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Heritage Marketing and City Branding: Positioning Lasem as a Living Heritage City

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Abstract: Lasem has valuable cultural heritage assets, especially its batik traditions, urban history, and multicultural identity; however, these resources have not yet been fully developed into a heritage-based city branding strategy. This study examines how Heritage Marketing can enhance Lasem's promotion as a Cultural Heritage Town in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using a qualitative case study approach, the research includes in-depth interviews, visual and textual documentation, and thematic analysis of narratives created by batik entrepreneurs and local heritage stakeholders. The findings highlight four key issues. First, Lasem has significant heritage assets linked to batik motifs, collective memory, historical narratives, and community-driven cultural practices. Second, there is a major challenge in effectively translating these assets into clear city narratives and market communications. Third, digitalization and AI tools offer significant opportunities to enhance the visibility of these heritage elements through storytelling, visual content, and social media marketing. Fourth, the success of digital promotion relies on maintaining cultural authenticity, especially regarding the original motifs, colors, and meanings of Batik Lasem. This article offers a conceptual model that connects heritage assets, cultural storytelling, digital activation, collaboration among various actors, and sustainable city branding, advancing heritage-focused urban marketing and culturally rooted local development.

Keywords: *heritage marketing, cultural heritage city, city branding, lasem, digital promotion, SDGs*

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage has increasingly been identified in alignment with the SDGs as a strategic asset for sustainable urban development, place identity, and socially inclusive tourism. In this respect, digitalization provides opportunities for better eliciting heritage values through narrative-building, color, and visual representation in the market. Lasem is a relevant case because this area serves as a living heritage city that holds meaning beyond Batik Lasem as an economic product, encompassing maritime history, collective memory, and cultural identity that shape the city's tourist experience.

Lasem is a cultural preservation site rich in batik, coastal history, and a strong local identity. Arcos-Pumarola et al. (2023) show that intangible cultural heritage and creative industries can serve as tourism assets that support the development of creative cities. Meanwhile, Rickly (2022) emphasizes that authenticity remains a central concept in

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tourism studies. Similarly, Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) underline that authenticity, visitor engagement, and destination image contribute to memorable tourism experiences. Magnoni et al. (2021) indicate that place heritage and place experience strengthen place brand equity and attachment to the city. Thus, Lasem is well-positioned not just as a batik center but also as a cultural space with symbolic capital, poised to develop into an experiential destination.

However, Lasem's primary issue is not the lack of cultural assets; rather, it is the inadequate transformation of these assets into a coherent city marketing narrative. Research findings indicate that interviews with key informants reveal obstacles in promotion, limited innovation, weak public recognition, and insufficient integration of heritage, branding, and digital platforms. In other words, Lasem's cultural richness often appears fragmented rather than as a cohesive, recognizable city story. This finding aligns with Confetto et al. (2023), who argue that digital destination branding requires integrating social network presence, content, and digital services beyond simply having digital accounts. In research on social media affordances, a direct influence on destination image formation was confirmed for both cognitive and affective dimensions (J. Z. Liu, 2024). Another study shows that historical storytelling can strengthen perceptions of authentic places and value co-creation in heritage tourism (J. Y. Leong, 2022). From a city branding governance perspective, Bisani et al. (2024) demonstrate that the legitimacy of place branding depends on inclusivity and community participation. Therefore, Lasem's challenges are both academic and practical: the issue is not solely about promoting batik, but about translating heritage into consistent, participatory, and relevant market communication within today's digital ecosystem.

Looking at how heritage destination marketing has changed over time, it is clear that cities have come to understand the importance of leveraging their cultural assets not only to attract tourists but also to build community pride. This method has led to big changes in how cities market themselves to tourists from around the world. This research identifies a gap in studies that simultaneously integrate four elements: heritage assets, cultural storytelling, digital mediation, and multi-actor place branding, particularly for mid-sized heritage cities like Lasem. While recent studies have explored heritage tourism through isolated lenses such as destination authenticity (J. M. Rickly, 2022), storytelling (A. M. W. Leong et al., 2024), or digital branding presence (Liu, 2024), there remains a critical research gap in integrative approaches, particularly for mid-sized heritage cities like Lasem. Previous literature often treats these concepts as separate entities rather than an interconnected ecosystem. To address this, this study positions Heritage Marketing as the dominant theoretical framework. Under this overarching umbrella, concepts such as cultural storytelling, digital mediation, and community participation are operationalized as interconnected pillars. By employing this unified theoretical lens, this study investigates how Lasem can transform its fragmented heritage assets into a cohesive, digitally mediated city brand without compromising its cultural authenticity.

This study aims to analyze how Lasem can be positioned as a cultural heritage city through a heritage marketing approach, establishing authenticity, collective memory, cultural symbols, and storytelling as core values. More specifically, it seeks to identify Lasem's heritage potential as a basis for city marketing. This study not only fills a conceptual gap in heritage marketing research but also lays the foundation for developing Lasem as a heritage city promoted as a cultural living space rather than just a consumption destination.

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As heritage marketing evolves, it is important to know how to combine modern marketing techniques with cultural preservation. This ongoing change has made people rethink how to protect and market heritage in the digital age, for heritage cities must be viewed as a strategy that combines four elements: authenticity, collective memory, cultural symbols, and storytelling. These elements are then put into practice through participatory city branding and experience-based cultural tourism, rather than merely consuming objects. In this framework, a heritage city is promoted not just for its cultural products but also for the meaningful experiences, engaging narratives, and social interactions that keep heritage alive (J. Rickly & Canavan, 2024; J. M. Rickly, 2022). This research framework aligns with conceptual goals and is relevant for positioning Lasem as a living heritage city.

Cultural heritage is important at the city level not just because it attracts tourists, but also because it shapes people's identities and strengthens the city's symbolic role in the public sphere. Intangible heritage and the creative industries can be used to attract tourists and help creative cities grow (Arcos-Pumarola et al., 2023; Magnoni et al., 2021). Additionally, place branding and heritage-based place brand experiences have been shown to increase place brand equity, which, in turn, increases place attachment and encourages positive behaviors toward the city (Magnoni et al., 2021). These findings indicate that heritage-based city branding must incorporate history, experiential elements, and collective identity, ensuring the city is perceived as a vibrant cultural space rather than merely a contemporary consumer hub.

In heritage-based city branding, storytelling transforms cultural assets into communicative value. Historical storytelling enhances tourist interaction, authentic place perception, and value co-creation (Leong, A et al., 2024). Authenticity, engagement, and destination image enhance memorable tourism experiences, revisit intention, and electronic word of mouth (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021).

The idea of place branding has changed a lot. There is now more emphasis on how cultural and historical factors shape a place's identity. This growing field examines how cities can use these factors effectively to attract people to live, work, and invest there. For a place brand to be real, the community must be involved, there must be a variety of stories, and people must work together to give the place meaning. Heritage cities must be constructed with the involvement of local stakeholders, as heritage value arises from a continuous, tangible social existence. The emergence of digital media has revolutionized the communication of heritage. Liu and Zhang show that the features of social media directly affect how people think and feel about a destination, and that they also help people form a conative image through social presence and parasocial interaction. X. Liu & Zhang (2024) assert that sensory appeal, content clarity, and character interactivity in short videos augment emotional experiences, consequently fostering identification with and loyalty to the destination brand. Lonardi et al. (2024) assert that symbolic elements, such as minority languages in online marketing, significantly influence tourists' perceptions and engagement.

In conclusion, Heritage Marketing for heritage cities must amalgamate authenticity, collective memory, cultural symbols, and storytelling via participatory city branding and experience-driven cultural tourism. So, heritage cities are marketed not only through cultural products, but also through meaningful experiences, interesting stories, and social interaction that keep heritage alive, relevant, and long-lasting.

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There are three main things that all of the citations have in common. First, cultural heritage is not seen as a fixed object or a marketing tool, but as a source of meaning, experience, and identity for a place. Second, authenticity is a big part of the tourism experience and how people see places, stories, and cultural symbols. Thirdly, city branding and cultural tourism can only work if people can turn heritage into experiences, images, and strong social ties.

The studies differ in their analytical focus. J. M. Rickly (2022) and J. Rickly & Canavan (2024) emphasize authenticity from a conceptual-philosophical standpoint; Leong et al. (2024) and Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) focus on storytelling, authenticity, engagement, experience, and tourists' behavioral intentions. Arcos-Pumarola et al. (2023) examine intangible heritage for creative cities. Magnoni et al. (2021) and Bisani et al. (2024) underscore the importance of community engagement, legitimacy, inclusivity, and participation. In contrast, Li & Zhang (2023) and Lonardi et al. (2024) highlight the role of digital mediation. The existing literature is incomplete: Leong, A et al. (2024) and Lonardi et al. (2024) concentrate on authenticity, aesthetics, and word of mouth. Yi et al. (2025) also concentrate on authenticity, aesthetics, and word of mouth. Confetto et al. (2023) and L. Liu et al. (2023) examine digital branding, and Bisani et al. (2024) and Suriyankietkaew et al. (2025) address legitimacy, inclusivity, and local empowerment. There is a research gap due to the scarcity of studies promoting medium-sized heritage towns like Lasem as vibrant sociocultural ecosystems.

This research describes several research questions related to the development and marketing of Lasem as a cultural heritage city. Heritage marketing no longer consists merely of promoting heritage physically; it is part of the current digital turn, involving digital platforms, visuality, data-driven communication, and AI-aided content production. Consequently, this research primarily analyses the potential of Lasem heritage development as a basis of city marketing. Second, this article examines the sociocultural and promotional obstacles to the marketing of Lasem Cultural Heritage City. Third, it seeks to understand how heritage marketing can be supported through digitalization and AI, but remains true to its culture of origin, that is, the motifs, colors, meanings, and local narratives from Batik Lasem.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative methodology and a case study design to examine the marketing strategies of Lasem Cultural Heritage City, a heritage-focused cultural living environment. This study focuses on Lasem, selected as an exemplary single case because it is a unique and revelatory case of a living heritage city in Rembang Regency, Central Java. Its distinctive feature lies at the meeting point of Batik Lasem, coastal history, narratives of multiculturalism, collective memory, and community-oriented cultural practices, all under one urban heritage landscape. Using Lasem as a revelatory case, this study explores how local social life may transform deep-rooted heritage assets into city-marketed processes through digitalization and AI (automatic machine learning)- supported promotion. Thus, focusing on lasem provides deeper insight into the prospects and challenges of marketing heritage while retaining the authenticity of those cultures.

It examines how batik cultural heritage, urban branding, digital marketing, and sustainability work together. The research subjects were intentionally chosen and include

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Lasem batik MSME participants, cultural leaders or heritage advocates, individuals involved in the promotion or digitization of cultural artifacts, and, when possible, local government representatives, community members, and youth participating in promotional activities. The appendix lists the informants.

In this study, informants were selected purposively based on their expertise, experience, and involvement relevant to the research focus. The selection of informants was deliberate to obtain in-depth, rich, and contextual information from parties with direct knowledge and experience of the subject under study. The informants in this study include the Editor-in-Chief of National Geographic Traveler magazine, the Head of the Rembang Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda), a Rembang batik entrepreneur, the Chair of the Lasem Heritage Foundation, who is also an author and advocate for the documentation of Lasem batik, a senior cultural figure, the Head of Dasun Village, a Lasem maritime cultural figure, and a Lasem cultural figure and tour guide. It is hoped that the diversity of these informants' backgrounds will provide a comprehensive perspective, covering policy, cultural preservation, creative economic practices, local history, and tourism development. Data from these informants were collected through in-depth interviews to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon of travel. The face-to-face interviews took place with informants in Lasem City. Interviews focused on direct contemplation of contextual expressions, local narratives, and heritage-related meanings through the researcher's eyes. This interview lasted 1-2 hours, depending on the informant's role, experience, and the depth of information provided.

The study examines marketing strategies based on cultural heritage and heritage narratives in Lasem batik, the impact of digital media and AI on promotion, and the relationship between these strategies and sustainability goals. We collected the data through comprehensive interviews, photography, written documentation, and the examination of promotional materials and supplementary documents (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023). Manual thematic coding was used for qualitative analysis in order to provide an account of transparency across the data. Data analysis began with transcribing the interviews, which were repeatedly read to identify patterns that gave meaning. These were then manually drafted, initial codes, rated against wider themes, interpreted in the context of the research questions, and finally synthesized into a conceptual model.

The study employed source triangulation, cross-verification of interviews and documents, and monitoring thematic consistency to ensure data validity. Ethically, informant confidentiality was preserved when required, and all data were employed for scholarly purposes (Bonney & Miles, 2020; Imran & Almusharraf, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How is Lasem's heritage potential developed for city marketing?

Research findings indicate that Lasem is better understood as a living heritage city rather than just a center for batik production. Lasem batik exists not only as an economic product but also as a living cultural practice through motifs, social rituals, family memories, and cross-regional market relations. Motifs such as Godong Pringsisir and Kembang Sepatu Burung Hong demonstrate that batik serves as a symbolic marker that connects place, collective memory, and the continuity of tradition. In this perspective, living heritage through community meaning-making practices aligns with the view that authenticity is at the core of tourism and intangible heritage, and the creative industry is

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a strategic asset of cultural cities (Arcos-Pumarola et al., 2023; J. M. Rickly, 2022). Moreover, cultural documentation through books, photography, and international publications becomes an important narrative infrastructure, as storytelling, authenticity, engagement, and destination image strengthen memorable travel experiences, intentions to revisit, and electronic word of mouth (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021).

From the perspective of community-based heritage promotion, Lasem needs to be promoted in ways that go beyond mere sales. This means getting the people in the community to help make sense of things. Interviews highlight the importance of integrating youth, community members, photographers, and microbusinesses to strengthen media management and digital marketing in Lasem. As one participant pointed out, "Youth involvement in documenting history through photography and videography helps disseminate information and attract the interest of the younger generation(N1)", which could mean engaging local youth to actively produce visual materials and take control over whom they want their social media to speak to. They have the platform and potential to increase online awareness of Lasem's cultural heritage. A case in point is an informant who claimed, "Buyers from among lecturers or designers often come for research or product development – (N2)," to collaborate with photographers and local entrepreneurs, can turn Batik Lasem, historical sites, and community traditions into products that are more appealing to be promoted. The research results demonstrate that participatory media management is more than a technical process; it is also an approach to maintaining community-based cultural identity and heritage tourism. This shows that the stories that people in a city tell shape its identity and that the city's brand is stronger when everyone works together.

Apart from discussing cultural preservation and tourism development practices, this study also discusses the technology dimension of heritage promotion in Lasem. Special emphasis was placed on the deployment of digital and AI-assisted tools, including ChatGPT, Canva, CapCut, and Photoroom, which are increasingly used by local communities and cultural agents to produce content, tell stories, document actions, or promote online. Data on technology use were gathered using semi-structured interviews, field observation of digital part promotion activities, and document review. This study analyzed how technologies could enhance the visibility, accessibility, and transmission of Lasem's culture while maintaining cultural authenticity. This study therefore reflects recent work analyzing the growing presence of AI and digital technologies in heritage tourism, cultural heritage narrative communication, and destination branding (Sánchez-Martín et al., 2025; Susanto et al., 2025). While many cultural actors are now experimenting with digital tools for promotion, the uptake of digital technologies is still very uneven. An entrepreneur engaged in batik acknowledged that they had not yet actively used social media for promotional activities (N2), indicating that the adoption of technology to promote heritage is still developing.

Lasem's history is like a treasure that can be used to promote the city and its culture. It has four parts: staying true to its culture, remembering its past, engaging the community, and using digital technology. People in Lasem do not sell batik; it is a symbol of the city and its history, and it is a way for people to come together and make sense of things. When promoting Lasem, the main point should be to show that it is a city with a history, where people can have real experiences, see local symbols, and hear stories about the place. Here is how the visual representation looks:

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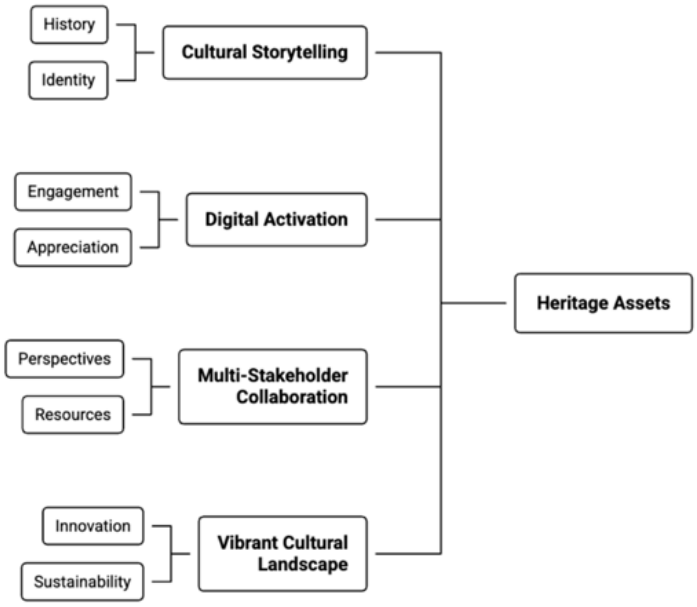

Figure 1. Lasem's Heritage Assets
Source: Compiled by researchers

The interview results indicate that Lasem's primary issue is not a deficiency of heritage assets, but rather an inadequate translation of cultural heritage into coherent market communication. According to N1, they are not aggressive in large promotions or social media like Instagram lately, thus the promotion for lasem batik is still limited. Its branding is equally fragmented, as N2 observed that Lasem is still labeled "a santri town, batik town, or heritage town," thus requiring digital storytelling in an integrated manner.

Because of this, the historical richness, motifs, and social memories in Lasem batik have not yet fully come together to form a city story that everyone can easily understand. Confetto et al. (2023) assert that digital destination branding must extend beyond mere digital presence, necessitating the establishment of three interconnected pillars: social network presence, social network content, and digital tourism services (Figure 2). Inkinen et al. (2024) demonstrate that effective destination marketing requires a strategic, comprehensive, and innovative approach, particularly for cities or regions with inadequate visibility (Figure 3). So, Lasem's problem is not just that it does not get enough attention; it is that it lacks a citywide communication system that combines products, place stories, and cultural identity into one brand. Here is a picture of it:

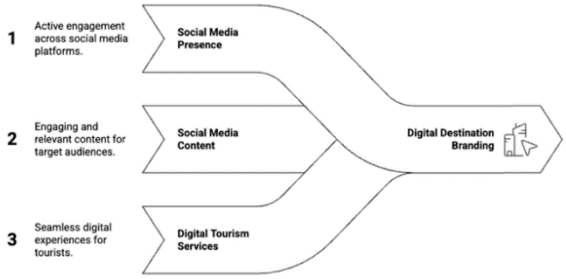

Figure 2. Three Pillars of Digital Destination Branding
Source: Confetto et al. (2023)

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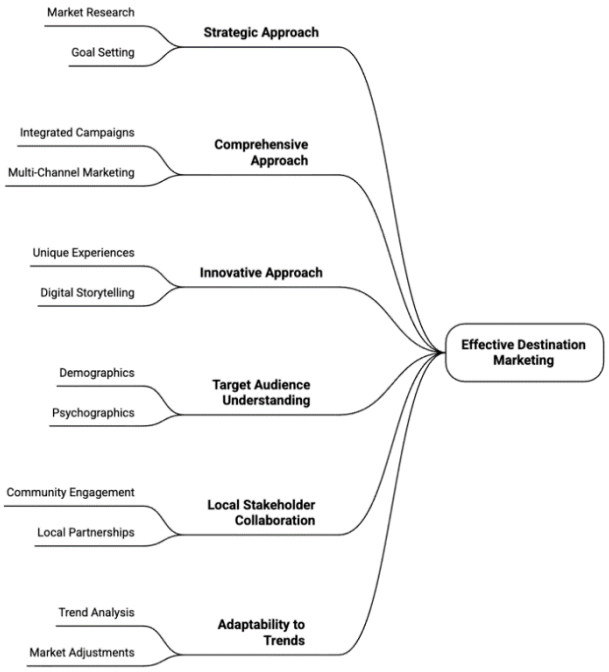

Figure 3. Development of an Effective Destination Branding Model
Source: Adopted from Inkinen et al. (2024)

Promotion of Lasem has so far been piecemeal and product-oriented, with batik appearing more as a commodity than as a gateway to the city's identity. However, in a heritage city, cultural products should serve as a medium for connecting the audience with the space, history, community, and place. (Magnoni et al., 2021) demonstrate that place heritage and place experience positively influence place brand equity and strengthen place attachment. In line with this, He et al. (2024) emphasize that brand biographies for tourism products can build emotional connections between tourists, products, and destinations. However, Lasem's weakness lies in a narrative that has yet to unify these assets into a cohesive city image. Furthermore, Lasem's city narrative has not yet been developed in a participatory manner. Interviews indicate the need for the involvement of the younger generation, students, communities, and business operators. This aligns with Bisani et al. (2024), who state that the legitimacy of a place brand depends on participation, co-creation, and community engagement.

What are the social and promotional challenges in marketing the Lasem Cultural Heritage City?

Findings from the interviews indicate that digital mediation in Lasem has begun to emerge, but has not yet been fully directed towards building the town's narrative. Informant 1 explained that digital promotion remains an important issue because several cultural actors in Lasem have not fully optimized online platforms. As stated by one informant, "Until now, they have not been very active in large-scale promotions or utilizing social media such as Instagram" (N1). This indicates that AI-assisted tools and social media can support more consistent production of captions, short videos, and promotional materials for Lasem's cultural heritage, particularly Batik Lasem. Informant 2 further emphasized the importance of youth involvement in expanding heritage visibility, stating that “Youth involvement in documenting history through photography

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and videography helps disseminate information and attract the interest of the younger generation." (N2).

Nevertheless, this development remains predominantly at the level of product communication and has not yet reached destination narrative architecture. In the context of heritage tourism, A. M. W. Leong et al. (2024) demonstrate that historical storytelling can strengthen value co-creation through interaction, perceptions of authenticity, and meaningful experiences. Therefore, Lasem's digital media must go beyond fabric photographs and sales information by weaving together stories of motifs, the social relationships of batik makers, coastal history, and Lasem's identity as a living heritage town. Consequently, Lasem requires documentation, storytelling, community participation, and digital strategies to transform its heritage into a coherent, communicative, participatory, and sustainable image of the town.

How can digitalization and AI support Heritage Marketing without compromising cultural authenticity?

Digital technologies should be regarded as catalysts rather than substitutes for human creativity and cultural interpretation. The integration of AI-assisted tools introduces a complex process of negotiating cultural authenticity. While AI accelerates content production and enhances destination visibility, it carries the inherent risk of homogenizing local heritage if deployed without critical human oversight. Therefore, authenticity in Lasem's digital branding is not a static attribute but a continuously negotiated practice. Local artisans, cultural leaders, and youth must actively curate AI-generated narratives, acting as community gatekeepers to ensure that the sacred philosophical meanings and specific color palettes of motifs are not algorithmically diluted. In this sociocultural ecosystem, technology amplifies reach, but community-driven storytelling remains the ultimate anchor for authentic destination legitimacy.

The interviews show that digitalization works well when it is based on stories from different cultures. AI helps organize stories and video clips to make SME ads more engaging and consistent. This lets people see Lasem batik as a cultural story to be shared with others, not just something to post on social media. These findings align with the research conducted by A. M. W. Leong et al. (2024), which indicated that historical storytelling enhances visitor engagement, perceptions of authenticity, and value co-creation. Similarly, Xu & Chen (2024) found that the right type of story enhances a destination's appeal and the intention to visit. Digital technologies should be regarded as catalysts rather than substitutes for human creativity and cultural interpretation. Interviews showed that AI can make ads more effective, but the patterns and colors still need to be unique. This aligns with the research of Bui et al. (2024), Seo et al. (2020), and J. J. Zhang et al. (2024), which emphasizes that authenticity, quality, and reliability remain the essential determinants of the effectiveness of AI-driven heritage communication.

Digital literacy is a big deal. Interviews show that the main problem is not a dislike of technology, but rather the ability to keep up with trends, understand algorithms, receive training in photography, captioning, and video production, and the need for apps that work together. So, for heritage to be seen, people need to be able to use digital technology so that AI, visual creativity, and heritage storytelling can all work together to promote Lasem's small businesses.

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How do these strategies connect with the SDGs agenda?

The interviews show that digitalization can only improve Lasems' marketing methods if it stays true to the culture. One of the people we talked to said that while technology like AI can help with marketing and creating content, it should not change the themes or colors of Lasem batik.

(Yi et al., 2025) Have also said: when something is authentic, people talk about it positively, appreciate its beauty, feel connected to their identity, and take care of it. It is also important for different groups to work together, including businesses, local communities, young people, the government, and experts. This is what Mandić et al. (2024), Mandić & Kennell (2021), and T. Zhang et al. (2022) found out: for a city's story to make sense and connect its heritage, communities, and digital media, everyone needs to be involved in decision-making, try out ideas together, manage relationships with stakeholders, and make sure the community is part of it.

Lasem batik and digitalization should go hand in hand to preserve its authenticity. The younger generation plays a role in preserving Lasem's cultural heritage through digitalization. Digitalization can help promote Lasems' legacy marketing when done authentically.

Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, these findings are relevant to Goal 11.4 through keeping the designs and colors of Lasem batik. They also align with Goal 8.3 by strengthening small businesses. Goal 9 is relevant through the use of Artificial Intelligence and digital promotion. Goal 4.4 is relevant because technical training is needed. Goal 17.17 is relevant through working with the government, small businesses, universities, communities, and young people.

This connection is highlighted by Suriyankietkaew et al. (2025). They show that community-based creative tourism can help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by reviving culture and empowering people. The success of Lasem's Heritage Marketing needs a balance between promoting, being true to its roots, working together, and building capacity. This agrees with what Collado-Agudo et al. (2023) and A. M. W. Leong et al. (2024) say. They stress that ecosystem factors, places, and storytelling are important for creating value together.

The Heritage Asset, Cultural Storytelling, Digital Activation, Multi-actor Collaboration, Sustainable City Branding Model

This model demonstrates that the marketing of the Lasem Cultural Heritage City relies on transforming cultural values into a communicative, sustainable city image. Lasem's heritage assets include batik, the history of motifs, cultural memory, documentation, and living social practices. The Godong Pringsisir, Gunung Ringgit, and Sepatu Burung Hong motifs serve not only as ornamentation but also as markers of place history, trade relations, and cultural symbols. Informant 2 confirmed that Godong Pringsisir derives from a place name in Lasem and is sought after as far as Malaysia, whilst the book documentation was compiled because written sources on Lasem batik remain limited. These findings align with (A. M. W. Leong et al., 2024) regarding historical storytelling and authentic place, as well as (Yi et al., 2025) on cultural authenticity and heritage aesthetics that drive word of mouth.

At the stage of cultural storytelling, the issue in Lasem is not the absence of heritage, but rather the inconsistent translation of motifs, history, and local memory into market communication. This is consistent with Confetto et al. (2023), J. Liu et al. (2024), and X.

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Zhang et al. (2023), who argue that integrating digital content, emotion, and social media affordances shapes a destination's identity and image.

The third step is activation. This is where social media, digital images, and intelligent marketing are used to convey heritage. We talked to people. They said they use tools like ChatGPT, Canva, CapCut, PhotoRoom, Photoshop, and Corel. They use these tools to create pictures, videos, and captions to promote products.

One of the people we talked to said that artificial intelligence makes it easier to promote things, and it makes the promotions look more modern. This way, more people can understand what they are trying to say. However, for this to work, many people need to work. Here is a picture of it.

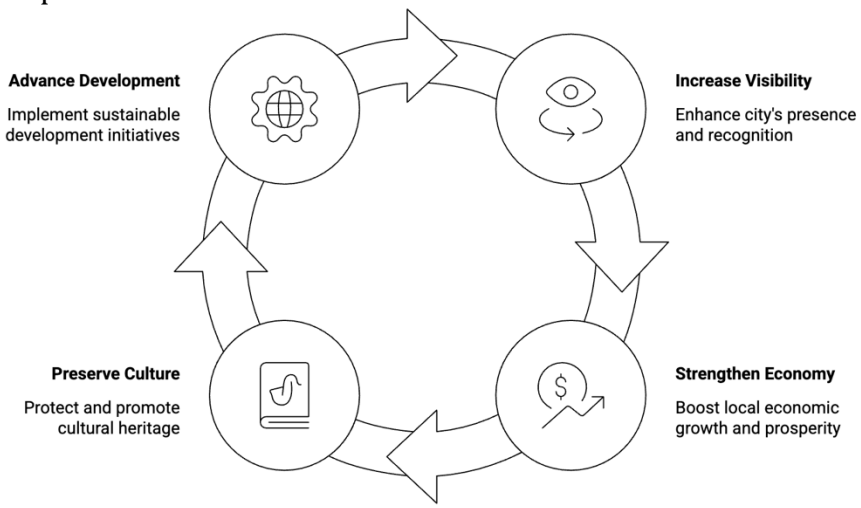

Figure 4. Cycle of Sustainable City Branding

One person said that the government should teach people skills. Another person said that students and young people should be in charge of the media and come up with new ideas. This is similar to what Mandić et al. (2024) and Suriyankietkaew et al. (2025). They said that it is very important for people to work together and for communities to make their own decisions.

The last step is city branding. This is when a city is well known, its local economy is strong, its culture is preserved, and it is sustainable. This only works if you are true to yourself. We talked to people. They said that artificial intelligence cannot replicate the unique qualities of Lasem batik. So Lasem needs to change the way it promotes itself. Instead of promoting products, it needs to make the city a more interesting place. This will help support the Sustainable Development Goals. The tradition of conserving and defending Lasem's cultural legacy is directly linked to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 11, 8, 9, 4, and 17. Cultural heritage plays a prominent role in advancing the implementation of SDG 11, which stands for Sustainable Cities and Communities. The results also demonstrate that digital technologies and AI-support tools enable innovation in cultural promotion (SDG 9), whereas tourism and creative industries create local economic opportunities (SDG 8).

Additionally, documenting local knowledge and heritage stories facilitates cultural education and intergenerational transmission of knowledge (SDG 4). Lastly, these collaborative efforts are a testament to the importance of partnerships for sustainable heritage management (SDG 17), as exemplified by contributions from local communities and universities, NGOs, government actors, and creative professionals. These results

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reconfirm previous studies arguing that digital heritage initiatives can address the simultaneous requirements of cultural sustainability, economic resilience, technological innovation, and stakeholder collaboration.

Lasem city branding needs to focus on making the city more interesting. This is the key to supporting the Sustainable Development Goals. Lasem batik is very important to the city. It needs to be preserved.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that Lasem possesses strong heritage assets, such as batik, the town's history, collective memory, cultural symbols, and living social practices. However, these have not yet fully translated into the town's competitive edge, as the integration of cultural narratives, digital promotion, and city branding remains weak. Consequently, the development of Lasem must prioritize SDG-based heritage marketing, digital training, documentation, youth participation, and collaboration.

Sporting potential as a strategy to promote cultural products, this theoretically advances Heritage Marketing into an integrative analytical framework for understanding heritage cities as living sociocultural ecosystems. Conducted research demonstrates that this model is unique, in particular: it integrates three dimensions typically discussed separately: (1) AI-based digital promotion, (2) collective memory, and (3) the SDGs. This framework does not position AI simply as a promotional tool, but rather as an intermediary through which local narratives, visual documentary practices, and cultural products can be converted into digitally accessible content (while community gatekeeping remains necessary to ensure authenticity). The model is rooted in collective memory, meaning that Lasem's batik, historical architecture, maritime stories, and coastal traditions are relayed not as commodities to be sold as prizes only once, but rather as inherited meanings continuously reconstituted by local agents. This resonates with one of the informants, who says, "The youth engage history via the camera and video to share information and wake up the younger generation." (N1), suggesting that digital channels can maintain intergenerational trajectories of cultural memory. This, of course, connects very local practices with wider sustainability processes composed first and foremost of heritage safeguarding, but also including local economic growth, innovation, and education through active stakeholder cooperation. This allows the model to enrich Heritage Marketing theory by demonstrating that, by promoting culture, this practice can serve as a digital innovation (Ottaviani et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025), support memory preservation, and advance sustainable development at once (UNESCO, 2025). Its main contribution is an integrative model that links heritage assets, cultural storytelling, digital activation, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable city branding, thereby enriching the study of heritage marketing, city branding, community-based heritage promotion, and the digital mediation of culture.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the development of a novel analytical framework (Figure 4) that shifts the paradigm of Heritage Marketing. Rather than serving merely as a descriptive summary of promotional tactics, this model functions as a structured diagnostic tool. By systematically linking heritage assets, cultural storytelling, digital activation, and multi-stakeholder collaboration, it provides academics and destination managers with a concrete mechanism for evaluating and designing city branding efforts that are legitimate, inclusive, and culturally sustainable.

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This research is limited to a qualitative case study of Lasem, thus emphasizing depth of interpretation rather than broad generalization. Data is also predominantly sourced from key actors, whilst the perspectives of tourists, policymakers, and other groups have not been explored to the same extent. Future research should broaden the range of informants, use surveys and digital engagement analysis, conduct comparative studies, and test the conceptual model in other heritage destinations.

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