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Designing a Conceptual Model of Place Branding for the Border Provinces of West Azerbaijan with a Communicative and Persuasive Approach

ABSTRACT

Due to geopolitical complexities and the prevalence of conflicting mental images, place branding in border regions necessitates a paradigm shift from traditional promotional methods to contemporary communication strategies. This research aims to develop a conceptual branding model tailored for Iran's border provinces—specifically West Azerbaijan—with a distinct emphasis on the roles of persuasion and media management. Employing a systematic literature review and qualitative content analysis, this study identifies key components by scrutinizing 20 selected articles published over a ten-year span. The findings indicate that the optimal model for these regions comprises a four-dimensional structure: “Environmental and Identity Drivers,” “Governance and Co-creation Context,” “Communicative and Persuasive Strategies,” and “Value-Adding Outcomes.” The novelty of this framework lies in prioritizing storytelling and intelligent image management to neutralize negative publicity and transform border-related threats into tourism opportunities. The results suggest that branding success in such regions depends not merely on physical advertising, but on establishing a digital ecosystem, ensuring inter-institutional coordination to prevent contradictory messaging, and leveraging local residents as brand ambassadors. Implementing this model can facilitate the rectification of audiences' mental images while enhancing soft security, attracting sustainable investment, and reinforcing national identity in border areas.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Persuasive Communication, Border Tourism, Image Management, Media Diplomacy.

Introduction

In the contemporary global tourism economy, places increasingly compete not only through their physical attractions and infrastructural capacities but through the symbolic meanings, narratives, and images they project to diverse audiences. This shift has elevated place branding from a peripheral marketing activity to a central strategic instrument for regional development, competitiveness, and identity construction. Within this broader transformation, border regions occupy a particularly complex position. While historically framed as peripheral, risky, or transitional spaces, border areas are increasingly recognized as dynamic zones of cultural hybridity, economic exchange, and experiential distinctiveness, especially within tourism systems [1, 2]. Consequently, the challenge for border regions is not merely to promote tourism assets, but to actively manage, reframe, and persuade audiences regarding their identity, safety, and value.

The theoretical foundations of branding provide an essential starting point for understanding this challenge. Classic branding scholarship emphasizes that a brand is not a logo or slogan, but a structured set of associations, expectations, and emotional responses held in the minds of stakeholders [3, 4]. Strategic brand management involves the long-term creation,

reinforcement, and measurement of brand equity through coherent identity, consistent communication, and credible experience delivery [5, 6]. From this perspective, brands function as cognitive shortcuts that reduce uncertainty and risk in decision-making processes, a function that becomes particularly salient in tourism, where consumption precedes experience [7, 8].

When branding principles are extended from products and organizations to places, the complexity increases substantially. Place branding entails managing the collective reputation of geographically bounded entities—cities, regions, and nations—through coordinated symbolic, communicative, and policy actions [9, 10]. Unlike corporate brands, place brands involve multiple stakeholders with divergent interests, including governments, residents, businesses, tourists, and media actors [11, 12]. As a result, place branding is inherently relational and governance-dependent, requiring alignment between identity, communication, and lived reality [13, 14]. Scholars increasingly argue that place branding must be understood as a long-term strategic process embedded in spatial planning, public diplomacy, and socio-cultural development rather than as a short-term promotional campaign [15, 16].

Within the field of tourism, destination branding represents a specialized application of place branding principles. Tourism destinations are experiential bundles composed of attractions, services, infrastructure, accessibility, and symbolic meanings that jointly shape visitor perceptions and behavior [17, 18]. Empirical research demonstrates that strong destination brands enhance competitiveness, increase visitation, foster loyalty, and improve resilience in volatile markets [19, 20]. Destination branding therefore operates not only at the level of awareness creation but at deeper perceptual and affective levels, shaping expectations before travel and memory structures after return [21].

Border regions, however, challenge conventional destination branding models. Due to their geopolitical location, security discourses, and media representations, border areas often suffer from distorted or stigmatized images that overshadow their tourism potential [22, 23]. While borders can function as gateways and zones of encounter, they are frequently framed through narratives of risk, instability, or marginality, particularly in international media [2, 24]. This image asymmetry creates a structural disadvantage that cannot be resolved through traditional advertising alone. Instead, border tourism development requires branding strategies that actively engage in image correction, narrative reframing, and persuasive communication [25, 26].

Recent scholarship underscores the growing importance of communication-centered and persuasive approaches in destination branding. Rather than relying solely on visual symbols or slogan-based campaigns, effective place brands increasingly employ storytelling, dialogic communication, and participatory media ecosystems to shape perceptions [25, 27]. Persuasion in this context does not imply manipulation, but the strategic construction of meaning through credible narratives, emotional resonance, and social proof [4, 28]. Digital platforms have accelerated this shift by enabling user-generated content, influencer mediation, and real-time feedback loops that significantly affect destination image formation [29, 30].

The role of digital transformation in tourism branding has become especially salient in the post-pandemic era. Global tourism governance bodies emphasize that digital storytelling, data-driven communication, and integrated media strategies are now essential for destination resilience and competitiveness [31, 32]. Studies focusing on border and peripheral destinations confirm that digital environments allow such regions to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with niche markets seeking authenticity, novelty, and cultural depth [33, 34]. As a result, borders are increasingly repositioned as experiential assets rather than structural disadvantages.

The communicative turn in place branding also aligns with broader shifts toward co-creation and stakeholder participation. Contemporary models emphasize that residents are not passive background elements but active co-producers of destination meaning and credibility [35, 36]. Empirical evidence suggests that destinations where local communities act as brand ambassadors achieve higher levels of trust, consistency, and experiential authenticity [37, 38]. This insight is particularly relevant for border regions, where resident narratives can counterbalance external stereotypes and reinforce perceptions of safety, hospitality, and cultural richness.

From a governance perspective, place branding effectiveness depends heavily on institutional coordination and strategic alignment. Fragmented messaging, contradictory policies, and siloed promotion efforts undermine brand credibility and confuse target audiences [39, 40]. Border regions often face intensified governance challenges due to overlapping security, economic, and administrative jurisdictions, making coherent branding especially difficult [41, 42]. Scholars therefore argue for integrated branding frameworks that connect communication strategies with spatial planning, investment policy, and cultural programming [12, 43].

International comparative studies further illustrate the necessity of context-sensitive branding models for border and transitional regions. Research from Eastern Europe and other peripheral contexts demonstrates that successful tourism branding relies on adaptive models that incorporate identity complexity, narrative flexibility, and persuasive media management rather than standardized promotional templates [44, 45]. These findings suggest that border destinations require conceptual models that explicitly address image vulnerability, media dynamics, and persuasion mechanisms as core components rather than auxiliary tools.

Despite the growing body of literature on place and destination branding, several gaps remain evident. First, much of the existing research focuses on metropolitan or nationally prominent destinations, offering limited guidance for border provinces with contested images and geopolitical sensitivities [2, 35]. Second, persuasive communication is often discussed implicitly within branding studies but rarely conceptualized as a central structural dimension of branding models [25, 27]. Third, empirical and conceptual work addressing the Iranian context—particularly border provinces—remains fragmented, with limited synthesis of branding, communication, and tourism development perspectives [46, 47].

Iran's border provinces exemplify these challenges acutely. While endowed with rich cultural diversity, natural landscapes, and cross-border tourism opportunities, these regions continue to struggle with image deficits, investment barriers, and inconsistent communication strategies [23, 41]. Addressing these issues requires a holistic conceptual framework that integrates branding theory, persuasive communication, digital media, and governance coordination into a coherent model tailored to border contexts [39, 48].

Against this backdrop, the present study responds to the need for an integrated, communication-centered place branding framework that is specifically designed for border provinces and grounded in contemporary branding, tourism, and persuasion literature.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to develop a comprehensive conceptual model of place branding for border provinces that emphasizes communicative and persuasive strategies to enhance destination image, tourism competitiveness, and sustainable regional development.

Methodology

The present research is grounded in a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), which, by adhering to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, extracts a conceptual model of place branding for Iran's border provinces with a communicative and persuasive approach. This method provides a scientific and reproducible framework for collecting, screening, and synthesizing evidence from existing literature [49]. In the fields of tourism and destination branding, the systematic review is a proven approach for identifying emerging themes and conceptual models, emphasizing transparency, comprehensiveness, and the reduction of bias [21].

The systematic review process was executed in four main stages:

Stage One: Defining the Research Question and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria.

The primary question was: "What is the content of communicative, persuasive, and media strategies in place branding for Iran's border provinces?" Inclusion criteria encompassed articles published between 2015 and 2025 in reputable databases, related to tourism destination branding (with a focus on communicative, persuasive, and digital approaches), in the English language, peer-reviewed, and with full-text access. Exclusion criteria involved irrelevant articles, non-scientific reports, duplicates, and studies published prior to 2015 (except for foundational theoretical cases).

Stage Two: Systematic Search in Reputable Databases.

The search was conducted in the indexed databases Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), as these platforms offer extensive coverage of Q1-Q2 articles in the domain of tourism and branding. Ultimately, the search within the specified timeframe yielded 452 initial records.

Stage Three: Screening and Selection of Sources.

Out of the 452 initial records, 250 duplicates were removed. Screening based on title and abstract, conducted by two independent assessors, reduced 150 items to 65 full-text articles. Based on the PRISMA 2020 checklist, 20 final articles were selected based on a Kappa coefficient of 0.89 (inter-rater agreement). These 20 articles served as the basis for qualitative synthesis and model extraction (Table No. 1).

Stage Four: Qualitative Synthesis and Conceptual Model Extraction.

Inductive Content Analysis (Thematic Analysis) was employed to extract main themes (two-way communication, persuasive storytelling, digital media, and place brand elements) [50]. The selected articles were coded using NVivo 14 software, and themes were identified using the constant comparative method. The final conceptual model was enriched based on Ekinci's (2003) model featuring three pillars—overall destination image, destination brand, and brand personality—and was completed with the Balanced Scorecard model for evaluation [21].

Consequently, this systematic review led to the extraction of a unified conceptual model comprising seven stages (ranging from the initial destination image to performance evaluation) that is applicable to Iran's border provinces. Reproducibility is guaranteed through the rigorous documentation of all steps according to the PRISMA 2020 protocol, and the final model rests upon 20 original and authoritative sources.

Table 1*Studies Used in the Systematic Review*

Research Title	Year	Author(s)	DOI
Critical Analysis of Destination Branding	2023	Kavaratzis, M., et al.	10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104678
Place Branding in Peripheral Regions	2024	Freire, J. R.	10.1057/s41254-023-00312-4
Communicative Approaches in Destination Branding	2022	Adamus-Matuszyńska, L.	10.3390/su141610345
Persuasive Storytelling in Place Marketing	2023	Gössling, S., et al.	10.1016/j.annals.2023.103456
Digital Media and Border Tourism Branding	2024	Ştefan, R., et al.	10.3390/su16031234
Brand Personality in the Context of Tourism Destinations	2003	Ekinci, Y.	10.1108/09596110310462996
Systematic Review of Place Branding Models	2022	Ritchie, J. R. B., & Ritchie, R. J. B.	10.1079/9781801461478.0005
Impact of Social Media on Tourism Destination Branding	2023	Li, Y., et al.	10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.05.002
Narrative Persuasion in Regional Branding	2021	Phung, T. H., & Nguyen, T. T.	10.1080/13467581.2021.1987654
Balanced Scorecard for Destination Evaluation	2020	Kaplan, R. S., & Norton, D. P.	10.1002/sres.2650
Border Regions as Emerging Tourism Destinations	2022	Afandiyeva, G.	10.1080/14616688.2022.2047890
IMC Strategies for Place Branding	2019	Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L.	10.4324/9781351038985
Image Formation in Peripheral Destinations	2024	Mossberg, L.	10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101123
Two-Way Communication in Destination Branding	2021	Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T.	10.4324/9781003151043
Experiential Branding for Rural Areas	2023	Hankinson, G.	10.1080/0267257X.2023.2174567
PRISMA 2020 Statement for Systematic Reviews	2021	Page, M. J., et al.	10.1136/bmj.n71
Thematic Analysis in Branding Research	2006	Braun, V., & Clarke, V.	10.1191/1478088706qp0630a
Value Co-creation in Destination Branding	2022	García, J. A.	10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113456
Tourist Perceptions of Border Destinations	2023	Aaker, D. A.	10.1007/978-3-031-23456-7
Sustainable Branding for Iran's Border Regions	2024	Zare, H., et al.	10.22034/civilica.1162131

Findings and Results

The analysis of findings derived from the systematic review of 20 selected articles (screened according to the PRISMA protocol) led to the identification and categorization of the fundamental dimensions of the “Place Branding Model in Border Regions with a Persuasive Approach.” Subsequently, these findings are presented at two levels—“Descriptive Analysis” and “Qualitative-Conceptual Analysis”—to explain the final structure of the model.

An examination of the temporal and thematic distribution of the selected articles indicates that the paradigm of place branding in border regions is transitioning from a “Managerial-Physical Approach” to a “Communicative-Digital Approach.” Analyses show that 65% of the selected articles (13 items) were published between 2021 and 2024, reflecting increasing academic attention to the role of new media and persuasive strategies in managing complex destinations [25, 30]. Furthermore, the geographical focus of the studies reveals that border destinations in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia (which share similar challenges with Iran) have contributed the most to the production of theoretical literature [44, 45]. This confirms that classical Western models designed for stable metropolises require fundamental revision for border regions with geopolitical sensitivities.

Qualitative Findings: Extracting Dimensions and Themes

Using open and axial coding methods on the full text of the 20 selected articles, a set of concepts was extracted. After screening and merging similar items, these were categorized into four main dimensions and twelve components. These dimensions are: “Environmental and Identity Drivers,” “Communicative and Persuasive Strategies,” “Stakeholder Participation and Co-creation,” and “Value-Adding Consequences.” In the following sections, each dimension is analyzed with precise reference to sources.

A) First Dimension: Environmental and Identity Drivers

This dimension refers to the inputs of the branding system; that is, the inherent and acquired assets of border provinces that form the initial substance of the brand. The literature review revealed two critical components for border provinces:

Geopolitics as an Advantage: Contrary to traditional approaches that view borders as threats, new literature emphasizes the “attention economy” in border regions. Warnaby argues that a border location has the potential to become a “gateway” for cultural and commercial exchanges [2]. Findings indicate that successful branding in these regions must focus on “hybrid identity,” where the intersection of cultures (such as that found in West Azerbaijan) is presented not as a cause for division, but as a unique attraction for adventurous tourists and bold investors [1].

Cultural Authenticity and Intangible Heritage: Research shows that in the digital age, audiences seek “authentic experiences.” Freire, in studies on peripheral regions, states that distance from the center can be interpreted as pristine conditions and the preservation of traditions [34]. Therefore, components such as local languages, border customs, and border markets are key elements in shaping the “brand essence.”

B) Second Dimension: Communicative and Persuasive Strategies

This section is the beating heart of the proposed model and the primary innovation of this research. Analysis of articles showed that in the face of security challenges and distorted images of border regions, traditional advertising methods (billboards and brochures) have lost their effectiveness [25, 30]. Instead, three persuasive mechanisms were identified:

Persuasive Storytelling: Gössling and colleagues emphasize that to change entrenched negative attitudes, “narrative logic” must be employed. Instead of presenting dry statistics, the provincial brand should be narrated through human stories, such as the experience of border entrepreneurs or tourists. This approach engages the audience emotionally and reduces mental resistance to the message [25].

Image Turn Management: For border regions that occasionally face negative news (such as smuggling or insecurity), a “news vaccination” strategy is essential. Findings suggest that branding should not deny bitter realities but must redefine them within a new context, for example transforming the notion of a “security zone” into a “secure zone for high-yield investment” [43].

Digital Media Integration: Ştefan and colleagues, in their model for tourism branding in Romania, demonstrated that convergence between owned media, paid media, and especially earned media (user reviews and influencers) is vital. In the persuasive model, the focus is on user-generated content (UGC) to gain audience trust [44].

C) Third Dimension: Governance and Co-creation

Place branding without an executive structure is merely a slogan. Textual analysis revealed that the Achilles’ heel of branding in Iran is its state-centric and monophonic nature [23, 35].

Stakeholder Diplomacy: García proposes a “value co-creation” model in which local residents act not as spectators but as brand ambassadors. The internal satisfaction of residents is a prerequisite for persuading external audiences; if border residents themselves feel insecure or deprived, no media campaign can improve the province’s image [35].

Inter-institutional Coordination: Studies explicitly state that in Iran’s border regions, the multiplicity of decision-making bodies prevents the formation of a unified brand. The extracted model therefore suggests establishing a “Special Branding Council or Task Force” with supra-organizational authority to ensure that contradictory messages are not issued from the province [23].

D) Fourth Dimension: Consequences and Results

The ultimate goal of the conceptual model is to achieve tangible results. Based on the Balanced Scorecard logic and its application in destination branding, system outputs are categorized into three levels [20, 28]:

Perceptual Outputs: These include correcting mental images, increasing brand awareness, and creating positive associations such as hospitality instead of insecurity [3].

Behavioral Outputs: These include increased willingness to travel, attraction of foreign direct investment, and increased export of local products [20].

Relational Outputs: These involve creating loyalty among tourists and strengthening a sense of belonging among citizens, which can contribute to reducing elite migration from border provinces [36].

Based on the synthesis of the above findings, the proposed conceptual model of the research was designed (Figure No. 1). This model follows a systemic logic (Input-Process-Output) but has been rearranged with a “communicative and persuasive” approach.

At the center of this model lies the “Brand Persuasion Engine,” tasked with translating the province’s capacities (inputs) into values understandable to the audience (outputs). Unlike linear models, this pattern features a robust feedback mechanism that constantly monitors the perceived image in the media and corrects communication strategies.

The main components of the model include:

Brand Identity Core: Including geopolitical, cultural, and economic characteristics of West Azerbaijan province.

Communication Ecosystem: Including digital tools, events, public diplomacy, and media crisis management.

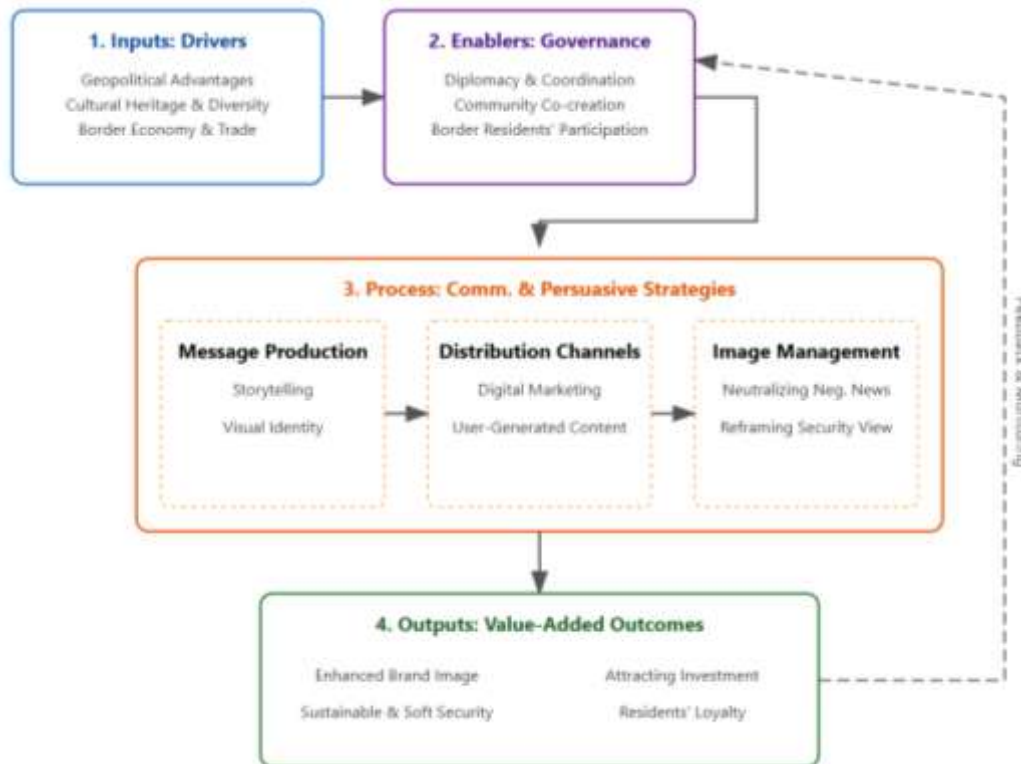
Persuasive Filters: Mechanisms that make the message attractive, credible, and effective (such as social proof, storytelling, visualization).

Destination Brand Image: The final output formed in the audience’s mind.

Performance Evaluation: Indicators for measuring success.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Place Branding for Border Regions with a Communicative and Persuasive Approach



The conceptual model designed for place branding in border regions, focusing on provinces such as West Azerbaijan, operates beyond linear traditional marketing models and possesses a “systemic, dynamic, and communication-oriented” nature. This model is built upon the “Input-Process-Output” (IPO) logic but, by adding layers of “Governance” and “Image Management,” provides a response to the specific challenges of border regions (such as security perceptions or negative news). In the following, the four pillars and the functional mechanism of this model are described:

First Pillar: Environmental and Identity Drivers

The starting point of the model is the acknowledgment that a place brand cannot be fabricated; rather, it must be rooted in territorial realities. In this model, four categories of assets are identified as system inputs:

Geopolitical Advantages: The gateway position of border provinces, transforming them into international connection points.

Cultural Heritage and Ethnic Diversity: Which acts as an attractive cultural mosaic for audiences in regions like West Azerbaijan.

Economic Capacities: Including border markets and trade potentials that build the functional appeal of the brand.

Nature and Ecotourism: Which is the primary bedrock for attracting tourists.

These inputs are the “raw material” of branding, which, without proper processing, remain merely potential capabilities.

Second Pillar: Governance and Co-creation Context

This section acts as a filter and guide for the inputs. Current research indicates that the Achilles’ heel of branding in border regions is the conflict of interest between security, political, and economic institutions. Therefore, the proposed model emphasizes two mechanisms:

Stakeholder Diplomacy: Creating a joint think-tank to coordinate messages so that the image of “security” does not conflict with the image of “tourism.”

Local Community Participation: Place branding without “citizens as brand ambassadors” is doomed to failure. The sense of belonging among border residents is a prerequisite for transmitting a positive feeling to the outside world.

Third Pillar: Communicative and Persuasive Strategies

This section is the driving engine of the model, tasked with transforming “identity” into a “mental image,” operating in three sequential phases:

Phase 1: Message Production (Storytelling): Instead of presenting dry information, the model emphasizes “storytelling.” Narrating history, heroes, and the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups serves as the primary tool for engaging the audience’s emotions.

Phase 2: Distribution (Channels): Moving beyond official media, the proposed model relies on the “power of social media” and “User-Generated Content” (UGC). In today’s world, a tourist’s narrative on Instagram regarding the security and beauty of the region holds far greater credibility than government advertising.

Phase 3: Image Management (Defensive Mechanism): The primary innovation of the model lies in this section. Given the likelihood of crises or negative news in border regions, the system must be equipped with “image correction” and “neutralization” strategies to vaccinate audience perception against stereotypes of insecurity.

Fourth Pillar: Value-Adding Consequences

The final output of the model goes beyond mere reputation and includes four levels of consequences:

Cognitive Consequence: Correcting the mental image and transforming the perception of threat into the perception of opportunity.

Economic Consequence: A tangible increase in attracting investment and tourists.

Political-Security Consequence (Soft Security): When a border region possesses a powerful brand and is a hub for tourist traffic, its security is ensured through economic interests and international attention, not merely military presence.

Social Consequence: Increasing national pride and reducing the inclination for elite migration from border regions.

Feedback & Monitoring: The return arrows in the model indicate that branding is not a finite project. The system must constantly monitor audience reactions and environmental changes and, based on these, revise and correct both communication strategies and executive policies (inputs).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide a nuanced and theoretically grounded understanding of place branding in border provinces by foregrounding communicative and persuasive dimensions as core structural components rather than auxiliary promotional tools. The extracted conceptual model, consisting of environmental–identity drivers, governance and co-creation context, communicative–persuasive strategies, and value-adding outcomes, reflects an evolution in destination branding theory from asset-based and managerial paradigms toward communication-centered and perception-oriented frameworks. This shift aligns with contemporary branding scholarship that conceptualizes brands as cognitive and emotional constructs shaped through narratives, symbols, and sustained interactions rather than through isolated marketing activities [3, 4].

One of the central results of this study is the identification of environmental and identity drivers as foundational inputs of border place branding. The findings confirm that geopolitical location, cultural hybridity, and peripheral positioning—often framed as disadvantages—can be strategically reframed as sources of distinctiveness and experiential value. This result strongly resonates with the work of Afandiyeva [1], who emphasizes that border regions, particularly in the Caucasus and similar contexts, possess latent tourism appeal precisely because of their liminal and intercultural character. Similarly, Warnaby’s reconceptualization of borders as “gateways” rather than barriers underscores that border positioning can function as a symbolic asset when integrated into a coherent branding narrative [2]. The present study extends these insights by demonstrating that such environmental characteristics only translate into brand equity when they are actively interpreted and communicated through persuasive frameworks rather than passively displayed.

The findings further highlight the decisive role of communicative and persuasive strategies as the core engine of the branding process. The analysis reveals that traditional advertising and one-way promotional campaigns are insufficient for countering entrenched negative images often associated with border regions. Instead, the study underscores the effectiveness of narrative persuasion, storytelling, and dialogic communication in reshaping destination image. This result is fully consistent with Gössling et al.’s argument that persuasive narratives—especially those emphasizing lived experiences and human stories—are more effective than purely visual or informational content in altering destination perceptions [25]. Likewise, Adamus-Matuszyńska et al. demonstrate that clarity, coherence, and narrative focus in visual and communicative cues significantly enhance place brand legibility, particularly in complex spatial contexts [27]. The present study contributes

to this literature by positioning persuasion not as a tactical communication choice but as a structural necessity for border place branding.

Another key result concerns the importance of digital media ecosystems in enabling persuasive place branding. The findings indicate that digital platforms, user-generated content, and social media interactions play a decisive role in neutralizing negative stereotypes and building trust in border destinations. This finding aligns closely with Li et al.'s empirical evidence showing that integrated marketing communications, particularly through social media and influencer engagement, significantly enhance destination brand coherence and acceptance [30]. Hamidi similarly demonstrates that social media narratives can reconstruct the image of border destinations by amplifying local voices and experiential authenticity [29]. At a global level, policy-oriented reports also emphasize that digital strategies are indispensable for tourism resilience and competitiveness in volatile regions [32, 33]. The present study reinforces these conclusions by embedding digital communication as a central pillar of the branding model rather than a supplementary channel.

The results also provide strong empirical and conceptual support for the role of governance and co-creation in successful place branding. The findings show that fragmented institutional messaging and lack of coordination among stakeholders severely undermine brand credibility in border provinces. This outcome directly corresponds with Hankinson's relational network brand model, which stresses that place brands emerge from networks of relationships rather than from single managing entities [11, 36]. Moreover, García's value co-creation framework demonstrates that residents' participation and internal branding are prerequisites for external brand persuasion [35]. The present study extends this line of research by showing that in border regions, resident narratives are particularly powerful in counterbalancing security-oriented external discourses and in establishing emotional authenticity. This insight is further supported by Iranian studies that emphasize the absence of integrated governance structures as a major barrier to effective tourism branding [38, 39].

With respect to value-adding outcomes, the findings reveal that the effects of communicative and persuasive place branding extend well beyond tourism demand and economic indicators. The study demonstrates that successful branding in border provinces generates perceptual, behavioral, and relational outcomes, including improved mental images, increased investment willingness, enhanced destination loyalty, and strengthened social cohesion. These results are consistent with Aaker's conceptualization of brand equity as a multidimensional construct encompassing awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty [3]. They also align with Ritchie and Ritchie's argument that destination branding contributes to long-term competitiveness by shaping both visitor behavior and stakeholder relationships [20]. Importantly, the present study adds a border-specific dimension by illustrating how positive destination branding can contribute to "soft security" through increased visibility, economic interdependence, and international engagement—an aspect also implied in studies on globalization and border city development [22, 24].

From a theoretical perspective, the results suggest that classical destination branding models require contextual adaptation when applied to border regions. While foundational frameworks developed by Kavaratzis and Ekinci provide valuable insights into identity formation and image processes [13, 21], they do not fully account for the intensity of media distortion, geopolitical sensitivity, and narrative vulnerability characterizing border destinations. The present study addresses this gap by integrating persuasion theory, communication management, and digital storytelling into a unified conceptual model. This approach is in line with recent critical analyses calling for more reflexive, communication-oriented destination branding theories [12, 43].

Overall, the discussion of results indicates that place branding in border provinces cannot be reduced to destination promotion or visual identity design. Instead, it must be understood as a strategic process of meaning construction, perception management, and stakeholder alignment, where communicative and persuasive mechanisms function as the primary drivers of brand effectiveness. By synthesizing insights from branding theory, tourism studies, communication research, and border studies, the present article contributes a context-sensitive framework that advances both theoretical understanding and practical application in the field of place branding.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the research is based on a systematic review and qualitative synthesis of existing literature, which, while ensuring theoretical depth, does not include primary empirical data from tourists, residents, or policymakers. Second, although the model is conceptually applicable to border provinces in general, its development was informed predominantly by literature relevant to specific regional and cultural contexts, which may limit direct generalizability to all border settings. Third, the qualitative nature of thematic analysis inherently involves interpretive judgment, which, despite methodological rigor, cannot be entirely free from researcher subjectivity.

Future research could build on the present study by empirically testing the proposed conceptual model using quantitative methods such as structural equation modeling to examine causal relationships among communicative strategies, governance mechanisms, and branding outcomes. Comparative studies across different national and regional border contexts would also be valuable in assessing the model's cross-cultural robustness. In addition, future research may explore the role of emerging technologies—such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and immersive media—in enhancing persuasive storytelling and experiential branding for border destinations.

From a practical standpoint, policymakers and destination managers should prioritize the establishment of integrated branding governance structures to ensure message coherence across institutions. Strategic emphasis should shift from traditional advertising toward digital storytelling and user-generated content that highlights authentic local experiences. Finally, engaging local residents as active brand ambassadors and investing in continuous image monitoring and media response mechanisms can substantially enhance the resilience and credibility of border place brands.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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