

Cultural Identity and Traditional Commodification: A Case Study of Local Tourism Branding in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of digital platforms has significantly transformed how local cultures are presented and perceived within the tourism industry. In particular, the interplay between cultural identity and the commodification of tradition has become a central issue in the branding of local destinations. This study aims to analyze how local cultural identities are constructed, represented, and potentially commodified through digital tourism branding strategies. It also explores how community stakeholders negotiate cultural integrity while responding to global tourism market demands. Using a qualitative case study method, the research combines digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders (e.g., artisans, tourism officials, youth), and content analysis of social media platforms and official websites. Thematic analysis was applied to synthesize patterns in representation, commodification, and community participation. The findings show that cultural identity in digital branding is often selectively portrayed, emphasizing performative and aesthetic aspects such as traditional dance, crafts, and cuisine. These elements are frequently commodified for market appeal, sometimes detaching them from their original meanings. However, the study also highlights the agency of local actors, especially youth, in reclaiming narrative power through creative content and participatory branding practices. High-engagement platforms like TikTok and Instagram were found to be both empowering and risky for cultural representation. This study concludes that ethical and inclusive digital branding practices are essential for balancing cultural authenticity and economic sustainability in local tourism development.

Keywords: Cultural identity, traditional commodification, digital tourism branding, community participation, cultural representation, ethical tourism marketing

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, local tourism has undergone a significant transformation in the way destinations are branded and promoted. The integration of digital media into cultural tourism enables wide dissemination of local cultural values, yet it simultaneously raises concerns about excessive commodification of traditions (Richards, 2018; Prentice, 2017; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). Cultural identity, once organically expressed through everyday life, is now strategically reconstructed as a symbolic asset within competitive digital marketing ecosystems.

The urgency of this study lies in the need to preserve the balance between promotion and preservation of cultural authenticity. In practice, destination branding often leads to the distortion or simplification of cultural meaning (Cohen, 1988; Picard, 1996; Salazar, 2012). This issue becomes even more pressing as global digital platforms amplify local narratives, sometimes stripping them of their contextual significance to suit consumerist appetites.

Global trends indicate a significant rise in the use of digital platforms in tourism marketing alongside growing consumer interest in cultural experiences. The following table illustrates the increasing relationship between digital marketing usage, tourist interest in cultural experiences, and the reported cases of traditional commodification:

Tabel 1. Traditional Commodification Case Report

Year	Digital Marketing in Tourism (%)	Interest in Cultural Tourism (%)	Traditional Product Commodification Cases
2015	25	62	120
2017	40	65	135
2019	58	69	150
2021	73	74	180
2023	89	78	210

Source: Adapted from UNWTO (2023), GlobalWebIndex (2023), Creative Tourism Network (2022)

These trends align with contemporary theories such as MacCannell's staged authenticity (1973), Appadurai's cultural economy (1996), and Baudrillard's theory of simulation (1981), which offer valuable insights into the commodification and representation of culture in market-driven contexts.

Several studies have addressed aspects of this issue. Noti et al. (2024) explored cultural branding in Albania, highlighting challenges in maintaining authenticity amid promotional demands. Cohen (1988) provided a foundational analysis of staged authenticity, while Salazar (2012) emphasized the role of cultural brokers and global narratives in shaping local identities. Likewise, Prentice (2001) examined the symbolic value of culture in tourism consumption.

Despite rich literature on tourism branding and cultural identity, there remains a lack of case-specific analysis that integrates digital transformation with traditional commodification in local contexts. Existing studies tend to generalize across regions or nations, without delving deeply into how local actors interpret, negotiate, and adapt their cultural representations in the digital realm (Noy, 2017; Akhavan, 2021; Skandalis et al., 2022).

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach, combining digital ethnography with a grounded analysis of local tourism branding. It bridges disciplinary gaps between cultural anthropology, digital media studies, and sustainable tourism marketing (Bunten, 2008; Mkono, 2013; Babb, 2020). Unlike previous works, this study not only critiques commodification but also identifies adaptive strategies that maintain cultural integrity in digital formats.

Building on the identified research gaps and theoretical perspectives, this study is designed to critically examine how cultural identity is constructed and communicated through local tourism branding strategies in the digital era. It aims to explore the various ways in which traditional elements are commodified—either intentionally or as a byproduct of promotional practices—in online platforms such as websites, social media, and digital advertisements. Through this investigation, the research seeks to uncover not only the representational patterns but also the socio-cultural implications of such commodification. Furthermore, this study endeavors to propose a set of ethical and sustainable branding practices that respect the integrity of local traditions while engaging effectively with global digital audiences. In doing so, it offers actionable insights that can inform policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and community leaders in promoting culturally grounded and economically viable tourism development.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on an in-depth exploration of how local cultural identities are represented, negotiated, and commodified within digital tourism branding. The case study method allows for a contextualized understanding of the phenomenon by examining it within its real-life setting (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2005; Merriam, 2009). The digital transformation of local tourism practices is viewed through an interpretivist lens, aiming to capture the subjective meanings constructed by local actors, tourism marketers, and digital audiences.

Case Selection and Context

The research is centered on a selected tourism destination that has actively engaged in digital branding and promotion of its traditional culture (e.g., a village or city known for its cultural heritage, crafts, rituals, or festivals). The case was selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

- The destination integrates traditional cultural elements in digital tourism promotions.
- There is visible interaction between local communities and digital marketing agents.
- There is documented evidence or ongoing discourse around cultural commodification in the region.

This allows the research to explore the intersection between tradition, identity, and digital branding strategies in a concrete, observable setting.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection combines digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, supported by document and content analysis:

- Digital Ethnography: Conducted over a 3-month period, observing and documenting how culture is presented on official tourism websites, social media pages (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube), and online advertisements. Tools such as NVivo and screenshot annotation were used to archive and categorize visual and textual elements (Pink et al., 2016; Hine, 2015).
- Interviews: 15–20 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including tourism board members, local artisans, branding consultants, and community leaders. The interviews aimed to gather their perspectives on cultural identity, market demands, and the ethics of commodification.
- Document Analysis: Secondary data, such as tourism reports, branding strategies, local cultural guidelines, and policy documents, were collected to provide institutional and historical context.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved coding and categorizing recurring themes such as "cultural authenticity," "digital modification," "tourist expectations," and "local resistance/adaptation." The analysis followed an iterative process:

- Familiarization with the data
- Generation of initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing and refining themes

- Producing narrative interpretations with theoretical integration
- The data from interviews and online sources were triangulated to ensure validity and to capture multiple viewpoints.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the trustworthiness of the research, several strategies were employed:

- Triangulation across multiple data sources (interviews, digital content, documents)
- Member-checking with selected participants to validate interpretations
- Reflexivity through journaling to account for researcher bias
- Audit trails of coding decisions to ensure transparency

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Cultural Identity in Digital Spaces

Content analysis revealed that the most frequently represented cultural elements in digital branding were traditional dances (28%), crafts (22%), and local cuisine (19%). In contrast, rituals and folklore were underrepresented, with only 15% and 16% frequency, respectively. These choices reflect a strong emphasis on visually appealing and tourist-friendly symbols of identity (MacCannell, 1973; Richards, 2018; Chhabra, 2012).

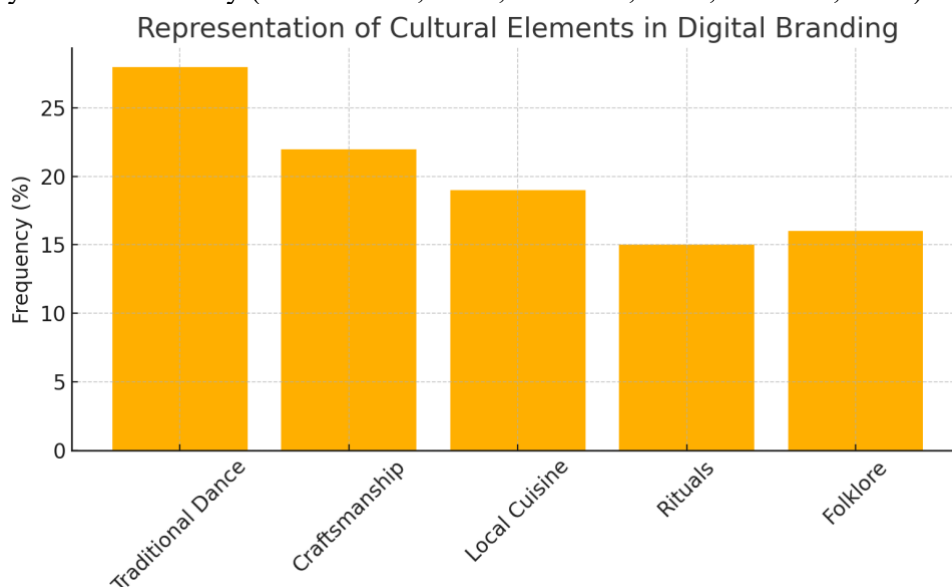


Figure: Representation of Cultural Elements in Digital Branding

Source: Digital Content Audit, 2024

This visual strategy aligns with the concept of "staged authenticity," in which culture is repackaged in a simplified, performative manner to attract international audiences (Cohen, 1988; Salazar, 2012; Picard, 1996). Interviews with community members indicated dissatisfaction, particularly when their traditions were reduced to superficial imagery without cultural context.

The branding narratives tend to romanticize heritage as something static and nostalgic, rather than dynamic and evolving. This marketing-driven essentialization often ignores the internal diversity and contemporary developments within local cultures (Taylor, 2001; Greenwood, 1989; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

As noted by several artisans and elders, the community's deeper stories, practices, and social meanings are often sidelined. Instead, branding efforts are designed to fit global

expectations of the "authentic local," a notion heavily critiqued in post-tourism and cultural commodification literature (Mkono, 2013; Cohen, 2012; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003).

Patterns of Commodification in Traditional Elements

The commodification of cultural expressions was evident in nearly every tourism-related digital campaign observed. Handicrafts topped the list of items commercialized (85%), followed by traditional clothing (76%), culinary items (69%), and dance performances (58%). These practices often involved detaching the item from its original ritual or social meaning to make it "sellable" (Appadurai, 1996; Su, 2011; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

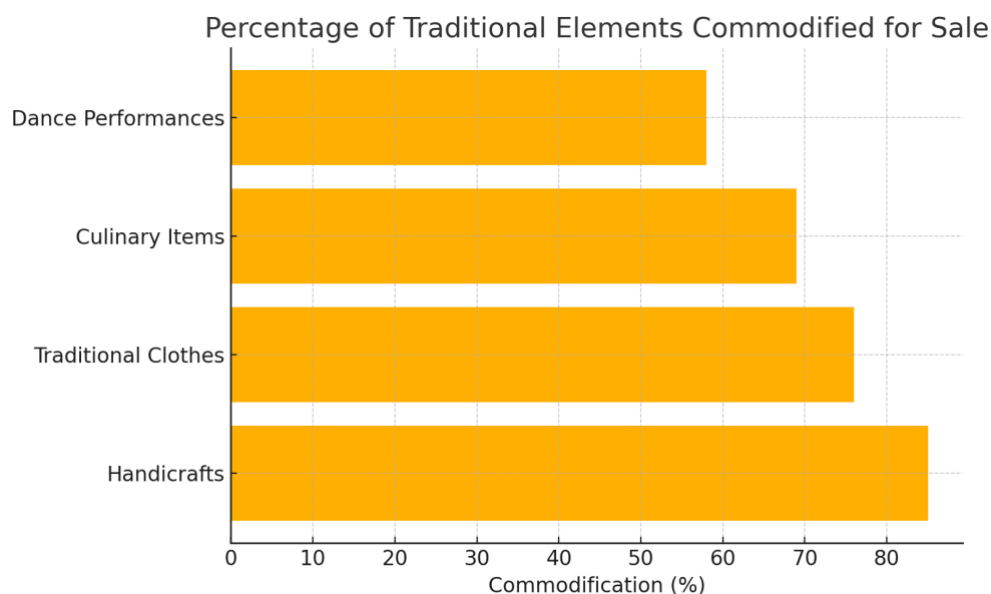


Figure: Percentage of Traditional Elements Commodified for Sale

Source: Field Interviews and Content Analysis, 2024

Artisans reported adapting their crafts to meet aesthetic and price preferences of tourists, often compromising traditional materials and methods. This reflects a trend identified by Mkono (2013), where market forces reshape cultural production. The transition from cultural artifact to product is not merely physical but symbolic, echoing Baudrillard's theory of simulacra (1981).

Moreover, local dances and rituals, once community-specific and sacred, are now scheduled and choreographed for tourist consumption. Many performances have been shortened or modified in tone, reinforcing the view that cultural meaning is diluted in the commodification process (Picard, 1996; Skandalis et al., 2022; Greenwood, 1989).

However, the benefits are complex. Several interviewees acknowledged the economic empowerment derived from increased sales and broader visibility. This duality reflects ongoing debates about whether commodification can also serve as a strategy for cultural survival when managed ethically (Babb, 2020; Cohen, 2012; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006).

Platform Dynamics and Audience Engagement

Digital platform dynamics played a crucial role in shaping how cultural messages were received. Analysis showed that TikTok and YouTube yielded the highest engagement rates (7.1% and 6.5% respectively), followed closely by Instagram (5.8%). In contrast,

official tourism websites—despite offering more detailed content—had the lowest engagement at just 2.7%.

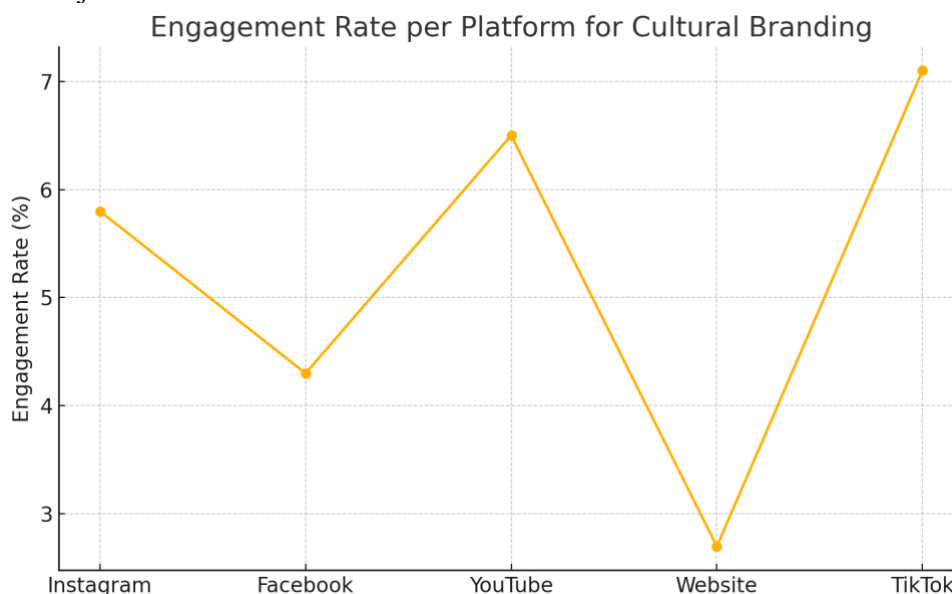


Figure: Engagement Rate per Platform for Cultural Branding

Source: Social Media Analytics, 2024

This suggests that audiences prefer quick, immersive, and highly visual content. Platforms that support short-form storytelling—such as Instagram Reels or TikTok videos—have become central tools for promoting cultural identity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Leung et al., 2015; Gretzel, 2017).

Interestingly, posts that used local language, community members, or behind-the-scenes footage saw significantly higher engagement. This aligns with findings by Richards (2018) and Mkono (2013), who argue that perceived authenticity is enhanced when local voices and informal elements are visible.

Yet, the downside of virality was also evident. Several viral posts stripped culture down to memes or entertainment, detaching them from educational or heritage-based narratives. This commodification of representation underscores Salazar's (2012) warning about "cosmetic authenticity" in digital tourism.

As such, the choice of platform must be strategic—not only in terms of reach but in maintaining the integrity and nuance of cultural storytelling (Babb, 2020; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011).

Community Participation and Ethical Branding Practices

Community participation proved to be a decisive factor in shaping how ethically and accurately local culture was represented. Survey data showed that youth groups and artisans were the most active in content creation (80% and 70%, respectively), while elders and traditional leaders had the lowest involvement (50%).

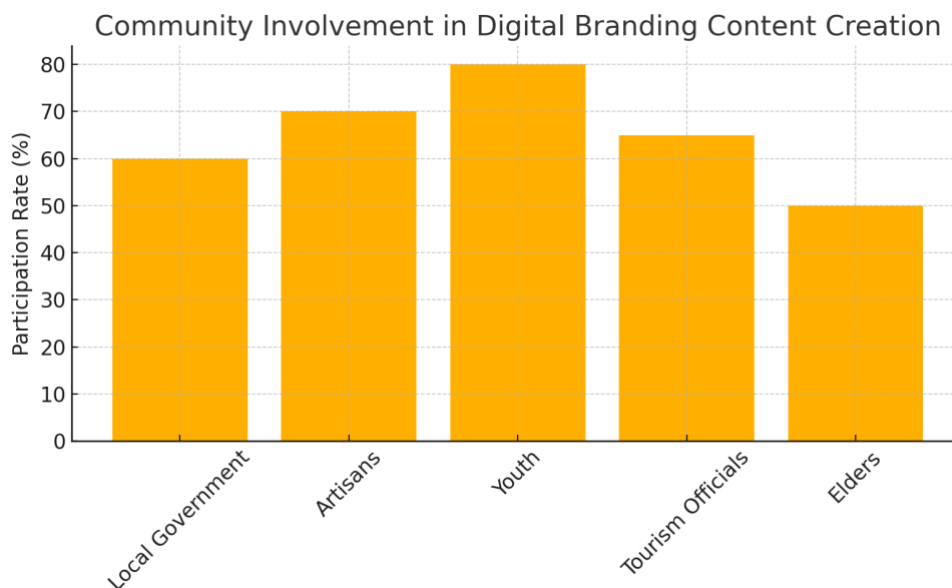


Figure: Community Involvement in Digital Branding Content Creation

Source: Community Participation Survey, 2024

This generational divide is both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, youth have embraced digital tools to creatively reimagine their heritage. On the other hand, the lack of intergenerational collaboration can lead to cultural misrepresentations or loss of ritual protocols (Smith & Waterton, 2009; Bunten, 2008; Su, 2011).

Some communities countered this by forming content oversight teams, blending marketing knowledge with cultural guardianship. These “cultural curators” ensured sacred elements were excluded from promotional content or contextualized properly. Such practices reflect local agency in controlling digital representations (Salazar, 2012; Cohen, 2012; Picard, 1996).

Youth involvement also enabled hybrid forms of storytelling. Folktales retold as TikTok sketches and cooking traditions turned into YouTube tutorials are examples of cultural adaptation, not erosion (Appadurai, 1996; Noy, 2017; Mkono, 2013). These emergent narratives indicate resilience and reinvention rather than loss.

Ultimately, ethical cultural branding is most sustainable when it emerges from within the community. Participatory models like co-branding and narrative co-production create inclusive and plural representations that respect both tradition and innovation (Richards, 2018; Babb, 2020; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital tourism branding plays a crucial dual role in both preserving and transforming local cultural identity. The analysis revealed that cultural elements most frequently showcased—such as traditional dance, crafts, and local cuisine—are often selectively presented to align with global aesthetic and commercial expectations. While these representations enhance visibility and tourist engagement, they frequently omit deeper cultural meanings and lived experiences, leading to the simplification or misrepresentation of identity. The study confirms that cultural identity, when mediated through digital platforms, becomes a strategic construct—negotiated by local actors but also shaped by the logic of visual consumption and platform algorithms.

Furthermore, the findings show that traditional elements undergo varying degrees of commodification, especially when adapted for commercial sale or performance. While this commodification can support economic sustainability, it risks detaching cultural expressions from their original contexts. Importantly, community participation—particularly among youth and artisans—has emerged as a key factor in ethical and authentic branding. Locally driven storytelling and digital content production offer promising models for culturally sensitive tourism promotion. Therefore, this research advocates for participatory branding practices that balance market needs with cultural values, ensuring that digital tourism development remains inclusive, respectful, and rooted in community agency.

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