

# Destination Branding in Creative Cities: A Framework for Sustainable Tourism Development

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## Abstract

*Destination branding has emerged as a crucial strategy for tourism destinations to stand out in a competitive market characterized by global challenges such as climate change, social inequalities, and economic instability. Within such framework, this paper explores the intersection of creative industries, tourism, and destination branding, focusing on how to enhance the distinctiveness, authenticity, and sustainability of destination brands. Drawing on the principles of creative cities, this study introduces the 5-Pillar Creativity and Tourism Monitor (5PCTM) as a tool for destination managers to evaluate and guide the integration of creative assets into branding strategies. Such an approach offers a strategic pathway for destinations interested in capitalizing on their creative and tourism potential to remain competitive and adaptable in a rapidly changing global tourism landscape.*

**Keywords:** *Destination branding; Creative industries; Creative cities; Tourism competitiveness.*

## 1. Introduction

The challenge for destinations in today's globalized and highly competitive tourism industry is to stand out from the myriads of options available to travellers. The concept of destination branding has gained prominence as a strategic tool to convey the distinctive experiences a destination has to offer and building a memorable identity in the minds of prospective tourists. As destinations increasingly recognize the importance of branding, the role of creative industries in shaping and enhancing these brands has become more significant.

Rooted in cultural and artistic values, creative industries (CIs) have in fact demonstrated considerable potential to enhance destination branding by fostering unique identities that resonate with modern travellers. Creative tourism in particular emerged as a key driver in the evolution of destination branding, offering destinations a way to engage with visitors in a more meaningful and profound way.

Building on the existing body of research, this study explores how integrating CIs can contribute to more resilient destination brands, introducing the 5-Pillar Creativity and Tourism Monitor as a framework for evaluating and guiding these efforts.

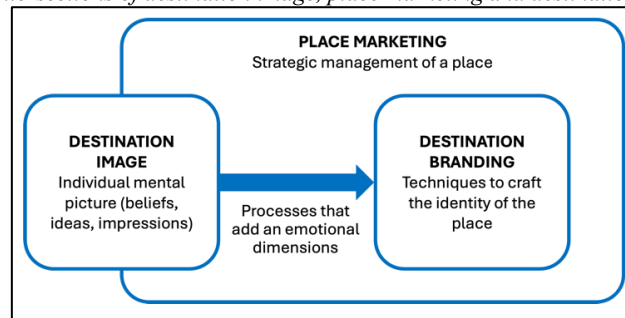
## 2. Literature review

The relationship between creative industries and tourism has progressively drawn scholarly attention in recent years. The concept of CIs was initially established through

policy discourse in the second half of the '90s (Flew, 2002), encompassing a broad range of sectors, from traditional arts and crafts to digital media and design. While a single and unambiguous definition is still missing (Throsby, 2008; UNCTAD, 2022), it is generally agreed that creative industries have become crucial drivers of economic growth and cultural preservation, making them integral to tourism strategies (OECD, 2014; 2022). Creative industries, in fact, not only contribute to the cultural vibrancy of destinations, but also play a crucial role in enhancing their allure and distinctiveness (Peres & Friel, 2016), leading to the emergence of creative tourism, which answers to tourists' need for active engagement and co-creation of experiences (Richards & Raymond, 2000; Richards & Wilson, 2006).

Destination branding has emerged as a strategic tool to articulate and promote the distinct identities of tourist destinations. Since its introduction in the late '90s (Oppermann, 2000), this concept progressively evolved into a comprehensive framework that builds on the destination image – i.e. people's perceptions and beliefs of a place (Jenkins, 1999) – and integrates it with strategic place marketing efforts, ultimately forging strong emotional connections and associations that define a compelling destination brand (Ekinci, 2003; Kavaratzis, 2005).

**Fig. 1:** *Intersections of destination image, place marketing and destination branding*



*Source:* own elaboration

CIs are key in destination branding, allowing destinations to stand out by leveraging unique cultural assets and fostering innovation. Creative content in tourism offerings acts as a powerful promotional tool (OECD, 2022) and, additionally, destinations can integrate creativity into branding strategies to enhance their appeal, support sustainable development, and strengthen connections among residents and visitors (Richards, 2016). Building on the pivotal role of creativity in destination branding, creative cities exemplify how urban centres that leverage their cultural and creative assets to drive economic development and enhance their global competitiveness (Landry, 2000). As hubs of innovation and cultural production, these cities draw talent, investment, and visitors, which not only reinforces their brand appeal but also cultivates a thriving cultural and creative ecosystem. This dynamic environment, in turn, further boosts their attractiveness to tourists, residents, and businesses alike (Florida, 2002).

### 3. Conceptual/methodological framework

Drawing inspiration from the principles of creative cities, destination branding can be reimagined to focus on fostering local creativity, promoting cultural diversity, and enhancing urban vibrancy. With this approach, the creative city model is transformed from an urban development goal into a strategic branding framework that helps destinations become more appealing and competitive in the global tourism market.

To support this reimagined approach to destination branding, the 5-Pillar Creativity and Tourism Monitor (5PCTM) is introduced as a practical framework within this paper. This tool, currently under development as part of the author's PhD research, is meant to help policymakers and stakeholders in assessing a city's creative infrastructure, tourism profile and overall enabling environment. Rather than delving into the technical aspects, the 5PCTM is presented here as a conceptual guide for destination managers to direct the integration of creativity and tourism within destination branding efforts. The 5PCTM is based on five pillars necessary for building creative cities that can drive tourism growth and achieve broader economic and social objectives, and thus represent key elements that destinations must focus on to build resilient and dynamic brands. Table 1 outlines the assessment method of the five pillars and their possible applications in enhancing destination branding strategies.

*Tab. 1: Possible applications of the 5PCTM for destination branding*

Pillar	Method	Application
Cultural Vibrancy	Assess creative and cultural assets (e.g. museums, festivals...).	Highlight assets in branding campaigns to differentiate the destination.
Creative Economy	Evaluate the role of creative jobs and the vitality of CCIs.	Incorporate creative economy elements in the narrative to position the destination as a hub of innovation.
Profile of the Destination	Define key characteristics of the tourism offer.	Feature distinctive traits in branding to attract target audiences.
Impacts of Tourism	Measure the impacts of tourism on the local economy and culture.	Use these insights to refine branding, aligning with sustainability goals.
Enabling Environment & Sustainability	Analyze policies, infrastructure, and sustainability practices supporting long-term growth and resilience.	Leverage these elements in branding to showcase how environmental, economic, and social sustainability fosters innovation.

*Source: own elaboration*

### 4. Discussion

The potential integration of CIs into destination branding represents an avenue to enhance the distinctiveness, authenticity, and competitiveness of tourism destinations. By leveraging the 5PCTM, destination managers could investigate methods for systematically applying creative city principles into their branding efforts and align such endeavours with local cultural strengths and sustainable growth objectives.

Cultural Vibrancy (pillar 1) is widely recognized as an integral element in establishing a destination's unique identity: cultural and creative assets such as museums, festivals, and creative experiences contribute significantly to a destination's appeal, creating a lively atmosphere that draws both visitors and locals (Richards & Wilson, 2006). Similarly, the Creative Economy (pillar 2) greatly influences the overall attractiveness of a destination (OECD, 2014). Branding campaigns that integrate these assets into the destination's narrative could on the one hand position the city as a hub of innovation, and on the other differentiate it from competitors, potentially attracting tourists who seek more meaningful connections with the places they visit. In this way, place marketing strategically builds upon the image by highlighting the creative strengths of the destination and crafting a brand that resonates with tourists.

According to Jenkins (1999), travelers' decisions are significantly influenced by their perception of a destination's image. Such perceptions, shaped by various sources, are pivotal in determining a destination's appeal. Consequently, effective branding strategies should consider the Profile of the Destination (pillar 3) and articulate its unique characteristics, enabling tailored approaches to target specific market segments. Yet, as tourism's burden on environmental, economic, and cultural landscapes are increasingly being recognized (Sharpley, 2020), ongoing measurement and analysis of the Impacts of Tourism (pillar 4) are of paramount importance. By assessing these impacts, destination managers could refine their branding to ensure it promotes long-term viability without sacrificing local resources or cultural integrity.

Lastly, Enabling Environment & Sustainability (pillar 5) emphasizes how critical are supportive infrastructure and policies that foster CIs and sustainable tourism. As noted by Florida (2002), a conducive environment that supports creativity and innovation is essential for fostering a thriving creative city. Thus, destinations that highlight their commitment to sustainability and innovation in their branding may attract not only tourists but also investors and residents.

It is worth discussing one final remark. While the applications of the 5 pillars discussed above can help building a dynamic and competitive brand, effective branding strategies must go beyond that, connecting these assets to the destination's broader image and marketing efforts, enhancing the emotional resonance of a destination's brand and forge lasting impressions.

## **5. Concluding remarks and future research**

This paper offers a cross-disciplinary contribution by applying creative city principles to destination branding in tourism, demonstrating how these strategies, typically used for urban development, can be leveraged to build resilient and dynamic destination brands that adapt to evolving tourist preferences.

The 5-Pillar Creativity and Tourism Monitor is introduced here as a tool through which creative cities can systematically evaluate their strengths in terms of cultural vibrancy, creative economy, destination's profile and enabling environment. Such assessment would be greatly beneficial for destination managers, helping them make

informed decisions to build resilient and dynamic brands.

Of course, limitations exist. A common risk in integrating creative industries and tourism is the commodification of experiences, where destination makers prioritize tourist preferences over preserving authenticity (Shepherd, 2002). Secondly, the 5PCTM is still under development, meaning that its effectiveness in diverse contexts remains to be fully validated.

Thus, future research can pursue different avenues. On the one hand, the 5PCTM will need refining and long-term impact testing, both compare creative cities and offer insights on the synergies between tourism and creativity – which is the main goal of the PhD thesis –, and to guide the integration of creativity and tourism within destination branding efforts. On the other, future studies should explore strategies for balancing cultural preservation with commercialization and investigate how policy frameworks can better support the integration of creative city principles into destination strategies. Together, these efforts can help destinations build sustainable, culturally authentic, and competitive brands in an ever-changing tourism landscape.

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