

Reflecting Role of Culture in Place Branding:

A Literature Review

Denny Indrayana Setyadi,⁺ Acep Iwan Saidi,⁺⁺ Gregorius Prasetyo Adhitama³ & Andryanto Rikrik Kusmara⁴ (Indonesia)

Abstract

Culture is a complex and contested concept that cannot easily be understood through a single definition. Nevertheless, culture plays an important role in place branding strategies and is interpreted in diverse ways within place branding scholarship. This study aims to identify and reflect upon the various roles of culture in place branding through a review of previous studies, particularly within the fields of Social Studies and Arts & Humanities published between 2008 and 2026. Using a literature review approach, the study collected data from the Scopus database and employed thematic analysis to examine how culture is conceptualized and positioned within place branding discourse. The findings reveal ten major themes representing different cultural roles in place branding, including everyday culture, cultural identity, gastronomy, sports, cultural heritage, festivals, community participation, cultural critique, cultural production, and the relationship between traditional and contemporary culture. Based on these findings, this study proposes a reflective checklist consisting of critical questions that may be used as an initial framework for identifying and reflecting on the role of culture within place branding practices, particularly in the context of urban culture and city branding. Rather than functioning as an evaluative measurement tool, the checklist is intended to encourage deeper reflection on the cultural dimensions and potentials embedded within place branding strategies.

Keywords: *Culture, Place Branding, Urban Culture, Literature Review, Thematic Analysis, Reflective Checklist*

⁺ Denny Indrayana Setyadi, S.T., M.Ds. Post Graduate Student, Doctoral Program Art and Design, Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung & Visual Communication Design Departement, ITS Surabaya, Indonesia. email: denny@its.ac.id.

⁺⁺ Acep Iwan Saidi, Prof., S.S., M.Hum., Doctoral Program Art and Design; Literacy, Culture & Visual Research Group; Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia. email: acepiwan@itb.ac.id.

³ Gregorius Prasetyo Adhitama, Assoc. Prof., M.Sn., Human and Interior Research Group; Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia. email: prasetyo@itb.ac.id.

⁴ Andryanto Rikrik Kusmara, Assoc. Prof., S.Sn., M.Sn., Art Research Group; Art Departement; Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia. email: rikrik@itb.ac.id; rikrik@itb.ac.id; informasi-fsrd@itb.ac.id.

Introduction

Place branding has developed as a significant area of inquiry within urban, cultural, and management studies, evolving from earlier practices of place promotion and marketing into a more complex process of meaning-making and identity construction (Anholt, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2004). Although place branding is frequently associated with global competition among cities (particularly in attracting tourists, investment, and international visibility), this perspective represents only one dimension of a broader phenomenon. Beyond its economic and promotional functions, place branding also shapes how places are experienced, represented, and understood through social and cultural processes.

Within this context, culture is frequently positioned as a key element of place branding strategies. It is often mobilized through festivals, heritage narratives, creative industries, and visual representations to differentiate places and enhance their attractiveness. However, such approaches tend to frame culture as a resource or asset, raising critical concerns about reductionism and instrumentalization. Previous studies have pointed to issues such as the commodification of culture (Rius-Ulldemolins & Klein, 2022), commodification of music in tourism (Jurková & Cernáková, 2017), the framing of cities as participants in an “international beauty contest” (Boland, 2013), and the phenomenon of “cultural hijacking,” where local meanings are appropriated to fit branding agendas (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2015; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015).

These debates indicate that the relationship between culture and place branding is not simply a matter of application, but one of interpretation. Culture itself is a complex and contested concept, encompassing multiple meanings across different contexts. As Raymond Williams (1983) famously argues, culture may refer not only to artistic production or cultural objects, but also to a “whole way of life,” including everyday practices, values, beliefs, and social relations. This broader understanding challenges more instrumental approaches to culture, particularly when branding practices prioritize visibility and economic outcomes over lived cultural experience.

Despite the increasing attention given to culture in place branding literature, many studies continue to approach culture from a management-oriented perspective. In these works, culture is often framed as a strategic resource to support tourism development, economic competitiveness, and branding performance (Maheshwari et al., 2011; Plaza et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2019; He et al., 2020). It is frequently operationalized through events, experiences, and representational elements such as heritage, architecture, or local products (Bursiewicz, 2021; Chuang, 2018; Yiannakou et al., 2022; Pongsakornrungrungsilp et al., 2021).

While these approaches demonstrate the practical role of culture in place branding, they tend to privilege instrumental and representational dimensions, with less emphasis on culture as a lived and everyday social practice.

Based on this issue, this study formulates the following research questions:

- RQ1: How is culture conceptualized in place branding literature?
- RQ2: What are the various roles and positions of culture within place branding discourse?

This study aims to critically examine how culture is conceptualized within place branding literature, with particular attention to the positioning of culture as a “way of life.” To achieve this, a structured literature review of 78 articles indexed in Scopus is conducted, combined

with a thematic analysis approach. The analysis draws on Raymond Williams' framework of cultural meanings to identify patterns in how culture is interpreted and operationalized across studies.

Theoretical Framework

Williams (1983) notes that the notion of culture is widely employed across various scientific disciplines and diverse knowledge systems, rendering it a complex word to interpret clearly. In general, we can associate at least four meanings of culture. Quoting Inglis (2005), the primary meaning of 'culture' today is:

- 'High culture,' a meaning related to the words 'art' and 'civilization';
- Personal refinement, such as when discussing a 'cultured person.'
- Cultural objects and products such as books, films, and TV shows;
- The 'whole way of life' of a given group. It is a way of thinking, understanding, believing, and acting that is a 'characteristic' of a particular group.

Regarding the culture of a place, Inglis (2005) quotes Raymond Williams's three levels of culture in exploring culture and everyday life, as follows:

- 'Lived culture' of a particular time and place
- 'Recorded culture' of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts; the culture of the period
- 'Culture of the selective traditions.'

Accessing 'Lived Culture' is the most challenging among 'recorded culture' and 'traditional selective cultures.' It requires exploring the two other levels with a skeptical attitude toward cultural facts that immediately appear naturally. Therefore, understanding 'Lived Culture' is essential when discussing the role of culture in a place.

Turning into place branding theories, which developed from place promotion to place marketing to place branding, has quite strong roots in management and marketing sciences (Yanada & Salamah, 2014). Therefore, place branding is more commonly referred to as the most relevant strategy for gaining popularity in a place (Anholt, 2010). Regarding the role of culture in place branding, the meaning of place branding cannot force the culture to become a part of a strategy toward gaining popularity. Culture is not a tool for gaining popularity; it is a part of human life that carries out and maintains a better life.

Kalandides et al. (2012) identified cultural meanings related to place branding as Cultural goods, Cultural industry products, and Heritage. He also uses terms such as 'cultural resources' and 'cultural planning.' Cultural planning is a tool to achieve cultural resources.

Developing places, infrastructure, essential events, arts, and culture packaged in city branding efforts are risks of ignoring local culture and creating a standard global city image. Such circumstances can induce feelings of isolation among residents, potentially leading to long-term harm to the city's image (Riza, 2015). Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2014) propose rethinking the role of culture in place branding. Furthermore, Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) use the term 'Cultural Hijacking' to describe the tension between culture and place branding and propose a conceptual framework to mitigate the relationship. Nursanty et al. (2023) propose a conceptual framework to address the tension between place branding and authenticity: focus on uniqueness and authenticity, Citizen and stakeholder engagement, Balance between the need for branding, and continuous evaluation and adjustment.

Methodology

Research Methods

This study adopts a structured literature review approach to examine how culture is interpreted within the discourse of place branding. Rather than simply collecting previous studies, this research applies a systematic filtering process to ensure the relevance and quality of selected literature. The data were collected using the Scopus database, accessed via its official platform. The search process was conducted in several stages to progressively refine the dataset. In the initial stage, the keywords “place branding” AND “culture” were used within the fields of article title, abstract, and keywords. The search was limited to publications from 2008 to 2026, resulting in 452 articles.

In the second stage, the results were refined using subject-area and document-type filters. Only publications within the Social Sciences and the Arts and Humanities were included. Additionally, the document type was limited to journal articles, the source type to journals, and the language to English. This refinement reduced the dataset to 181 articles.

In the third stage, an accessibility criterion was applied by selecting only open-access publications, ensuring full-text availability for in-depth analysis. This final filtering process resulted in 78 articles, which formed the dataset for this study.

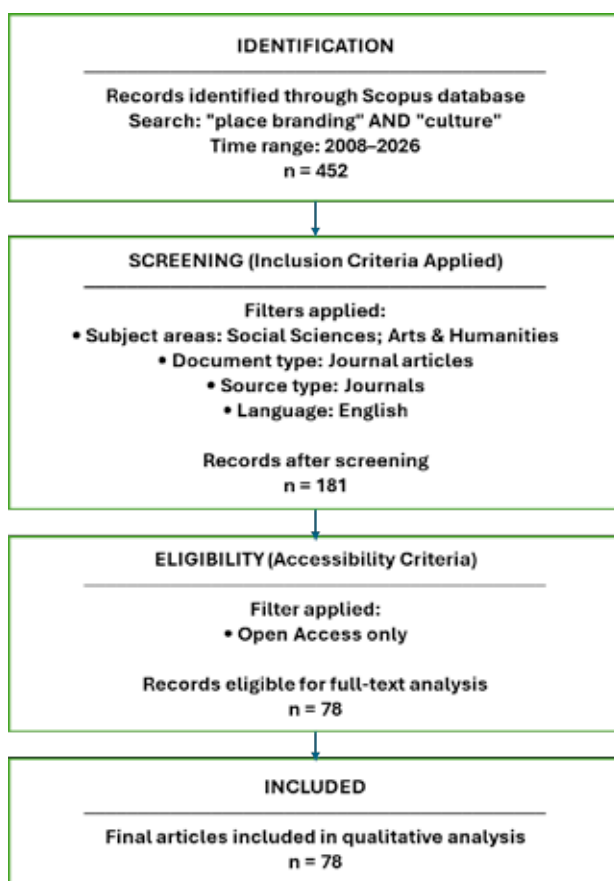


Figure 1. Literature search and selection process showing progressive filtering from 452 initial records to 78 final articles included in qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

Following the data collection process, qualitative analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti to systematically organize and interpret the selected literature. The analysis began with initial coding, in which each article was examined based on key concepts related to culture, place, and branding. The coding process focused on identifying how culture is defined, interpreted, and positioned within place branding discussions. To structure the analysis, this study adopted Raymond Williams' framework of cultural definitions, which categorizes culture into four dimensions: high culture, personal refinement, cultural object/product, and a whole way of life. These categories served as analytical lenses to examine variations in cultural interpretation across the selected literature.

The study employed a thematic analysis approach following Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun (2013) to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and tensions between culture and place branding. This stage moved beyond descriptive analysis by critically comparing how different studies conceptualized and operationalized culture. The findings were then synthesized to address the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the collected data and the results of the analysis conducted to address the research questions.

Figure 2 presents a thematic map that illustrates the relationship between culture and place branding across the reviewed literature. The findings identify ten major themes that demonstrate the various ways culture is positioned and operationalized within place branding discourse. These themes include: (1) culture as a way of life; (2) cultural identity; (3) gastronomy culture; (4) sports culture; (5) heritage; (6) cultural events and festivals; (7) community culture; (8) cultural criticism; (9) cultural production; and (10) cultural traditions.

The thematic map illustrates that culture in place branding extends beyond promotional and economic functions. Culture is positioned not only as a representational asset, but also as a lived, social, symbolic, and experiential dimension that shapes the identity and meaning of place. Several themes, such as community culture, cultural traditions, and culture as a way of life, emphasize the role of everyday cultural practices in constructing place identity. Meanwhile, themes such as gastronomy, sports, heritage, and cultural festivals demonstrate how culture is frequently operationalized as a strategic and visible element within branding initiatives.

At the same time, the emergence of themes such as cultural criticism and cultural production reflects tensions within place branding discourse, particularly regarding the commodification, negotiation, and circulation of culture. These findings suggest that culture in place branding is not static, but continuously produced, interpreted, and contested across social, political, and economic contexts.

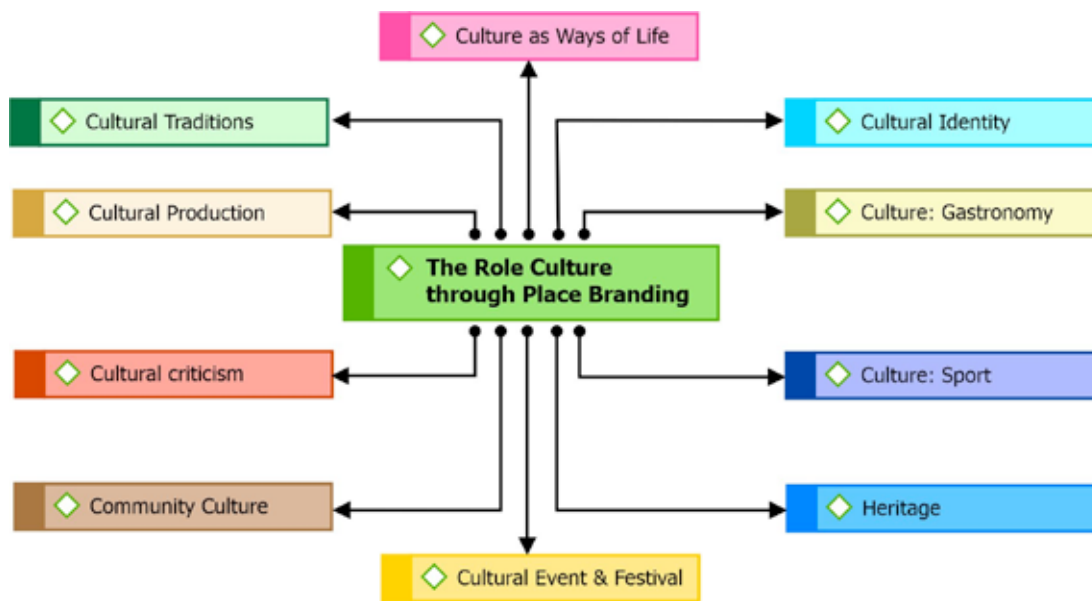


Figure 2. Thematic Map of Role of Culture through Place Branding.

'Way of Life' in Place Branding

"If everyday life is so banal, why would one want to write about it? The answer to that question is: because everyday life contains within it more significance than we might think..." (Inglis, 2005:2).

Inglis (2005) statement reflects one perspective on culture in everyday life. In this context, culture can be understood as part of a "way of life," referring to Raymond Williams' concept of lived culture: "There is the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place" (Williams, 1961:66). From this perspective, culture is not limited to artistic products or formal cultural expressions, but also includes everyday routines, values, and social practices embedded within community life. Anwar et al. (2025) demonstrate this perspective through their study on sustainable historical city identity and place attachment. Their findings show that communities living in riverside settlements possess stronger attachment to historical meanings and values than residents in city centers. This suggests that everyday culture may represent urban identity more effectively than formalized cultural expressions concentrated in central urban areas.

Everyday culture is also inherently diverse because it emerges from interactions among different social and cultural groups within a city. Hassen and Giovanardi (2018), through their study on Leicester, argue that cultural diversity does not hinder city branding; instead, it can strengthen urban identity and social cohesion. In Leicester, multiculturalism is promoted through festivals and ethnic celebrations organized by different communities, positioning diversity itself as part of the city's identity. Everyday culture is further reflected through daily social routines such as Fika in Sweden and Hygge in Denmark. These practices represent local values and social interaction while simultaneously providing distinctive cultural experiences for visitors. Consequently, everyday culture functions not only as symbolic representation, but also as an experiential dimension through which people engage with and interpret a place.

Culture and Identity in Place Branding

One key role of culture in place branding is its ability to shape a place's identity. Place identity becomes inseparable from the branding process, serving as the foundation for constructing and communicating meanings, perceptions, and a place's distinctive character.

One important dimension of place identity relates to the naming of places. An interesting study conducted by Hayward (2021) analyzed several place names in Canada associated with mermaids and sirens. These mermaid-themed names contributed to the construction of local tourism appeals, such as *Mermaid Cove* and *Mermaid Rock*. However, the study found that such naming practices were largely arbitrary and lacked strong connections to local folklore or significant local cultural traditions. Instead, the names were more closely associated with cultural imperialism and colonial history. Similar findings were also identified in several tourist destinations in Australia (Hayward & Fleury, 2021), where the use of mermaid symbolism was found to have little relation to Indigenous Australian culture. These findings suggest that place identity in branding practices may sometimes be shaped by externally imposed cultural symbols rather than by locally rooted cultural meanings.

Research on place identity was also conducted by Lombard and Du Plessis (2016), who examined several regions in Montana, United States, where local identity was connected to the historical use of cattle branding irons from local ranches. The various branding symbols identified in the study were closely linked to the history and cultural heritage of local ranching communities. Within place-branding discourse, such forms of everyday cultural heritage are often overlooked and receive limited scholarly attention. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that cattle branding symbols have become embedded within the local system of meaning and identity formation. Consequently, place branding strategies should pay greater attention to forms of local culture that continue to exist within everyday community practices.

Apart from *mermaid* and cattle branding irons, horses also represent an important cultural identity maintained in Seoul, South Korea. Podoler (2025) discusses horses as part of the city's cultural landscape, arguing that horses symbolize South Korea's national aspirations within place branding strategies through public artworks distributed across urban spaces. Through this study, Podoler introduces the concept of a "collage cultural landscape" to analyze the interaction between humans, animals, and cultural landscapes in the construction of place identity. This perspective highlights that place identity is shaped not only by architecture and visual symbols but also by the cultural meanings attached to living beings, historical memory, and spatial experience.

The Role of Gastronomic Culture in Place Branding

Although the term *culinary* is more commonly used, gastronomy encompasses a broader spectrum related to the relationship between humans, food, culture, and the surrounding world (Soeroso & Turgarini, 2020). In this sense, gastronomy functions not only as food consumption, but also as a cultural system connecting food, place, and social life within place branding strategies.

Blom (2024) examines the Swedish culture of *fika* as a form of cultural experience and tourism value creation. As an everyday social tradition centered on coffee, conversation, and togetherness, *fika* demonstrates how simple daily practices can become authentic cul-

tural experiences attractive to tourists. This finding suggests that gastronomy contributes to place branding through the relationship between food, social interaction, and cultural identity.

Similarly, Farrelly and Makkar (2023) discuss artisanal food culture in Tasmania, showing that artisanal food represents not only products, but also the stories, experiences, and everyday lives of local producers. Consequently, gastronomy strengthens place identity through narratives of authenticity and local culture. Kladou and Trihas (2022) further introduce the concept of *gastro-cultural* experiences, emphasizing that gastronomy reflects local traditions, social relationships, and cultural participation through activities such as food festivals, culinary tours, and cooking classes. In this context, gastronomy enhances tourism attractiveness while enriching place branding through experiential engagement.

Beyond tourism, gastronomy also functions as a form of cultural diplomacy. Cabral et al. (2025) argue that food and eating culture contribute to the construction of national identity and strengthen a country's international image, positioning gastronomy as a symbolic medium through which nations communicate cultural identity in global contexts. Similarly, Songcharoen et al. (2024) highlight the importance of integrating design with local culture and gastronomy to enhance audience perception, as demonstrated through the identity of Phetchaburi as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy.

The Role of Sports Culture in Place Branding

Sport represents one form of culture that contributes significantly to the development of place branding. According to Girginov and Gorginova (2025), sport cannot be separated from culture because it constitutes part of social practices, collective identity, and the representation of societal values. Within the context of place branding, global sporting events such as the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup, Southeast Asian Games, and other international competitions exert substantial influence on the image of host regions and the branding strategies developed around them. This perspective is reinforced by Richelieu (2018), who argues that sport can shape place perception at the urban, regional, and national scales.

Edensor and Millington (2008) discuss a campaign conducted by Manchester City F.C. to strengthen Manchester residents' loyalty to the club. The campaign, titled *Our City*, cultivated fan culture by portraying Manchester City as an authentic club rooted in traditional working-class communities. The campaign demonstrates how urban myths and sports club identities can be combined to produce a city identity that is emotionally resonant and closely aligned with local communities. In this context, sport functions as a medium for the production of urban cultural identity.

A similar case regarding the contribution of football club identity to urban identity is reported by Xu (2019). The study demonstrates that the blue color associated with Leicester City F.C. plays a significant role in constructing place identity through place branding, identity mediation, and the development of urban visual culture. Within the multicultural society of Leicester, the color blue functions as a unifying symbol across diverse cultural groups and social identities. Thus, visual symbols associated with sport can operate as mechanisms of social integration within culturally diverse urban contexts.

Meanwhile, John and McDonald (2020) examine the role of sport in shaping Melbourne's branding. They argue that sport serves as a form of “cultural glue” connecting public values to the city's neoliberal ideology. This finding illustrates how sports culture can simultaneously generate civic identity, economic narratives, and political symbolism within place branding strategies.

The Role of Cultural Heritage (Tangible and Intangible) in Place Branding

Cultural heritage is one of the most recognizable forms of culture within place branding and is generally categorized into tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible heritage includes buildings, historical sites, artifacts, and cultural landscapes, while intangible heritage encompasses rituals, traditions, local knowledge, and social practices.

Jacobsen et al. (2024) discuss the transformation of Odense through the redevelopment of the historic house of Hans Christian Andersen. By integrating museum design with the surrounding urban environment, the project connects Andersen's narratives with the broader cultural experience of the city. The study demonstrates that cultural heritage can strengthen spatial experience, tourism, and place identity.

Similarly, Liu et al. (2025) examine private art museums in Eastern China, showing that museums function not only as exhibition spaces but also as social spaces that foster interaction and community formation. Their findings suggest a reciprocal relationship between culture and place branding, where culture shapes place image while place branding supports cultural preservation and revitalization.

Wei et al. (2022) further demonstrate the role of heritage in national identity through the Mausoleum of the Yellow Emperor. Rituals, architecture, and cultural landscapes at the site communicate spiritual meaning, national unity, and historical identity through the relationship between space, symbolism, and historical narratives.

Beyond tangible heritage, Tillotson et al. (2020) examine sauna culture in Finland as a form of intangible cultural heritage. Their study shows that sauna culture functions as a symbolic resource embedded within Finland's national branding discourse, illustrating how everyday cultural practices can become part of national cultural identity and international image-building.

The Role of Cultural Events and Festivals in Place Branding

Cultural events and festivals are effective strategies for destination branding because they promote cultural diversity, social interaction, local economies, tourism awareness, and longer visitor stays (Yalçinkaya & Çaylan, 2026). Many international festivals originate from local community traditions that gradually develop into larger cultural events (Yoopetch, 2022), allowing places to communicate identity and collective cultural experiences.

Brokalaki and Comunian (2021) discuss the Athens Fringe Festival as a community-based arts festival that transforms public urban spaces into participatory cultural environments. Similarly, Šepetavc and Majsova (2024) show how folk-pop festivals in Slovenia combine traditional and popular culture to support heritage tourism and national identity.

However, cultural mega-events may also create tensions within place branding. Howcroft (2023) highlights the UK City of Culture 2017 program in Kingston upon Hull, which

promoted civic “pride” as a branding narrative but was criticized for overlooking local socio-economic concerns and citizen participation. Likewise, Baker et al. (2025) discuss the Eurovision Song Contest as a mega-cultural event where popular culture, politics, and national identities intersect, illustrating how festivals also function as platforms of cultural diplomacy and symbolic projection

The Role of Community Culture and Local Residents in Place Branding

This theme represents various studies discussing place branding strategies through two main approaches: top-down and bottom-up approaches. In recent developments, bottom-up approaches have received increasing attention because top-down strategies are often considered insufficient for building place identity without the involvement of local communities and public participation. Consequently, residents are no longer positioned merely as objects of branding, but rather as key actors in shaping the identity and meaning of a place. Contemporary developments in place branding are increasingly moving toward the concept of community branding. Daldanise (2020) highlights the transformation from place branding to *community branding* as a consequence of the growing role of local communities in the branding process. This approach positions residents as central participants in the formation of place identity, narratives, and experiences, enabling the resulting image of a place to become more authentic and closely connected to the social realities of everyday life.

Mihalis Kavaratzis and Gregory Ashworth (2015) provide an important discussion regarding the relationship between culture and place branding. Their study demonstrates that limited understandings of place branding may result in the disconnection between local culture and branding strategies. Through the concept of “hijacking culture,” they argue that local communities are often marginalized within branding processes, causing the resulting place image to diverge from the lived culture of local residents. This critique highlights the importance of community participation so that place branding does not merely function as a promotional tool but also reflects the cultural realities and everyday experiences of local society.

In relation to planning approaches, King et al. (2025) examine how top-down policies may inhibit bottom-up place-making initiatives. Their study emphasizes the need for new governance structures capable of integrating both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Such integration is considered necessary not only for enhancing tourism development, but also for balancing relationships between culture, tourism, and the quality of life of local communities. This finding suggests that successful place branding requires collaborative governance rather than purely centralized image management.

Trapp (2020) discusses the successful implementation of a volunteer ambassador program in Aarhus, Denmark. The program represents a form of direct community participation in place branding strategies. The study demonstrates that local volunteers were able to provide richer and more authentic understandings of the city compared to formal tourism managers. The volunteers shared personal experiences, local stories, and direct cultural interactions with visitors. This study illustrates that bottom-up place branding can produce stronger, more participatory, and more authentic cultural experiences grounded in the everyday lives of local residents.

The Role of Culture as a Mechanism of Critique in Place Branding

Culture within place branding discourse also functions as a mechanism of critique and resistance against the excessive exploitation of culture that ignores local social realities. Bermúdez (2019) discusses the development of the cultural district *Cidade da Cultura* in Galicia as an example of *Disneyfication*, where culture and urban space are transformed into visual spectacles and tourism commodities within neoliberal urbanism. In this context, culture is treated more as a consumable image than as a representation of everyday community life. Similarly, Brokalaki and Comunian (2021) criticize cultural initiatives centered on “shiny flagship buildings” that primarily benefit governments and elite groups rather than local residents. Their study emphasizes the importance of repositioning everyday culture as a central component of urban life instead of merely a tool for urban competitiveness.

Caprioli et al. (2021) further argue that culture in destination branding is often represented superficially while overlooking lived local practices such as *Fika* in Sweden and *Hygge* in Denmark. These findings demonstrate that culture cannot simply be reduced to visual symbols or promotional slogans but should instead be understood as an actively lived social practice.

This critique is reinforced by Mihalis Kavaratzis and Gregory Ashworth (2015) through the concept of *Hijacking Culture*. They argue that dominant place branding approaches frequently disconnect branding strategies from local culture by reducing culture to a promotional instrument. Instead, culture should function as a medium connecting identity, perception, and community values. Therefore, effective place branding should articulate meanings genuinely experienced and understood by local residents.

The Role of Cultural Production and Circulation in Place Branding

Within cultural studies perspectives, culture is not understood as something inherently given through ancestry, ethnicity, or geographical origin. Rather than being fixed and static, culture is continuously produced, negotiated, and circulated through social practices, media, and power relations. Consequently, culture is viewed as an ongoing process that continually changes in response to the surrounding social, political, economic, and technological contexts.

Luo (2025), for example, introduces anti-poverty dramas (*fupin ju*) as a television genre produced for contemporary Chinese society, representing governmental efforts to alleviate poverty. These dramas function as forms of cultural production that bridge state propaganda and popular culture, while simultaneously constructing anti-poverty cultural symbolism that reimagines marginalized regions as spaces of hope and development. In this context, cultural production serves as an important mechanism for strategically constructing and communicating place identities and social narratives to broader audiences.

Efforts to examine cultural production and circulation are also reflected in the study by Jiang and Kuang (2023), which investigates the image of Suzhou in Eastern China. Although the city is recognized as a rapidly developing economic and cultural center, it remains relatively less visible internationally. Their findings demonstrate that cultural circulation through media platforms produces different constructions of urban image depending on the interests, narratives, and audiences associated with each media channel. This suggests

that place branding is shaped not only by physical environments or official campaigns but also by mediated cultural representations that circulate across communication networks.

Meanwhile, Wang and Zhang (2025) examine representations of ancient cities in the Jiangnan region through social media platforms. They propose the concept of *symbolic effects on platform media* to explain how local culture is reconstructed and disseminated within digital environments. In this context, culture becomes something continuously reimagined through platform-based media systems and digital visual consumption. Their study highlights how social media platforms contribute to the transformation of local culture into circulating symbolic content, shaping how places are perceived, experienced, and consumed in contemporary digital culture.

The Role of the Alignment Between Traditional and Contemporary Culture in Place Branding

The relationship between traditional and contemporary culture emerges as an important theme in place branding, where both are often negotiated as complementary rather than opposing elements in shaping place identity. Bermudez (2019) examines the contrast between the historic Santiago de Compostela Cathedral and the contemporary *Cidade da Cultura* in Galicia, Spain. While the cathedral represents traditional culture and sacred heritage, *Cidade da Cultura* symbolizes contemporary global cultural tourism. The study highlights Galicia's transformation from a pilgrimage destination toward a globally oriented cultural tourism landscape. Similarly, Bursrewicz (2021) discusses contemporary architecture in Wrocław, Poland as part of urban identity and place branding. The study suggests that contemporary architecture can strengthen tourism attractiveness and contribute positively to city image.

In contrast, Gupta (2015) critiques The World Islands in Dubai as an example of neoliberal tourism culture centered on luxury and spectacle. The project is described as a “false” concept that blurs the relationship between culture and nature while prioritizing globalized elite tourism imagery. These studies demonstrate that place branding often involves negotiations between preserving local traditions and embracing contemporary cultural expressions in shaping urban and regional identities.

Study's Implications

The findings of this study highlight at least ten cultural roles within place branding identified through previous studies related to the keywords *culture* and *place branding* within the fields of social sciences, arts, and humanities over an 18-year period (2008–2026) indexed in the Scopus database.

Based on these thematic findings, this study proposes a reflective checklist that may be used for future research as well as by policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders interested in examining the role of culture in place branding. The checklist is formulated as a set of reflective questions intended to evaluate whether existing place branding strategies have adequately considered the cultural dimensions identified in this study.

Themes	Reflective Questions of Role Culture through Place Brading
Culture as a Way of Life	Has [place branding] _____ considered everyday culture as part of its place branding strategy?
Culture and Identity	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of culture in shaping place identity as part of its place branding strategy?
Gastronomic Culture	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of gastronomic culture as part of its place branding strategy?
Sports Culture	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of sports culture as part of its place branding strategy?
Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage as part of its place branding strategy?
Cultural Events and Festivals	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of cultural events and festivals as part of its place branding strategy?
Community Culture and Local Residents	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of community culture and local residents as part of its place branding strategy?
Culture as Critique	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of cultural critique as part of its place branding strategy?
Community Culture and Local Residents	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of cultural production and circulation as part of its place branding strategy?
Traditional and Contemporary Culture	Has [place branding] _____ considered the role of cultural production and circulation as part of its place branding strategy?

Figure 3. Table of Reflective Questions on the Role of Culture in Place Branding.

However, it should be emphasized that this reflective checklist is intended only as a guiding tool to encourage deeper exploration of the cultural potential within existing place branding practices. The checklist is not designed to provide quantitative evaluations of the role of culture in place branding. Furthermore, it is not procedural in nature, meaning that every question does not need to be answered in order to complete the reflective process comprehensively. Instead, the checklist may be used flexibly, allowing researchers and practitioners to select one or more themes that are most relevant to their specific context of reflection.

Conclusion

The role of culture in place branding remains an important topic for understanding the continuing development of place branding practices today. Culture cannot be reduced to fixed entities such as tangible and intangible cultural heritage alone. Rather, culture continuously evolves and becomes embedded within everyday life and social practices. This study sought to address the research questions concerning how culture is positioned within place branding and what kinds of cultural forms and perspectives emerge within existing literature on culture and place branding.

The findings demonstrate that the role of culture in place branding has expanded alongside the diversity of perspectives and theoretical approaches adopted by scholars interested in this topic. This study identifies ten thematic roles of culture in place branding that

may serve as reflective tools for examining existing place branding practices. Based on these themes, the study proposes ten reflective questions that can be used as preliminary reflective instruments before exploring more specific cultural dimensions within place branding contexts.

Importantly, these reflective questions are not intended to evaluate or measure the success of previous place branding practices. Instead, they are designed to encourage deeper consideration of the cultural possibilities and potential that may contribute to the development of more context-sensitive and culturally grounded place branding strategies. These objectives are embedded within each reflective question presented in this study.

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