, as pointed at by Vetrivel et al. (2024). Although past studies have offered the theoretical and empirical basis, this research is filling a considerable gap to compile the ideas of international branding and the knowledge economy with a qualitative study approach and expert contribution. It addresses questions which had not been examined in such a detailed and specialized way till now. This research distinguishes itself from prior models that solely considered the government and the tourism industry as stakeholders, as it incorporates tourists as knowledge prosumers within the branding process. Additionally, it positions universities as brand documenters and local trainers of Brandographers, who are the local creators and documenters of brands. Furthermore, this study elevates the role of governments from mere policymakers to that of effective facilitators of smart brand

governance. This study gives a different definition of the stakeholders in a knowledge ecosystem where there is interaction and co-creation of a brand.

Recommendations

To establish a Central Knowledge and Inter-sectoral Coordination Body: A dedicated central entity focusing on knowledge management and inter-sectoral coordination must be established to formulate and implement national and regional branding initiatives. Investment in Data Infrastructures and Smart Platforms: It is crucial to invest in the collection, processing, and dissemination of behavioral and spatial data pertaining to tourists, alongside the development of smart, multilingual infrastructures. Enhanced Networking: A vigorous implementation of networking is essential for sharing branding knowledge, standardizing criteria, and strengthening local brands on a global scale. Prioritization of Indigenous Knowledge and Evaluation Metrics: Emphasis should be placed on integrating indigenous knowledge into global brand narratives, as well as developing knowledge-based evaluation metrics for branding. Provision of Specialized Training: Training programs focusing on intercultural digital storytelling, brand data analysis, and knowledge management should be conducted for professionals in the industry and local communities. Utilization of AI-Powered Brand Analysis Tools: The promotion of digital brand-centric services is vital for improving customer experiences and facilitating access to global markets. Collaboration on Authentic Content Creation: Partnerships should be fostered with local residents, guides, and artists to produce authentic content that genuinely reflects the essence of the destination.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

The subsequent points outline potential directions for future research in this field: Expand the Scope of Stakeholders: Conduct interviews and surveys with an expanded array of stakeholders, including tourists, local small businesses, and civil society organizations, to develop a more comprehensive understanding. Investigate Emerging Technologies: Explore the implications of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, the metaverse, and blockchain on tourism branding, and identify strategies for leveraging these innovations for long-term benefits. Concentrate on Specific Destinations: Implement in-depth analyses of the challenges and opportunities associated with knowledge-based branding within particular locales (e.g., rural areas or specific cities) to yield more practical, context-driven insights.

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