

Communication and cultural representation of places: Destination brand analysis of the most visited states in the USA

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Abstract: This article analyses how destination brands construct cultural representations on the primary official tourism platforms of the most visited states in the USA — New York, Florida, and California. Drawing on Jean-Noël Kapferer's *Brand Identity Prism* and Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the study examines how branding operates as a discursive and symbolic tool for the construction of territorial identity. Through a comparative reading of brand elements and communicational strategies on official websites, the analysis identifies dominant values, visual codes, and identity narratives that shape the perceived image of each place. The findings reveal distinct approaches to emotional engagement, cultural depth, and promotional discourse, demonstrating how destination brands operate as cultural artefacts that mediate the relationship between place, culture, and consumer. The article thus contributes to critical debates on cultural branding, tourism imaginaries, and the symbolic power of subnational place communication, highlighting the ways in which the USA's visual representation is articulated through the analysed brands.

Keywords: Cultural branding; Cultural representation; Tourism communication; Destination brands; United States.

Comunicación y representación cultural de lugares: Análisis de la marca de destino de los estados más visitados de EE. UU.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza cómo las marcas de destino construyen representaciones culturales en las plataformas turísticas oficiales de los estados más visitados de EE. UU. —Nueva York, Florida y California—. A partir del Prisma de Identidad de Marca de Jean-Noël Kapferer y la teoría de la representación de Stuart Hall, el estudio examina cómo el branding opera como una herramienta discursiva y simbólica para la construcción de la identidad territorial. Mediante un análisis comparativo de los elementos de marca y las estrategias comunicativas presentes en los sitios web oficiales, se identifican los valores dominantes, los códigos visuales y las narrativas identitarias que configuran la imagen percibida de cada lugar. Los hallazgos revelan enfoques diferenciados en cuanto al compromiso emocional, la profundidad cultural y el discurso promocional, evidenciando que las marcas de destino operan como artefactos culturales que median la relación entre lugar, cultura y consumidor. El artículo contribuye así a los debates críticos sobre el branding cultural, los imaginarios turísticos y el poder simbólico de la comunicación subnacional, destacando el modo en que la representación visual de Estados Unidos se articula a través de las marcas analizadas.

Keywords: Branding cultural; Representación cultural; Comunicación turística; Marcas de destino; Estados Unidos.

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1. Introduction

The growing centrality of territorial brands in the management and promotion of tourist destinations has reconfigured how territories present themselves and become consumable in the global market of experiences. In an environment where tourism is a cultural practice, branding strategies play an important role in the production of identity narratives, often translated through digital channels that represent institutional and symbolic discourses. In that context, this article seeks answers to the following research question: How are the most visited destination brands in the USA culturally represented through their official communication platforms, specifically on their websites?

Despite the expansion of place branding as a field of research and practice, many approaches remain anchored in a functionalist and promotional perspective of brands (cf. Kapferer 2008; Olins 2014; Dinnie 2022). There is a lack of critical readings that recognise these brands as living cultural devices, producers of meaning, and organisers of collective imaginaries. In federal contexts such as the USA, where states enjoy relative autonomy in constructing their image, destination brands become privileged arenas for observing processes of cultural representation and symbolic mediation.

In this path, the main objective of this article is to analyse how the state brands *I Love NY*, *Visit Florida* and *Visit California* construct hegemonic cultural representations through their online institutional communication. It is relevant to examine the values, codes, and visual patterns that become recurrent—and often naturalised—in the narratives that each state projects about itself. The theoretical framework articulates Jean-Noël Kapferer's (2008) *Brand Identity Prism* analytical model with Stuart Hall's (1997) Representation Studies, understanding brands not only as distinctive signs, but as discursive devices that organise what is visible and sayable about the territory. In addition, contributions from authors who reflect on the intersection between cultural identity and territorial branding are considered. The methodology is based on the communicational analysis of the official tourism websites of New York, Florida, and California, based on the dimensions of Kapferer's prism (2008) and its interpretative extensions regarding representations of material culture, culture as symbolic construction, cultural context, and public mediation. The article is organised into four sections: theoretical review, methodological approach, case analysis, and findings and conclusions. It seeks to contribute to a critical understanding of place brands as cultural devices that articulate identity, representation, and communication in the context of contemporary tourism by analysing the brands examined in this research.

2. Theoretical review

2.1. The concept of representation: From culture to branding

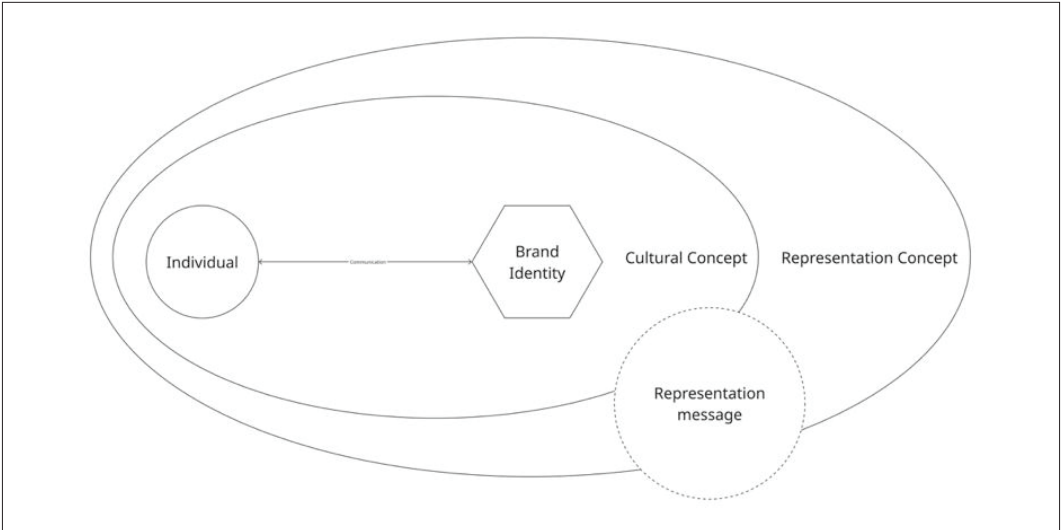
According to Stuart Hall (1997), representation produces and fixes arbitrary cultural meanings through symbolic systems of shared codes, organising ideas and narratives to help people comprehend their environment. In a similar vein, Jean-Noël Kapferer (2008) emphasises the notion of representation as a dialectical process that builds various layers of meaning in which the identities of the sender and receiver are simultaneously constituted, deconstructed, and reconstructed throughout the communicative process. Therefore, human understanding of the world is grounded in the everyday social practice of representation, in which concepts and languages are linked to enable communication, mutual recognition, and behaviour in various social and spatial contexts (Hall 1997, p. 6).

Representation does not simply reflect environmental reality, but operates as an active, constructive practice that organises and structures perception—what is seen, thought, and imagined—of specific contexts and places, facilitating understanding and communication about the surrounding world (Hall 1997, p. 19). Furthermore, Hall's (1997) proposal directly linked representation with national identities through symbols, stories, and images that help people construct the idea of what it means to belong there and what it means to share a local culture.

Likewise, Kapferer (2008) connects representation with branding, stating that brands act as significant mediators of symbolic and individual representation, actively and constructively influencing these processes between the different parties involved and their interactions. In this sense, any branded object transcends its utilitarian function by serving as a concrete representation of a specific culture (Cantú et al. 2019; Gomes and Cantú 2024) while simultaneously acting as a communication channel that conveys the values, narratives, and meanings that comprise the brand's identity. For Kapferer (2008), representation is about constructing meaning through signals and messages transmitted via different brand facets such as products (p. 21), people (pp. 12, 51), places (pp. 12, 51), and communication (pp. 31,

37) and it is deeply connected with the complex and multi-faceted brand identity, as will be further worked through Kapferer's *Brand Identity Prism*. Consequently, representation is an interactive and evolving construct that involves not only who the brand is but also how it is perceived and what it communicates over time, including its cultural shifts and the meanings attributed to it (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The concept of representation according to Kapferer.



Source: Image by the authors.

In an articulated manner, Hall's (1997) and Kapferer's (2008) approaches to representation are close, as they both emphasise that it is a dynamic and adaptable concept shaped by the cultural contexts in which it is inserted and expressed. While Hall argues that representation shapes social reality through the construction of cultural meanings in different places, Kapferer suggests that brands construct and communicate an identity based on symbolic and functional attributes, contributing to the formation of perceptions in the collective imagination as mediators of cultural meanings that can reinforce or challenge dominant discourses in society.

2.2. Branding places and tourism

A brand is a multi-faceted symbol of recognition, signification, and consumption that links desires with cultural practices and mediates meaning between producers and consumers (O'Reilly 2005; Pinto Grunfeld 2023). It also functions as an ideological reference, consolidating social practices through signs, symbols, images, and narratives (Schroeder 2017). Communicationally, a brand is "a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these elements that is intended to identify the goods or services of a seller and differentiate them from competitors" (Kotler et al. 2022, p. 267), encompassing both material —logos, taglines, colours, forms, fonts, and styles (Oswald 2012)— and intangible —identity, stories, and symbolic meanings (Holt 2004)— dimensions.

Brands express culturally codified identities, representing specific positioning and promises (Oswald 2012, 2015), and operate as "packages of meanings" (McCracken 2005, p. 179; Batey 2013, p. 33) that help consumers seek symbolic value and "decipher products" (Kapferer 2008, p. 43). Semprini (2006) describes them as "super signs" that create "possible worlds," linking emotion, recognition, and identity to goods, services, organisations, and places. Operationally, branding integrates functional, semiotic, and cultural factors to foster recognition and preference in a symbolic, performative, and identifying manner (Pinto Grunfeld and Pinheiro Gomes 2023).

Branding places involves representing territories through visual, verbal, and behavioural associations (Vrant 2016), irrespective of size, administrative form, or interrelationships with other areas (Olins

2014). Place branding evolves from consumer engagement to collective representation, functioning as cultural artefacts that condense the symbolic values of a given space and time. Rose (2010) comments that visual and material representations are never neutral, as they integrate broader regimes of meaning and structure how places are perceived and acted upon. Hence, Kaefer (2021 p. 19) describes a place brand as a representation of both the visible and tangible identity of a territory, as well as the —abstract— image it projects in people's perceptions, thereby articulating its distinctive character.

The social-affective dimension of place is central to recent approaches that challenge functionalist notions of localities (Almeida 2018; Dinnie 2022). As Kim and Park observe: "A place is an emotional relationship between a space and the individuals who occupy it" (2023, p. 7). They frame branding as an emotionally symbolic operation shaped by human experience (Kim and Park 2023). By evoking symbols and sensations, this approach fosters affective bonds between visitors and place identity (Kim and Park 2023, p. 25), opening the possibility of place brands as aesthetic experiences of shared meaning. A place's identity includes geography, culture, history, myths, and features such as language, architecture, or gastronomy (Dinnie 2022, pp. 133–134), while its image reflects its social interpretations (Pinto Grunfeld 2023). Given the above, the image of a place has evolved into a strategic construct shaped by institutions (Chaves 2008) and contested by different involved actors (Almeida 2018).

Place branding emphasises territorial uniqueness to attract investment, exports, and tourism (Kapferer 2008; Olins 2014; Dinnie 2022), necessitating political and multi-scalar strategies that extend beyond design due to the complex demands of stakeholders (Anholt 2010; Dinnie 2022). Places benefit from complexity, especially in subnational branding (Anholt 2010). In this sense, state branding, as a subtype of nation branding, reflects the social order of its society (Banerjee 2021, p. 318). Branding places —nations, cities, regions/states— is a multidimensional process shaped by many stakeholders and contact points (Dinnie 2022, pp. 2–3). Strengthening key contact points (Olins 2014) and community engagement (Kaefer 2021) is crucial, though image perception depends on shared cultural codes (Chaves 2010). The audience decodes a brand's identity through signals emitted by the dynamic brand system, giving rise to its represented image (Kapferer 2008).

Tourism is central to place branding and shaping reputations (Anholt 2010). While traditionally defined as a short stay away from home (Kotler et al. 2022, p. 517), Cohen and Dann (1984; Dann and Cohen 1991) view tourism as a culturally transformative phenomenon. Tourist destinations must consider the diverse motivations of travellers as tourists co-create experiences (Gertner and Freire 2019; Freire and Gertner 2025). Brand differentiation helps craft appealing place images. Tourists embody modern desires for mobility (MacCannell 1999) and global experiences (Page 2015). Branding strategies shape tourist mobility by dynamically combining physical and symbolic elements (Semprini 2006; Freire and Gertner 2025).

Nowadays, destination branding integrates visual identity with experiential, infrastructural, and digital components (Gil 2021; Tarigan et al. 2023, 2024; Nurbaiti et al. 2024; Sharafuddin et al. 2024). These elements, ranging from transportation and lodging to booking, maps, and marketing, guide how destinations are perceived (Nurbaiti et al. 2024). Thus, in terms of communication and cultural representation, the effectiveness of digital platforms in shaping experience, fostering emotions, and reinforcing brand value is increasingly evident (Sharafuddin et al. 2024), as will be further explored in the subsequent sections.

2.3. Cultural representation in destination brands

Brands emerge as complex cultural expressions formed by ideologies, myths, and codes (Holt and Cameron 2010). Holt's cultural branding model proposes that brands fulfil symbolic needs through myths and strategic storytelling to shape identity and cultural icons (Holt 2004; Oswald 2015). With cultural branding, as Holt puts it, "the product is simply a conduit through which customers can experience the stories that the brand tells" (2004 p. 35). In the area that concerns this study, Holt cites Paris and Silicon Valley as iconic place brands projecting identity myths (2004 pp. 7–9), which help frame the public imagination of space (Rose 2010).

A destination brand represents a place uniquely managed within a tourism framework (Dinnie 2022). In short, a destination is a place that encourages visits (Anholt 2010, p. 89), integrating natural, historical, and cultural resources with infrastructure and experiences (Kotler et al. 2022; Gertner and Freire 2019). Tourist destinations increasingly rely on a diversity of "things-to-do" to differentiate themselves and attract visitors (Gertner and Freire 2019; Daskin and Pala 2022) as complex packages of emotions, experiences, and loyalty for the individual and collective tourist (Tarigan et al. 2023, 2024; Freire and Gertner 2025).

Destination brands promise distinctive experiences through evocative imagery tied to a place's personality and status (Kotler et al. 2022; MacCannell 1999). They serve as social symbols of leisure and pleasure, drawing

on the emotional, psychological, and cultural aspects of the experience (Morgan et al. 2004). Destinations represent motivations from personal fulfilment to social interaction (Kotler et al. 2022, p. 536).

Kafer (2012) adds that destination branding must consider the needs of residents, implement policies to educate visitors, and manage tourism flows effectively. Kapferer (2008) and Dann (2000) note that places generate emotionally attractive myths drawn from their cultural and historical uniqueness. As Nilsson and Blom (2018) propose, places foster mythical connotations that interact with tourists' fantasies and prior knowledge, strengthening their distinctive identity. In practice, destination brands strategically combine cultural heritage with adapted signs and myths (Pinto Grunfeld 2023, pp. 141–142). This focus aligns with Herstein's (2012) concept of multi-scalar place branding, where design and communication strategies are often standardised across public platforms to reflect institutional coherence and legitimacy. This standardisation, however, does not negate the need for symbolic differentiation, especially in federated contexts like the USA, where states often project distinct cultural identities within a shared national narrative. Analytically, Herstein (2012) maps territorial branding by intersecting geographic scales —nation, region, city— with the cultural depth of representation. This perspective illustrates the need for subnational branding efforts to strike a balance between uniqueness and alignment with national narratives.

Several authors warn about the homogenising risks of branding strategies when applied instrumentally to a place (Dinnie 2022; Gerosa and Tartari 2023; Eireiner 2024; Kim and Park 2024). Branding may privilege cosmopolitan codes over local diversity. Banerjee (2021) emphasises the selective nature of state branding, which involves constructing images that align with strategic interests and internal societal orders, often prioritising elements that resonate with international audiences. Eireiner (2024) refers to the global phenomenon of model cities and generic urbanism, where places replicate cosmopolitan aesthetics typical of metropolises like New York, Buenos Aires or Paris, relying on reproducible spatial formulas and ignoring local developments or singular planning visions. Gerosa and Tartari (2024) criticise “top-down” beautification that masks local problems and marginalises groups. Even grassroots initiatives may involve risks of symbolic gentrification and identity loss, particularly when branding does not translate into broad community empowerment. They stress the need for sensitive, context-aware approaches.

Other scholars argue that cultural representation in destination brands must consider authenticity and sustainability to maintain credibility and foster long-term engagement (Gil 2021; Freire et al. 2022; Tarigan et al. 2024). Some mythifications —e.g., *sun-and-beach* destinations— oversimplify culture and overlook infrastructure, sports, heritage or gastronomy (Gertner and Freire 2019). Thus, contemporary destination brands necessitate striking a balance between authenticity, cultural identity, and strategic storytelling to ensure compelling and credible representations that engage local communities and avoid cultural appropriation (Freire et al. 2022).

In summary, destination brands are co-created cultural objects that articulate the essence of a place, representing its reputation and value while attracting visitors through carefully crafted narratives imbued with cultural significance (Pinto Grunfeld 2024). Building on this way, Rose argues that “the branded state, with its emphasis on the aesthetic and the politics of the emotion, represents the extension of the triumph of the visual over verbal” (2010, p. 259). These narratives reinforce branding that aligns with national and subnational strategies for legitimacy and recognition. Besides, Herstein (2012) classifies territorial branding efforts from a different angle, based on their geographic scope and cultural representational depth, illustrating how subnational initiatives navigate the tensions between local identity and national alignment. The following sections provide an examination of how these dynamics unfold in the most visited states in the USA, focusing on the interplay between branding communication strategies and identity, culture, and audience positioning. Digital communication channels —as their official websites— are key to competitiveness in today's tourism market. These platforms enable access, mobile interaction, and emotional engagement while reinforcing perceived —and/or represented— value (Nurbaiti et al. 2024; Sharafuddin et al. 2024).

3. Methodological approach

3.1. Conceptual-operational framework: Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism

Kapferer's (2008) *Brand Identity Prism* is a conceptual and applied model for analysing brands, providing a qualitative and empirical framework for understanding their internal and external positioning. It defines ten dimensions —six internal and four external to the prism— to interpret brands' relevance, representation, and cultural influence. It is worth mentioning that Kapferer highlights the centrality of identity in brand management and interpretation (2008, p. 172), asserting that although identity is a contemporary concept, it allows a semiosis process, i.e. interpreting the meanings of brands.

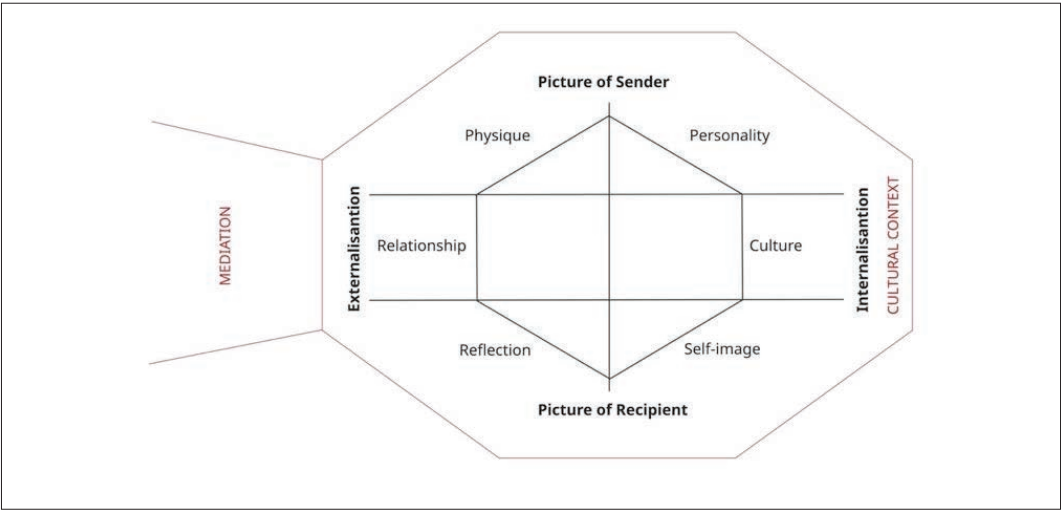
For the field of study addressed in this research, Kapferer’s proposal demonstrates that brand identity supports strategic decision-making and fosters coherent communication and creation across territories (2008, p. 187). Kapferer’s model interprets brand identity through representations of internal and external messages. The six internal dimensions are as follows: (i) The physical dimension concerns the brand’s tangible and symbolic attributes, which make it visually recognisable (Kapferer 2008, pp. 182–183); (ii) personality encompasses human attributes and beliefs, influencing how a brand communicates its internal essence to its audiences (pp. 183–184); (iii) culture reflects ideological stances and contextual meanings, situating the brand within a socio-cultural and symbolic framework (pp. 184–185); (iv) relationship analyses value exchanges and proximity dynamics between brands and audiences (pp. 185–186); (v) reflection projects the brand image and associated aspirations, lifestyles, and values (p. 186); and, finally, (vi) self-image explores how consumers perceive themselves through their connection to the brand, reinforcing identity construction (pp. 186–187).

Together, these dimensions shape brand perception and experience. Outside the prism, (vii) the picture of the sender refers to the brand’s projected identity, including personality, culture, and communication style (pp. 174, 187). It symbolically shapes how the brand interacts with its audience. Besides, (viii) the picture of the recipient (p. 182) defines the brand’s view of its ideal consumers, detailing demographic, behavioural, and psychographic profiles and fostering symbolic identification. This perspective enables the analysis of state brands as evolving representations of cultural identity, where places connect with audiences through symbolic expressions. In other words, their mix of communicational (ix) internalisation and (x) externalisation.

Thus, a place/destination brand is an interactive and dynamic construction that reflects and reinforces shared cultural values and meanings attributed to that space. In that sense, this article proposes that the operationalisation of these concepts adopts a theoretical-analytical framework (see Figure 2) that includes:

- a) representation of **material culture**, defined by physical and social elements of a community or cultural space;
- b) representation of **culture as a symbolic construction**, tied to meanings of objects, behaviours, and social practices;
- c) representation through **cultural context**, rooted in the environment in which messages are produced and interpreted; and
- d) **mediation to the public**, highlighting the interactive nature of representing an object, concept, or identity shaped by communication strategies and media, such as advertising, films, or digital platforms.

Figure 2: Contributions to the interpretation of Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism



Source: Developed by the authors, based on Kapferer (2008, p. 183).

4. Case study

4.1. Presentation

This study undertakes an analysis of the official communication of destination brands by applying Kapferer's *Brand Identity Prism* to the three most visited states of the USA during the last tourist season.

The selection of New York, Florida, and California is neither random nor incidental, as these states lead the latest *U.S. States & Cities Visited Monitor* (National Travel and Tourism Office 2024) in terms of international tourist arrivals. According to this report, New York recorded 9.076 million visitors, followed by Florida with 7.933 million, and California with 6.269 million.

On the other hand, the national focus on the USA is further supported by its prominent position in the *Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024* (World Economic Forum 2024), where it ranks first with a score of 5.24.^[1] This composite measure integrates key dimensions, including the enabling environment, tourism policy and enabling conditions, infrastructure and services, tourism resources, and sustainability for each country. In doing so, the USA surpasses other major destinations, including Spain (5.18), Japan (5.09), France (5.07), and Australia (5.00).

4.2. Analysis

This section presents a comparative analysis of three official tourism brands from the USA—*I Love NY*, *Visit Florida*, and *Visit California*—using Kapferer's *Brand Identity Prism* as a conceptual-operational base. By applying this model, adapted to the realm of state branding, the analysis examines how each brand constructs and communicates its territorial identity, cultural values, and relational positioning to potential visitors. The analysis is further informed by Stuart Hall's concept of representation, which is understood as the production of meaning through language and culture, as applied by Kapferer to the communication management of brands. In that line, state branding is not merely a promotional act but a discursive practice that constructs selective images of place, identity, and experience.

I Love NY

The *I Love New York* brand (<https://www.iloveny.com/>) is analysed here, providing an integrated understanding of the constituent elements of a brand's identity and how it projects itself and relates to its public. The exercise, guided by Kapferer's analytical guidelines, highlights the following:

- 1) **Personality:** The brand shows a relaxed and confident personality, communicating in a direct, structured, and affirmative way. Phrases such as “discover” and “expand your horizons” reinforce an inspiring, inviting, yet motivating tone;
- 2) **Culture:** The brand is inscribed in the values of freedom and diversity, associating the state of New York with a plural, cosmopolitan, and vibrant cultural experience. The images evoke lightness and discovery—balloons, flowery fields, parks—while the programme of events—such as art, culture, and food—reveals a place open to innovation, music, and global trends;
- 3) **Self-image:** The brand communicates values of freedom by encouraging the exploration of different spaces and experiences—a cheerful approach—. It is presented sentimentally, promoting an emotional connection with the place. It also emphasises the variety of options available, reinforcing the idea of a destination that is plural, inclusive, receptive, and adaptable to different visitor profiles and that adds to people's lives;
- 4) **Reflection:** The brand projects the image of a curious tourist and professional explorer, someone open to new experiences with a taste for nature, cultural diversity, and alternative forms of expression;
- 5) **Relationship:** The brand fosters a seductive and intimate relationship with the public, appealing to the personal sphere with messages such as “expand your horizons” and “show your unique experiences”—as an enthusiastic agent—. The communication is emotional and encourages individual experience, promoting an intimate and inspiring connection with a plural and complete destination;
- 6) **Physique:** The physical face of the brand is characterised by an iconic black and white logo featuring a red heart and typewriter-style lettering, evoking simplicity and affection. Red banners and brightly coloured images reinforce the brand's visual energy, highlighting the state's cultural, architectural, and natural attractions. The dark navy-blue map and the black banner in the footer introduce contrasts that evoke a sense of connection to water and urban sophistication. The constant presence of buttons, texts, and the heart icon, especially on social media, reinforces the emotional bond with the public and the brand's identity coherence.
- 7) **Picture of the Sender:** The brand presents itself as confident, accessible, and emotionally engaging. Its physique, marked by an iconic logo and vibrant visuals, conveys clarity and immediate presence.

The personality reveals a decisive and relaxed voice, which communicates with optimism and a call to action, reinforcing a secure, positive and inspiring brand image in line with New York's cosmopolitan and free spirit;

- 8) Picture of the Recipient: When consuming the brand, the recipient feels free, singular, and connected to something bigger. It offers them the chance to see themselves as adventurous, creative, and culturally open; someone who not only visits but is transformed by living authentic experiences in a territory that celebrates diversity and self-expression;
- 9) Internalisation: The brand assumes itself as confident, open, and culturally diverse. With an affirmative and relaxed voice, it inspires self-expression and freedom, reflecting an identity ideal where each visitor sees themselves as the protagonist of unique experiences in a plural and welcoming territory;
- 10) Externalisation: The *I Love New York* brand projects itself vibrantly and emotionally, combining an iconic visual identity with a close and inspiring relationship. It appeals to an audience that is exploratory and sensitive to diversity, reinforcing the idea of New York as a space for personal discovery and authentic expression. The brand reveals a coherent, emotional, and strategically constructed identity that can be read as one of prosperity and first-world. It presents itself with an iconic and accessible physicality combined with an affirmative and inspiring personality. The brand establishes a close and motivating relationship with the public, projecting them as curious explorers open to diversity. Culturally, it subscribes to the values of freedom and plurality while positioning itself as a confident and vibrant broadcaster. At the same time, it allows the consumer to see themselves as someone transformed by experience, effectively articulating their inner identity with a coherent and impactful external expression.

Visit Florida

The *Visit Florida* brand (<https://www.visitflorida.com/>) is read through Kapferer's analytical guidelines, which highlight the following:

- 1) Personality: The brand communicates in a welcoming, optimistic, and inspiring way. It uses direct and engaging language, with slogans such as "It's time for a Florida vacation" or "You could be here", inspiring visitors to explore the state outside their traditional travel routine. Its personality is marked by enthusiasm, dreaminess, and closeness, promoting an emotional and accessible all-around experience;
- 2) Culture: The brand embodies the values of entertainment, freedom, and celebration of outdoor life—including sports and resorts—. It values the plurality of tourism—natural, gastronomic, cultural, and leisure—assuming tourism as an economic engine and an expression of local identity. Visual and discursive communication reinforces a culture of lightness, diversity, and family well-being;
- 3) Self-image: When interacting with the brand, visitors perceive themselves as enthusiastic and friendly travellers who are connected to nature and the local culture. The brand allows tourists to identify themselves as the protagonists of authentic, accessible, enriching, transformative, and shareable experiences;
- 4) Reflection: The target audience projected by the brand comprises families, couples, adventurers, and culture lovers seeking happy, unique, and varied experiences. The brand reflects a curious visitor with capital, active and open to the diversity of proposals that the state offers;
- 5) Relationship: The brand builds a close, joyful, friendly, and inspiring relationship with visitors, offering detailed and personalised information. It encourages the imagination of future experiences—or dreams—and activates the desire to be in Florida, creating an emotional bond through positive images and messages;
- 6) Physique: The physical face of the brand is characterised by a modern, sans-serif logo paired with a vibrant colour palette—such as pink on a white background—and high-quality images. The photographs feature tropical beaches, theme parks, and cultural experiences, reflecting the state's natural and cultural diversity. Visual identity communicates lightness, energy, and accessibility. There are social networks and a lot of links to promotional videos;
- 7) Picture of the Sender: The brand presents itself as a confident, welcoming, and visually appealing entity. Its physique, resplendent and clear, conveys presence and dynamism, while the personality expresses an enthusiastic and optimistic tone. The brand positions itself as a facilitator of happy experiences, establishing itself as a warm and discovery-oriented sender;

- 8) Picture of the Recipient: The recipient of this brand sees themselves as someone free, curious, and in search of diverse and pleasurable experiences, where there is the possibility of imagining themselves as an active experimenter of a welcoming and multi-faceted destination;
- 9) Internalisation: Internally, the brand assumes itself as a promoter of a positive, plural identity connected to well-being. Its communication inspires freedom and connection with the territory, reflecting an ideal identity that values accessible leisure and cultural diversity;
- 10) Externalisation: Externally, the *Visit Florida* brand projects itself with enthusiasm and breadth through appealing visual language and an emotional discourse that seeks to reach different visitor and group profiles. Florida is presented as a destination where you can live, feel, and share experiences. Overall, the analysis of the *Visit Florida* brand suggests that its identity is vibrant and dynamic. The brand combines a bright, clear visual image with an enthusiastic personality, creating an emotional connection with visitors who are presented as individuals seeking well-being, joy, and authenticity. Culturally, it aligns with the values of freedom, inclusion, and enjoyment of life.

Visit California

The *Visit California* brand (<https://www.visitcalifornia.com/>) is examined using Kapferer's analytical guidelines, which indicate the following about the brand:

- 1) Personality: The brand has a relatively provocative, functional personality with a confident and commercial tone. Its communication is oriented towards the direct promotion of attractions and fresh products—very much represented in the images on the website—. The discourse is more advertising than relational, seeking to sell/show what the place has to offer in various areas;
- 2) Culture: The brand values California as an urban destination for relaxation, leisure, and young people, offering numerous opportunities for spending one's time. It associates the territory with an idea of lightness, a favourable climate, and an abundance of cultural, natural, and gastronomic attractions, operating a broad and hedonistic reading of local culture. California seems like a place of modern style;
- 3) Self-image: Visitors tend to identify the brand with a happy, existent but filmic image, supported by messages such as "where all dreams are welcome". The brand offers an institutional and aspirational vision of California, allowing tourists to see themselves as part of a universe of freedom, possibilities, and memorable experiences;
- 4) Reflection: The brand projects an image of a place for interested, young, adventurous visitors. It is a place with a lot of life, visually stimulating, and ready to showcase the American style of leisure. Its audience is challenged by commercial and visual content, with communication geared toward quick and efficient information consumption.
- 5) Relationship: This axis establishes a functional, utilitarian, and stylish connection with the user. Interaction with the brand is structured around the selection of a variety of attractions and experiences, with emotional and symbolic investment. The focus is on the effectiveness of overall tourism planning;
- 6) Physique: The brand has a clear visual identity, but it is excessively commercial. The images feature cities, roads, events, products, food, and tourist attractions, with a composition that lacks distinctiveness. The website, although functional, is dated and not very avant-garde, particularly in its logo—with the sun as the centrepiece—. There are numerous photos, texts, and videos about the place promoting various travel packages and promotions.
- 7) Picture of the Sender: The brand presents itself as an institutional entity, promoting a vast territory full of concrete opportunities. It is a brand that seems to communicate more as a showcase than as a host.
- 8) Picture of the Recipient: The recipient of the brand is conceived as someone looking for variety and entertainment, ready to consume experiences directly, not very emotionally involved, but interested in maximising the time and possibilities of enjoying the materialistic destination;
- 9) Internalisation: The brand is built on a broad vision of the Californian territory as a space for tourist consumption. Internally, it promotes the diversity of experiences as its main value, but without a robust cultural narrative that articulates local identities with a distinctive mission;
- 10) Externalisation: The brand is designed practically and functionally, highlighting attractions in a direct and visually appealing way but with an uninspiring discourse. Thus, its identity can be synthetically interpreted in terms of material exploration. *Visit California's* brand external image is effective in communicating quantity and diversity but lacks symbolic depth or impactful emotional involvement.

5. Findings and conclusions

This study articulates theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and empirical analyses that help understand how destination brand identities are constructed and communicated in the contemporary tourism context. The analysis revealed consistency between the concepts discussed in the academic literature and the specialised methods adopted and adapted for iconic case analysis.

From the literature discussion, representation is understood as a cultural practice that structures social meanings (Hall 1997) and, in branding, as a dynamic process that builds identity through symbolic factors, represented by the *Brand Identity Prism* (Kapferer 2008). At the same time, it is observed how branding applied to territories articulates material, abstract, and affective elements to project tourist identities that integrate cultural practices, visual narratives, and communication strategies (Kapferer 2008; Anholt 2010; Kaefer 2021; Dinnie 2022; Kim and Park 2023; among others). It is also recognised that destination brands operate as cultural artefacts that interweave myths, emotions, and identity discourses, facing tensions between authenticity, homogenisation, and symbolic appropriation (Holt 2004; Rose 2010; Herstein 2012; Banerjee 2021; Freire and Gertner 2020; among others).

Moving towards the methodological approach, the case analyses carried out, with the support of Kapferer's *Brand Identity Prism* (2008), by articulating its ten dimensions with other four obtained from the analysis of the representation concept (Hall 1997; Kapferer 2008). The proposed analytical framework contributes to understanding brands communication in terms of their representation of material culture, culture as a symbolic construction, cultural context, and mediation within the public. This facilitates a revisit to the initial question: How are the most visited destination brands in the USA culturally represented through their official communication platforms, specifically on their websites?; and suggests that these brands constitute complex visual and emotional identities that may respond to dominant aspirational models but do not always privilege national values over more local goals/ideals.

In its official tourism communication, the study identified New York as a strong, emotional, and plural brand, Florida as a relational, accessible, and familiar brand, and California as a functional, promotional, and lower sociocultural density brand. Thus, the model based on Kapferer (2008) confirmed that New York excels in culture, relationships, and self-image, promoting a visitor transformed by the experience of the place. At the same time, Florida focuses on reflection and psyche, with an emotional and transversal image. In contrast, California emphasises the dimensions of personality and psyche with a functional and material discourse. This comparison allows for an assessment of how each destination balances its identity symbolism with its specific promotional effectiveness.

Even so, it is possible to recognise some shared values and dominant myths, such as freedom, diversity, consumption, and pleasure, which prevail over tensions between state singularities and federal narratives (Herstein 2012; Banerjee 2021). Brands may or may not align with traditional or contemporary images of the USA. However, they do present cross-cutting communication patterns, such as the valorisation of outdoor offerings, the diversity of urban activities, and various forms of happiness for their audiences.

At the theoretical and methodological level, it can be concluded that Kapferer's model facilitates a structured and multifaceted understanding of brand identities, applicable to both visual and discursive analyses, such as those found in the communication of tourist destinations. Its applicability to both abstract and functional components make it a promising tool for future comparative research. Furthermore, articulations with authors such as Hall (1997), Holt (2004) or Herstein (2012), among others, enriched the understanding of these brands as cultural devices that reinforce territorial ideas or allow for critical readings of institutional communication and place branding as representations.

The brands analysed demonstrate how tourism branding influences shared cultural imaginaries in both macro and micro contexts. These signifying practices reveal identities represented by signs, values, and symbolic narratives in public spaces. Thus, this article also contributes to the understanding of destination brands as articulations between culture, identity, and communication from the local to the national or even the global frame.

Among the conceptual opportunities highlighted in this article are exploitable strategic coherences in destination brand representation, such as between the emotional and the authentic (Holt 2004; Kapferer 2008) in New York, the stimulating and the shareable (Tarigan et al. 2024; Gertner and Freire 2019) in Florida, and the standardized and the achievable (Eireiner 2024; Gerosa and Tartari 2024) in California. Limitations, however, relate to the qualitative and interpretive approach, the analysis of only three cases and a single type of communication platform, as well as the lack of data on visitor perceptions and reactions.

These findings and challenges invite the application of this model—or its variations—to other subnational or national contexts, including emerging destinations, territories with contrasting cultural regimes, different targets, and diverse media and communication scales. Integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches will enrich the interpretation of destination brands from institutional, cultural, and experiential perspectives.

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Notes

¹ The TTDI score is the arithmetic average of 17 pillars, each comprising multiple indicators normalised on a 1-to-7 scale based on global minima and maxima. These pillars include: Business Environment; Safety and Security; Health and Hygiene; Human Resources and Labour Market; ICT Readiness; Prioritization of Travel & Tourism; International Openness; Price Competitiveness; Environmental Sustainability; Air Transport Infrastructure; Ground and Port Infrastructure; Tourist Service Infrastructure; Natural Resources; Cultural Resources; Non-Leisure Resources; Socio-economic Resilience and Conditions; and Demand Pressure and Impact.

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