"EXPERIENTIAL HERITAGE MARKETING: THE KONIGIL COMPLEX AS A FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE PLACE BRANDING"

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21298754

Abstract. *Tourism in Uzbekistan follows international trends, exemplified by the Konigil complex near Samarkand a tourist village showcasing traditional crafts and eco-friendly design. Despite official and media attention, no systematic research has explored Konigil as a brand-building experience. This study fills this gap by conducting a qualitative case analysis of sensory engagement, storytelling, master classes, and the natural environment. Drawing on experience-based marketing, authenticity, and sustainable place branding theories, the Konigil Experiential Cultural Heritage Branding Model (KEHBM) was developed to highlight experience components in creating an authentic identity for sustainable tourism. Konigil serves as a heritage site and a model for experience-based place branding in Central Asia, offering a practical framework for heritage cluster planning that supports cultural preservation through visitor interaction.*
Keywords: *Experiential heritage branding, Konigil Complex, sustainable tourism, place identity, sensory marketing, participatory tourism.*

Introduction. Over the past 10 years, tourism in Uzbekistan has been developed intensively thanks to national programs on cultural routes, the rural community revitalization, and the introduction of intangible heritage into the nation economy. Samarkand has become the center of such initiatives, including the tourist village of Konigil with its traditional paper production and eco-friendly landscape. Despite being visibility in policy documents and marketing discourse, Konigil has been insufficiently examined in academic literature, especially in terms of creating a tourist experience. Modern tourists prefer active participation and immersion in engagement (Wang, 1999), which is especially important for intangible heritage sites. In Konigil, interactive craft demonstrations, a multimodal environment, and informal storytelling create a unique atmosphere, transforming the place into an experiential ecosystem rather than a conventional heritage site. The experiential and participatory nature of heritage destinations also creates opportunities for inclusive tourism development. Traditional craft demonstrations, storytelling, and community-based activities can be adapted for visitors of different ages, cultural backgrounds, and abilities, supporting broader accessibility and social inclusion in tourism. As a result, experiential heritage sites may contribute not only to cultural preservation and destination branding, but also to more inclusive forms of tourism development. The lack of research on the mechanism of creating value through experience and the role of Konigil in sustainable branding requires further study. The paper proposes the Konigil Experiential Heritage Branding Model (KEHBM), which uses sensory, narrative, participatory, and ecological stimuli to create a memorable and sustainable image of the place. This study serves as a theoretical and practical basis for the development of sustainable and meaningful tourism products at heritage sites.

Literature Review. According to recent tourism researches, there has been a trend in consumption of cultural heritage sites towards multisensory, interactive and affective consumption experiences. Experience marketing theory states that immersive environments which appeal to senses and emotions are unforgettable (Schmitt, 1999). Authenticity in heritage is a product of on-site ambience and human engagement as opposed to exhibits in museums and mausoleums. (*Timothy, D. J., & Boyd, S. W. (2003). Heritage Tourism. Harlow Prentice Hall. - References - Scientific Research Publishing*, n.d.) Heritage is regarded to be built on communication, performance and experience with more intangible aspects of crafts and narration being prominent. Research in Uzbekistan confirms that tourists desire to be in the traditional culture rather than read information boards as the emotional aspects more than facts are sought (Ergashev et al., 2022). Place branding has been developed out of slogans and logos to dynamic, experience based ideas that incorporate physical space, cultural behaviors and social interaction (Govers, 2009). The aim of creating the small tourist villages in Uzbekistan is to restore the rural life, and create identity based on natural cultural branding. Nonetheless, there is not much research literature on the combination of sensory stimulation, craft stories, visitor participation and ecological design to determine place identity.

Small heritage clusters such as the Konigil Complex provide immersive experiences in line with the new tourism theory yet they have not been studied academically. The existing literature indicates that the elements of experience are highly effective in determining the perceptions and memories of visitors, but there is no model to describe interaction among them. This is a significant gap in Central Asia, where there are plenty of cultural landscapes, and they are understudied in experiential branding. This paper discusses this through a qualitative research into Konigil, a popular tourist attraction in tourism media, but not yet investigated academically to determine how experiential spaces can contribute to the formation of sustainable places identity.

Methodology. Konigil experiential heritage was studied using a qualitative approach. There were three primary sources of data. First, online reviews, vlogs, and social media posts as visitor materials that will offer an insight into actual visitor experiences, their interaction with crafts, and how well the environment reacted. Second, the government of Uzbekistan and tourism policy documents, which position Konigil as the part of the national strategies, emphasize on the role of traditional craft centers and natural factors in tourism centers. Third, thematic coding of all gathered information into four dimensions: sensory, narrative, participatory, ecological, which enable defining key experiential elements and relationship between them. Based on this reflection, a new inductive Konigil Experiential Heritage Branding Model (KEHBM) was built up, and it is presented as the synergistic association between sensory and narrative and practical and ecological components, aimed towards the formation of unique sense-of-place. This strategy addresses the context-sensitive knowledge over statistical generalization and provides information on how to manage and plan similar cultural and tourism centers in Central Asia.

Results. Thematic coding, performed in the analysis of visitor materials and policy documents, showed that the experiential heritage of Konigil is a result of the application of the interaction of the sensory, narrative, participatory, and ecological dimensions. The interaction of the visitors with crafts, stories about the artisans, and the environment around will make up a coherent and memorable experience. Being engaged in papermaking and involved in the site promote the knowledge and attachment as well as the natural and man-made environment promotes authenticity.

These dimensions work together to complement each other to create a sense of place. The results affirm the KEHBM, which indicates that the identity of the site is context-dependent and experience-oriented to offer management ideas on sustainability of cultural and tourism centers.

Discussion. Konigil shows that experiential heritage can contribute a major influence to the brand and attractiveness of a destination. The results emphasize the significance of sensory, narrative, participatory and ecological aspects, revealing that using the experiential aspects of size, visitors are (emotionally and cognitively) more engaged than by informational displays. Interpersonal communication and active involvement, including involvement in the papermaking ensure the meaning and generate genuine experience, which aligns with the literature that addresses the relational and participatory nature of authenticity (Wang, 1999). Konigil also shows how craft activities coupled with ecological design are a part of a coherent place brand. The identity of the site is based on the local cultural and environmental resources without artificial image-generation. This strategy helps in sustainability: owing to the continuation of traditional crafts, in which visitors can participate to help preserve them, and owing to the economic aspect, which draws low-impact tourism with true significance to the local community. The KEHBM model may also contribute to inclusive tourism planning. By combining sensory, narrative, participatory, and ecological dimensions, the model encourages visitor engagement through diverse forms of interaction that can be adapted to different visitor needs and abilities. This suggests that experiential heritage sites may support not only destination branding but also broader social inclusion within tourism development. The study has limitations. It is based on one site and uses qualitative, interpretive analysis, thus the KEHBM is not a tested model, but a conceptual framework. Future studies may focus on visitor perceptions based on their demographics or compare Konigil with other heritage clusters to determine whether the kind of synergy observed based on experiential dimensions can be reproduced. Even after these restrictions, the study puts forth a point of reference when defining experiential heritage branding. It posits that the coherence of multi-sensory, participatory and narrative aspects of a site can be more vital in its identity and success than scale, fame or intensive marketing, giving lessons to sustainable development and planning of heritage tourism destinations.

Conclusion. The paper explored Konigil Complex as a heritage site where experiential facets contribute to visitor knowledge. Konigil is an interactive and immersive ecosystem where sensory stimulation, informal storytelling, active engagement in craft activities, and an ecological environment are the core factors. Following these discoveries, Konigil Experiential Heritage Branding Model (KEHBM) was developed to understand how these factors integrate to create a consistent place identity that can be experienced and recalled by visitors. The model underscores that it is not monumental architecture of information that creates meaning of heritage at Konigil, but rather the atmosphere, engagement and embodied practice. The site shows that visitor satisfaction depends on emotional resonance and perceived authenticity and active involvement. Konigil promotes ecological design and helps to achieve sustainable tourism as well as to preserve culture by integrating traditional crafts into its work. Despite dwelling upon a single location, the results of this paper could be applied by other cultural tourism sites that aim to balance cultural preservation with meaningful, experience-based tourism, to explain how every aspect of the experience can bolster a sense of place.

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