

Visualising Heritage: The Influence of Images, Design, and Digital Media on Destination Identity and Visitor Experience

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Received: 22 July 2026; Accepted: 12 August 2026; Published: 1 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Cultural tourism and visual communication have become increasingly interconnected, with visual media playing a central role in shaping how heritage destinations are perceived, selected, experienced, and remembered by visitors. This paper examines the relationship between these two fields by exploring how various forms of visual communication including destination branding, photography, interpretive signage, digital storytelling, social media imagery, and immersive technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) influence the representation and interpretation of cultural heritage. Through a comprehensive review of contemporary literature, the paper demonstrates that strategically designed visual communication enhances destination identity, enriches visitor engagement, and facilitates deeper cultural understanding. It further argues that effective visual communication should extend beyond destination promotion to preserve cultural authenticity, encourage local community participation, and support the sustainable management of heritage tourism. By highlighting emerging trends and best practices in visual communication, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of how visual strategies can balance tourism development with heritage conservation in an increasingly digital tourism landscape.

Keywords: *cultural tourism; visual communication; destination branding; visual storytelling; heritage interpretation; social media; immersive technologies; sustainable cultural tourism.*



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1 INTRODUCTION

Before deciding to visit Melaka's historic streets, the cultural villages of Sarawak, or the heritage town of George Town, many tourists have already formed expectations through photographs, social media, and other forms of visual media. Long before a journey begins, tourists are exposed to visual content disseminated through social networking platforms, travel websites, destination marketing campaigns, tourism brochures, documentary films, and recommendations from other travellers. These visual representations shape destination image, influence travel motivations, and affect how visitors perceive the appearance, atmosphere, authenticity, and cultural significance of a destination before experiencing it firsthand (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Recent studies further demonstrate that user-generated visual content, travel vlogs, and short-form videos on platforms such as Instagram and

TikTok have become dominant sources of destination image formation by enhancing perceptions of authenticity, emotional engagement, and travel intention (Ding et al., 2024).

Visual communication, broadly defined as the transmission of meaning through images, signs, symbols, typography, and designed media, is one of the most influential mechanisms through which cultural tourism is imagined, communicated, and experienced (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). This paper positions visual communication as a fundamental component of cultural tourism by examining how visual media shape the representation, interpretation, and promotion of heritage destinations. Visual communication in cultural tourism encompasses everything from destination logos on official tourism websites and interpretive wayfinding signage at heritage sites to professionally curated drone photography, immersive virtual experiences, and user-generated TikTok videos that can transform relatively unknown heritage sites into global tourism attractions overnight. Contemporary research has shown that social media imagery, visual storytelling, and digital heritage communication increasingly influence destination branding, tourist perceptions, and visitor engagement, while also contributing to sustainable heritage management through broader public participation and digital interpretation (Sang & Woon, 2024).

Despite the diversity of communication channels, they share a common semiotic function: they construct and communicate meanings about culture and place. These meanings shape tourists' expectations, influence destination choice, and affect the level of cultural understanding and respect that visitors bring to heritage sites. Recent scholarship further argues that visual narratives created by destination management organisations, local communities, influencers, and tourists collectively create destination identities, making visual communication an essential driver of contemporary cultural tourism and heritage branding (Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2024).

1.1 Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism has emerged as one of the most significant drivers of global tourism development, contributing substantially to economic growth while promoting the preservation and appreciation of cultural heritage. Across the world, destinations such as Paris, Rome, and Barcelona have successfully capitalised on their rich historical assets, museums, festivals, architectural landmarks, and artistic traditions to attract millions of international visitors each year. Their success demonstrates the importance of strategic destination branding and the integration of authentic cultural experiences with contemporary tourism infrastructure to sustain global competitiveness (Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024). Beyond its economic contribution, cultural tourism plays a crucial role in safeguarding heritage, strengthening cultural identity, and fostering intercultural understanding through meaningful interactions between visitors and host communities.

The evolution of contemporary tourism has shifted the focus from passive sightseeing towards immersive and participatory experiences that engage tourists on multiple sensory and emotional levels. According to Gudiksen, 2024, modern cultural tourism increasingly emphasises interactive interpretation, experiential learning, and visitor participation through digital technologies, immersive exhibitions, and community-based cultural activities. In response to these changing tourist expectations, both developed and developing countries have diversified their cultural tourism offerings by incorporating experiential activities such as traditional cooking classes, dance performances, handicraft-making workshops, and local storytelling. These authentic and participatory experiences enable tourists to gain a deeper understanding of local customs, traditions, and cultural values while fostering stronger emotional connections with destinations. Consequently, such experiences contribute to the creation of memorable tourism experiences that enhance visitor satisfaction, encourage destination loyalty, and support the long-term sustainability of cultural tourism (Lee et al., 2023).

1.1.1 Cultural Tourism in Malaysia

In Malaysia, cultural tourism has become a strategic component of the national tourism agenda, reflecting the country's rich multicultural heritage, diverse ethnic traditions, historical landmarks, and intangible cultural practices (Tourism Malaysia, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). The coexistence of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous communities has created a distinctive cultural landscape that attracts both domestic and international tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences (Kayat, 2014). Heritage cities such as George Town in Penang and Melaka, recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, together with destinations featuring traditional villages, cultural festivals, museums, religious landmarks, and local crafts, represent Malaysia's cultural diversity and historical significance. These cultural assets not only contribute to tourism revenue but also support heritage conservation, community empowerment, and the preservation of local identities.

In recent years, Malaysia has shifted its tourism strategy beyond conventional sightseeing by promoting experiential and community-based cultural tourism (Richards, 2021). Visitors are increasingly encouraged to participate in activities such as traditional food preparation, batik and songket crafting, indigenous cultural performances, heritage walking tours, and local festivals, allowing them to engage more deeply with Malaysian culture. This experiential approach aligns with the growing demand for authentic, meaningful, and memorable tourism experiences, where tourists actively interact with local communities rather than merely observing cultural attractions. Consequently, cultural tourism has become an important mechanism for enhancing destination competitiveness, strengthening Malaysia's cultural identity, and encouraging sustainable tourism development through the preservation and promotion of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual communication within cultural tourism possesses a significant semiotic dimension, as images function not merely as aesthetic representations but as systems of meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Visual signs communicate on two interconnected levels: denotative meanings, which refer to the immediate and observable content of an image, and connotative meanings, which evoke deeper cultural, emotional, and symbolic associations. In tourism promotion, visual symbols such as batik motifs, traditional wood carvings, and indigenous dance performances communicate cultural values and heritage without relying extensively on textual explanations. When strategically incorporated into destination branding, these symbols transcend their decorative function to represent collective cultural identity, fostering a sense of authenticity and emotional connection among both local communities and prospective visitors (Morgan et al., 2011).

Given the growing reliance on visual storytelling in tourism promotion, it is essential to examine how visual communication strategies are designed and interpreted within the context of storynomic tourism. Storynomic tourism emphasises storytelling as a strategic approach to communicate the cultural significance and uniqueness of destinations, allowing tourists to develop emotional and experiential connections before and during their visits (Wijaya et al., 2022). Understanding which visual elements most effectively communicate destination narratives, evoke emotional responses, and create a distinctive sense of place is fundamental to enhancing destination appeal. Furthermore, investigating how visual representations shape tourists' imagination, perceptions, and travel intentions can provide valuable insights into the role of visual communication in influencing destination image and visitor decision-making.

2.1 The Tourist Gaze

The Tourist Gaze remains one of the most influential theories in tourism studies. The concept of the tourist gaze, first introduced by Urry and further developed by Urry and Larsen, provides a foundational theoretical perspective for understanding how tourists perceive, interpret, and experience destinations.

Urry proposed that tourists primarily experience destinations through visual observation and that their perceptions are shaped by socially and culturally constructed images rather than by direct experience alone. (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Rather than engaging with destinations objectively, tourists seek visual experiences that align with their preconceived expectations and symbolic interpretations of a place. Consequently, tourists' perceptions are influenced not only by the physical characteristics of cultural attractions but also by visual representations encountered before travel, including photographs, promotional videos, travel websites, and social media content (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013).

Within the context of cultural tourism, the tourist gaze significantly influences how visitors perceive authenticity, cultural heritage, and local identity. Visual representations of historical monuments, traditional architecture, cultural festivals, indigenous communities, and artistic performances contribute to constructing destination expectations before the actual visit. These expectations subsequently shape tourists' destination choices, interpretation of cultural symbols, emotional engagement, and overall travel experiences (Stylidis et al., 2017). With the rapid development of digital technologies and social media, the tourist gaze has evolved from passive observation to active visual participation, where tourists not only consume destination images but also produce and disseminate them through photography, videography, and user-generated content.

2.2 Semiotics and Place Identity

Semiotic theory, as developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, provides an important framework for understanding how images communicate meaning in tourism. From a semiotic perspective, photographs of heritage destinations function as more than simple visual records; they act as signs that convey meanings and values such as authenticity, history, cultural significance, spirituality, and uniqueness. These meanings are communicated through visual elements including composition, framing, lighting, colour, perspective, and the presence or absence of people. Previous studies have demonstrated that photographs featuring local communities tend to create stronger perceptions of authenticity and cultural richness than images dominated by anonymous tourists, thereby influencing visitors' expectations and perceptions of heritage destinations.

2.3 Mental Imagery and Decision Making

Cognitive research on tourism marketing demonstrates that visual stimuli activate mental imagery. The vivid, sensory simulation of an anticipated experience which is a powerful predictor of booking intention. Mental imagery is widely recognised as a key mechanism influencing consumers' perceptions, emotions, and behavioural responses in tourism contexts (Lee & Gretzel, 2012). The effectiveness of mental imagery depends largely on two factors: the vividness of visual representations and the degree of interaction individuals experience with objects or environments (Schlosser, 2003). Studies analysing Instagram engagement with tourism destination posts have drawn on communication and mental imagery theories to show that image composition, color saturation, and the presence of aspirational human figures reliably trigger mental simulation of travel (Deng et al., 2022). This work suggests that visual communication in tourism is not a secondary embellishment to textual information but the primary mechanism through which travel desire is aroused and sustained.

3 VISUAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS IN CULTURAL TOURISM

Visual communication channels play a fundamental role in promoting cultural tourism by shaping how destinations are represented, interpreted, and experienced by potential visitors. As tourism increasingly relies on digital media, visual content has become one of the most influential forms of communication, enabling destinations to convey their cultural identity, heritage, and unique experiences in compelling and accessible ways. Through photographs, promotional videos, websites, social media platforms, virtual tours, mobile applications, and immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), destination marketers can communicate narratives that extend beyond

information to evoke emotions, stimulate imagination, and influence travel intentions. These visual channels not only enhance destination visibility but also facilitate storytelling by presenting cultural heritage through engaging and meaningful visual representations. Consequently, understanding the characteristics and effectiveness of different visual communication channels is essential for developing successful cultural tourism marketing strategies that strengthen destination image, foster visitor engagement, and encourage memorable tourism experiences.

3.1 Destination Branding and Visual Identity

Destination branding translates the complex, multi-dimensional character of a place into a communicable visual identity typically including a logo, colour palette, typographic style, and a curated library of photographic and video assets. Research on destination brand gestalt emphasises that effective visual identity requires coherence across all consumer touchpoints: the look and feel of the tourism board website must align with wayfinding signage at the airport, the visual language of promotional films, and the design of print collateral (Fekete & Boros, 2024). Inconsistency in visual identity a documented problem in destinations that lack centralised communication governance weakens brand recognition and dilutes the cultural message.

Village and rural heritage destinations face challenges in visual branding. A recent study of place branding co-creation strategies found that identity-building for small heritage communities must involve local stakeholders as co-authors of the visual brand, not merely subjects of externally imposed imagery (Mandagi & Centeno, 2025). When communities participate in defining how their heritage is visually represented, the resulting brand is more authentic, more sustainable, and more defensible against the commodification pressures that accompany commercial tourism.

3.2 Social Media and User Generated Media Content

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest, have transformed the way destination images are created, distributed, and consumed within cultural tourism. Unlike traditional destination marketing, where visual representations were predominantly produced and controlled by destination management organisations (DMOs), tourism authorities, and professional photographers, contemporary destination images are increasingly co-created through user-generated content (UGC). Tourists actively capture, edit, caption, and share their travel experiences in real time, contributing to a dynamic and collective visual narrative of heritage destinations. Studies have shown that UGC shared on platforms such as Instagram plays a significant role in shaping destination image, often presenting perspectives that differ from official promotional materials and reflecting visitors' authentic experiences and perceptions.

Among contemporary social media platforms, TikTok has emerged as a particularly influential channel for cultural tourism promotion due to its exceptionally high user engagement and algorithm-driven content dissemination. The popularity of short-form videos featuring cultural performances, heritage attractions, local traditions, and culturally relevant music enable destinations to reach global audiences rapidly, including potential visitors who may have had little awareness of the destination. While this viral exposure presents valuable opportunities to enhance destination visibility and stimulate tourism demand, it also poses challenges for heritage management, including overcrowding, overtourism, and increased pressure on the conservation of cultural resources.

Recent empirical research further highlights the importance of visual quality in determining audience engagement with tourism-related social media content. Eye-tracking studies have demonstrated that visual characteristics such as image clarity, colour contrast, composition, and the prominence of key cultural elements attract significantly greater viewer attention than accompanying textual captions or hashtag strategies. These findings reinforce the critical role of high-quality visual

communication in influencing audience perception, enhancing destination image, and motivating travel intentions within the increasingly competitive digital tourism environment.

3.3 Photography and The Construction of Heritage Authenticity

Photography plays a major role in constructing and communicating the authenticity of heritage destinations by shaping how cultural sites are perceived before, during, and after travel. Rather than serving as neutral records of reality, photographs selectively frame architectural features, cultural practices, landscapes, and local communities to create narratives about a destination. Through composition, lighting, colour, perspective, and the inclusion or exclusion of human activity, heritage photographs communicate symbolic meanings that influence tourists' perceptions of historical significance, cultural identity, and authenticity (Kim & Youn, 2016). As a result, photographs become powerful visual signs that mediate tourists' expectations and contribute to the formation of destination image long before the actual visit.

Authenticity in heritage tourism involves both the preservation of cultural heritage and the emotional and personal meanings that visitors attach to their experiences. Destination photographs communicate objective authenticity by showcasing tangible heritage features, such as monuments, architecture, and artefacts, while also conveying existential authenticity through the emotions and personal meanings tourists associate with their experiences.

In the digital era, user-generated photographs often portray spontaneous, everyday cultural experiences that complement or challenge official promotional images, contributing to a more diverse and dynamic representation of heritage destinations (Marine & Ferrer, 2018). Consequently, photography has become not only a medium for documenting heritage but also a powerful mechanism for constructing authenticity, influencing destination image, fostering emotional attachment, and shaping tourists' travel intentions (Garrod, 2009)

3.4 Interpretive Signage and On-Site Visual Communication

While social media plays a significant role in shaping tourists' expectations before travel and encouraging experience sharing after a visit, interpretive signage and on-site visual communication are essential in enhancing visitors' understanding during the tourism experience itself. Heritage interpretation involves communicating the historical, cultural, and social significance of heritage sites through various visual and informational media, including interpretive panels, maps, infographics, illustrations, audio guides, and interactive digital displays (Ham, 2013). As a specialised form of visual communication, effective heritage interpretation applies design principles such as visual hierarchy, typography, colour, imagery, and layout to present complex cultural narratives in an engaging and accessible manner for diverse audiences, regardless of their cultural background, language proficiency, or prior knowledge (Serrell, 2015).

Poorly designed interpretive materials characterised by excessive text, weak visual organisation, limited accessibility, or inadequate representation of local and Indigenous perspectives can reduce visitor engagement and hinder meaningful interpretation of cultural heritage. Recent studies on digital heritage interpretation suggest that visitors gain a richer and more memorable experience when multiple communication channels are integrated, combining traditional on-site signage with mobile applications, augmented reality (AR), QR code-based content, and guided interpretation delivered by trained heritage professionals. Such multimodal approaches not only improve visitors' understanding of heritage values but also foster emotional engagement, support inclusive learning, and enhance the overall quality of cultural tourism experiences.

3.5 Short Form Video and Emotional Storytelling

Short-form video has become one of the most influential visual communication channels in contemporary cultural tourism. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts enable destinations to communicate cultural experiences through engaging and easily accessible visual content. Recent studies have shown that short-form videos are effective in promoting destination image and strengthening destination branding by combining compelling visuals, music, storytelling, and authentic cultural experiences. Videos that showcase traditional ceremonies, local festivals, handicraft production, culinary experiences, and everyday community life help potential tourists develop emotional connections with a destination and increase their interest in visiting. Collaborative content creation between destination management organisations (DMOs), local communities, and independent content creators has become an important strategy for enhancing destination visibility and credibility. This shift from institution led promotion to participatory content creation reflects the evolving role of visual communication in cultural tourism, where user engagement and authentic storytelling play a central role in influencing destination image and travel intentions (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014).

4 IMMERSIVE TECHNOLOGIES AS VISUAL COMMUNICATION

The rapid advancement of immersive technologies has transformed the landscape of visual communication in cultural tourism. Technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality enable destinations to communicate cultural narratives through highly interactive and engaging experiences that extend beyond the capabilities of traditional visual media. Unlike conventional photographs, brochures, or promotional videos, immersive technologies allow users to actively explore, interact with, and experience cultural environments in real time, creating a stronger sense of presence and involvement. From a visual communication perspective, immersive technologies represent a shift from one-way information delivery to participatory communication. Rather than merely viewing cultural content, users become active participants in the storytelling process, enabling deeper emotional engagement and more meaningful interpretation of cultural heritage (Jung et al., 2016). As a result, these technologies have become increasingly important tools for cultural tourism industry.

4.1 Immersive Technology in Cultural Tourism

Virtual reality (VR) creates fully immersive digital environments that enable users to experience heritage sites and cultural attractions remotely. Through 360-degree visualisation and interactive virtual environments, VR allows potential visitors to explore destinations before travelling, thereby enhancing destination awareness, mental imagery, and travel intentions (Yung et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated that VR experiences generate a strong sense of telepresence the feeling of being physically present in a virtual environment which positively influences destination image formation and emotional engagement. In the context of cultural tourism, VR is particularly valuable for showcasing heritage sites that may be geographically remote, physically inaccessible, or vulnerable to deterioration, enabling broader public access while supporting heritage preservation efforts.



Image 1 The VR tour of cultural Heritage Sites Deoksugung Palace, South Korea.
Source: Onag (2020)

Augmented reality (AR), on the other hand, enhances visitors' experiences by overlaying digital information onto the physical environment. Through smartphones, tablets, or wearable devices, AR can provide historical reconstructions, multilingual information, interactive animations, and contextual storytelling directly at heritage sites (Tom Dieck & Jung, 2018). For example, visitors can use AR applications to visualise how historical buildings appeared in the past, observe cultural artefacts in their original settings, or access interpretive content that enriches their understanding of local history and traditions. By combining physical and digital elements, AR enhances visitor engagement, learning, and satisfaction while making cultural heritage more accessible and meaningful (Han et al., 2019).



Image 2 AR tech bringing liveliness and dynamism to historical settings.
Source: (Charr, 2020, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

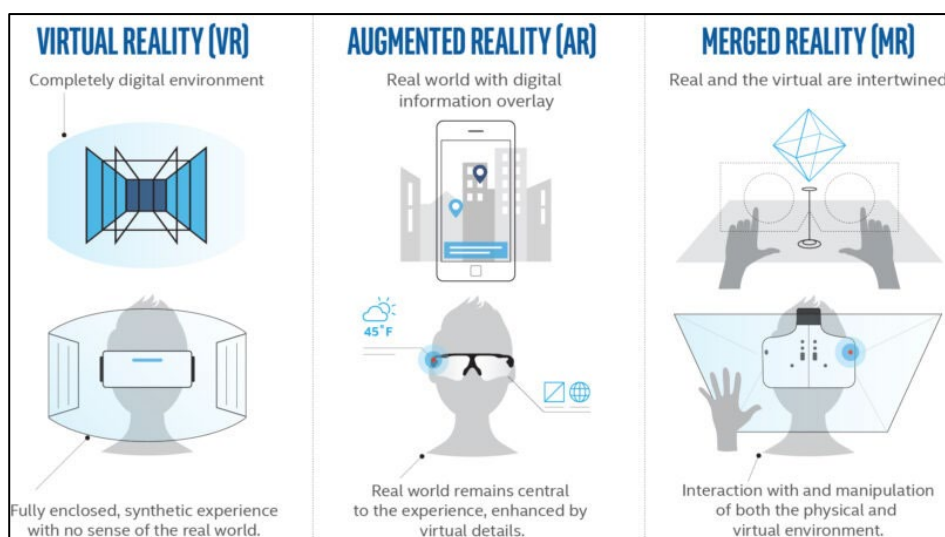


Image 3 Difference of VR, AR and MR

Source: (appliedart.com, 2017, Copyright Consent: Permissible to Publish)

Mixed reality (MR) further extends these capabilities by enabling real-time interaction between physical and virtual objects within the same environment. This technology facilitates immersive storytelling experiences in which visitors can interact with virtual characters, reconstructed historical scenes, and digital artefacts while remaining physically present at a cultural site (Bekele et al., 2018). Consequently, MR has emerged as a promising tool for museums, heritage centres, and cultural attractions seeking to create memorable and educational visitor experiences. These technologies support the creation of vivid mental imagery, strengthen destination image, and foster emotional connections between visitors and cultural places. As immersive media continue to evolve, VR, AR, and MR are expected to play an increasingly important role in cultural tourism by enhancing heritage interpretation, improving visitor experiences, and supporting sustainable destination promotion in the digital era (Yung et al., 2021).

5 DISCUSSION & FUTURE WORK

The rapid expansion of digital media and social networking platforms has introduced additional ethical challenges. User-generated content, influencer marketing, and short-form videos on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have democratised destination promotion by allowing visitors to become active creators of tourism narratives. However, these platforms often reward visually spectacular and highly shareable content, encouraging creators to prioritise aesthetic appeal over cultural context and historical accuracy. Sacred ceremonies, religious rituals, or culturally sensitive spaces may be photographed or recorded without appropriate permission, while geotagging previously secluded heritage sites can contribute to overcrowding, environmental degradation, and the erosion of cultural values. Consequently, destination managers and content creators must balance the promotional benefits of digital visibility with the responsibility to protect cultural integrity and community well-being. Ethical heritage interpretation therefore requires that digital visualisations remain evidence-based, culturally sensitive, and developed in collaboration with historians, archaeologists, heritage professionals, and local communities to ensure that technological innovation complements rather than replaces authentic cultural knowledge.

The advancement of digital technologies and visual communication presents significant opportunities for future research in cultural tourism. Although existing studies have demonstrated the influence of visual media on destination image and tourist behaviour, several areas remain underexplored. Future research should examine the long-term effects of user-generated content on the authenticity and identity of heritage destinations. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts would provide valuable insights into how social media platforms shape destination perceptions and

influence visitor behaviour. Second, further empirical research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of emerging technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), Mixed Reality (MR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in enhancing heritage interpretation and visitor engagement. Future studies should investigate how these technologies affect visitors' learning outcomes, emotional connections, cultural appreciation, and behavioural intentions while ensuring that digital experiences complement rather than replace authentic heritage encounters. Such research would contribute to evidence-based policies and design strategies that leverage technological innovation while preserving cultural authenticity, promoting responsible tourism, and supporting the long-term sustainability of heritage destinations.

CONCLUSION

Cultural tourism and visual communication are closely interconnected, with visual media playing a central role in shaping how heritage destinations are perceived, experienced, and remembered. Images presented through destination branding, photography, social media, and digital platforms influence tourists' expectations and travel decisions, while visitors' own visual content further contributes to the evolving image and identity of heritage destinations. Understanding this reciprocal relationship is essential for researchers, policymakers, and destination managers seeking to promote cultural heritage in a sustainable and meaningful way. The findings of this paper highlight three key conclusions. First, visual communication has become a primary driver of cultural tourism by influencing destination awareness, visitor expectations, and travel motivation. Consequently, heritage organisations and tourism authorities should prioritise strategic visual communication as an integral component of destination management and marketing. Second, the widespread use of social media and user-generated content has transformed destination branding by shifting influence from official tourism organisations to visitors themselves. Although this participatory approach increases destination visibility and engagement, it also presents challenges related to authenticity, cultural commodification, and the management of overtourism. Third, emerging technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and digital heritage archives provide new opportunities to enhance heritage interpretation, improve visitor engagement, and promote more sustainable tourism experiences by offering immersive and accessible alternatives to physical visitation.

As digital technologies continue to evolve, the future of cultural tourism will increasingly depend on the effective integration of visual communication with heritage conservation principles. Destination managers, designers, and policymakers should adopt visual communication strategies that accurately represent cultural heritage, encourage community participation, and promote responsible tourism practices. By balancing technological innovation with cultural authenticity and sustainability, visual communication can contribute not only to destination promotion but also to the long-term preservation of heritage values and the enrichment of visitor experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

No acknowledgement is due to any person or organisation in this paper.

FUNDING

This research is self-funded.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors played equal contributions towards the production of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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