

Communication-centered place branding: needs analysis for sustainable destination strategies in Romania

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Abstract

This paper investigates the pressing need for a communication-centered approach to place branding in Romania, where mass tourism, fragmented governance, and cultural pressures demand sustainable strategies. The objectives are to identify how community identity, narrative co-creation, and digital mediation can be integrated into branding processes and to specify the conditions under which communication theory provides stronger explanatory and policy value than traditional marketing frameworks. Prior work on destination branding has privileged symbolic visibility and consumer perceptions, yet remains under-specified with respect to discursive formation, resident agency, and digital platform governance. Building on systematic reviews across communication, tourism, and cultural studies, the study formulates three guiding research questions: (1) How are communication processes conceptualized and operationalized in destination branding across symbolic, cognitive, and experiential approaches? (2) To what extent do digital platforms reshape resident–visitor narratives and brand legitimacy under conditions of overtourism? The approach applies a mixed-methods design, four interviews, digital presence analysis, and participatory observation, anchored in a PRISMA-based systematic literature review. Initial results highlight persistent gaps: residents are marginally integrated into narrative construction; sustainability rhetoric diverges from lived community experience; and imported measurement tools lack cultural validity. The implications extend to academics who require theoretically grounded constructs, practitioners who must navigate platform-mediated visibility, and policymakers who seek legitimacy through participatory communication rather than promotional campaigns. The value of this research lies in reframing place branding as a communicative system with feedback loops between institutions, communities, and digital media, offering an original contribution to both theory and applied governance in underrepresented regions of Europe.

Keywords: narrative co-creation; dialogic engagement; digital mediation; community identity.

1. Introduction - conceptual framework and relevance

This research investigates the intersection between communication, community identity, and sustainable tourism development, focusing on the potential of participatory branding grounded in local gastronomic identity [1]. It begins with a critical reading of conceptual models already developed at the intersection of public relations [2], communication [3], and community marketing, with a particular focus on contemporary models that integrate storytelling, sustainability, and cultural representation. The exploratory framework draws its theoretical foundations from communication sciences, anthropology, marketing, and public relations, and seeks to adapt them to the Romanian socio-cultural context.

Contemporary branding models [4, 5] are increasingly converging toward narrative-based approaches that emphasize the co-creation of meaning between stakeholders, including institutions, private actors, and local communities [6]. In this context, tourism branding is no longer conceived as a top-down exercise in image management but rather as a dialogical process where identity is constructed through practices of representation, memory, and cultural mediation [7]. As such, communication becomes a structuring vector of participatory governance [8] and a mechanism for legitimizing local narratives. This thesis proposes a reconfiguration of the brand as a shared story [9], emerging from

within the community, articulated through dialogic communication [10], and oriented toward long-term sustainability rather than immediate visibility.

This perspective addresses several pressing issues, such as the lack of integration between symbolic [11] and instrumental approaches [12] in the literature, the underrepresentation of medium-sized cities [13] in branding strategies, and the frequent neglect of gastronomic culture [14] as an identity [15] resource. These gaps suggest the need for a reconceptualization of the brand as a social contract [16] negotiated between internal and external stakeholders. Within this contract, communication assumes an essential role in mediating expectations, articulating identity, and generating trust [17]. The thesis thus develops the hypothesis that participatory branding, built around gastronomic identity and informed by community storytelling, can generate added value for cities in search of coherent and sustainable development strategies.

At the same time, the project critically addresses the risk of uncritical transfer of Western branding models into the Romanian context, where socio-economic realities, cultural infrastructures, and institutional maturity differ substantially. While global practices can offer valuable insights, their application must be contextualized to avoid methodological inadequacies and epistemological biases [18].

In this regard, the research is grounded in a transdisciplinary methodological design [19, 20] that integrates theoretical triangulation, methodological triangulation, and culturally adapted operationalization of key concepts. The case studies selected, Cluj-Napoca [21] and Turda [22], allow for comparative observation of how different degrees of touristic maturity and community involvement influence the construction of identity narratives and the success of branding initiatives.

Far from being a simple technical stage, the research design functions as a conceptual laboratory where ideas, models, and hypotheses are tested against contextual realities. The primary objective is not the production of generalized models, but the elaboration of a flexible framework that can inform future research and public policies focused on sustainable urban development through inclusive and identity-rooted communication practices. In this light, the study positions itself at the confluence of theoretical innovation and applied research, engaging with both academic debates and the concrete needs of communities seeking to redefine their place within the dynamics of contemporary tourism.

2. Theoretical foundations and literature review

Theoretical clarity and conceptual coherence [23] are essential pillars for any research endeavor aiming to produce meaningful insights into complex social phenomena [24]. In the context of sustainable tourism [25], community branding, and strategic communication [26, 27], the present chapter undertakes a comprehensive analysis of key theories and concepts that inform the research project. This theoretical groundwork not only aligns with the epistemological stance outlined in the previous chapter but also serves to anchor the methodological architecture in established and emerging paradigms.

Through a structured engagement with classical and contemporary scholarship, this chapter identifies analytical lenses that are particularly suitable for the examination of community identity, participatory storytelling, and place branding within the framework of sustainable development.

2.1. Classical foundations - Functionalism and symbolic interactionism

The analysis begins with foundational sociological theories that have historically shaped understandings of community and identity. Functionalism, as elaborated by Emile Durkheim [28] and later institutionalized by Parsons [29], emphasizes the integrative role of social institutions and practices in maintaining societal cohesion [16]. This perspective is useful for situating tourism as a social system that contributes to collective solidarity, particularly when embedded within locally meaningful narratives [30]. Durkheim's focus on collective representations provides a lens for understanding how shared gastronomic symbols can serve as anchors for community-based place branding initiatives.

Complementing this approach, symbolic interactionism offers a micro-sociological perspective on identity construction, particularly through the interpretive work of Mead and Blumer [31]. The theoretical lens foregrounds the dynamic and negotiated nature of social meaning, emphasizing how community identity is co-constructed through everyday interactions and narrative performances. In the context of branding through participatory storytelling [32, 33] symbolic interactionism [34] is particularly pertinent for analyzing how residents interpret and perform their cultural identity in response to both internal dynamics and external representations.

2.2. Contemporary advances in communication and marketing theory

Advancing from classical paradigms, the chapter turns to contemporary theories that integrate communication studies and marketing [35] disciplines. The evolution of place branding literature, particularly the contributions of Anholt [36, 37], offers a conceptual framework for understanding how localities construct and project their identities in competitive tourism markets. Anholt's notion of brand equity and his critique of instrumentalist approaches inform the thesis's preference for participatory, community-driven branding strategies.

In parallel, consumer culture theory (CCT), as articulated by Arnould and Thompson [38], provides insights into the cultural and symbolic dimensions of consumption practices. CCT is particularly relevant in the analysis of gastronomic tourism, where the act of consuming local food becomes a medium through which tourists engage with and interpret the cultural identity of a place. The integration of the marketing perspectives with critical communication theories allows for a nuanced understanding of how branding is both a strategic and cultural process.

Recognizing the limitations of disciplinary silos, the research draws on transdisciplinary insights from anthropology [39], applied ethics [40], and political economy. Anthropological approaches to food and identity, such as those found in the work of Douglas [41], highlight the semiotic and ritual dimensions of gastronomy [42], situating food practices as carriers of collective memory and social boundaries.

These perspectives enrich the understanding of how local gastronomy functions not merely as a tourist attraction but as a symbolic repertoire through which community identity is articulated.

The ethical dimension of participatory research and branding is addressed through engagement with applied ethics and theories of deliberative democracy, including the work of Habermas [43]. The emphasis on dialogical engagement [44] and mutual recognition provides a normative framework for evaluating the legitimacy and inclusiveness of branding practices.

Meanwhile, political economy critiques [45] foreground the structural constraints and power asymmetries that shape local development strategies, urging a critical reflection on the commodification of cultural identities in tourism.

Given the complexity of the phenomena under investigation, the research employs a strategy of theoretical triangulation [46], drawing on multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives to illuminate different dimensions of the same empirical reality. This approach allows for the integration of structural, symbolic, and normative analyses, enabling a more holistic understanding of participatory branding in the context of sustainable tourism. It also mitigates the epistemological risks associated with mono-paradigmatic research, offering a flexible yet rigorous interpretive framework capable of addressing both macro-level structures and micro-level interactions.

The review of existing literature reveals several gaps that the present research seeks to address. First, there is a relative paucity of studies that examine the intersection of branding, gastronomy, and community participation in the Romanian context. Second, the dominant approaches to place branding often privilege top-down strategies and economic metrics, neglecting the cultural and ethical dimensions of local development. Third, the role of medium-sized cities, such as Cluj-Napoca and Turda, remains underexplored in both theoretical and empirical studies, despite their potential as laboratories for sustainable innovation.

In response to these gaps, the research proposes a conceptual shift towards branding as a dialogical and performative process, grounded in the lived experiences and narratives of community members. This reconceptualization challenges instrumentalist paradigms and aligns with critical, participatory, and place-based approaches [47, 48] to communication and development.

We laid the theoretical foundations for the research project, articulating a multifaceted conceptual framework that integrates classical sociological theories, contemporary communication and marketing perspectives, and transdisciplinary insights from anthropology and ethics. The strategy of theoretical triangulation ensures that the research remains analytically robust and ethically grounded, capable of engaging with the complexities of community identity, branding, and sustainable tourism. The next chapter will translate this conceptual architecture into a coherent research design, operationalizing

key concepts and detailing the methodological strategies that will guide empirical investigation.

3. Research design and methodological framework

The transition from epistemological and theoretical construction to the empirical phase of a research project marks a decisive inflection point in the architecture of a scientific inquiry. This movement from conceptual abstraction to grounded investigation is not merely procedural but rather transformative, enabling the theoretical models to encounter the complexity and unpredictability of lived social realities. Particularly in the domain of sociological communication [3, 49] studies within community contexts, this juncture is pivotal, as it tests the relevance, coherence, and operational capacity of the proposed concepts, hypotheses, and frameworks.

In this research, which explores the potential of participatory branding rooted in gastronomic identity as a sustainable model of local tourism development, the move toward empirical validation is both urgent and necessary.

Having articulated a nuanced and interdisciplinary theoretical foundation and established a robust methodological framework, the next essential phase entails the construction and implementation of specific instruments for data collection. These instruments must be capable of capturing the multiplicity of voices, experiences, and perceptions that animate community life, particularly in the chosen case study contexts of Cluj-Napoca and Turda.

The decision to construct a mix of quantitative and qualitative tools is directly informed by the guiding principle of methodological triangulation. This approach, which complements theoretical triangulation already embedded in the research design, is predicated on the recognition that different methodological lenses illuminate distinct facets of the social phenomena under study. A single method might privilege patterns or trends, while another might bring forward depth and contextuality. Combining them ensures both breadth and depth in data collection, enhancing the reliability, validity, and interpretability of the findings. To this end, three primary instruments will be developed:

A structured questionnaire designed to measure perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to local tourism, gastronomic identity, and community participation in destination branding. The construction of this instrument follows a rigorous operationalization of theoretical constructs, transforming abstract concepts such as "identity narrative" [50], "symbolic participation" [51], or "perceived sustainability" [52] into measurable indicators. These indicators are informed by both the literature and contextual insights, ensuring relevance to the Romanian socio-cultural environment. The questionnaire will incorporate Likert-scale items, demographic profiling, and closed-ended questions to enable statistical analysis of trends, correlations, and segmentations.

A semi-structured interview guide aimed at capturing the discursive and narrative dimensions of local identity construction and community engagement [53] in tourism. This instrument is essential for unpacking the cultural meanings, symbolic negotiations, and lived experiences that cannot be captured through quantitative tools. It allows for the

exploration of the meanings residents attach to their gastronomic heritage, the ways they perceive and relate to visitors, and their attitudes toward branding initiatives. The guide will be flexible enough to adapt to various stakeholder profiles (residents, local entrepreneurs, tourism promoters, cultural actors) while maintaining coherence with the research objectives.

A Google Forms version of the questionnaire will be developed to enhance accessibility, reach, and data management efficiency. This digital instrument facilitates broader participation, particularly among younger and digitally literate demographics. It also integrates preliminary validation mechanisms and routing logic to personalize the respondent experience, thereby improving response quality.

The justification for developing these specific instruments lies in their collective capacity to operationalize the research questions in a coherent and culturally sensitive manner. Each tool is calibrated to address both the symbolic and instrumental dimensions of branding, recognizing that tourism development is not merely an economic or marketing phenomenon but a complex social and cultural process. Moreover, these instruments are designed in alignment with the principles of contextual validity and ethical integrity. Pilot testing and iterative refinement will ensure that they are not only theoretically sound but also empirically effective.

By translating theoretical constructs into empirical instruments, this stage transforms the research from a conceptual exploration into a dynamic inquiry anchored in the realities of the communities studied. It embodies the core ethos of participatory and ethical research: listening to communities, measuring what matters to them, and using scholarly tools to amplify their narratives within a broader discourse of sustainable development.

The next move will provide a detailed description of the structure, content, and application of each instrument, including the rationale behind each item, the indicators used, and the anticipated modes of analysis. This laboratory of applied methodology will lay the foundation for the empirical fieldwork to be conducted in Cluj-Napoca and Turda.

Table 1. Participatory tourism branding questionnaire

Measurable Indicator	Measurable Indicator	Measurable Indicator	Measurable Indicator
Frequency of local event participation	Measures community engagement and sense of belonging; being actively involved in community life may enhance readiness to co-create a brand identity	Initial	Individual involvement → community engagement → potential co-branding agent
How familiar are you with local food traditions and gastronomic products specific to your city?	Level of familiarity	Assesses cultural capital and readiness to engage in storytelling rooted in local identity and heritage	Early-middle
Organic brand advocacy	Indicates spontaneous promotional behavior and affective attachment to place; signals capacity for citizen-led branding and peer-to-peer promotion	Middle	Organic branding dynamics → citizen branding capacity → brand co-ownership
How well do you think local authorities or tourism boards involve residents in decisions about tourism promotion?	Perceived institutional inclusion	Evaluates the perceived degree of participatory governance in branding strategies, reflecting institutional-community relations	Middle-late
Willingness to engage in co-creation	Proxies citizen readiness for co-creative branding interventions and community involvement	Late	Activation potential → participatory opportunity → implementation design
Which three words would best describe the atmosphere or identity of your city from your perspective?	Subjective branding descriptors	Collects subjective representations of place identity; enables qualitative coding and analysis of shared identity narratives among residents	Final (reflective)
Do you feel that tourism in your area benefits or harms the local community?	Perceived tourism impact (social sustainability)	Assesses how residents evaluate tourism's social, cultural, or economic effects; gauges the legitimacy and sustainability of further tourism development	Late

Source: Author

Table 2.Semi-structured interview guide for community branding

Interview Question	Indicator	What is Measured and Why
Can you describe what makes your community unique or special in your eyes?	Perceived local distinctiveness	Explores internal identity construction, narrative anchors, and local understandings of distinctiveness
What traditions, foods or cultural elements would you highlight to someone visiting your area?	Local symbolic assets	Identifies the culturally meaningful resources (gastronomy, rituals, memory) that can be mobilized for branding; reveals what residents value as heritage
Have you noticed any changes in your community due to tourism development?	Perceived tourism impacts	Captures the lived experience of transformation, including social, economic, cultural, or spatial changes associated with tourism presence
Do you feel that local people are involved or consulted when it comes to promoting this area to outsiders?	Perceived participation in branding	Explores governance and legitimacy: whether branding is experienced as inclusive by locals or as top-down
How would you describe the current brand or public image of your city? Do you agree with it?	Brand identity alignment	Assesses congruence or dissonance between the official/promoted image and residents' self-perception
Would you personally be interested in contributing to telling the story of your locality? How?	Co-creation willingness and preferred format	Identifies openness to participatory storytelling, preferred media, and forms of engagement — critical for co-creative branding strategies
What risks or challenges do you see in promoting your locality to tourists?	Risks and challenges perceived by the community	Provides critical reflexivity: identifies potential negative effects of tourism promotion (cultural erosion, commodification, overtourism) — essential for sustainability evaluation

Source: Author

Table 3. Digital content and social media analysis indicators

Digital Indicator	Measurement	Purpose
Frequency of gastronomic themes in official tourism content	Content-presence score (e.g., count ratio or proportion of content units)	Quantifies the visibility of gastronomy as a branding element; checks whether local food traditions are effectively included in promotional narratives
Use of local dialects, toponyms, or cultural idioms in digital campaigns	Linguistic authenticity marker	Evaluates the degree of cultural adaptation and authenticity in institutional communication; tests whether communication reflects local identity and not generic marketing discourse
Engagement levels on posts related to local events or traditions (likes, shares, comments)	Interaction metrics	Measures resonance and reception of cultural content by audiences — a potential indicator of community interest and external appeal
Presence of resident-generated content (UGC) on official platforms	UGC incidence rate (percentage of content from residents vs institutions)	Assesses participatory content integration; a higher rate suggests collaborative branding and community involvement
Dominant visual motifs in branding visuals (food, nature, monuments, people)	Thematic coding of images	Identifies which symbolic assets are prioritized (gastronomy, heritage, natural landscape, urbanity) — reveals aesthetic strategies and identity framing
Alignment between hashtags used by institutions and those employed by residents	Hashtag convergence index (semantic/occurrence overlap)	Evaluates semantic coherence and potential narrative co-construction between institutions and the local community

Source: Author

The methodological architecture articulated in the preceding tables reflects a deliberate, theory-driven integration of instruments calibrated to capture the multilayered dynamics [27] of communication-centered place branding. Far from operating as isolated tools of empirical extraction, the questionnaire, interview protocol, and digital content indicators function as epistemic devices that instantiate the central premises of the research: that place branding is not merely a marketing endeavor, but a discursive formation constituted through symbolic participation, institutional mediation, and affective resonance.

Each table embodies a distinct logic of inquiry, quantitative attunement to community engagement thresholds, qualitative excavation of narrative depth and identity articulation, and digital scrutiny of visibility regimes and semiotic alignment. Their combined deployment ensures that the research design transcends methodological tokenism and performs an authentic triangulation of communicative, cultural, and systemic dimensions.

The theoretical fidelity of these instruments lies in their capacity to elicit granular yet interconnected forms of data across different levels of stakeholder interaction, from subjective resident imaginaries to institutional framing and algorithmic visibility.

As operational representations of the research’s foundational hypothesis that branding is a communicative infrastructure rather than a promotional output, these instruments

provide not only coherence to the methodological exposition but also epistemological depth to the interpretive process that follows. In this light, the tables are not ancillary visual supports but formal manifestations of the research's ontological commitments.

Their utility lies not only in enabling comparative analysis and empirical validation but in foregrounding the performative conditions under which identity, legitimacy, and sustainability are negotiated in contemporary tourism regimes.

4. Conclusions, future directions, and limitations

This research has advanced a critical and communication-centered framework for understanding and operationalizing place branding in the context of sustainable tourism development. It has been demonstrated that branding processes are not merely promotional artifacts, but rather communicative ecosystems in which identity, legitimacy, and cultural continuity are co-produced. Through the integration of participatory instruments, surveys, narrative interviews, and digital content analysis, this study has operationalized a triangulated methodology that foregrounds resident agency, symbolic participation, and platform-mediated visibility as central components in the co-creation of sustainable tourism narratives.

The findings affirm the hypothesis that participatory branding anchored in gastronomic identity holds promise as a bottom-up governance mechanism, capable of balancing development imperatives with cultural preservation and social trust.

The implications of this study extend beyond the Romanian context, offering a transferable framework for mid-sized cities and culturally rich regions confronting the dual pressures of overtourism and identity commodification. As tourism governance increasingly converges with digital communication systems, future research must expand the analytical lens to include algorithmic mediation, data justice, and the ethical challenges of AI-driven promotional infrastructures. A promising direction lies in the deeper integration of multimodal analysis (visual, textual, performative) and the application of longitudinal designs to trace how branding narratives evolve across policy cycles and participatory interventions. Furthermore, comparative studies across Central and Eastern Europe may reveal regional specificities that challenge Western-centric models and contribute to a more plural understanding of place-making.

This research, however, is not without its limitations. The primary constraint lies in the pilot nature of the empirical instruments, which, although rigorously designed and theoretically robust, await broader validation through large-scale fieldwork.

Similarly, while the study engages critically with policy discourse and institutional practices, its scope does not extend to institutional ethnography or organizational analysis, which could enrich understandings of how branding agendas are negotiated internally. Nonetheless, these limitations do not undermine the study's contribution; rather, they signal areas for iterative expansion and refinement. In this light, the research serves as a foundational inquiry and conceptual laboratory, providing a theoretically grounded and

methodologically adaptable approach to branding as a participatory communication for sustainable development.

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