

## **Bridging Cultures Through Brands: Exploring the Role of Cultural Authenticity and Identity Alignment in Shaping Revisit Intention**

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### **Abstract**

In the era of globalized tourism, destinations function not only as geographic spaces but as communicative platforms for cultural exchange. This study examines how place branding elements—brand image, cultural authenticity, and community engagement—influence revisit intention through the mediating roles of perceived cultural exchange and destination identity alignment. Drawing on theories of intercultural communication and symbolic interactionism, a structural equation modelling approach using PLS-SEM was applied to data collected from 235 tourists visiting culturally significant destinations in Indonesia. The results reveal that perceived cultural exchange is the strongest predictor of revisit intention, while cultural authenticity and brand image significantly shape identity alignment and intercultural engagement. Community involvement was also found to impact perceived cultural exchange positively. The findings offer theoretical contributions by reconceptualizing place branding as a dialogic and identity-forming process and practical implications for designing culturally responsive branding strategies rooted in local narratives and community participation.

**Keywords:** Place Branding, Cultural Authenticity, Identity Alignment, Perceived Cultural Exchange, Revisit Intention

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### **A. INTRODUCTION**

In an increasingly globalized world, destinations have transformed from fixed geographic spaces into symbolic and communicative arenas where cultural meanings are continuously produced, exchanged, and negotiated. Tourism plays a critical role in this transformation, often oscillating between authenticity and commodification. Enclavic tourism, for instance, reinforces colonial imaginaries and spatial separation (Kothari, 2015), while cultural tourism can sometimes reduce complex identities to superficial representations (Enevoldsen, 2003). Cultural elements like food have also emerged as powerful identity markers in tourism branding (Fusté-Forné, 2018; Putri & Wijoyo, 2023). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has redefined tourist motivations, emphasizing the need for emotionally intelligent and culturally sensitive branding strategies (Aman et al., 2024; Verinita et al., 2024).

In response to these dynamics, place branding has gained traction as a strategic tool for articulating destination identities and fostering meaningful intercultural communication. More than just a promotional strategy, effective place branding involves the authentic and reciprocal expression of cultural values, enabling not only tourism growth but also genuine cultural exchange between visitors and host communities (Bose et al., 2021; Ćela et al., 2022; Pavlović & Perić, 2023). Participatory approaches that involve community narratives and lived experiences have been shown to enhance brand authenticity and foster stronger emotional bonds with visitors (Amaral et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2022). In the digital era, platforms like Instagram empower tourists to co-create destination images through shared experiences, adding a new layer to brand perception (Putra & Razi, 2020). Nonetheless, there remains a risk that branding strategies may reduce culture to spectacle and erode

local authenticity if not grounded in genuine community representation (Boland & McKay, 2021; Lemmetyinen et al., 2021; Sandbach, 2021).

Despite its growing relevance, much of the place branding literature remains anchored in marketing-based constructs—brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty—while neglecting its potential as a platform for intercultural communication and symbolic meaning-making (Khairatunnisa et al., 2022; Liang & Lai, 2022). Empirical studies on destinations underscore that brand images that reflect authentic cultural values enhance visitor trust and promote loyalty (Novirsari & Pranata, 2021). Similarly, branding through local events can generate cultural dialogue and reinforce identity (Norov & Ugli, 2021). However, these insights are often limited to conceptual or case-specific investigations, lacking systematic analysis of how cultural authenticity, community engagement, and visitor perceptions interact to facilitate mutual understanding. Addressing this gap requires an interdisciplinary framework integrating marketing, intercultural communication, and psychology (Bochaca et al., 2020; Policarpo & Loureiro, 2020).

Building on this need, the present study draws from cultural communication theory, symbolic interactionism, and destination marketing to conceptualize place branding as a communicative and symbolic act. Destinations are understood as dynamic spaces where meanings are co-created through social interactions (Cheng et al., 2020; Seyyedamiri et al., 2021) and where cultural symbols become central to how visitors interpret and emotionally connect with the place (Castyana et al., 2023; Norov & Ugli, 2021). Emotional ties to local traditions and identities have been found to influence visitor satisfaction and loyalty significantly (Liang & Lai, 2022), while community engagement plays a critical role in validating cultural narratives and encouraging co-creation between hosts and tourists (Almeida & Cardoso, 2022; Özdemir & Topaloğlu, 2023). Additionally, the digital sphere extends these exchanges, allowing visitors to share and amplify local stories, contributing to a global discourse on cultural authenticity (Adamus-Matuszyńska & Dzik, 2023; Adel et al., 2020).

This study responds to the growing scholarly interest in participatory place branding and co-created narratives by proposing a conceptual framework in which perceived cultural exchange and destination identity alignment act as mediating variables linking core branding components—cultural authenticity, brand image, and community engagement—with behavioural outcomes such as revisit intention and word-of-mouth advocacy. Tourists are seen as active meaning-makers who engage with and reinterpret destination narratives (Pham et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2020), while local communities serve as co-authors of these cultural texts (Gulisova et al., 2023; Wang, 2022). Digital platforms further strengthen this relationship, turning everyday interactions into brand-defining moments (Lozano-Monterrubio & Huertas, 2020; Sun et al., 2023). This study contributes a nuanced perspective that informs scholarly understanding and practical strategies for sustainable, inclusive, and culturally grounded tourism development by reimagining place branding as an intercultural communicative practice.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Place Brand Image and Perceived Cultural Exchange***

Place brand image refers to the cognitive and emotional associations visitors form about a destination, encompassing visual identity, cultural symbolism, and perceived uniqueness. In cultural tourism, a well-crafted and authentic brand image can effectively communicate the richness of local traditions, transforming the destination into a meaningful space for cultural interaction. When tourists engage with branding that reflects the true character of a place, they are more likely to interpret their experience as a reciprocal cultural exchange rather than a passive visit. Recent scholarship highlights how participatory branding, storytelling, and co-creation with local communities can amplify this effect by fostering authentic narratives and enhancing emotional engagement (Harits et al., 2023; Romão et al., 2021; Zhou & Chen, 2023). Co-creation allows tourists to actively shape their experiences actively, reinforcing emotional bonds and brand equity. Digital platforms and community-based branding initiatives enhance these dynamics by enabling more inclusive narratives that

resonate with locals and visitors (Kalalo & Setiawan, 2023; Shen & Ma, 2022; Zavaleta Chavez Arroyo et al., 2023).

While conceptual frameworks for branding continue to evolve, much of the existing literature remains limited to case studies or anecdotal insights, lacking rigorous empirical evidence to substantiate how brand image influences cultural engagement. Scholars call for quantitative approaches to assess how cohesive brand identities and participatory strategies impact tourists' perceptions of cultural authenticity and exchange (Amoiradis et al., 2021; Mortezaei et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023). Moreover, branding strategies should consider unplanned or emergent narratives that arise organically from community participation and tourist storytelling, especially through social media (Octaviani & Basuki, 2023; Sun et al., 2023). The dynamic interactions among stakeholders—locals, tourists, and brand managers—form the basis for multi-layered narratives that shape visitors' emotional responses and willingness to engage meaningfully with local culture (Nurjaya, 2022; Ченурда & Ченурда, 2020). Therefore, place branding that integrates cultural symbolism, community voices, and emotional resonance can significantly enhance the perception of cultural exchange among tourists.

*H1: Place brand image has a positive effect on perceived cultural exchange.*

### **Cultural Authenticity and Destination Identity Alignment**

Cultural authenticity is a critical dimension of the tourism experience, especially in cultural and heritage tourism contexts. It refers to how a destination's traditions, rituals, crafts, cuisine, and social customs are perceived as genuine reflections of the local way of life. Authentic experiences foster trust, credibility, and emotional engagement among visitors, enhancing their connection to the place (Absattarov et al., 2022; Bose et al., 2021; Minardi et al., 2020). Studies have shown that when tourists participate in authentic cultural practices—such as local festivals, artisan workshops, or traditional cooking—they gain a deeper appreciation of the host culture and are more likely to establish emotional ties with the destination (Pavlović & Perić, 2023). These experiences are not just passively consumed but actively constructed through interaction between hosts and tourists, aligning with experiential authenticity (Walters et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022).

The perception of authenticity also plays a key role in shaping what is known as destination identity alignment—where tourists perceive a congruence between their values and the cultural identity of the place. This alignment significantly impacts visitor satisfaction, trust, and loyalty (Goshkheteliani & Kalandia, 2022; Putri & Wijoyo, 2023). Authentic cultural representation builds credibility and fosters long-term emotional bonds, making visitors more inclined to revisit or recommend the destination (Çela et al., 2022). Trust, emotional engagement, and value alignment thus form a feedback loop that benefits the visitor experience and contributes to sustainable destination development and local community empowerment (Lemmetynen et al., 2021; Putra & Razi, 2020).

*H2: Cultural authenticity has a positive effect on destination identity alignment.*

### **Community Engagement and Perceived Cultural Exchange**

Community engagement plays a vital role in shaping authentic and reciprocal tourism experiences, particularly in destinations rooted in cultural heritage. When residents actively develop and share their cultural narratives, tourism evolves from a one-sided consumption model into a participatory dialogue between hosts and guests. Empowered communities are more likely to preserve and promote their heritage, resulting in richer, more meaningful tourist experiences (Boland & McKay, 2021; Sandbach, 2021). As the primary narrators of their culture, residents bring personal depth and contextual authenticity that cannot be replicated by commercialized experiences (González & Gale, 2020; Kumar, 2021). This direct interaction allows tourists to connect on a human level, fostering emotional bonds and a genuine appreciation of local values and ways of life (Gulisova et al., 2023; Salim et al., 2023).

Cultural exchange is significantly enhanced when tourists participate in community-led practices such as traditional cooking, crafts, or storytelling. These immersive experiences deepen cross-cultural understanding and empathy (Mosed et al., 2021; Zinaida & Salsabila, 2020). Beyond enriching the visitor's journey, these interactions also cultivate community pride and cultural ownership, reinforcing the sustainability of tourism from within (Hui-wen et al., 2022; Yefremtseva et al., 2021). The dialogical process between tourists and hosts fosters shared meaning-making, where both sides contribute to constructing cultural knowledge and mutual respect (Braslauskas, 2021; Zapata-Barrero & Hellgren, 2023). In this framework, tourists transition from passive observers to active participants, helping shape a tourism landscape that is inclusive, empathetic, and culturally responsive.

*H3: Community engagement has a positive effect on perceived cultural exchange.*

### **Perceived Cultural Exchange and Revisit Intention**

Perceived cultural exchange refers to a tourist's subjective sense of engaging in a meaningful, two-way interaction with the host culture—an experience that fosters mutual understanding and emotional enrichment. Rather than acting as passive observers, tourists participating in cultural rituals, sharing meals, or engaging in storytelling with locals often report deeper satisfaction levels and a stronger emotional connection to the destination (Bochaca et al., 2020; Policarpo & Loureiro, 2020). These experiences enhance the memorability of a trip, contributing to the formation of lasting impressions that shape the tourist's perception of authenticity and cultural value (Cheng et al., 2020; Seyyedamiri et al., 2021). When such interactions evoke emotional fulfilment and personal transformation, tourists are more likely to remember the destination positively and reflect on their journey with affection and respect (Norov & Ugli, 2021; Wang, 2022).

Importantly, this emotional and cultural resonance directly impacts future travel behaviour. Studies consistently show that visitors who experience a high level of perceived cultural exchange tend to express stronger intentions to revisit the destination and recommend it to others (Castyana et al., 2023; Liang & Lai, 2022). Emotional bonds formed during culturally immersive activities—such as traditional festivals, artisan workshops, or locally guided tours—can influence tourist loyalty by reinforcing a sense of belonging and identity alignment (Novirsari & Pranata, 2021; Özdemir & Topaloğlu, 2023). As a result, destination managers are encouraged to design tourism programs that foster authentic cultural encounters, integrating community involvement and narrative-based experiences to enhance cultural empathy and long-term engagement (Adamus-Matuszyńska & Dzik, 2023; Almeida & Cardoso, 2022). Creating such environments elevates visitor satisfaction and supports sustainable development by empowering local voices and preserving cultural heritage.

*H4: Perceived cultural exchange has a positive effect on revisit intention.*

### **Destination Identity Alignment and Revisit Intention**

Destination identity alignment refers to the perceived congruence between a tourist's identity and the cultural identity communicated by a destination. When visitors find that a destination reflects their values, beliefs, or lifestyle, they tend to form a sense of belonging and emotional connection, making the destination more than just a travel location—it becomes a part of their self-narrative (González & Gale, 2020; Gulisova et al., 2023). This psychological alignment is closely associated with enhanced satisfaction and personal meaning as visitors integrate their experiences into their identity frameworks (Kumar, 2021; Pham et al., 2022). Emotional connections rooted in identity alignment evoke a deeper engagement with the destination's cultural essence, contributing not only to the memorability of the visit but also to its long-term impact on the traveller's perception of self and place (Camatti & Wallington, 2022; Xu et al., 2020).

The implications of destination identity alignment extend to behavioural outcomes, notably revisiting intention and positive word-of-mouth. Visitors who feel emotionally connected to a place are significantly more likely to return and recommend it to others, driven by the sense that the destination holds personal relevance and emotional resonance (Prayag & Hosany, 2014; Tajvidi et al., 2020). Narrative transportation—the

psychological process through which individuals become immersed in culturally resonant stories—further reinforces this connection, transforming tourism into an identity-affirming experience. For destination marketers, highlighting authentic cultural narratives and facilitating emotionally engaging experiences can strengthen this alignment, enhancing loyalty and advocacy (Lozano-Monterrubio & Huertas, 2020; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2023). By recognizing and responding to the identity needs of tourists, destinations can foster sustainable visitor relationships grounded in shared values and emotional authenticity.

*H5: Destination identity alignment has a positive effect on revisit intention.*

### C. METHODS

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to test the proposed conceptual model that links place brand image, cultural authenticity, community engagement, perceived cultural exchange, destination identity alignment, and revisit intention. The research focused on exploring the structural relationships between these constructs in the context of cultural tourism. The target population comprises domestic and international tourists recently visiting culturally rich destinations in Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique ensured that respondents experienced meaningful cultural interactions during their visit. Based on the SEM-PLS sample size guideline, which recommends 10 times the number of indicators for the most complex construct, a target sample of at least 200 respondents was considered adequate. Ultimately, \_\_\_ valid responses were collected and used in the final analysis. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via email, travel forums, and social media channels related to tourism and culture. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections: the first gathered demographic information (e.g., age, gender, nationality, and previous travel experience), while the second measured latent variables using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). All measurement items were adapted from prior validated scales in tourism and branding literature and modified to reflect the context of cultural exchange and community-based tourism.

The construct place brand image was measured by indicators of the destination's perceived uniqueness and cultural symbolism. Cultural authenticity focused on tourists' perception of how genuine the cultural experiences were, while community engagement captured the involvement of residents in cultural presentation and interaction with tourists. Perceived cultural exchange assessed the extent to which visitors felt a two-way cultural interaction occurred during their stay. Destination identity alignment refers to the alignment between the tourists' values and the cultural identity of the destination, and revisit intention measures tourists' willingness to return and recommend the destination. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach using SmartPLS 4.0 software. This technique is particularly suitable for exploratory models involving multiple latent variables and is robust in handling non-normal data distributions. The analysis involved two key stages: the outer model evaluation, which tested indicator reliability, internal consistency (using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), convergent validity (using Average Variance Extracted or AVE), and discriminant validity; and the inner model evaluation, which tested the structural relationships between constructs using path coefficients,  $R^2$  values, predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ), and hypothesis testing through a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. This approach allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the measurement and structural models.

### D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### *Respondent Profile*

A total of 235 valid responses were collected and analyzed for this study. The demographic distribution of respondents showed a balanced representation across various age groups, genders, and nationalities, ensuring a diverse perspective on cultural tourism experiences. Regarding gender, the sample consisted of 52% female and 48% male respondents. The majority of participants fell within the age range of 26 to 35 years (43%), followed by those aged 18 to 25 years (29%), 36 to 45 years (17%), and above 45 years (11%). This indicates that

the sample predominantly comprised young to early middle-aged adults, reflecting the demographic most actively engaged in cultural and experiential travel.

Regarding nationality, 72% of respondents were domestic tourists, while 28% were international visitors, with most foreign respondents originating from Southeast Asian and European countries. Regarding educational background, 78% of participants held at least a bachelor's degree, indicating a relatively high level of education among the respondents. Employment status showed that 64% were working professionals, while the remainder included students (21%), entrepreneurs (10%), and retirees or others (5%). Most respondents (85%) reported that they had visited the cultural destination within the last 12 months, which aligns well with the study's criteria for recent tourism experience. Furthermore, 68% of the participants said they engaged in at least one cultural activity—such as attending a traditional performance, visiting a local craft market, or participating in a community-led workshop—during their visit. This supports the relevance of the sample for examining constructs related to cultural exchange, authenticity, and place branding.

### Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated to assess the reliability and validity of the latent constructs before testing the structural relationships. Following standard procedures in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the assessment focused on indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Indicator reliability was assessed by examining the outer loadings of each item on its respective construct. All retained items had loading values above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating strong individual contributions to their constructs. All constructs' Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity, as described in Table 1.

**Table 1. Outer Loadings and Convergent Validity**

| Construct                      | Indicator Code & Statement   | Loading | AVE   |
|--------------------------------|--|---------|-------|
| Place Brand Image              | PBI1: The destination has a unique and recognizable identity.                              | 0.804   | 0.641 |
|                                | PBI2: The cultural aspects of this place were represented in its branding.                 | 0.811   |       |
|                                | PBI3: I was able to understand the identity of this place through its promotional efforts. | 0.793   |       |
| Cultural Authenticity          | CA1: The cultural experiences I encountered felt genuine and not staged.                   | 0.832   | 0.678 |
|                                | CA2: Local traditions were presented in a way that seemed authentic.                       | 0.817   |       |
|                                | CA3: The destination's cultural identity felt true to its real way of life.                | 0.802   |       |
| Community Engagement           | CE1: Residents were actively involved in sharing their culture.                            | 0.781   | 0.653 |
|                                | CE2: I had direct interaction with members of the local community.                         | 0.807   |       |
|                                | CE3: The local community-led or supported Cultural programs or events.                     | 0.832   |       |
| Perceived Cultural Exchange    | PCE1: I felt there was a mutual cultural exchange between myself and the local people.     | 0.846   | 0.705 |
|                                | PCE2: I learned meaningful things from the local culture during my visit.                  | 0.832   |       |
|                                | PCE3: The local people also showed interest in understanding my culture.                   | 0.826   |       |
| Destination Identity Alignment | DIA1: I feel that this destination reflects my values and interests.                       | 0.803   | 0.669 |
|                                | DIA2: I can relate to the cultural identity of this place.                                 | 0.818   |       |
|                                | DIA3: The destination's values align with my lifestyle or worldview.                       | 0.821   |       |
| Revisit Intention              | RI1: I intend to revisit this destination in the future.                                   | 0.843   | 0.714 |
|                                | RI2: I would recommend this destination to my friends or family.                           | 0.822   |       |
|                                | RI3: I would like to return to experience more of this destination's culture.              | 0.867   |       |

Source: Research data, 2024

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). As shown in Table 2, all constructs exceeded the commonly recommended thresholds of 0.70 for both measures, indicating the high reliability of the constructs.

**Table 2. Internal Consistency Reliability**

| Construct             | Cronbach's Alpha | Composite Reliability |
|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Place Brand Image     | 0.792            | 0.867                 |
| Cultural Authenticity | 0.813            | 0.879                 |

| Construct                   | Cronbach's Alpha | Composite Reliability |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Community Engagement        | 0.796            | 0.872                 |
| Perceived Cultural Exchange | 0.821            | 0.885                 |
| Destination Identity Align. | 0.808            | 0.874                 |
| Revisit Intention           | 0.842            | 0.899                 |

Source: Research data, 2024

Discriminant validity was tested using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. HTMT values for all pairs of constructs were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, providing further evidence of discriminant validity. (see Table 3). All values fell well below the threshold, confirming that the constructs were empirically distinct.

**Table 3. HTMT Ratio**

| Construct Pair                            | HTMT Value |
|---|------------|
| Place Brand Image – Cultural Authenticity | 0.632      |
| Place Brand Image – Community Engagement  | 0.589      |
| Cultural Authenticity – PCE               | 0.673      |
| Community Engagement – PCE                | 0.611      |
| PCE – Destination Identity Alignment      | 0.708      |
| Destination Identity Alignment – RI       | 0.742      |

Source: Research data, 2024

Overall, the measurement model demonstrated strong psychometric properties across all constructs. The indicators showed high reliability, internal consistency, convergent, and discriminant validity. These results confirm that the measurement model is statistically sound and provides a robust basis for testing the hypothesized structural relationships in the next analysis stage.

### Structural Model

After confirming the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the next step was to evaluate the structural model to test the proposed hypotheses and assess the strength and significance of the relationships among latent variables. This stage involved examining collinearity, coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), effect size ( $f^2$ ), predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ), and the results of hypothesis testing through the bootstrapping procedure. Before hypothesis testing, collinearity diagnostics were assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all predictor constructs. All inner VIF values were below the recommended threshold of 5.0, indicating no multicollinearity concerns and confirming that the model is suitable for interpretation.

The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) indicates the variance in the endogenous constructs explained by the exogenous constructs. The  $R^2$  values in this study were as follows: Perceived Cultural Exchange ( $R^2 = 0.49$ ), Destination Identity Alignment ( $R^2 = 0.47$ ), and Revisit Intention ( $R^2 = 0.53$ ). These values suggest moderate explanatory power, indicating that the model explains a meaningful portion of the variance in these dependent variables. In addition, effect size ( $f^2$ ) was assessed to determine the individual contribution of each exogenous variable to the  $R^2$  of the endogenous constructs. The  $f^2$  values ranged from 0.03 to 0.27, indicating small to moderate effects, with the strongest contribution observed in the path from Perceived Cultural Exchange to Revisit intention.

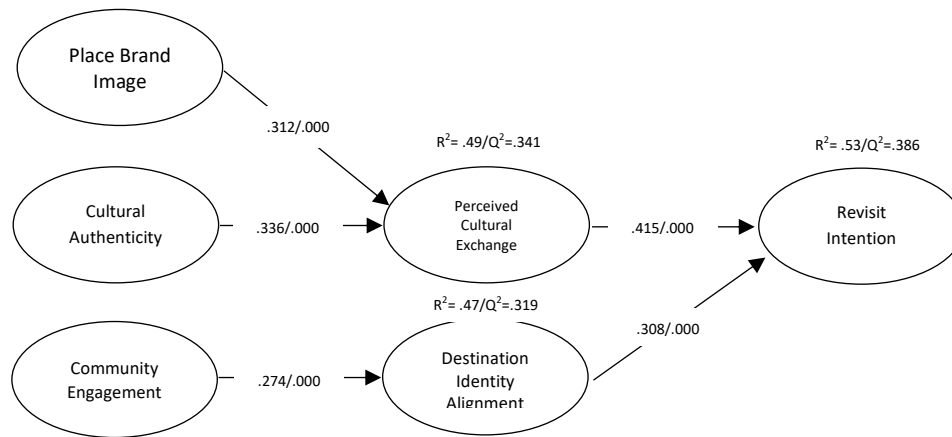
Furthermore, the model's predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) was evaluated using the blindfolding procedure, and all  $Q^2$  values were found to be above zero, confirming that the model has adequate predictive power for the endogenous variables. Specifically, the  $Q^2$  value for Perceived Cultural Exchange was 0.341, Destination Identity Alignment was 0.319, and Revisit Intention was 0.386. According to established benchmarks, these values indicate large predictive relevance, thus supporting the model's robustness in predicting the key outcomes under investigation.

**Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results**

| Path  | $\beta$ | t-value | p-value | Result    |
|---|---------|---------|---------|-----------|
| H1: Place Brand Image → Perceived Cultural Exchange | 0.312   | 5.742   | 0.000   | Supported |

| Path   | $\beta$ | t-value | p-value | Result    |
|--|---------|---------|---------|-----------|
| H2: Cultural Authenticity → Destination Identity Alignment | 0.336   | 6.128   | 0.000   | Supported |
| H3: Community Engagement → Perceived Cultural Exchange     | 0.274   | 4.865   | 0.000   | Supported |
| H4: Perceived Cultural Exchange → Revisit Intention        | 0.415   | 7.392   | 0.000   | Supported |
| H5: Destination Identity Alignment → Revisit Intention     | 0.308   | 5.043   | 0.000   | Supported |

Source: Research data, 2024



**Figure 1. Structural Tested Model**

Source: Research data, 2024

All hypotheses depicted in Table 4 and Figure 1 were statistically significant at the 0.05 level, with t-values > 1.96 and p-values < 0.05, indicating that the data supported the proposed relationships between constructs. The strongest effect was found in the relationship between Perceived Cultural Exchange and Revisit Intention ( $\beta = 0.415$ ), suggesting that meaningful cultural interactions significantly influence tourists' intention to return. These findings provide empirical support for the conceptual model, reinforcing the role of authenticity, community engagement, and identity alignment in fostering deeper cultural experiences and sustainable tourist behaviour. The results also highlight the value of designing place branding strategies emphasizing intercultural communication and reciprocal cultural exchange.

### Discussion

This study offers empirical insights into the intricate dynamics between place branding and cultural exchange in the context of tourism, reinforcing the premise that branding is not merely a marketing function but a form of intercultural communication. The structural model confirms that perceived cultural exchange plays a central role in shaping revisit intention, with the strongest direct effect observed between these two constructs. This finding corroborates previous work that positions meaningful cross-cultural interaction as a critical antecedent of tourist loyalty (Liang & Lai, 2022) while also extending this logic by positioning cultural exchange as a mediating process shaped by branding strategies and community interaction. Notably, place brand image significantly influences perceived cultural exchange, affirming that branding is a semiotic entry point through which tourists interpret and engage with local culture. This supports theoretical perspectives that consider place brands as symbolic systems that mediate identity and perception (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). The data suggest that tourists are more likely to engage in cultural exchange when the brand image communicates coherence, relevance, and authenticity. This contributes to a growing body of literature advocating a paradigm shift from promotional branding to value-driven, narrative-based branding in destination management. The relationship between cultural authenticity and destination identity alignment underscores the psychosocial dimension of authenticity in tourism. Rather than being treated as an inherent property of the experience, authenticity emerges as a relational and identity-affirming construct, validating earlier studies on experiential

authenticity and emotional engagement (Pham et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). The findings indicate that tourists are likelier to perceive alignment between themselves and the destination when cultural expressions feel lived rather than staged. This is particularly relevant in post-pandemic tourism, where authenticity, transparency, and human connection have become decisive factors in travel behaviour.

Similarly, community engagement was shown to exert a meaningful effect on perceived cultural exchange. This reinforces calls for greater democratization of branding processes, where communities are not simply subjects of representation but co-authors of the place narrative (González & Gale, 2020; Gulisova et al., 2023). The implication is that reciprocal cultural interaction is more likely to flourish in environments where local voices are structurally embedded into the tourism experience. This aligns with community-based tourism (CBT) frameworks and suggests that participatory approaches should be central to sustainable place branding practices. Finally, the linkage between destination identity alignment and revisit intention validates theoretical claims that identity congruence is a precursor to loyalty (Camatti & Wallington, 2022). When tourists perceive a destination as reflecting their personal or aspirational identity, it becomes integrated into their self-concept and life narrative, creating lasting emotional bonds. This finding enhances understanding of destination attachment from a symbolic interactionist lens and signals to practitioners that cultivating shared values is not a soft branding feature but a strategic imperative.

The results of this study make several contributions. Theoretically, the research extends place branding discourse by framing it within intercultural exchange theory and testing it quantitatively using a structural model. The operationalization of constructs such as cultural authenticity and destination identity alignment within an SEM-PLS framework provides methodological advancement in an area still dominated by conceptual and case-based inquiry. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for destination marketers and policymakers: branding efforts should foreground cultural storytelling, community participation, and identity resonance rather than solely focusing on promotional aesthetics. While the model exhibits strong explanatory and predictive power, future research could expand this framework across cultural contexts or incorporate longitudinal designs to explore how identity alignment and cultural exchange evolve. Additionally, integrating behavioural tracking data or ethnographic methods may enrich the understanding of how tourists navigate branded cultural spaces in real-world settings.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

This study empirically validates a conceptual model linking place brand image, cultural authenticity, and community engagement to revisit intention, mediated by perceived cultural exchange and destination identity alignment. The results affirm that place branding is not merely promotional but a communicative and relational process that fosters identity negotiation and intercultural dialogue. Notably, perceived cultural exchange emerged as the strongest predictor of revisit intention, while identity alignment was key in fostering emotional attachment and loyalty. These findings offer a more holistic understanding of sustainable, culture-driven branding in tourism. Theoretically, the study contributes by integrating symbolic interactionism and intercultural communication into place branding research and applying SEM-PLS to test symbolic-psychological constructs. It also confirms destination identity alignment as a meaningful mediator between authenticity and loyalty. The study provides strategic direction for tourism marketers and policymakers to adopt community-centred, narrative-based branding that prioritizes local voice, cultural values, and experiential authenticity. While the model demonstrates strong explanatory power, limitations include its cross-sectional design and geographic focus on Indonesian destinations. Future research should adopt longitudinal or cross-cultural comparative approaches to capture temporal and contextual variations. Incorporating behavioural or ethnographic data could enrich an understanding of real-time cultural exchange. Exploring moderators such as digital engagement or cultural intelligence may further enhance insights into how destination brands resonate with diverse audiences.

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