

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural identity and destination branding in a globalized world

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ABSTRACT

In the context of rapid globalization and digital transformation, destination identity emerges as a foundational factor that determines the uniqueness and sustainability of the tourism industry. The paper titled "Cultural Identity and Destination Branding in a Globalized World" explores the organic relationship between identity and destination branding. It argues that identity—comprised of cultural, historical, natural, and community elements—serves as the core substance, while destination branding represents the consistent and professional expression of that identity to the global market. Drawing on case studies from Vietnam, including Hanoi, Ninh Binh, Hue, Hoi An, and Da Lat, the paper highlights successful efforts in preserving and promoting cultural identity. At the same time, it warns of potential risks such as homogenization, commercialization, and the erosion of authentic values under the pressures of globalization. The paper recommends an in-depth approach to identity, the development of branding strategies rooted in local characteristics, and the integration of creative technologies, alongside enhanced participation from communities, artists, and businesses. These measures aim to ensure the flexible, innovative, and sustainable preservation and development of identity in the global flow.

Keywords: identity; destination branding; globalization

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and digital technology, travelers can book a trip to virtually any destination with just a tap. Tourism experiences are becoming increasingly homogenized—from café designs and hotel interiors to social media check-in formats. The world of travel is undergoing rapid standardization. In this context, identity is no longer a secondary advantage—it has become the essential factor that creates distinction and lasting impressions. A destination may not be the most beautiful or the most modern, but if it offers visitors a unique cultural experience, it will remain vivid in their memories.

For Vietnam—a country with thousands of years of civilization, 54 ethnic groups, and a vast treasure trove of tangible and intangible cultural heritage—there is no shortage of "identity." However, the question remains: Have we been able to tell our identity stories in a compelling, consistent, and contemporary way?

This paper offers a perspective on the relationship between identity and destination branding, the opportunities and challenges brought about by globalization, and presents case studies from Vietnam to propose strategic orientations for sustainable tourism development based on effectively leveraging cultural

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identity and destination branding.

1.1. Overview of destination identity, destination branding, and the age of globalization

In the development of modern tourism, a clear understanding of destination identity, destination branding, and the far-reaching impacts of globalization is essential for shaping sustainable development strategies. This section provides an overview of these foundational concepts, explores the relationship between identity and branding, and examines the challenges that globalization poses for the tourism sector.

Destination identity refers to the unique and distinctive combination of cultural, historical, natural, human, and lifestyle elements of a locality or country, which leaves a lasting impression on visitors. It not only enables a destination to be easily recognized, but also serves as the foundation for building a sustainable tourism brand. The synergy of these elements creates differentiation and local appeal, shaping the overall experience for tourists and contributing to the destination's competitive advantage.

One of the key components that shape destination identity is cultural heritage. Traditional festivals, ancient architectural structures, local customs and practices, as well as handicrafts, all serve as vivid expressions of cultural identity. These elements not only reflect historical depth but also convey spiritual values, community pride, and the collective identity of local people. In addition, natural landscapes such as beaches, mountain ranges, waterfalls, terraced rice fields, and shimmering salt flats also play a vital role in enhancing the attractiveness of a destination. Unique, pristine, or awe-inspiring natural beauty often leaves strong impressions on visitors and encourages repeat travel. Local cuisine is another indispensable aspect of destination identity. Each dish or beverage reflects the region's natural conditions and available ingredients, while also telling stories about the history and lifestyle of its people. These unique culinary experiences enrich the cultural exploration journey of tourists. Alongside this, the local community—from communication styles and traditional clothing to daily routines—contribute significantly to the distinct “soul” of a destination.

Destination identity plays a pivotal role in sustainable tourism development strategies. A destination with a strong and distinctive identity enjoys a major advantage in attracting international visitors and encouraging repeat visits. Moreover, maintaining and promoting this identity helps raise local communities' awareness of the need to preserve cultural, natural, and social values, avoiding excessive homogenization or commercialization. As a result, destinations can achieve not only economic growth but also long-term sustainability and cultural vitality.

In tourism, destination identity acts as the “soul” that connects visitors to the local culture and way of life. According to Saraniemi and Komppula (2019), destination identity is not merely a pre-existing cultural product but rather the outcome of a co-constructive process involving interactions among various stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and destination management organizations (DMOs). This conceptualization aligns with the service-dominant logic, which posits that brand value is created through experience and engagement rather than through one-way communication alone ^[5]. Therefore, identifying, preserving, and promoting destination identity in a thoughtful and responsible way brings enduring value—not only to local communities but also to the global tourism industry.

Destination branding refers to the image, values, and emotions that travelers or the public associate with a specific location, region, or country. It is a fusion of distinctive features and emotional impressions, aimed at differentiating a destination from others in the minds of tourists. A destination brand is not merely a slogan or promotional logo; it is the overall identity built from the actual experiences that visitors have. Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2004) emphasize that destination branding should be built upon emotions and

perceptions, rather than merely relying on names, logos, or slogans ^[2]. A strong destination brand creates appeal, reinforces a positive image, and drives tourism demand.

The components of destination branding are diverse but can be categorized into three main groups. The first is destination resources, including natural landscapes, cultural heritage, cuisine, festivals, and the people. These are the core "content" that form the destination brand's image. Unique and characteristic resources help the destination leave a lasting impression. The second component is the image and emotions conveyed by the destination. Through media campaigns, promotional efforts, and visitors' actual experiences, the destination builds its distinct image (e.g., Paris – romantic, Kyoto – ancient, Bali – a tropical paradise, etc.). The third element is the tourist experience, which includes service quality, the friendliness of locals, safety, and the emotional values that tourists receive throughout their journey. Positive experiences ensure that visitors remember the destination and are likely to recommend it to others, thus spreading the brand naturally.

The role of destination branding in modern tourism development has become increasingly important. First and foremost, it helps attract tourists by creating appeal and differentiation in a highly competitive market. A strong brand helps a destination stand out among numerous choices, capturing attention and sparking curiosity. Additionally, destination branding contributes to economic value by extending tourist stay durations, increasing their spending, and developing supporting services such as accommodation, food, and shopping. Furthermore, branding helps foster local pride, as residents become more aware of their cultural and natural resources, thus actively participating in the preservation and sustainable development of the destination. Finally, a reputable destination brand also plays a crucial role in attracting investment, international collaboration, and the development of related sectors such as education, healthcare, and commerce. Destination branding is not only a promotional tool but also a strategic asset—it's the soul of sustainable tourism development. Investing in building and managing an effective destination brand will bring long-term benefits, not only to the tourism industry but also to the local community and economy.

Destination Identity and Destination Branding are two closely interconnected concepts that complement and influence each other in the process of building a destination image and developing sustainable tourism. Destination identity is considered the core "content"—it embodies the unique cultural, historical, natural, and lifestyle values of a locality. Meanwhile, destination branding is the "form of expression" that conveys these values outwardly through communication, promotion, and tourism experiences, aiming to create recognition and positive emotions among the public and visitors.

Destination identity serves as the foundational basis for building destination branding. For a destination brand to be sustainable and appealing, it must be developed by effectively and deeply leveraging the distinctive identity elements, rather than copying or creating artificial images. If the brand does not reflect the true identity, visitors will easily feel disappointed and disconnected, leading to reduced trust and loyalty. Conversely, when a destination brand is built upon a strong identity, visitors will have a consistent experience, which in turn fosters emotional attachment and positive word-of-mouth.

At the same time, destination branding also plays a role in enhancing, refreshing, and elevating the destination identity. Through creative communication strategies, local identity can be more vividly interpreted, updated with new trends, yet still maintain its core values, thereby expanding its appeal on a global scale. Therefore, balancing the preservation of identity and brand development is the key factor determining the long-term success of a destination.

Globalization has opened up many opportunities for tourism development, but it has also posed significant challenges, particularly in maintaining differentiation and achieving sustainability. One of the greatest challenges is homogenization. In the context of continuous cultural exchange and mutual influence,

many destinations risk losing their unique traits and becoming indistinguishable from one another, making it difficult for tourists to find truly distinct experiences. Ritzer (2004) describes the trend of "McDonaldization" as a clear manifestation of cultural homogenization, in which experiences become increasingly standardized and indistinguishable across different locations ^[3]. The second challenge is the overexploitation of natural and cultural resources to cater to mass tourism, which leads to environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional values. Additionally, intense competition in the global market requires each destination to have a clear positioning and the ability to adapt flexibly to international tourism trends.

In this context, destination identity and destination branding play a pivotal role in helping localities overcome the challenges posed by globalization. Destination identity represents the unique cultural essence—it's the core that helps a destination maintain differentiation and establish its position in the market. This was addressed by Robertson (1995), who introduced the concept of "glocalization" — a simultaneous process of globalization and localization — in which local identity can be preserved and restructured under global influences ^[4]. Dredge and Jenkins (2007) likewise argue that globalization does not necessarily harm destinations, provided that managers are able to transform it into an opportunity to enhance soft power and competitiveness through branding strategies grounded in authentic identity ^[1]. Deeply exploiting this identity not only creates unique tourism products but also builds a strong emotional connection with visitors, fostering long-term brand loyalty. Meanwhile, destination branding is the strategic tool to express that identity consistently, appealingly, and professionally to the international market. A strong destination brand tells the unique cultural story of the locality, helping to capture attention amidst the countless global tourism options available today.

Therefore, to overcome the challenges of globalization, destinations need not only to preserve and promote their identity deeply from within but also to build a creative, modern destination brand linked to authentic, in-depth experiences. This is the path to sustainable tourism development, maintaining individuality in a rapidly changing globalized world.

2. Destination identity and branding in vietnam in the context of globalization

2.1. Efforts in building destination branding

In recent years, Vietnam has continuously strived to build and develop its destination brand in order to assert its position on the world tourism map. These efforts are clearly reflected in national image campaigns, investment in tourism infrastructure, and the development of distinctive tourism products, all aimed at creating an attractive, unique, and sustainable brand for Vietnam.

One of the most notable steps has been Vietnam's focus on crafting memorable tourism slogans over the years. Campaigns such as "Vietnam – The Hidden Charm" (2000), "Vietnam – Timeless Charm" (2011), and more recently "Vietnam – A Place to Love" (2021) have helped position Vietnam's image in the minds of international audiences. Through these campaigns, Vietnam has emphasized its long-standing cultural values, stunning natural landscapes, and the warmth and friendliness of its people, creating a distinctive appeal.

Alongside these communication efforts, Vietnam has also made significant investments in upgrading tourism infrastructure. International airports such as Noi Bai, Tan Son Nhat, Da Nang, and Cam Ranh have been expanded and modernized, improving the travel experience for tourists. Numerous resort projects and high-end hotels have been developed in regions like Phu Quoc, Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Ha Long, raising the quality of accommodation services and meeting the increasing demands of international tourists.

Moreover, Vietnam has placed strong emphasis on developing tourism products that are deeply rooted in local cultural identity. Heritage tourism, eco-tourism, and community-based tourism have been widely promoted, with a focus on UNESCO-recognized world heritage sites such as Ha Long Bay, Trang An Complex, Hoi An Ancient Town, and the Hue Royal Court Music. Traditional festivals, folk art performances, and local cuisine have also been effectively leveraged, both preserving cultural identity and supporting brand-building efforts.

Vietnam has demonstrated a proactive approach in engaging with international tourism fairs and exhibitions such as ITB Berlin (Germany), WTM London (UK), as well as promotional campaigns in the United States, South Korea, and Japan. These activities not only help introduce Vietnam's image but also establish partnerships and expand the international customer base. Additionally, hosting successful international events such as APEC 2017, SEA Games 31, and the ASEAN Tourism Forum has further enhanced the nation's reputation and destination brand.

A key element in Vietnam's destination branding strategy lies in its emphasis on promoting the country's distinctive cultural and natural identity. Through the effective integration of local cultural values—such as historical heritage, traditional cuisine, folk arts, and communal lifestyles—Vietnam has crafted a unique and compelling tourism image. Strategic promotional campaigns like “Vietnam – The Timeless Charm” and “Heritage Destination” focus on celebrating cultural landmarks, including Hoi An Ancient Town, the Imperial City of Hue, Ha Long Bay, as well as intangible cultural treasures such as Ca Tru, Quan Ho folk songs, and Imperial Court Music. These efforts underscore Vietnam's commitment to preserving and sharing its rich cultural heritage with the world.

The greatest success can be seen in Vietnam's ability to position itself as an attractive destination due to its rich culture and natural beauty. Festivals such as the Hue Festival, Buon Ma Thuot Coffee Festival, and Ao Dai Festival not only draw large numbers of international tourists but also strongly promote national cultural values. Additionally, tourism products based on cultural identity, such as community tourism in Sapa, ecological tourism in Cu Lao Cham, and agricultural tourism in Dong Thap, have been promoted, diversifying the Vietnamese tourism market. In 2024, Vietnam's tourism industry won multiple top awards, including “World's Leading Heritage Destination” for the fifth consecutive year and “Asia's Leading Destination” for the sixth consecutive year at the World Travel Awards (WTA) ^[14].

Over the past three years, Vietnam's tourism industry has shown strong signs of recovery following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Based on the compiled statistics from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism on Vietnam's tourism sector between 2020 and 2025, we present the recorded number of tourists visiting Vietnam during this period as follows:

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of International Tourists (millions of arrivals)	3,8	0,0149	3,66	12,6	17,5
Number of Domestic Tourists (millions of arrivals)	56	40	101,3	108,2	110
Total Revenue (trillion VND)	312	180	495	678,3	840
Growth Rate (%)	-57,0	-42,3	175,5	37,0	23,8

Source: Compiled from the official portal of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2020–2024

The sharp increase in international tourist arrivals from 3.66 million in 2022 to 17.5 million in 2024 indicates a remarkable recovery, partly attributable to efforts in promoting Vietnam's brand as a safe, friendly, and affordable post-pandemic destination. The return of international visitors also reflects the positive impact of globalization, as Vietnam's destination brand has been effectively “exported” through global media

channels. Domestic tourism has served as a vital backbone, rising from 40 million trips in 2021 to 110 million in 2024, underscoring the continued appeal of local tourism and the strong demand for exploring Vietnam's cultural identity, heritage, cuisine, and natural landscapes. Industry revenue reached VND 840 trillion in 2024, reflecting the cumulative effect of brand consolidation and enhanced visitor experiences.

However, alongside these successes, Vietnam still faces some challenges in connecting cultural identity with its destination brand. In many places, the commercialization of culture for tourism has been excessive, leading to the loss of authenticity and cultural depth. Some traditional festivals have been distorted into tourist performances, lacking genuine community participation. Moreover, there is a lack of consistency and a long-term strategy in preserving cultural identity while developing tourism products, leading to repetitive, similar offerings between destinations.

Therefore, moving forward, for Vietnam's destination brand to develop sustainably, promoting cultural identity must go hand in hand with preserving and respecting its original values. At the same time, the approach to communication and image promotion needs to be more professional, attracting tourists while maintaining the "soul" of the national culture.

Overall, Vietnam's ongoing efforts to build its destination brand have yielded positive results, helping the country gain recognition as an attractive, safe, and culturally rich destination on the global tourism map. However, for continued strong and sustainable development, Vietnam needs to focus on striking a balance between resource exploitation and preservation, as well as between innovation and the safeguarding of traditional values in future destination branding strategies.

2.2. Some cases

To better understand the relationship between identity and destination branding in the context of globalization, this article analyzes five representative cases in Vietnam: Hanoi, Ninh Binh, Hue, Hoi An, and Da Lat. These destinations hold prominent positions on Vietnam's tourism map, but each has its own approach to preserving, retelling, and recreating identity, resulting in different branding outcomes.

2.2.1. Hanoi – From a thousand-year heritage to a creative city

Hanoi is a convergence of diverse heritage, from architecture, festivals, crafts, cuisine, to folk arts, deeply embodying the essence of "a thousand years of civilization" ^[18]. Hanoi's recognition by UNESCO as a "Creative City" in design (2019) opened a new direction: combining heritage and creativity to establish a distinctive tourism brand.

In reality, Hanoi has developed an ecosystem of creative spaces, with around 120 such spaces currently in operation ^[15]. Many of them have become popular cultural hubs for the public, such as Complex 01, Ô Kìa Hà Nội, and VICAS Art Studio, along with various contemporary art festivals. However, Hanoi's tourism brand remains relatively obscure in the international market compared to its potential. Heritage and creative activities still operate somewhat independently and have yet to form a clear and coherent tourism product system. In the future, Hanoi needs to foster stronger connections between the "old" and the "new" in order to shape a sustainable creative identity.

2.2.2. Ninh Binh – From cinematic backdrop to regional identity branding

Ninh Binh is renowned for its majestic natural landscapes, particularly the Trang An complex, a UNESCO World Heritage site (2014). After being featured in "Kong: Skull Island" (2017), its global image soared. Eco-tourism products such as cycling through rural villages, boat rides, and homestays also create unique, friendly experiences. However, Ninh Binh's tourism brand is still largely defined by its scenic and cinematic qualities, with its cultural and historical depth (e.g., Hoa Lu ancient capital, local beliefs, folk art)

not yet fully emphasized. The region needs a strategy to highlight its North Vietnamese identity, blending nature and human elements to form a sustainable destination brand.

2.2.3. Hue – Repositioning the brand through heritage depth and innovation

Hue has a significant advantage as a former capital, possessing a system of royal heritage, royal music, architecture, and festivals that are highly symbolic. Hue's identity is closely linked with tranquility, poetry, and cultural depth. In recent years, Hue has made efforts to renew its image by creatively blending traditional elements through art festivals ^[19], international exchanges, and the development of community-based creative art spaces. Both the people of Hue and domestic and international tourists enjoy experiencing creative spaces such as: the Le Ba Dang Memorial Space, the Diem Phung Thi Art Center, and the Sónglab digital experience space, among others.

2.2.4. Hoi An – Preserving identity, spreading globally

Hoi An is an exemplary case of a destination that has successfully preserved its identity while effectively communicating its brand. With its ancient town recognized by UNESCO (1999), Hoi An is renowned for its traditional architecture, slow-paced lifestyle, merchant culture, and the active involvement of the community in tourism development. Products like lanterns, street food, and light festivals are deeply rooted in local experience, forming a cohesive, recognizable, and vibrant image. However, the growing popularity brings challenges, such as tourism overload during peak seasons, pressure on the ancient town's space, and commercialization of cultural products. Hoi An's challenge is to continue renewing its identity—not just preserving but developing it sustainably.

2.2.5. Da Lat – Fading identity or repositioning?

Once known as the "City of Mist" and a chic French-era resort, Da Lat now attracts younger generations with creative coffee and homestay models, along with a romantic atmosphere. The city's image has gained significant traction on social media, particularly within Gen Z. However, rapid and unchecked development is leading to a crisis in its identity, with the rise of mismatched architectural styles and increasingly uniform tourism experiences ^[16]. Da Lat must now either preserve its unique essence or reposition its brand by highlighting its highland heritage, local community, and distinct architecture ^[17].

Through analysis of these localities, it becomes clear that identity is the core factor for a destination's competitiveness in the globalized world, where uniqueness and authenticity are increasingly valued. However, identity cannot survive unless told through a new language—creativity, technology, and experience. While places like Hoi An and Hue have succeeded in crafting brand images linked to cultural depth, other regions face the risk of losing their identity due to rapid development or lack of long-term strategies. Defining identity—therefore, systematically building a tourism brand—is how Vietnam can more clearly position itself on the global tourism map, not by being “like the world” but by embracing what only Vietnam possesses.

3. Shaping strategies to leverage identity for enhancing Vietnam's destination brand in the era of globalization

To enhance the quality of Vietnam's destination brand in the context of globalization, while effectively utilizing its identity to promote sustainable tourism, the following key strategies should be implemented:

3.1. Leverage deep identity, not just surface aspects

For the destination brand to be truly distinctive and sustainable, Vietnam must explore the depth of its cultural identity, avoiding shallow exploitation of cultural elements. In-depth research into local history,

customs, beliefs, and folklore should be conducted. These insights can be creatively communicated through storytelling, turning cultural values into compelling narratives that resonate emotionally with visitors.

3.2. Brand strategy aligned with local characteristics

An important principle in destination branding is avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. Each region should emphasize its unique strengths and characteristics rather than copying success formulas from other areas. For example, the Northwest should focus on community-based tourism linked to ethnic cultures, while Central Vietnam should concentrate on heritage and coastal tourism. The identity should be woven into every aspect of tourism, from tour design and accommodation to food and souvenirs.

3.3. Integration of creativity and technology

In the digital age, Vietnam must embrace new technologies like multimedia storytelling, VR, AR, short films, and digital experience spaces to bring traditional identity values to life. Technology can recreate historical sites, customs, and folklore in interactive ways, enhancing immersive experiences for visitors. Additionally, involving artists, designers, and the creative community in the destination branding process will lead to innovative tourism products and media that celebrate identity while remaining contemporary and accessible to both domestic and international tourists.

4. Conclusion

In the context of deepening globalization, Vietnam's tourism faces both significant opportunities and challenges. Destination identity and branding are not only pivotal in the tourism development strategy but also the "soul" that helps Vietnam maintain its distinctiveness and assert its position on the global tourism map. The thorough and authentic exploitation of cultural and natural identities, combined with the creation of a modern and professional destination brand, is the necessary path for Vietnam's tourism to develop sustainably.

However, in the face of powerful globalization, without proper direction, Vietnam risks losing its uniqueness and distinct identity, making its tourism fade and lack competitiveness. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy is required: preserving traditional values while innovating to align with global trends.

Vietnam can no longer rely solely on natural beauty or low costs—factors that are increasingly common across the global tourism landscape. Instead, sustainable appeal must derive from the depth of its destination identity, transformed into unique, emotionally resonant experiences capable of leaving a lasting impression. What sets a destination apart is not merely *what it has*, but *what stories it tells*, and *how those stories are told*. The application of technologies such as augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), artificial intelligence, and digital storytelling to vividly reimagine cultural heritage—combined with the co-creative participation of local communities, artisans, and creative enterprises—will be key to preserving Vietnam's identity while innovating its brand expression. This is not merely an act of preservation, but a process of identity regeneration within the context of globalization.

Success in this endeavor will not come from isolated promotional campaigns or a few standout destinations, but from a strategically coordinated effort involving all levels of governance, local communities, the private sector, and the creative industries. Only when identity is regarded as a core "soft asset" in the construction of national branding can Vietnam position itself not just as a short-term tourist attraction, but as a globally recognized, culturally distinctive, and truly sustainable tourism icon in the twenty-first century.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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18. According to data published in March 2025, Hanoi is home to 6,489 historical sites, including the UNESCO World Heritage site, the Thang Long Imperial Citadel. The city also hosts 22 special national relics, over 1,200 national-level monuments, and more than 1,500 city-level sites. Additionally, Hanoi boasts approximately 1,350 craft villages, with 337 officially recognized by the municipal authorities. These figures underscore Hanoi's rich cultural and historical heritage, which plays a vital role in shaping its identity as a prominent tourist destination.
19. Since 2000, Hue has organized a biennial Festival, showcasing cultural, artistic, and tourism events with both national and international participation. The 12 editions of the Hue Festival, from 2004 to 2024, have followed the theme "Cultural Heritage with Integration and Development," emphasizing the city's rich cultural legacy while fostering global connections and growth.