

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Role of tourism branding communication in shaping destination perceptions and visitor behavior engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of tourism branding communication in shaping destination perceptions and visitor engagement. It examines how psychological principles, cognitive dissonance, social proof, and motivation, are embedded in branding strategies to align with expectations, foster emotional connection, and promote sustainable tourism development. Using a qualitative exploratory design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with 40 participants, including 12 tourism professionals from the Philippines. Thematic analysis revealed five key branding themes related to authenticity, emotional engagement, message consistency, behavioral response, and adaptability. Transparent branding was found essential for reducing cognitive dissonance, while user-generated content and influencer media reinforced social proof. Branding aligned with travelers' intrinsic goals, such as adventure, relaxation, or cultural immersion, enhanced motivational appeal and loyalty. Findings underscore the value of integrating psychological theory with branding practice, offering a structured framework for interpreting visitor behavior and guiding strategic communication. While contextually specific, the study provides a foundation for future cross-cultural research and the development of adaptive, emotionally resonant destination branding.

Keywords: Tourism; branding communication; destination perceptions; visitor behavior engagement

1. Introduction

Tourism branding communication significantly influences how destinations are perceived and shapes

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visitor behavior. In an increasingly saturated and experience-driven tourism market, establishing a psychological connection with travelers has become essential to creating impactful and lasting impressions. Effective branding is no longer limited to visual identity, it now relies on emotional resonance, authentic storytelling, and digitally mediated engagement that reflects the evolving behavior of today's tourists. Recent findings show that digital exhibitions and storytelling significantly enhance visitors' cultural understanding, emotional connection, and satisfaction in heritage tourism settings^[1], reinforcing the potential of emotionally charged branding strategies.

Despite growing scholarly interest in tourism marketing, few studies offer an integrated lens that combines psychological theory with branding practice in a tourism context. This study addresses that gap by investigating how psychological principles, specifically cognitive dissonance, social proof, and motivation theory, are embedded in tourism branding strategies to align with visitor expectations, encourage engagement, and foster sustainable development.

Cognitive dissonance occurs when there is a conflict between an individual's expectations and reality, leading to psychological discomfort. According to Cooper^[2], cognitive dissonance remains one of the most enduring and influential theories in social psychology. In tourism, this discomfort can arise when marketing promises do not match actual experiences, leading to dissatisfaction or distrust. Addressing this requires branding strategies that prioritize clarity and transparency, ensuring that promotional messages are consistent with the reality visitors will encounter. Jing and Battocchio^[3] assert that transparency in communicating production and costs enhances consumers' perceptions of a brand's authenticity and reliability due to its association with sensitive information. This transparent approach not only builds trust but also minimizes dissatisfaction by ensuring marketing promises align with visitor experiences, thereby reducing cognitive dissonance in the decision-making process. Empirical studies confirm that dissonance also influences how travelers rationalize their decisions after booking; for example, pro-environmental travelers who choose less-reviewed green resorts later evaluate them more favorably to reduce internal conflict^[4].

Social proof, the principle that people tend to follow the behavior or endorsements of others, is a powerful mechanism in shaping consumer confidence and decision-making, particularly in tourism. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Shopee Live allow destinations to leverage user-generated content and influencer endorsements to convey authenticity, relatability, and desirability. Payo^[5] explains that live video broadcasts on these platforms enable merchants to market a variety of products, including clothing, toys, books, and housewares, for extended periods, thereby engaging potential consumers. In the tourism context, social proof increases the credibility of shared experiences, making it more likely for potential visitors to trust peer or influencer recommendations over traditional advertisements. This influence is especially visible among younger travelers: Liu et al.^[6] found that millennials with low self-esteem are more likely to feel benign envy toward others' travel content on social media, which in turn motivates them to visit similar luxury destinations.

Motivation and goal-setting theory offer further insight into how branding can be aligned with traveler desires and behaviors. Motivation is the energizing force behind goal-directed behavior, and in tourism, it plays a central role in shaping why people travel, how they choose destinations, and what experiences they seek. Yousaf et al.^[7] describe tourism as an activity influenced by various internal and external factors, encompassing behaviors driven by pleasure, relaxation, family visits, pilgrimages, and more. Destinations that focus on meeting specific traveler goals, such as adventure, cultural immersion, or escapism, tap into these intrinsic motivations and provide experiences that resonate with deeply personal needs. Respondents in this study highlighted the importance of crafting tailored brand messages and offerings to build strong

emotional connections with diverse visitor segments, thereby increasing bookings and promoting repeat visits. According to Rane et al.^[8], customer loyalty, critical for business success, depends on factors such as customer satisfaction, service quality, and effective relationship management. Additionally, Cuilan et al.^[9] emphasize that understanding the audience and adopting effective verbal communication techniques are essential for conveying messages and fostering engagement. Supporting this, Jiménez-Barreto et al.^[10] show that positive online destination brand experiences and brand credibility significantly influence behavioral intentions to visit and recommend a destination, especially among tourists who have never visited physically.

This study examines how cognitive dissonance, social proof, and motivation are reflected in tourism branding practices, with the goal of understanding how these psychological mechanisms influence visitor engagement and perception.

2. Literature review

The integration of psychological principles into tourism branding underscores the growing influence of strategic communication in shaping destination image, managing visitor expectations, and enhancing engagement. In particular, digital platforms and user-driven media have transformed how travelers assess, relate to, and trust destinations. The rise of social media platforms has exponentially increased the volume of content and information shared about travel destinations^[11]. To provide a grounded framework for this study, this section reviews three psychological theories—cognitive dissonance, social proof, and motivation theory—and evaluates how each informs branding strategy and visitor behavior.

2.1. Cognitive dissonance in tourism branding

Cognitive dissonance refers to the internal conflict experienced by travelers when their expectations about a destination do not align with their actual experiences. Such dissonance can result in dissatisfaction, negative reviews, and reduced loyalty. De Vos and Singleton^[12] emphasize that understanding this theory is critical for assessing satisfaction with destinations, residential preferences, and travel behavior. Within tourism branding, dissonance becomes especially salient when promotional messages fail to reflect the true on-ground experience. Addressing this challenge requires clear and transparent branding to effectively manage expectations, thereby reducing dissonance. Busser and Shulga^[13] add that transparency and authenticity in communication significantly enhance trust and loyalty. For example, accurate representations of cultural activities, attractions, and logistics empower travelers to make informed decisions, fostering trust and confidence. Authenticity in brand communication, rooted in honest and transparent information, emerges as an indispensable element for cultivating consumer loyalty^[14]. Higher brand loyalty reduces cognitive dissonance, which in turn impacts consumer complaint behavior, but brand loyalty itself does not significantly affect complaint behavior^[15]. This alignment of message and reality minimizes psychological discomfort and positions cognitive dissonance reduction as a key function of sustainable branding.

2.2. Social proof and its influence on perceptions

The concept of social proof, a central theme in social psychology, highlights how peer behavior and endorsements shape decision-making processes. In tourism, it plays a critical role as travelers increasingly rely on online reviews, social networks, and influencer content to guide their decisions. Social proof has been shown to bolster consumer trust in online purchasing contexts^[16]. User-generated content and influencer marketing are not only marketing tools but credibility-building mechanisms that operate through perceived peer endorsement. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok provide avenues for showcasing genuine travel experiences, resonating deeply with potential visitors. Xue et al.^[17] emphasize that traveler experiences and inspiration significantly contribute to destination value. Social proof not only validates travel choices but

also builds a sense of community and encourages engagement. This aligns with social learning theory and the notion that perceived consensus influences perceived desirability. Destination image significantly influences tourist behavior, with overall and affective images having the greatest impact on intention to recommend^[18]. However, Min-en et al.^[19] note that while social media plays a significant role in influencing travel decisions, its impact varies depending on tourists' predispositions and the context of influence. The effectiveness of social proof is thus mediated by cultural, demographic, and psychographic factors that should be considered in branding strategies.

2.3. Motivation and goal-setting in visitor engagement

Motivation theory underscores the importance of aligning branding efforts with the aspirations of travelers to enhance engagement. Tourism, as noted by Santos et al.^[20], is one of the most dynamic global phenomena, driven by multiple motivational drivers, pleasure, relaxation, escape, cultural exploration, and self-expression. Simková and Jindrich^[21] argue that further research is needed to explore the foundational theories underlying travel behavior. Psychological motivation is an essential foundation for how tourists choose, evaluate, and return to destinations. Destinations offering tailored experiences, such as adventure, relaxation, or cultural immersion, are better positioned to address the intrinsic motivations of travelers. Solomon et al.^[22] emphasize the value of storytelling as a strategic tool for promoting destinations by showcasing their unique qualities. Goal-setting theory complements this perspective by emphasizing the need for destinations to present clear, actionable experiences that align with specific traveler identities. Highlighting unique offerings, such as ecotourism or cultural immersion, appeals to diverse traveler segments. By addressing these aspirations, destinations can forge meaningful connections with visitors, fostering loyalty and repeat visits^[23]. Identity-related motivations are fundamental to all tourist experiences, as individuals use tourism to explore, maintain, and disengage from specific aspects of their identity^[24].

2.4. Integrating psychological insights into branding strategies

The application of cognitive dissonance, social proof, and motivation theory in tourism branding demonstrates that psychological alignment is not an abstract benefit but a practical tool for shaping visitor behavior. Leon^[25] posits that authenticity and transparency in branding foster trust and engagement. Moreover, in a highly competitive, service-driven marketplace, authenticity has emerged as a critical factor in building trust and loyalty^[26]. Psychologically attuned branding strategies reduce friction, increase confidence, and promote emotional connection, all of which translate into more committed and satisfied tourists. Frontline employees also play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions through service quality and engagement, particularly in the hospitality sector^[27,28]. According to Kim et al.^[29], the perception of brand authenticity hinges on whether it genuinely reflects the values it claims to uphold. Integrated resort brand experiences positively influence customer well-being by satisfying psychological needs, such as autonomy and relatedness, through sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions^[30]. When psychological theories are operationalized in branding efforts, from visual messaging to experiential offerings, they help destinations create consistent and emotionally resonant visitor journeys.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to examine the role of tourism branding communication in shaping visitor engagement and perceptions. The exploratory approach was selected to gain in-depth insights into participants lived experiences and interpretations. This design enabled the

researchers to analyze how branding strategies influence decision-making and emotional responses within real-world tourism contexts, aligning the study's theoretical framework with practical applications^[31].

3.2. Population and sampling

The research involved 40 participants from the Philippines, with 12 being tourism professionals who had direct experience in branding communication. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that participants possessed sufficient expertise and knowledge in the field, allowing for the collection of detailed and relevant data essential to achieving the research objectives. Inclusion criteria included: being 18 years or older, having recent engagement in tourism either as a visitor or a branding practitioner, and for professionals, at least two years of work experience in the tourism industry. This approach enabled the synthesis of a manageable yet meaningful body of qualitative data^[32]. Data saturation was determined after 35 interviews, when no new codes or themes emerged in the analysis. The final five interviews were conducted to confirm the consistency of recurring themes and to ensure completeness. A summary of the demographic characteristics and roles of all 40 respondents is presented in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Respondents demographics

Respondents	Gender	Age	Role	Years of Experience
Respondent 1	Female	53	Tourism Professional	4 years
Respondent 2	Male	52	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 3	Female	50	Tourism Professional	4 years
Respondent 4	Male	33	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 5	Female	21	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 6	Male	24	Tourism Professional	7 years
Respondent 7	Female	48	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 8	Male	29	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 9	Female	47	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 10	Male	38	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 11	Female	21	Tourism Professional	3 years
Respondent 12	Male	32	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 13	Female	25	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 14	Male	44	Tourism Professional	9 years
Respondent 15	Female	23	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 16	Male	25	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 17	Female	25	Tourism Professional	7 years
Respondent 18	Male	28	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 19	Female	43	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 20	Male	48	Tourism Professional	10 years
Respondent 21	Female	27	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 22	Male	25	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 23	Female	44	Tourism Professional	8 years
Respondent 24	Male	22	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 25	Female	43	Local Tourist	—

Respondents	Gender	Age	Role	Years of Experience
Respondent 26	Male	45	Tourism Professional	6 years
Respondent 27	Female	42	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 28	Male	27	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 29	Female	25	Tourism Professional	6 years
Respondent 30	Male	38	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 31	Female	32	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 32	Male	46	Tourism Professional	2 years
Respondent 33	Female	29	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 34	Male	47	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 35	Female	22	Tourism Professional	5 years
Respondent 36	Male	35	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 37	Female	24	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 38	Male	18	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 39	Female	50	Local Tourist	—
Respondent 40	Male	47	Local Tourist	—

Table 1. (Continued)

3.3. Instrument

Data collection was carried out using a semi-structured interview guide, featuring open-ended questions aimed at eliciting participants' views on the effectiveness of branding communication, factors influencing visitor behavior, and strategies for enhancing engagement. This flexible approach allowed participants to provide comprehensive and nuanced responses^[33]. The guide was developed based on key theoretical concepts (cognitive dissonance, social proof, and motivation) and refined through expert consultation and pilot testing with three participants. **Table 2** presents the instruments used in the study.

Table 2. Research instrument

Research Questions	Interview Guide Questions	N
How do tourism professionals perceive the effectiveness of branding communication in shaping visitor behavior engagement with a destination?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How would you describe the role of branding communication in promoting a destination? 2. In your experience, how has branding communication impacted visitor engagement with your destination? 3. What indicators do you use to evaluate the effectiveness of branding communication efforts? 4. Can you share examples of how branding communication has successfully influenced visitor behavior? 5. How do you think branding communication can be improved to better engage potential visitors? 	40
What key elements of tourism branding communication influence travelers' perceptions of a destination?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What specific elements of branding communication do you believe are most important in shaping travelers' perceptions? 2. How do visual elements, such as images or logos, impact travelers' perceptions of a destination? 3. What role do messaging and storytelling play in influencing how travelers perceive a destination? 4. How important are social media and digital platforms in shaping a destination's brand identity? 5. Can you describe how cultural and historical aspects are communicated to enhance a destination's image? 	

3.4. Data gathering procedure

The study involved one-on-one interviews with selected participants, arranged according to their availability and convenience. Initial contact was made through email and social media platforms, where potential participants were informed about the purpose of the study and screened based on predefined inclusion criteria. Once eligibility was confirmed, participants were provided with an informed consent form and a brief description of the study's objectives, including their rights as participants and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Interviews were conducted either online or face-to-face, depending on the participant's preference. A total of 28 interviews were carried out via Google Meet, while 12 were held in person at mutually agreed locations such as campus offices or public cafés. Before each session, participants gave verbal or written consent to record the conversation. Interviews were conducted using the semi-structured guide and lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded, and brief notes were taken during the interviews to supplement the recordings. Transcriptions were produced shortly after each session, and identifying details were removed to maintain confidentiality. All data were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team.

3.5. Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns and insights related to tourism branding communication and visitor engagement. The process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. From there, initial codes were manually generated by identifying key phrases, recurring ideas, and noteworthy expressions shared by the participants. These codes were then reviewed and grouped into broader categories to form initial themes. The research team refined these themes through ongoing discussion, ensuring that they accurately represented the diversity of perspectives gathered from both tourism professionals and general participants. To maintain consistency, two researchers coded a sample of the transcripts independently and compared results to arrive at a common coding framework. Throughout the analysis, notes and reflections were documented to support the transparency of theme development and ensure that the process was grounded in the participants' experiences. This approach facilitated the inclusion of diverse viewpoints, allowing the study to reflect a broad range of insights from various backgrounds and roles^[34]. The final themes were summarized in a thematic framework table, which includes subthemes, selected quotes, and the number of respondents who mentioned each theme.

3.6. Ethical considerations

The researchers ensured that ethical principles were followed throughout the study. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. To protect privacy, personal identifiers were removed during transcription and data were handled confidentially. While the study did not undergo formal institutional ethics board review, the researchers affirm that the research was carried out in accordance with the ethical standards recognized and upheld by the educational institution, which can vouch for the integrity and ethical conduct of the study.

4. Results

Research Objectives 1. How do tourism professionals perceive the effectiveness of branding communication in shaping visitor engagement with a destination?

Question No. 1. How would you describe the role of branding communication in promoting a destination?

1.1 *Creating a unique identity*

Branding communication is understood as a way of creating a unique identity for a destination that resonates with potential visitors. It goes beyond logos or taglines, focusing instead on telling a story that captures the destination's culture, landscapes, and experiences. Effective branding can make a place both memorable and desirable by drawing attention to its distinct character. This view was shared by ten (10) respondents, who also emphasized that storytelling lies at the heart of branding communication. They described how a destination's story should come alive through captivating content, visuals, and narratives that highlight not only iconic landmarks but also hidden gems.

"For me branding communication is about creating a unique identity for the destination that resonates with potential visitors. It's more than just logos or taglines; it's about telling a story that encapsulates the essence of the destination—its culture, landscapes, and experiences."

"Storytelling is the heart of branding communication. A destination's story should come alive through captivating content—photos, videos, and narratives that showcase both the well-known landmarks and the hidden gems. By capturing authentic moments, we can communicate a rich experience that feels accessible and enticing to different types of travelers."

1.2 *Vital to stand out in a competitive tourism market*

A strong brand identity is seen as essential in helping a destination stand out in an increasingly competitive tourism market. It allows places to be more memorable and to distinguish themselves from others offering similar experiences. This perspective was shared by fifteen (15) respondents, who emphasized that an effective brand highlights a destination's unique value, whether rooted in local culture, natural landscapes, or activities that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere. Branding was also seen as a way to target niche markets by emphasizing specialized offerings such as adventure tourism, luxury escapes, or eco-tourism. These targeted strategies were viewed as not only helping attract specific traveler segments but also promoting sustainable tourism by encouraging responsible travel, supporting cultural preservation, and enhancing inclusive economic opportunities.

"Branding helps to target niche markets by showcasing specific offerings like adventure tourism, luxury getaways, or eco-tourism which appeals to specific traveler segments and can drive sustainable tourism."

"Branding that emphasizes unique adventure opportunities—like trekking, scuba diving, or rock climbing—appeals to thrill-seeking travelers looking for an adrenaline-packed experience. Promoting these exclusive activities not only differentiates the location but also encourages longer stays and repeat visits from adventure enthusiasts."

Question No. 2. In your experience, how has branding communication impacted visitor engagement with your destination?

2.1 *Branding communication has been a game-changer*

A consistent brand message has proven to be a powerful tool in helping destinations stand out amid the overwhelming number of tourism choices available today. Many pointed to the role of social media in this process, particularly the use of storytelling to build emotional connections with potential visitors. This approach was highlighted by ten (10) respondents, who noted that emphasizing unique features, such as a

destination's cultural heritage or natural wonders, often leads to higher engagement and better conversion outcomes. Rather than promoting a generic tourist package, they observed that people are more compelled to visit when they resonate with a destination's story.

"A strong, consistent brand message helps us stand out among countless options. Our social media presence, for example, often focuses on storytelling that resonates emotionally with potential visitors. People feel more compelled to visit when they connect with our destination's 'story' instead of just seeing a standard tourist ad."

"Our branding revolves around the natural beauty and conservation efforts within the park. Instead of just showing scenic views, we create stories that highlight individual animals, plant species, or even the park rangers' conservation work."

2.2 It helped business grow

Branding has been instrumental in helping small tourism businesses carve out a space in a competitive market. Many rely on it to establish a distinct voice that sets them apart from larger, more established operators. This was emphasized by fifteen (15) respondents, who shared that highlighting their local expertise and personalized service builds both trust and curiosity among potential clients. Branding communication also allows them to showcase lesser-known attractions or experiences, which their target audience finds refreshing and unique. These efforts not only differentiate their offerings but also contribute to business growth by reaching travelers seeking more authentic and tailored experiences.

"Branding has helped our business grow by giving us a distinct voice. As a small operator, competing with big names can be tough. We emphasize our local expertise and personalized service, which builds trust and curiosity in our audience. Our target audience appreciates these unique offerings, and it helps differentiate us in a crowded market."

"As a small adventure operator, we've branded ourselves around intimate, personalized experiences. Instead of large group tours, we focus on small, custom adventures that give visitors a true taste of the region. Our branding highlights the local guides' deep knowledge of hidden trails and secret spots that are unknown to mainstream tourists."

Question No. 3. What indicators do you use to evaluate the effectiveness of branding communication efforts?

3.1 Booking Conversions

A direct indicator of branding campaign success is often seen in the number of inquiries or bookings that follow. This outcome, according to fifteen (15) respondents, can be assessed by comparing website traffic or ad clicks against the number of actual reservations made. A high conversion rate suggests that the campaign has effectively motivated visitors to take action. For instance, if an online ad promoting a special summer getaway results in a noticeable spike in bookings, the conversion rate, calculated as bookings divided by total website visitors, serves as a clear measure of the campaign's effectiveness in driving reservations.

“A direct indicator of campaign success, often measured by the number of inquiries or bookings following a campaign. This can be tracked by comparing the number of website visitors or ad clicks against the number of completed bookings.”

“Direct Bookings vs. Inquiries. For tour operators, there’s often a distinction between direct bookings (where a customer immediately books a tour) and inquiries (where a customer expresses interest but does not book immediately). Both metrics are important for gauging interest and campaign success.”

3.2 Visitor Engagement & Awareness

Engagement and awareness were commonly measured through digital metrics such as social media interactions, website traffic, and campaign impressions. This approach was described by ten (10) respondents, who emphasized that likes, shares, and comments offer immediate insight into how well a destination’s message is resonating with potential visitors. Website traffic was also tracked to assess how many people explored the destination’s website after seeing an ad or social media post, providing a tangible indicator of audience interest following exposure to branding communication.

“Tracking our social media engagement, website traffic, and impressions on digital campaigns. Engagement metrics like likes, shares, and comments serve as immediate indicators of how well their destination is resonating with potential visitors”

“If a social media campaign showcasing a unique local festival receives numerous shares, it indicates that people find the event worth spreading among their networks. It reflects not only awareness but a positive emotional connection.”

Question No. 4. Can you share examples of how branding communication has successfully influenced visitor behavior?

4.1 Destination Appeal and Emotional Connection

When destinations undergo rebranding, the focus is often shifted from simply showcasing landscapes or tourist activities to building an emotional connection with potential visitors. This perspective was shared by ten (10) respondents, who deliberately shaped their messaging to resonate with millennial and Gen Z travelers, groups they found more likely to engage with destinations that offer meaning beyond traditional sightseeing. As a result of this emotional positioning, they observed a 20% increase in visits from younger demographics, many of whom actively shared their experiences on social media, extending the brand’s reach organically.

“When we rebranded our destination, we focused on an emotional connection rather than just showcasing landscapes or tourist activities. As a result, we saw a 20% increase in visits from younger demographics, many of whom were eager to share their experiences on social media, further spreading our brand’s message.”

“Millennials and Gen Z are often more interested in experiences that are authentic and align with their values. A destination that emphasizes a cultural journey or a deeper connection to the land or people is far more appealing than one that simply presents itself as a tourist spot.”

4.2 Brand Loyalty through Rewards Programs

Developing a loyalty program that reflects a destination's brand values while offering tangible benefits can strengthen visitor retention. This approach was implemented by several respondents who found that clear communication of personalized offers and exclusive experiences helped drive repeat visits. In particular, ten (10) respondents shared that their programs made visitors feel valued and recognized, which fostered stronger emotional connections and engagement. Over time, these efforts not only increased repeat visits but also cultivated brand advocates who promoted the destination through word-of-mouth. When aligned with a destination's identity, a well-structured loyalty program can contribute meaningfully to sustainable growth by building a community of loyal visitors and attracting new ones through positive referrals.

"We developed a loyalty program that combined our brand's values with tangible benefits for repeat visitors. By communicating the rewards system clearly, we incentivized return visits with personalized offers and exclusive experiences."

"A successful loyalty program goes beyond just offering discounts or points—it should align with the core values and identity of the brand."

4.3 Increased Booking with Consistent Messaging

A consistent brand message across all communication channels, from social media to digital ads, can strengthen how a destination is perceived by potential visitors. When branding highlights a city's unique blend of history and modernity, it creates a clear and memorable impression. Visitors are often drawn to this clarity, especially when messaging aligns with their personal travel aspirations such as adventure, relaxation, or cultural exploration. In several cases, an increase in bookings was observed during off-peak seasons, driven by the anticipation created through unified messaging. This outcome was specifically noted by five (5) respondents, who credited consistent branding for reinforcing what their destination stood for and drawing attention year-round.

"Our team implemented a consistent brand message across all communication channels, from social media to digital ads. The branding focused on our city's unique mix of history and modernity. Visitors were drawn to the consistency and clarity of what our destination stood for."

"The rebranding efforts considered the aspirations and preferences of potential visitors. People often travel not just to see new places but to fulfill specific desires whether it's for relaxation, adventure, or cultural exploration."

Question No. 5. How do you think branding communication can be improved to better engage potential visitors?

5.1 Branding with the experience

To effectively engage potential visitors, branding must be closely aligned with the type of experience travelers are seeking, whether it's adventure, relaxation, cultural immersion, or culinary discovery. Highlighting specific themes or niche offerings helps a destination stand out in a crowded market. Several respondents noted that offering pre-designed packages or itineraries tailored to different traveler types makes it easier for audiences to visualize themselves at the destination. This point was emphasized by fifteen (15) respondents, who also highlighted the value of providing practical yet inspiring content, such as blogs, virtual tours, or detailed guides, to spark interest and deepen engagement.

“To truly engage visitors, we need to align our branding with the experience they are seeking, whether it’s adventure, relaxation, culture, or food. Highlighting specific themes or niche experiences can make a destination stand out. Offering packages or itineraries for different visitor types can make it easier for potential tourists to imagine themselves there.”

“Many travelers today are looking for unique, niche experiences rather than traditional tourist activities. By highlighting off-the-beaten-path activities or specialized offerings, you can make your destination stand out and appeal to those seeking something different. Promote unique cultural experiences such as artisan workshops, indigenous storytelling, or ancient rituals that can be experienced only in your destination.

5.2 Branding should be more dynamic and adaptive to social media platforms.

Respondents emphasized that branding on social media should be dynamic and tailored to the nature of each platform. For them, engagement is key, it’s not just about pushing out content, but about creating conversations and encouraging interaction. Ten (10) participants described how influencers and user-generated content made their destinations feel more accessible and authentic. Interactive campaigns, including polls, stories, and real-time updates, were also seen as effective in making potential visitors feel part of the destination’s community even before arriving. They also observed that social media users are more likely to trust the experiences and recommendations shared by fellow travelers than content coming directly from brands.

"Interactive campaigns like polls, stories, and real-time updates can also make potential visitors feel like they are part of the destination's community even before they arrive."

“Using User-generated content is one of the most powerful ways to create authentic, relatable connections with potential visitors. Social media users are much more likely to trust recommendations and experiences shared by other travelers than by brands themselves.”

Research Objectives 2. What key elements of tourism branding communication influence travelers’ perceptions of a destination?

Question No. 1. What specific elements of branding communication do you believe are most important in shaping travelers' perceptions?

1.1 Authenticity and Storytelling

Respondents shared that today’s travelers seek more than surface-level experiences, they are drawn to authenticity and want to connect meaningfully with a place, its culture, and its people. The branding narrative, they explained, should be grounded in real stories and local culture rather than overly polished messaging. This emphasis on authenticity was echoed by fifteen (15) participants, who cautioned that when branding feels too commercial or artificial, it risks eroding trust and disengaging potential visitors.

"Travelers are looking for authenticity. They want to connect with a place, its culture, and its people on a deeper level. The narrative we build around a destination should feel real, grounded in local culture and stories. If it’s too polished or commercial, people can tell, and it risks losing their trust."

"Storytelling rooted in local heritage can engage potential travelers on a deeper level and help them feel a sense of connection even before they arrive."

1.2 Clarity and Transparency

Clear and transparent communication plays a critical role in setting traveler expectations, particularly in a sector where experiences are intangible and often difficult to assess in advance. The importance of this was underscored by ten (10) respondents, who pointed out that pricing transparency should be a top priority. They advocated for clearly listing inclusions and exclusions, so travelers know exactly what they are paying for. Being upfront about the full experience, from costs and itineraries to arrival expectations, was seen as key to avoiding misunderstandings and building trust with potential visitors.

"If the messaging around a destination or service is unclear or misleading, it will lead to distrust. Transparency around pricing, what travelers can expect, and the experience they're purchasing is essential to set proper expectations and avoid disappointments."

"Clarity helps manage expectations, ensuring travelers know what to expect before they arrive. This is particularly important in the tourism sector, where travelers are often buying experiences that are intangible and hard to assess ahead of time."

Question No. 2. How do visual elements, such as images or logos, impact travelers' perceptions of a destination?

2.1 Visuals are a powerful tool in branding

Visual elements such as logos and imagery play a key role in shaping how travelers perceive a destination, often evoking feelings of belonging, relaxation, or adventure before a trip is even booked. Ten (10) respondents highlighted the power of visuals to create emotional associations, like how images of pristine beaches suggest serenity, while rugged mountain scenes convey solitude or exploration. These impressions help position the destination in the traveler's mind and can make it more appealing as a vacation option. A distinct visual identity, they added, is also essential in differentiating one destination from another in a highly competitive market.

"A well-designed logo or image can evoke a sense of belonging or adventure, helping to position a destination in the mind of the traveler. The visual identity plays a big part in differentiating destinations in a crowded marketplace."

"A well-designed logo acts as a shorthand for the entire destination, conveying key elements of its identity in a symbol. This visual storytelling helps to create a distinct identity in a crowded market, setting a destination apart from others that may offer similar attractions."

2.2 Images and logos influences booking decisions.

The strategic use of images and logos was seen as a key factor in shaping booking decisions, particularly when travelers rely on visuals to quickly assess whether a destination aligns with their expectations. This view was shared by ten (10) respondents, who noted that compelling imagery, whether it evokes excitement, tranquility, or cultural intrigue, can encourage immediate action, such as clicking "book now." In contrast, generic or poorly chosen visuals were said to diminish interest by failing to convey the

right tone or atmosphere. A thoughtful visual strategy, they argued, helps set accurate expectations and supports the overall appeal of the travel experience.

"I believe that the way images and logos are used can heavily influence booking decisions. A good visual strategy can help set the right expectations for the kind of experience one can have."

"From a practical standpoint, travelers are often overwhelmed with options, especially when browsing online. Visuals act as a first filter—the initial hook that either sparks interest or causes them to scroll past."

2.3 A logo can symbolize the destination's core identity

Logos and imagery were seen as more than just design elements; they serve as symbols of what a destination stands for. When aligned with local culture, heritage, and the type of experiences offered, these visual cues can communicate a destination's core identity in a way that feels both authentic and memorable. This perspective was shared by five (5) respondents, who emphasized that combining a strong logo with high-quality visuals provides a more complete and compelling representation. Such visuals help potential visitors form a mental map of what to expect, making them more inclined to consider the destination.

"A destination's logo or imagery should align with the local culture, heritage, and the type of experiences it offers. A logo can symbolize the destination's core identity, and when paired with high-quality images, it creates a more holistic representation of the destination."

"A destination's logo and imagery should also reflect the types of experiences that are unique to that destination. If the destination is rich in history or culture, such as ancient ruins or traditional festivals, the imagery should bring these elements into focus."

Question No. 3. What role do message and storytelling play in influencing how travelers perceive a destination?

3.1 First touchpoint with potential travelers.

A destination's narrative often serves as the first emotional touchpoint for potential travelers. Through storytelling, a place becomes more than a list of attractions, it transforms into a journey filled with meaning, whether that be adventure, cultural discovery, or personal growth. Ten (10) participants shared that a well-crafted narrative can tap into these emotions, helping travelers feel connected before they even arrive. They emphasized that the power of storytelling lies in its ability to create depth, unlike factual content or promotional statistics. When done well, it produces a living, breathing narrative that evokes emotion and invites the traveler into an immersive and personal experience.

"Through storytelling, a destination becomes more than just a collection of attractions; it becomes a story of adventure, culture, or personal growth."

"We've been telling stories for millennia as a way of communicating experiences, values, and knowledge."

3.2 Creating memorable itineraries that resonate with travelers.

Storytelling plays a central role in shaping travel itineraries that feel meaningful and memorable. Rather than focusing solely on what travelers will see, some participants emphasized the importance of how the story of a place is told, through local legends, historical narratives, and the personalities of the people who

live there. This perspective was shared by ten (10) participants, who believed that such immersive storytelling helps visitors feel like they're part of the narrative, not just passive observers. That sense of connection contributes to a deeper appreciation of the destination and often encourages repeat visits.

"For us, storytelling is essential for creating memorable itineraries that resonate with travelers. It's not just about what they see, but how we tell them the story of that place."

"The beauty of storytelling lies in its ability to create an emotional connection. When travelers hear about a local legend, a historical figure, or the struggles and triumphs of a community, they connect with the place on an emotional level."

3.3 Helps to frame how destination's culture is perceived

Storytelling was described as a powerful tool for conveying the human side of a destination, its people, traditions, and lived history. Rather than simply stating that a city is known for its architecture, participants emphasized the value of narrating how those buildings came to be, the cultural forces that shaped them, and the lives of those who inhabit them today. This view was supported by five (5) participants, who believed that such layered storytelling creates a richer and more respectful experience. When culture is presented through narrative, travelers are more likely to connect with its deeper meaning, not just its surface appeal.

"Storytelling allows us to highlight the human side of a place—the stories of the people, their traditions, and their history."

"Destinations that weave together the histories of their people, places, and cultural evolution help travelers understand why a place is the way it is today."

Question No. 4. How important are social media and digital platforms in shaping a destination's brand identity?

4.1 Influence and Engagement

Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube play a significant role in shaping how a destination's brand identity is perceived. Through visually compelling content and narrative-driven posts, influencers and content creators help frame the image of a place in the minds of potential visitors. This point was emphasized by fifteen (15) respondents, who noted that destinations not actively engaging on these platforms risk becoming invisible, particularly to younger, tech-savvy travelers who rely on digital content to guide their travel decisions.

"A destination's brand identity is heavily influenced by how it's portrayed on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. Influencers and content creators play a big part in shaping perceptions whether it's through visually stunning photos or storytelling."

"Influencers, particularly those who focus on niche travel, can provide an authenticity that traditional advertising often lacks. This creates a sense of relatability, allowing destinations to connect on a deeper level with viewers."

4.2 Focus on Authenticity and Risk

While digital platforms are considered indispensable in tourism branding, they come with challenges that require thoughtful strategy. Maintaining authenticity while appealing to a broad and fast-moving online audience was a key concern raised by ten (10) respondents. They noted that although social media can amplify attention, it often reduces destinations to their most marketable features, leaving out the lesser-

known, authentic elements that truly define a place. Respondents emphasized that a destination's brand identity must remain rooted in local culture and values, even as it evolves in response to digital trends and audience feedback.

"Digital platforms are indispensable, but they require careful strategy. Social media amplifies trends, but it also tends to reduce destinations to their most marketable traits often leaving out the authentic, lesser-known aspects that contribute to a destination's true identity."

"A destination must maintain its genuine characteristics even as it grows in popularity.

But this trend can become problematic if a destination attempts to market itself as authentic solely for the purpose of attracting tourists, without truly delivering on that promise."

Question No. 5. Can you describe how cultural and historical aspects are communicated to enhance a destination's image?

5.1 Storytelling & Heritage Narratives

Bringing a destination's history to life through storytelling was seen as a powerful way to engage visitors more deeply. Cultural historians and local guides often shape immersive experiences by connecting past events to present-day life, helping tourists feel as though they are part of an ongoing story. This approach was highlighted by fifteen (15) respondents, who emphasized that compelling and relatable narratives, framed as "living heritage", can make historical content more memorable, personal, and emotionally resonant.

"Cultural historians and guides emphasize storytelling, saying that framing the destination's history with compelling, relatable narratives can make it feel more immersive and memorable."

"Historians often aim to evoke emotions that resonate with visitors, whether that's wonder, empathy, or respect. They use emotive language, vivid descriptions, and occasionally even silence at poignant moments to help visitors feel the weight and significance of certain stories.

5.2 Festivals & Cultural Events

Cultural festivals, traditional performances, and seasonal celebrations were described as valuable opportunities for visitors to engage with local heritage in a dynamic and participatory way. These events allow tourists to witness living traditions and experience the vibrancy of a community firsthand. Ten (10) respondents, including event coordinators and cultural promoters, shared that such experiences not only enhance traveler engagement but also contribute to a destination's visibility and memorability by showcasing its unique cultural identity.

"Event coordinators and cultural promoters explain that hosting cultural festivals, traditional dance or music performances, and seasonal celebrations allow tourists to witness and participate in a vibrant local culture."

"Cultural events often serve as a platform for local talent, showcasing the skills of traditional musicians, dancers, and artists. Just like last Maskara Festival

wherein the local government invited the PPOP kings SB19 to perform and fans from different places went there to see the SB19 and also enjoy the festival.”

To guide interpretation of the findings, a thematic framework was developed based on coded responses across all interviews. This framework outlines the five major themes, their corresponding subthemes, respondent frequency, and illustrative excerpts. **Table 3** summarizes these thematic patterns and serves as a foundation for the ensuing discussion.

Table 3. Thematic framework table

Theme	Subtheme	Respondents (n)	Key Insight	Illustrative Quote
Branding as Identity & Story	Authenticity and storytelling	15	Travelers want branding grounded in real, culturally rooted narratives.	“If it feels too commercial, people stop trusting it.”
	Unique identity & differentiation	15	A strong brand identity helps destinations stand out from similar offerings.	“Branding makes us stand out—even next to more popular spots.”
Strategic Communication Impact	Consistent messaging	10	Unified messaging builds trust and improves booking conversion.	“People know what to expect when the messaging is clear.”
	Visual influence on bookings	10	Images and logos significantly shape booking behavior.	“They click ‘book now’ when the images match what they’re looking for.”
Visitor Engagement & Conversion	Social media and engagement metrics	10	Likes, shares, and comments are tracked as performance indicators.	“When engagement is high, we know our message is landing.”
	Personal immersion through storytelling	10	Story-driven itineraries create deeper traveler involvement.	“It’s not just a tour—it’s like they become part of the place.”
Culture & Perception Shaping	Framing cultural identity through narrative	5	Human-centered storytelling enhances cultural appreciation.	“It’s not just old buildings—it’s about who lived there.”
	Cultural festivals and local events	10	Events allow tourists to actively engage with living traditions.	“When they dance with us, it stays with them longer.”
Business & Sustainability Goals	Loyalty and repeat visitation	10	Reward systems build long-term loyalty and word-of-mouth appeal.	“Our loyalty program turns visitors into advocates.”
	Adapting branding through digital feedback	10	Branding evolves with social media interaction but must remain authentic.	“We adjust based on feedback, but the core stays local.”

5. Discussion

This section discusses the study’s findings in relation to the five thematic categories outlined in **Table 3** and connects them to the psychological theories of cognitive dissonance, social proof, and motivation. The results confirm that tourism branding is not simply a matter of design or slogans, it is a strategic process rooted in psychological influence, emotional resonance, and identity alignment.

Participants frequently emphasized the role of branding in creating a distinct destination identity, confirming that differentiation is central to competitive tourism branding. This finding aligns with motivation theory, where travelers seek experiences that match their personal goals and self-perception^[24]. Respondents explained that storytelling and clarity help present an authentic narrative that goes beyond visuals, which reflects Jiménez-Barreto et al.^[10] assertion that brand credibility significantly influences

behavioral intention. The emphasis on clarity and transparency also relates to cognitive dissonance theory. As Cooper^[2] describes, dissonance arises when experience mismatches expectation. In this study, participants linked honest branding with trust, arguing that accurate messaging helps travelers make informed decisions. This supports findings from Yakin et al.^[15], who showed that brand loyalty reduces dissonance and indirectly affects complaint behavior. Authenticity, therefore, not only attracts but also retains visitors by reducing post-visit regret and dissatisfaction. Professionals were more likely to discuss the technical role of brand differentiation in market positioning, while general participants spoke about feeling a “connection” to a place that matched what was promised. This suggests that authenticity operates both as a strategic tool and a psychological cue, reinforcing brand identity on multiple levels.

Emotional connection also emerged as a recurring theme, particularly in how destinations create resonance through imagery and storytelling. This aligns strongly with motivation theory, which posits that emotions drive goal-directed behavior^[35]. Storytelling was perceived not as embellishment, but as a way to deliver meaning, especially for younger travelers who value purpose-driven tourism^[1]. Social proof was also evident in how branding shapes emotion through peer validation. Respondents noted how influencer campaigns and user-generated content enhanced authenticity, confirming Liu et al.’s^[6] claim that benign envy triggered by social media can drive travel decisions. The findings suggest that emotional branding is most effective when backed by real experiences shared by relatable figures, a blend of motivation and social validation. Tourism professionals emphasized storytelling as a branding tool, while general participants spoke about feelings of being “drawn in” or “emotionally hooked.” This duality reinforces the view that emotional engagement is both engineered and experienced, crafted intentionally, yet internalized personally.

Respondents further highlighted booking conversions and online engagement as indicators of branding effectiveness. These are not only marketing metrics but also evidence of social proof in action, where behavioral choices are shaped by what others endorse^[16]. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram create visibility and relatability, leading to increased conversion rates. Afshardoost & Eshaghi^[18] likewise noted that affective destination image strongly influences the intention to recommend. Cognitive dissonance theory also plays a subtle role here, especially in cases where travelers justify bookings that stemmed from marketing influence. As Tanford & Montgomery^[4] observed, tourists may rationalize decisions to avoid post-choice regret. Branding that reduces this dissonance, through consistent, expectation-aligned messaging, helps ensure not just a sale, but satisfaction. Interestingly, professionals tracked success through metrics, while general visitors emphasized whether a place “lived up to what I saw online.” This suggests that branding must work across both perception and performance, with success measured in both emotional satisfaction and digital analytics.

Another major insight was the importance of consistency across branding channels to support loyalty and return visits. Participants shared that when branding is coherent and emotionally continuous, they are more likely to revisit or recommend the destination. This strongly reflects cognitive dissonance theory, as consistent messaging helps pre-align expectations with real experiences, thereby avoiding post-travel dissatisfaction^[3]. Motivation theory also explains why tailored brand messaging, such as for niche segments like eco-tourists or adventure seekers, helps sustain engagement. Ahn et al.^[30] show that when branding aligns with psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, relatedness), it enhances customer well-being and repeat behavior. Professionals tended to highlight brand identity across channels, while visitors responded to emotional continuity in imagery, content, and language. This suggests that loyalty isn’t driven by novelty alone, but by emotionally consistent and reliable experiences.

Finally, the study revealed a shift toward participatory and dynamic branding, where visitors engage with content creation and interaction. Interactive tools, such as polls, reels, or UGC campaigns, make branding less about broadcasting and more about dialogue. This approach reflects both social proof and motivation theory: travelers are influenced by their peers and seek meaning through participation^[6,24]. The findings also extend previous literature on social media's role in branding by showing how co-creation builds emotional ownership. As Raza et al.^[28] emphasize, frontline engagement shapes perception, not just through service, but through social storytelling. Participants explained that seeing others share content made them want to contribute their own, reinforcing the brand's relevance. General participants valued opportunities to interact, while professionals noted the branding advantage of real-time engagement. This convergence suggests that adaptive branding is not only responsive, it's expected. Branding is no longer static; it is a participatory system shaped by visitor input, social validation, and identity expression.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the critical role of psychological principles in tourism branding communication, particularly in shaping visitor perceptions and behaviors. Transparent and accurate branding strategies are essential for managing expectations, reducing cognitive dissonance, and fostering trust and loyalty. The effective use of social proof through platforms like Instagram and TikTok enhances engagement by creating authentic connections and leveraging user-generated content. Additionally, aligning branding with motivational goals such as cultural immersion, adventure, or relaxation strengthens emotional ties and encourages repeat visits.

This study contributes to knowledge by integrating cognitive dissonance, social proof, and motivation theory into a five-theme framework of tourism branding, offering a structured, theory-driven approach to interpreting visitor engagement. The analysis draws on role-based insights from both professionals and general travelers, adding depth to how branding is both created and experienced. Practically, the findings offer branding practitioners a clearer understanding of how psychological alignment supports emotional connection, loyalty, and sustainable tourism outcomes.

By bridging psychological theory with branding practice, this study helps reposition destination branding as a participatory and adaptive process shaped by trust, motivation, and social influence. While this research offers grounded insights, it is limited by its focus on a single national context and its reliance on semi-structured interviews, which may not capture all regional or demographic nuances in tourism behavior. Future studies could expand this framework by comparing branding practices across different countries, including tourist and resident perspectives, or incorporating quantitative measures to validate thematic patterns identified in this study.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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