Strategic Rebranding of Secondary Cities in Tuscany: Leveraging Cultural Heritage and Digital Soft Power in the Smart Tourism Era

Marco Rossi

Department of Cultural Economics, University of Florence, Italy

Giulia Bianchi

Institute of Tourism Management and Digital Innovation, University of Siena, Italy

Abstract

In the wake of persistent over-tourism in primary Italian destinations such as Florence and Venice, the strategic management of secondary cities has emerged as a crucial area of inquiry within destination marketing and public administration. This paper investigates how secondary cities in Tuscany—specifically Arezzo, Pistoia, and Lucca—can leverage their cultural heritage as a "soft power" asset to execute effective rebranding strategies in the smart tourism era. Utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative data from international tourists ($N = 450$) with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews ($N = 15$) conducted with regional Destination Management Organization (DMO) executives and cultural heritage curators. The quantitative findings indicate that digital storytelling and perceived cultural authenticity significantly enhance a secondary city's soft power, positively correlating with extended visitor stays and elevated destination loyalty. Qualitative thematic analysis reveals that while cultural heritage forms the foundational identity of these cities, the lack of integrated digital infrastructure and cohesive brand narratives currently hinders their competitive positioning. Consequently, this paper proposes the *Cultural Soft Power Model for Secondary Cities (CSPM-SC)*, which provides a strategic framework for DMOs to synergize historical assets with modern digital marketing ecosystems. The research contributes to the literature on city branding and cultural economics, offering actionable strategies to redistribute tourist flows, stimulate local economies, and foster sustainable tourism in regional ecosystems.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Soft Power, City Branding, Secondary Cities, Tuscany, Smart Tourism, Sustainable Destination Management.

1. Introduction

The global tourism landscape has undergone profound transformations over the past decade, characterized by hyper-mobility, digital disruption, and a growing concentration of visitors in specific hyper-tourist hubs. In Italy, and particularly in the region of Tuscany, primary destinations such as Florence, Pisa, and Siena have long dominated the cultural tourism market. While this concentration generates significant economic revenue, it also results in severe over-tourism, characterized by infrastructural strain, the degradation of cultural heritage, and a decline in the quality of life for local residents (Russo, 2002). Consequently, the strategic spotlight is shifting toward "secondary cities"—urban centers that possess rich historical and cultural assets but suffer from low international visibility and disproportionately low tourism revenues (Boisen, Terlouw, Groote, & Couwenberg, 2018).

This paper addresses the challenge of rebranding secondary cities in Tuscany—specifically Arezzo, Pistoia, and Lucca—by conceptualizing their cultural heritage not merely as a collection of historical artifacts, but as an active asset of "soft power." Originally coined in international relations to describe the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce (Nye, 2004), the concept of soft power has increasingly been adapted to city branding (Anttiroiko, 2014). At the municipal level, soft power represents a city's capacity to attract tourists, investors, and creative talent through its cultural resonance, digital narrative, and perceived authenticity (Dinnie, 2011).

Despite the growing body of literature on city branding, a significant gap remains regarding how secondary cities can operationalize their cultural heritage into digital soft power to compete with primary hubs. Existing studies predominantly focus on macro-level national branding or the management of established global cities (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011). Furthermore, while the advent of "smart tourism" has revolutionized destination management (Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang, & Koo, 2015), the intersection of smart technology, digital storytelling, and soft power in the context of secondary cultural destinations remains under-researched.

Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do perceived cultural authenticity and digital engagement influence the soft power and tourist behavioral intentions in Tuscan secondary cities?

2. What are the primary structural and strategic barriers that local DMOs face when attempting to rebrand secondary cities using cultural heritage?

3. How can secondary cities strategically integrate smart tourism tools to convert historical heritage into contemporary soft power?

By answering these questions, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive framework that aligns with the core themes of ICCMETS 2026, synthesizing creativity (cultural heritage), management (destination branding), and technology (smart tourism).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Soft Power and City Branding

The concept of soft power, introduced by Nye (2004), rests on the triad of culture, political values, and foreign policies. In the context of urban geography and tourism, this concept has been recontextualized as "city soft power," defined as a city's ability to shape the preferences of external audiences through the appeal of its cultural identity, quality of life, and institutional excellence (Anttiroiko, 2014). City branding is the strategic mechanism through which this soft power is communicated. According to Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005), city branding is not a transitory marketing trick or a mere logo redesign; it is a holistic assertion of a city's identity. Dinnie (2011) emphasizes that successful city branding requires the alignment of the city's internal reality with its external projection, relying heavily on the distinctiveness of its assets.

2.2 Cultural Heritage as a Strategic Destination Asset

Cultural heritage is a primary driver of global tourism. Richards (2018) notes that cultural tourism has evolved from the passive consumption of historical sites to the active pursuit of "memorable cultural tourism experiences" (Seyfi, Hall, & Rasoolimanesh, 2020). For secondary cities, cultural heritage provides the vital "sense of place" required for effective destination branding (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2014). However, as Russo (2002) warns in his analysis of the "vicious circle" of heritage tourism, destinations that fail to actively manage their cultural narratives risk becoming either forgotten transit zones or overburdened day-trip destinations. For secondary cities in Tuscany, the proximity to Florence is a doubleedged sword: it offers access to a massive influx of tourists but relegates these cities to the shadows unless a strong, independent brand narrative is established.

2.3 Rebranding Secondary Cities in the Smart Tourism Era

Secondary cities are often defined not strictly by population size, but by their functional and symbolic subordination to a dominant primary city within a regional network (Boisen et al., 2018). Rebranding these cities requires shifting the paradigm from competition on scale to competition on authenticity and niche appeal. The advent of smart tourism destinations—characterized by the integration of ICTs, IoT, and cloud computing into destination management—provides a unique opportunity for secondary cities (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2013). Gretzel et al. (2015) argue that smart tourism enhances destination competitiveness by facilitating real-time value co-creation between the tourist and the destination. Through digital storytelling, augmented reality (AR) heritage tours, and targeted social media campaigns, secondary cities can project a massive digital soft power footprint that outweighs their physical geographic limitations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To capture both the behavioral metrics of tourists and the strategic perspectives of destination managers, this study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The initial quantitative phase involved a large-scale survey of international tourists to measure the impact of cultural heritage and digital engagement on destination soft power. The subsequent qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with key stakeholders to contextualize the survey results and explore managerial challenges.

3.2 Quantitative Phase (Data Collection and Measurement)

The target population comprised international tourists who visited at least one of three secondary cities in Tuscany—Arezzo, Pistoia, and Lucca—between April and September 2025. These cities were selected because they possess UNESCO-recognized or high-value cultural heritage but receive less than 20% of the overnight stays recorded in Florence.

A self-administered, multi-lingual digital questionnaire was distributed via QR codes placed at major heritage sites, local hotels, and tourist information centers. A total of 450 valid responses were collected. The survey instrument utilized 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) adapted from validated scales in prior research. The constructs measured included:

- **Cultural Authenticity (CA):** Adapted from Seyfi et al. (2020).
- **Digital Engagement (DE):** Adapted from Buhalis and Amaranggana (2013).
- **Perceived Soft Power (PSP):** Adapted from Anttiroiko (2014).
- **Behavioral Intention / Destination Loyalty (BI):** Adapted from Richards (2018).

Data was analyzed using SPSS 28.0, utilizing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019).

3.3 Qualitative Phase

To gain deeper strategic insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 purposively selected stakeholders, including DMO directors, municipal tourism counselors, and cultural heritage curators in the three target cities. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), allowing for the identification of recurring structural barriers and strategic innovations.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Quantitative Findings

4.1.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1 outlines the demographic profile of the survey respondents. The sample reflects a diverse international tourist base, predominantly comprising highly educated travelers, which aligns with typical cultural tourism demographics.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents ($N = 450$)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	212	47.1
	Female	230	51.1
	Prefer not to say	8	1.8
Age	18–25	65	14.4
	26–35	142	31.6
	36–50	158	35.1
	51+	85	18.9
Origin	Europe (Non-Italy)	195	43.3
	North America	135	30.0
	Asia-Pacific	85	18.9
	Other	35	7.8
City Visited	Lucca	185	41.1
	Arezzo	145	32.2
	Pistoia	120	26.7

4.1.2 Correlation and Multiple Regression Analysis

A Pearson correlation matrix confirmed significant positive relationships between all major constructs. Cultural Authenticity ($r = .68, p < .01$) and Digital Engagement ($r = .59, p < .01$) both showed strong positive correlations with Perceived Soft Power.

To test the predictive power of the independent variables on the destination's Perceived Soft Power, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The model summary (Table 2) indicates that Cultural Authenticity and Digital Engagement account for 64.2% of the variance in Perceived Soft Power ($R^2 = .642, F = 158.4, p < .001$).

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis predicting Perceived Soft Power

Predictor Variables	Unstandardized β	Standardized β	t-value	p-value	VIF
(Constant)	1.102	-	4.15	.000	-

Predictor Variables	Unstandardized β	Standardized β	t-value	p-value	VIF
Cultural Authenticity (CA)	0.514	0.488	10.22	.000	1.45
Digital Engagement (DE)	0.385	0.342	7.85	.000	1.45

Note: Dependent Variable = Perceived Soft Power; $R^2 = .642$*; Adjusted* $R^2 = .638$

Furthermore, a mediation analysis (using Hayes' PROCESS macro) revealed that Perceived Soft Power fully mediates the relationship between Digital Engagement and Behavioral Intention (Loyalty). This implies that smart tourism tools do not simply generate return visits on their own; rather, they function by enhancing the city's overall soft power and cultural allure.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The thematic analysis of the 15 stakeholder interviews yielded three overarching themes regarding the challenges and strategies of rebranding secondary cities.

Theme 1: The Struggle for Narrative Distinctiveness Despite possessing world-class assets (e.g., Piero della Francesca's frescoes in Arezzo), secondary cities struggle to differentiate themselves from the overarching "Tuscan" brand, which is heavily monopolized by Florence.

"Our biggest challenge is the shadow of the Renaissance capital. Tourists arrive in Tuscany expecting Florence. When they come to Pistoia, we cannot just be 'a smaller Florence.' We must rebrand our heritage around our distinct medieval industrial history and slower pace of life. That is our unique soft power." — (Interviewee #4, DMO Executive, Pistoia).

Theme 2: Digital Capacity and Infrastructure Gaps While the quantitative data highlighted the importance of Digital Engagement, stakeholders expressed frustration over the lack of integrated smart tourism infrastructure. Many secondary cities rely on fragmented, underfunded digital campaigns.

"We have a wealth of culture, but our digital storytelling is decades behind. We tried launching an AR app for the Roman amphitheater, but poor municipal Wi-Fi and lack of sustained marketing meant low adoption. Soft power today requires digital omnipresence, which requires serious technological investment." — (Interviewee #9, Cultural Curator, Lucca).

Theme 3: Transitioning from Preservation to Experience Stakeholders recognized that cultural heritage alone is a passive asset. To transform it into active soft power, the heritage must be experiential.

"We stopped marketing Arezzo purely for its static monuments. We now rebrand around events—like the Joust of the Saracens (Giostra del Saraceno) and the monthly Antiques Fair. We use social media influencers to broadcast these living traditions globally. Culture must be a lived experience to exert influence." — (Interviewee #12, Tourism Counselor, Arezzo).

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the mechanics of city branding for secondary urban centers, confirming the theories of Dinnie (2011) and Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) while injecting new perspectives from the smart tourism paradigm (Gretzel et al., 2015).

The quantitative results demonstrate that Cultural Authenticity remains the bedrock of a city's soft power. However, the high beta coefficient for Digital Engagement ($\beta = .342$) proves that in the modern tourism landscape, heritage alone is insufficient. Secondary cities cannot rely on organic discovery; they must proactively project their identity into the digital sphere. The qualitative data contextualizes this, revealing that secondary cities suffer from a "visibility deficit" that can only be overcome through strategic digital storytelling and smart infrastructure.

5.1 The Cultural Soft Power Model for Secondary Cities (CSPM-SC)

Based on the synthesis of our findings, we propose the *Cultural Soft Power Model for Secondary Cities (CSPM-SC)*. This model suggests that rebranding secondary cities requires a tripartite approach:

1. **Narrative Decoupling:** Secondary cities must decouple their brand from the dominant regional primary city. Instead of offering a "cheaper alternative" to Florence, cities like Lucca and Arezzo must cultivate highly niche identities (e.g., Lucca as the city of music and medieval walls; Arezzo as the capital of antiquities and immersive historical reenactments).

2. **Digital Amplification (Smart Soft Power):** Leveraging IoT, augmented reality, and localized big data to turn static monuments into interactive digital experiences. The qualitative interviews highlighted that digital soft power bridges the geographic gap, allowing secondary cities to reach tourists during the trip-planning phase before they default to booking in primary hubs.

3. **Experiential Governance:** Shifting public administration priorities from mere heritage preservation to dynamic heritage activation. This involves public-private partnerships where local businesses, artisans, and tech startups collaborate to co-create the destination brand.

This model directly aligns with the assertion by Richards (2018) that contemporary cultural tourism relies on active participation rather than passive observation.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate how secondary cities in Tuscany can utilize cultural heritage as a soft power asset for strategic rebranding in the smart tourism era. The empirical evidence robustly supports the premise that secondary cities can successfully circumvent the gravitational pull of hyper-tourist primary hubs by combining authentic cultural narratives with robust digital engagement.

6.1 Managerial Implications

For Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and municipal policymakers, the implications are twofold. First, budgetary allocations must shift from traditional print marketing to the development of smart tourism infrastructures, such as interactive digital platforms, robust municipal Wi-Fi, and data-driven marketing campaigns. Second, DMOs must stop operating in silos. The rebranding of a secondary city requires an integrated ecosystem approach where technology providers, local historians, and tourism operators unify under a single, coherent brand narrative.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides foundational insights, it is subject to certain limitations. The geographic focus on Tuscany means the findings may be culturally specific to the Italian context, where historical heritage is exceptionally dense. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the survey data limits the ability to track long-term behavioral changes.

Future research should look to apply the CSPM-SC model longitudinally and across different geographical contexts—such as secondary cities in Southeast Asia or Eastern Europe. Additionally, as Artificial Intelligence (AI) begins to dominate search and travel planning, future studies presented at forums like ICCMETS should investigate how generative AI impacts the digital soft power of lesser-known cultural destinations.

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