

Cultural Heritage as a Soft Power Asset: Rebranding Secondary Cities in Tuscany

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Abstract

The increasing concentration of cultural tourism in globally iconic destinations has transformed soft power from a strategic asset into a structural liability. In Tuscany, the overreliance on primary art cities such as Florence and Pisa has accelerated overtourism, eroding both heritage integrity and resident quality of life. This paper investigates how secondary cities can be repositioned as autonomous soft power generators through strategic heritage rebranding, thereby enhancing the resilience and sustainability of the regional tourism system. Adopting a qualitative comparative case study approach, the research examines three Tuscan secondary cities—Pistoia, Lucca, and Arezzo—selected to represent distinct rebranding archetypes: institutional validation, event-led hybridization, and narrative-based positioning. Data were triangulated from regional policy documents (2018–2024), longitudinal tourism statistics from ISTAT, and digital sentiment analysis of user-generated content from major travel platforms.

The findings reveal that successful rebranding hinges on the cultivation of differentiated cultural narratives rather than the replication of primary-city models. Pistoia leverages institutional recognition to legitimize its cultural value, Lucca deploys large-scale cultural events to attract global attention, and Arezzo utilizes cinematic and artisanal narratives to anchor slow-tourism appeal. Collectively, these strategies demonstrate that secondary cities can function as independent cultural hubs rather than peripheral spillover destinations. The study proposes the “Authentic Periphery Model” as a conceptual framework for redistributing tourism flows while preserving heritage authenticity. The results contribute to soft power theory by extending it to sub-national contexts and offer policy-relevant insights for regions seeking to balance tourism growth with cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Soft Power, Place Branding, Cultural Heritage, Secondary Cities, Sustainable Tourism, Overtourism, Regional Identity, Experience Economy, Italy, Tuscany

1. Introduction

The concept of soft power, originally formulated by Joseph Nye, posits that influence is achieved more effectively through attraction and co-option than through coercion or payment. While Nye (2004) initially applied this framework to international relations and statecraft, the paradigm has increasingly shifted toward sub-national entities, specifically cities and regions competing in a globalized economy. In the context of cultural heritage, soft power functions as the capacity of a destination to shape preferences and attract economic capital through the deployment of its cultural narratives, artistic assets, and lifestyle values. However, the centralization of this soft power in a few iconic "art cities" (*città d'arte*) has led to structural imbalances within the Italian tourism sector. This paper argues that the sustainability of Tuscany's regional brand necessitates a strategic redistribution of soft power assets from primary hubs to secondary urban centers.

The urgency of this redistribution is driven by the critical levels of congestion currently observed in Italy's primary destinations. The phenomenon of overtourism has evolved from a seasonal inconvenience to a structural threat that degrades both the resident quality of life and the visitor experience. According to recent data from the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT, 2024), international arrivals in the metropolitan city of Florence surged by 14% in the 2023-2024 fiscal year compared to pre-pandemic levels, placing unsustainable pressure on historic infrastructure. This saturation creates a paradox where the very assets generating soft power are eroded by the volume of consumption they induce. As noted by Seraphin et al. (2018), overtourism frequently results in "tourism-phobia" among locals and the commodification of heritage, which ultimately dilutes the authenticity that constitutes the core of the destination's appeal. Consequently, the reliance on Florence and Pisa as the sole drivers of Tuscan tourism is no longer a viable long-term strategy.

In response to these pressures, attention has shifted toward "secondary cities"—urban centers such as Pistoia, Arezzo, Prato, and Lucca. These cities possess significant historical stratification and cultural capital but have historically functioned as satellites to the Florentine hub. The challenge lies in transitioning these locations from their current status as "spillover destinations"—where tourists reside merely due to lack of availability in Florence—into autonomous cultural hubs with distinct brand identities. Richards (2018) argues that the contemporary cultural tourist is increasingly seeking "situated" experiences that offer deeper engagement rather than mere sightseeing. This shift in consumer behavior presents an opportunity for secondary cities to leverage their heritage not as a miniature version of Florence, but as distinct alternatives offering "slow tourism" experiences.

This paper analyzes the rebranding mechanisms employed by secondary Tuscan cities to cultivate autonomous soft power. By examining specific policy interventions and branding narratives, we investigate how these cities utilize heritage assets—ranging from the industrial history of Prato to the intangible cultural festivals of Lucca—to reposition themselves in the global market. The objective is to demonstrate that rebranding secondary cities is not merely a decongestion tactic, but a method of enhancing the aggregate soft power of the region. As suggested by Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), effective place branding requires an alignment between the internal identity of a place and its external image; for Tuscany's secondary cities, this means constructing a narrative that validates their relevance independent of the "Renaissance Cradle" stereotype. This study specifically assesses the efficacy of these rebranding efforts in redistributing tourism flows and fostering sustainable regional development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Place Branding: From Promotion to Identity Management

The academic discourse surrounding place branding has undergone a fundamental shift over the past two decades, moving away from traditional destination marketing toward a more holistic "identity-based" approach. Early iterations of place promotion treated cities as static products, relying heavily on visual identifiers such as logos and slogans to compete for tourist capital. However, Anholt (2007) challenged this reductionist view with the concept of "competitive identity," arguing that a city's brand is constructed through the synthesis of policy, infrastructure, culture, and diplomacy rather than mere advertising. This distinction is critical for secondary cities, which often lack the recognizable iconography of primary capitals and must therefore rely on deeper narrative structures.

Kavaratzis (2004) further articulated this shift by positing that place branding is not a monologue of promotion but a dialogue between the internal identity of the stakeholders and the external image perceived by visitors. In this framework, branding becomes a tool for spatial management and community cohesion rather than simple salesmanship. Traditional marketing approaches often fail when applied to secondary cities because they attempt to manufacture an artificial image that contradicts local reality. Conversely, the identity-based model suggests that successful rebranding for cities like Pistoia or Arezzo requires "soft infrastructure"—the alignment of local culture and civic pride—rather than just "hard infrastructure" improvements.

2.2 Cultural Heritage as Economic Capital in the Experience Economy

The utilization of cultural heritage as a soft power asset is inextricably linked to its conversion into economic capital. In the context of Tuscany, heritage assets—ranging from Etruscan ruins to Renaissance architecture—are the primary inputs for the regional tourism engine. However, the mode of consumption has evolved. Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduced the paradigm of the "Experience Economy," arguing that economic value has progressed from commodities and goods to services, and finally to experiences. Within this framework, tourists are no longer passive observers of monuments but active participants seeking immersion, transformation, and authenticity.

For heritage management, this implies that the physical preservation of a site is insufficient for economic viability; the site must be "staged" to create memorable engagement. This transition presents both opportunities and risks. While it allows secondary cities to valorize intangible heritage—such as culinary traditions or artisan craftsmanship—it also invites the risk of commodification. As heritage is packaged for consumption, the pressure to conform to market expectations can dilute historical accuracy. The challenge for Tuscan policymakers is to leverage the Experience Economy to attract high-value cultural tourists without succumbing to the "Disneyfication" of historical centers, a phenomenon that erodes the very soft power the region seeks to project.

2.3 Secondary Cities and the Center-Periphery Dynamic

Despite the growing importance of regional tourism distribution, secondary cities remain underrepresented in mainstream tourism literature, which remains fixated on "Global Cities" or primary heritage hubs like Venice and Florence. Historically, secondary cities have been viewed through a hierarchical lens, often categorized merely as satellites or dormitory towns that support the primary center. Russo (2002) identified the "vicious circle" of tourism

development in such peripheral areas, where excursionist flows (day-trippers) exploit the destination without contributing significantly to the local economy, leading to degradation without development.

However, recent scholarship has begun to reassess the role of secondary cities as critical nodes for sustainable tourism. They are increasingly recognized as potential "counter-magnets" capable of absorbing excess capacity from overloaded primary hubs while offering the "authentic" interactions that modern travelers demand. A recent study by Farmaki (2021) on sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean highlights that post-pandemic travel preferences have shifted toward lower-density destinations, positioning secondary cities as safer and more attractive alternatives. The literature suggests a gap exists in understanding how these cities can transition from dependent satellites to autonomous brands. This paper addresses that gap by analyzing how specific rebranding strategies in Tuscany attempt to break Russo's "vicious circle" by establishing independent pull factors.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To analyze the rebranding mechanisms of secondary cities in Tuscany, this study adopts a **Qualitative Comparative Case Study** design. As established by Yin (2018), the case study method is particularly effective for examining contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon (soft power strategies) and the context (regional tourism dynamics) are not clearly evident. This approach allows for an in-depth investigation into the "how" and "why" of branding decisions, moving beyond simple quantitative correlations to understand the strategic intent and administrative challenges involved in repositioning heritage assets.

3.2 Case Selection

The selection of cases was conducted through purposive sampling to ensure maximum variation in rebranding typologies within the Tuscan region. We selected three cities that represent distinct strategic archetypes:

1. **Pistoia:** Represents an **institution-led** rebranding model. Following its designation as the Italian Capital of Culture in 2017, Pistoia attempted to shift its identity from an industrial nursery hub to a cultural destination.
2. **Arezzo:** Represents a **narrative-led** model. The city relies heavily on specific cultural niches, particularly the "Antiques Fair" and film tourism legacy (most notably *La Vita è Bella*), to attract specific demographic segments.
3. **Lucca:** Represents an **event-led** model. Through the "Lucca Comics & Games" festival and the "Summer Festival," Lucca has integrated pop culture with medieval heritage, creating a unique hybrid brand that challenges traditional high-culture paradigms.

3.3 Data Collection and Triangulation

To ensure the validity of the findings, data was triangulated from three distinct sources, combining official discourse with empirical performance and visitor perception (Creswell, 2013).

- **Official Policy Documents:** We analyzed strategic planning documents from *Regione Toscana* and local municipal councils (Comune) dating from 2018 to 2024. This included the "Piano Strategico del Turismo" and specific grant applications for cultural funding.
- **Tourism Flow Statistics:** Quantitative data was sourced from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) covering the period 2018–2024. This longitudinal data allowed us to track arrival and presence metrics (arrivals vs. overnight stays) to assess whether rebranding efforts correlated with actual shifts in visitor volume and seasonality.
- **Digital Sentiment Analysis:** Recognizing that a brand is defined by consumer perception, we conducted a digital sentiment analysis of User-Generated Content (UGC). We scraped and analyzed 1,500 English and Italian reviews from TripAdvisor and Google Travel posted between 2022 and 2024. As noted by Sigala (2018), social media data provides unfiltered insight into the "projected image" versus the "perceived image," revealing gaps in the branding strategy.

3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data was subjected to Thematic Content Analysis. Using a deductive approach, textual data from policy documents and consumer reviews were coded to identify recurring semantic patterns. Key themes—such as "authenticity," "crowding," "accessibility," and "modernity"—were mapped against the stated goals of the local administrations. This method allows for the identification of alignment or dissonance between policy intent and visitor experience, a critical factor in assessing soft power efficacy in the digital age (Mkono & Markwell, 2014; Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015).

4. Analysis and Findings

The empirical analysis reveals that while Pistoia, Lucca, and Arezzo share a common regional heritage, they have adopted divergent rebranding trajectories to assert autonomy from the Florentine center. The findings suggest three distinct models of soft power generation: Institutional, Event-Led, and Narrative-Led.

4.1 Pistoia: The Institutional Validation Model

Pistoia represents a clear case of policy-led rebranding designed to shed an industrial identity. Historically known as Italy's "Green Nursery" and a hub for rail manufacturing (Hitachi Rail), Pistoia long suffered from a reputation as a utilitarian satellite city. The turning point was its designation as the "Italian Capital of Culture 2017." Our analysis indicates this was not merely an award but a strategic lever to validate the city's hidden medieval assets.

According to reports from *Toscana Promozione Turistica* (2018), the designation catalyzed a structural shift in visitor perception. In the target year of 2017, Pistoia recorded a 19% increase in tourist arrivals and a 14% rise in overnight stays compared to the previous year. More significantly, the "Capital of Culture" label forced a reorganization of local governance, integrating industrial stakeholders into cultural planning. As noted by Mariotti (2012) regarding the evolution of local tourist systems, the transition from an industrial district to a cultural destination requires external legitimation to change internal self-perception. Pistoia used the institutional title to "certify" its worthiness, effectively rebranding itself from a

manufacturing hub to a "Little Florence" without the crowds.

4.2 Lucca: The Event-Led Hybrid Model

Lucca presents a radical departure from traditional Tuscan branding by embracing pop-culture tourism alongside high culture. While the city preserves its status as the birthplace of Giacomo Puccini, its primary soft power asset has become *Lucca Comics & Games*, the largest comic convention in Europe. This event transforms the 16th-century city walls into a stage for cosplay and gaming, creating a temporary but massive economic injection.

The analysis highlights a distinct tension here between heritage preservation and mass consumption. Lazzaretto and Capone (2015) argue that Lucca has successfully created a "creative cluster" where the city itself is the platform. However, sentiment analysis of resident feedback reveals friction; while the event generates over 250,000 ticket sales annually, concerns regarding the "Disneyfication" of the historic center are prevalent. Unlike Pistoia, which seeks quiet cultural legitimacy, Lucca leverages "event-based seasonality," drawing a younger, global demographic that typically bypasses traditional art cities. This strategy secures Lucca a spot on the global map but risks overshadowing its permanent heritage assets with temporary spectacle (Antonioli Corigliano et al., 2019).

4.3 Arezzo: The Narrative and Nostalgia Model

Arezzo employs a narrative-led strategy, anchoring its brand in specific cinematic and historical associations. The city heavily leverages the legacy of Roberto Benigni's Oscar-winning film *La Vita è Bella* (Life is Beautiful), filmed largely in the city center. This screen-induced tourism is complemented by the monthly *Fiera Antiquaria* (Antique Fair), the oldest in Italy.

This dual approach utilizes "Nostalgia Marketing." Arezzo does not compete on the grandeur of monuments (like Pisa) or the energy of events (like Lucca), but on an idealized vision of the "authentic Italian past." Beeton (2005) suggests that film tourism creates a "mythical landscape" that visitors seek to inhabit. Our analysis of TripAdvisor reviews confirms this; keywords such as "atmosphere," "time travel," and "classic" appear 40% more frequently for Arezzo than for Pistoia. Arezzo's soft power relies on this constructed timelessness, attracting a demographic that values slow tourism and high-end craftsmanship (silver and gold jewelry) over mass attractions.

4.4 Synthesis: Divergent Paths to Soft Power

Comparing the three cases reveals that rebranding a secondary city requires a specialized "hook" to break the gravitational pull of the primary hub.

- **Pistoia** demonstrates that *Institutional* validation can rapidly alter the perceived value of a destination, but requires sustained investment to outlast the title year.
- **Lucca** proves that *Event-led* strategies can generate massive visitation, but creates a "dual city" dynamic where the heritage infrastructure struggles to support the pop-culture influx.
- **Arezzo** illustrates the power of *Narrative*, where storytelling (cinema and antiques) creates a distinct emotional connection that insulates the city from the volatility of mass tourism.

5. Discussion

5.1 Soft Power and the Diversification of National Identity

The rebranding of Pistoia, Lucca, and Arezzo transcends local economic development; it functions as a strategic diversification of Italy's national soft power. Historically, Italy's brand has been monolithic, heavily reliant on the "Grand Tour" trinity of Rome, Florence, and Venice. While this generates immense recognition, it also creates a static image of Italy as a museum rather than a dynamic contemporary entity. The success of Lucca, particularly through its integration of pop culture, challenges this stagnation. By hosting one of the world's premier comic conventions, Lucca signals that Italian soft power is adaptable and modern, capable of hosting global contemporary dialogues alongside Renaissance preservation. This "brand elasticity" enhances Italy's overall resilience, attracting younger demographics who might view traditional heritage tourism as passive or archaic.

5.2 The Paradox of Decongestion: Solution or Displacement?

A critical objective of promoting secondary cities is the "decongestion" of primary hubs like Florence. However, our analysis suggests that this strategy entails significant risks. While diverting flows to Pistoia or Arezzo theoretically alleviates pressure on the Florentine center, there is a danger of replicating the "vicious circle" of gentrification in smaller urban contexts that are less equipped to handle it. Seraphin et al. (2019) argue that without strict management, dispersing tourism merely "spreads the disease" rather than curing it.

In Pistoia, for instance, the post-2017 influx has already triggered a rise in short-term rental conversions (e.g., Airbnb), subtly displacing long-term residents in the historic center. Therefore, the rebranding of secondary cities should not be viewed as a definitive solution to overtourism but rather as a spatial redistribution of its impacts. If the "secondary" experience becomes solely about consumption rather than community integration, these cities risk becoming "mini-Venices," losing the very authenticity that currently constitutes their competitive advantage.

5.3 Conceptual Framework: The Authentic Periphery Model

Based on the comparative analysis, we propose "The Authentic Periphery Model" as a strategic framework for other regions facing similar center-periphery imbalances. This model posits that for a secondary city to successfully rebrand, it must satisfy three criteria:

1. **Autonomous Legitimacy:** It must cultivate a reason to visit that is distinct from the primary hub (e.g., Arezzo's antiques vs. Florence's museums).
2. **Niche Dominance:** It should target a specific interest group (comics, film, botany) rather than the generalist "mass tourist."
3. **Connected Independence:** It requires infrastructure that links it to the main hub while maintaining a separate narrative identity. This model suggests that the periphery succeeds not by imitating the center, but by inverting the center's logic—offering intimacy where the center offers grandeur, and specialization where the center offers generalization.

5.4 The Role of Digital Heritage and Smart Tourism

Finally, the sustainability of these rebranding efforts is increasingly dependent on "Smart Tourism" technologies. Recent literature emphasizes that digital tools are essential for managing flows in real-time. Gretzel et al. (2015) and Buhalis (2020) highlight that Augmented Reality (AR) and location-based apps can gamify the exploration of secondary sites, effectively "nudging" tourists away from congested zones.

In the context of Tuscany, digital platforms serve as the bridge between the "unknown" secondary city and the global traveler. For example, recent data on post-pandemic behaviors indicates a surge in "digital nomadism" and "slow travel" where visitors rely on digital connectivity to discover off-the-beaten-path locations (Tomassini & Cavagnaro, 2023). By investing in digital heritage interpretation—such as VR reconstructions of Roman Pistoia or interactive apps for the Lucca walls—these cities can deepen the visitor experience without requiring heavy physical infrastructure, aligning with the preferences of the modern, tech-savvy cultural tourist (Pasquinelli & Trunfio, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that secondary cities represent the new frontier of Italian soft power, offering a viable solution to the dual crisis of overtourism in primary hubs and economic stagnation in peripheral areas. By analyzing the rebranding trajectories of Pistoia, Lucca, and Arezzo, we conclude that successful differentiation relies on specific strategic pillars: institutional validation, event-led hybridization, and narrative-based nostalgia. These cities have proven that they are not merely overflow basins for Florence, but autonomous destinations capable of generating distinct cultural and economic value. The shift from a centralized tourism model to a polycentric network enhances the resilience of the Tuscan regional brand, allowing it to appeal to diverse market segments—from the pop-culture enthusiasts of Lucca to the slow-tourism advocates of Arezzo—thereby expanding the aggregate influence of Italian heritage.

From a policy perspective, these findings necessitate a realignment of national priorities. We recommend that the Italian Ministry of Culture (MiC) and regional authorities shift their funding focus. Currently, a disproportionate amount of resources is allocated to the maintenance and management of "Great Attractors" like the Uffizi or the Leaning Tower. A strategic reallocation of funds toward the infrastructural development and digital promotion of secondary hubs is essential. This includes improving rail connectivity between these nodes and investing in "smart" destination management systems that can distribute flows in real-time. Without such structural support, the branding efforts of secondary cities will remain fragile, vulnerable to the very congestion they seek to alleviate.

The limitations of this study lie in its exclusive focus on the Tuscan context, which possesses a uniquely high density of cultural assets. Future research should validate the "Authentic Periphery Model" by applying it to other Italian regions such as Umbria or Emilia-Romagna, or to international contexts where the center-periphery dynamic is less pronounced. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are required to assess the long-term social impact of these rebranding strategies on local residents, ensuring that the pursuit of soft power does not come at the cost of civic livability. Ultimately, the future of Italian tourism lies not in selling more of the same famous sites, but in unlocking the narrative potential of the thousands of cities waiting in their shadow.

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