

Reimagining Pokhara: Destination Branding, Cultural Transformation, and the Promise of Sustainable Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Pokhara, the newly proclaimed tourism capital of Nepal, is widely celebrated for its natural splendor, cultural vibrancy, and adventure offerings. With panoramic views of the Annapurna range, tranquil lakes like Phewa and Begnas, and a blend of ethnic traditions, Pokhara continues to attract both domestic and international tourists. However, despite its strong appeal, the city's tourism branding remains fragmented, outdated, and often reactive rather than strategic. The rapid commercialization of tourism, combined with unregulated development and cultural commodification, has led to visible socio-cultural dissonance, eroding local identity and creating discontent within indigenous communities.

This paper aims to explore how Pokhara can reposition itself through strategic destination branding grounded in sustainability, cultural authenticity, and inclusive governance. Using qualitative methods, the research draws insights from 75 tourists, 75 tourism entrepreneurs, one focused group discussion (FGD), and seven expert interviews, including representatives from the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), Gandaki Province Government, Pokhara Tourism Council, and tourism academia.

Through thematic analysis, visual data representation, and literature synthesis, the paper proposes an Integrated Destination Branding Model (IDBM) that emphasizes community participation, experiential storytelling, and digital transformation. The findings underscore the need for unified brand governance through a Destination Management Organization (DMO),

improved tourism infrastructure, and sustainable practices that balance development with preservation. The paper concludes that Pokhara's global competitiveness in tourism depends on a reimagined branding approach-one that is rooted in local values, inclusive of its people, and aligned with global sustainability trends.

Keywords: *Destination branding, cultural transformation, Pokhara, rebranding, sustainable tourism, tourism events.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism today is more than travel-it's an immersive experience where place, people, and identity intersect. According to the World Tourism Organization (2023), tourism contributes over 10% to global GDP and is a primary employment driver in developing countries. In Nepal, Pokhara stands out as a leading tourist hub, known for its majestic mountains, serene lakes, and vibrant ethnic culture. Yet, with growing global competition, evolving tourist preferences, and the impact of unregulated tourism, Pokhara's brand identity faces critical challenges. Traditional slogans like "*Paradise Pokhara*" lack the dynamism and authenticity now sought by modern travelers. As Bhandari (2024) notes, branding today must evolve from mere slogans to multidimensional identity systems rooted in local voices, sustainability, and digital presence.

This paper explores how Pokhara can transition from a passive tourist spot to an actively branded experiential destination. It identifies core challenges, applies a theoretical model for branding, and presents primary research on tourist and stakeholder perceptions to offer actionable recommendations.

Theoretical Framework: Integrated Destination Branding Model (IDBM)

Drawing from interdisciplinary literature and empirical insights, this study proposes the Integrated Destination Branding Model (IDBM). This model envisions destination branding as a holistic system that connects multiple stakeholders, tangible and intangible assets, and policy frameworks. It includes four core layers:

- a. Core Identity - Defined by the natural environment (e.g., lakes, mountains), cultural heritage (e.g., indigenous practices), and community values.
- b. Brand Messaging - Involves storytelling, symbolic events, rituals, and visual communication (e.g., festivals, slogans, digital content).

- c. Visitor Experience - Encompasses the real-time experience of infrastructure, service quality, accessibility, and participation in local life.
- d. Governance & Sustainability - Covers brand regulation, tourism ethics, environmental practices, and stakeholder inclusivity.

Each component of the model is interlinked and mutually reinforcing. The Core Identity fuels the Brand Messaging, which in turn sets expectations for the Visitor Experience. The success of this experience depends on strong Governance & Sustainability, which loops back to protect and preserve the Core Identity. Together, they create a feedback-driven, sustainable branding cycle, aligning local authenticity with global tourism demands. This model supports a participatory and place-based approach to branding, echoing Bhandari's (2009) vision of identity-driven tourism. It emphasizes that branding is not a top-down activity but a dynamic, iterative process co-created by communities, entrepreneurs, and travelers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination branding is broadly understood as the process of creating a unique identity and emotional resonance for a place to attract and retain tourists. Ritchie & Ritchie (1998) defined it as a symbolic, experiential, and emotional portrayal of a place's characteristics. Morgan, Pritchard & Pride (2011) emphasized the role of narrative construction and emotional pull in successful branding.

Recent discourse shifts toward cultural co-creation where local communities actively contribute to shaping the destination's evolving identity (Bhandari, 2024; Richards, 2014). This participatory model is seen as essential for post-COVID-19 tourism recovery and resilience.

Sharma (2012) applied Doxey's Irridex Model in Pokhara, identifying rising resident irritation and alienation due to over-tourism. The transition from euphoria to apathy and annoyance indicates deeper issues of crowding, loss of privacy, and cultural commodification. Acharya (2019) similarly warned that unchecked tourism threatens indigenous rituals, family structures, and traditional livelihoods.

Several studies point to branding confusion due to overlapping slogans like "Paradise Pokhara," "Adventure Capital," and "City of Lakes," which lack coherence and strategic positioning (Subedi, 2020). Tourists today seek more than scenic beauty—they seek authenticity, interaction, and purpose-driven travel (Cohen & Cohen, 2012).

Event tourism has emerged as a significant soft branding tool. Khatriwada (2021) analyzed Pokhara's street festivals (e.g., New Year Festival, paragliding competitions) and

found them effective in reinforcing the city's vibrant identity and emotional appeal. These events offer episodic authenticity (Kim & Jamal, 2007), allowing visitors to feel temporarily immersed in local culture.

With the digital era, destination branding has extended into visual storytelling and online representations. As Dinnie (2008) notes, image construction through social media, influencers, and user-generated content (UGC) plays a central role in modern tourism branding. For Pokhara, however, there is an evident digital fragmentation—with uncoordinated visuals and underutilized narratives (Bhandari, 2009; Aryal, 2022).

UNWTO (2023) emphasizes that future branding must align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This includes fair representation, low-impact travel, and community-led governance. Bhandari (2009) earlier proposed an ethical branding approach for mountain tourism, where ecological carrying capacity and social harmony are key indicators of branding success.

DATA AND METHODS

This study was conducted in Pokhara Metropolitan City, located in Gandaki Province, Nepal. Pokhara, recently declared the *Tourism Capital of Nepal*, serves as the country's prime tourism destination and the gateway to the Annapurna region. Its scenic landscape, adventure activities, and cultural diversity make it a focal point for tourism development. However, issues such as fragmented branding, cultural commodification, and unsustainable development present critical challenges. These complexities provide a strong rationale for selecting Pokhara as the study area to explore how strategic and sustainable destination branding can reposition the city in the global tourism landscape.

Data was obtained from direct field engagement with tourists, tourism entrepreneurs, community representatives, and institutional actors. The population included individuals and organizations directly involved in tourism activities in Pokhara. A total of 150 respondents were selected through purposive sampling, comprising 75 tourists (domestic and international) and 75 tourism entrepreneurs (including hoteliers, travel agents, and adventure operators). To enrich the data, one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was organized with community representatives, and seven Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with key stakeholders, including the Director of NTB Gandaki, the Secretary of the Ministry of Tourism (Gandaki Province), the President of Pokhara Tourism Council, the head of the tourism office in Pokhara, and three experts from academia and the tourism business sector.

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured questionnaires, interview guides, and FGD guidelines. These instruments were designed to elicit detailed responses while allowing flexibility for probing emerging themes. Field notes and audio recordings were used to maintain accuracy and capture non-verbal cues. Data collection also included document review to complement primary findings and ensure triangulation.

The study maintained strict ethical standards. All participants were informed about the objectives of the research, and their voluntary participation and consent were obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and data were used solely for academic purposes.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. All interview and discussion transcripts were coded, categorized, and interpreted to identify recurring patterns and relationships among key concepts. Triangulation of data from interviews, FGDs, and secondary sources enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings. The results were synthesized into visual and descriptive representations, leading to the development of an Integrated Destination Branding Model (IDBM) that integrates community participation, experiential storytelling, and sustainable tourism governance for reimagining Pokhara's tourism identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic and Perceptual Information

The survey data reveals that male tourists (45) slightly outnumber female tourists (28), with only 2 identifying as 'other', suggesting a relatively gender-balanced sample. The majority of tourists (26–35 age group) reflects a youthful, adventure-seeking demographic, with 30 respondents in this category, followed by 18–25 (20) and 36–50 (18). Only a small group (7) were over 50, indicating Pokhara's stronger appeal to younger travelers.

In terms of travel purpose, Adventure (30) and Relaxation (20) dominate motivations, confirming Pokhara's branding as an adventure-nature destination. Cultural and pilgrimage motives also show relevance (12 and 10 respectively), but business travel remains negligible (3). Preferred activities align with these motivations — Trekking (30) and Paragliding (25) top the list, showcasing Pokhara's natural capital and adrenaline tourism appeal.

Infrastructure satisfaction is moderate: while 50 tourists expressed satisfaction (Very Satisfied – 15, Satisfied – 35), 25 respondents remained neutral or dissatisfied, suggesting a need for infrastructure consistency and improvement. Local perspectives on tourism impact are

varied, with 'mixed' views (30) being the most common, followed closely by both positive (22) and negative (23) perceptions. This highlights an underlying tension between benefits and challenges of tourism growth.

Finally, when asked about the need for destination rebranding, 55 respondents (Strongly Agree – 20, Agree – 35) supported the idea, indicating strong consensus toward revamping Pokhara's tourism image to better represent its evolving identity and meet global competitiveness.

Tourist Motivation to Visit Pokhara

Adventure tops the motivation chart (35%), followed by Nature (30%) and Culture (25%). Only 10% of tourists cited events or festivals as their primary motivator. Adventure-based branding has the strongest pull among international tourists, followed closely by nature and cultural appeal. The low percentage of tourists citing festivals highlights a missed opportunity to develop and market event-based tourism as a seasonal attraction and identity for Pokhara.

Local Concerns on Tourism Impact

Cultural erosion and price rise were the most cited issues (30% each). Locals worry about being priced out of their neighborhoods and losing cultural ownership. While tourism brings economic gains, it also creates social tensions. Locals feel marginalized in terms of cultural preservation and economic accessibility, pointing to the need for inclusive and responsible tourism planning that prioritizes cultural sustainability.

Tourist Satisfaction

A combined 75% of tourists were either Very Satisfied or Satisfied. However, 10% expressed dissatisfaction due to infrastructure issues and a lack of authenticity. Pokhara continues to appeal to tourists overall, thanks to its scenic beauty and general hospitality. However, dissatisfaction among a minority indicates areas for improvement, particularly in maintaining cultural authenticity and upgrading infrastructure for a consistent visitor experience.

Branding Recognition Gap

Only 20% of international tourists could recall Pokhara's tourism slogan or branding. Sixty percent associated Pokhara with lakes and mountains; others had no specific brand association. Despite Pokhara's physical allure, its identity as a tourism brand is weakly defined and poorly communicated. This underscores the urgency of investing in a strategic and distinctive destination branding campaign that resonates with target markets and strengthens Pokhara's unique identity.

Entrepreneurial View on Destination Management

Seventy percent of tourism entrepreneurs cited lack of unified vision among stakeholders and fifty percent reported duplicated promotional efforts and weak coordination among agencies. Tourism stakeholders in Pokhara are working in silos, leading to inefficiency and diluted branding efforts. A central coordination body or joint platform could streamline initiatives, reduce duplication, and foster collaborative destination management.

Perceived Value of Community Involvement

Sixty five percent of local respondents felt excluded from tourism decision-making and only 20% had experienced any form of participatory planning. Community voices are underrepresented in the tourism development process. Strengthening local involvement can foster ownership, ensure cultural sensitivity, and lead to more equitable tourism benefits—enhancing both community support and tourist experiences.

Visitor Perception of Sustainability

One in four tourists observed over-commercialization, especially in Lakeside and 35% noticed issues like pollution and overcrowding during peak seasons. Tourists are increasingly mindful of sustainability and environmental conditions. Negative perceptions about crowding and commercialization could harm long-term visitor satisfaction and brand image. A sustainable destination strategy is crucial for Pokhara to retain its charm and competitiveness.

Challenges in Current Branding Practices

Despite Pokhara's recognition as Nepal's Tourism Capital and its popularity among adventure and nature enthusiasts, several critical challenges undermine its branding effectiveness. Insights from the field survey, focus group discussion, and stakeholder interviews point toward the following seven major issues:

Fragmented Governance and Absence of DMO

The lack of a unified Destination Management Organization (DMO) has resulted in fragmented efforts across tourism bodies. Stakeholders such as government institutions, local entrepreneurs, and tourism councils work in isolation, leading to duplication of roles and inconsistency in messaging. As one key informant put it, "Everyone is working hard, but not together." This lack of coordinated governance impairs strategic branding and long-term vision.

Infrastructure Inconsistencies

While Pokhara boasts remarkable natural beauty and now has an international airport, tourists expressed only moderate satisfaction with infrastructure - 35 reported being “Satisfied,” 15 were “Very Satisfied,” but 25 remained neutral or dissatisfied. Issues like traffic congestion, uneven roads, unmanaged urbanization, and limited public amenities hinder the overall tourist experience. These inconsistencies dilute the premium brand image that Pokhara aspires to project.

Limited Community Inclusion

Branding initiatives are often top-down and dominated by government bodies or external consultants, sidelining indigenous voices and local participation. In the FGD, community representatives stressed that cultural custodians and heritage communities feel excluded from brand decision-making. This marginalization weakens authenticity, which is a key tourism attraction in Pokhara, especially for those seeking cultural experiences.

Digital Branding Deficit

Digital presence remains a major weakness. Despite a growing number of young, tech-savvy tourists (especially in the 26–35 age group, which was the largest segment), Pokhara’s online visibility is poor, with uncoordinated social media efforts, outdated websites, and inconsistent storytelling. This limits reach and engagement, especially among global audiences who rely on digital platforms for travel planning.

Misaligned Brand Positioning

While 30 tourists cited ‘Adventure’ and 25 preferred ‘Trekking’, many branding materials still broadly promote Pokhara as a romantic or peaceful getaway. This disconnect between tourist motivations and marketed identity dilutes brand clarity. The data clearly indicates a need to align branding with actual tourist preferences, particularly around adventure, paragliding, boating, and nature-based tourism.

Mixed Local Perceptions and Weak Community Buy-in

Tourism success relies on local support. However, perception data shows that locals hold ‘mixed’ (30) and even ‘negative’ (23) views on tourism impact, slightly outweighing the ‘positive’ (22). Concerns include cultural dilution, unequal economic benefits, and environmental pressure. Without community trust and enthusiasm, destination branding efforts struggle to gain depth and resilience.

Need for Rebranding and Strategic Narrative

The study reveals an urgent call for destination rebranding, with 55 tourists either strongly agreeing or agreeing that Pokhara's current brand no longer reflects its full potential or modern tourism trends. Tourists seek not just mountains and lakes but curated experiences, meaningful interactions, and quality infrastructure. Rebranding should embrace Pokhara's strengths — youth appeal, adventure capital, and cultural richness - while addressing structural and perceptual gaps.

CONCLUSION

Results reveal that Pokhara's current brand identity is largely spontaneous and reactive rather than strategically planned. Most tourists associate Pokhara with its lakes and mountains but not with a distinct or unified brand narrative. Majority of entrepreneurs reported a lack of coordination and a unified vision among stakeholders. Moreover, more than two-third of community respondents felt excluded from tourism decision-making processes. This exclusion not only diminishes community ownership but also undermines the authenticity that is central to Pokhara's cultural brand.

Although tourists were satisfied with their visit, many expressed concern over over-commercialization and environmental degradation, particularly in Lakeside areas. Local concerns about cultural erosion and price escalation further reveal that tourism expansion has not always translated into equitable or sustainable development. Synthesizing thematic findings, the research developed an *Integrated Destination Branding Model (IDBM)* that emphasizes community participation, experiential storytelling, digital transformation, and unified brand governance. The study concludes that Pokhara's long-term competitiveness depends on establishing institutional coordination, embedding sustainability in every branding effort, and re-centering the city's image around authentic culture, nature, and responsible adventure.

Overall, Pokhara stands at a turning point: it possesses unmatched natural beauty and strong tourism potential, yet faces pressing challenges of coordination, authenticity, and sustainability. Reimagining Pokhara requires a transition from fragmented promotion to a cohesive, inclusive, and future-oriented branding strategy rooted in local identity and guided by sustainable development principle

Drawing directly from the above conclusions, establish a Destination Branding Authority (DBA), Promote Community Co-creation and Cultural Inclusion, implement

Thematic Branding Campaigns, develop experience-based brand themes aligned with tourist motivations, strengthen Digital Branding and Marketing, Enhance Sustainable Infrastructure and Urban Mobility, upgrade public amenities, promote eco-mobility are the recommendations.

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