

INFO - 204

UDK 316.77:008

<https://doi.org/10.63191/mcpr.17.1.6>

ORIGINALNI ZNANSTVENI RAD /
ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND LOCAL IDENTITY BEARERS: COMMUNICATIVE DIMENSIONS OF IMAGE BUILDING IN ISTRIA AND KVARNER

Krešimir Dabo

*Department for Cultural and Island Studies
Institute for Migration Research
Trg Stjepana Radića 3, 10000 Zagreb
kresimir.dabo@imin.hr*

Danijel Knežević

*Algebra Bernays University
Gradišćanska 24, 10000 Zagreb
danijel.knezevic@algebra.hr*

Dejan Gluvačević

*Algebra Bernays University
Gradišćanska 24, 10000 Zagreb
dejan.gluvacevic@bernays.hr*

ABSTRACT: This study investigates the role of cultural heritage in shaping regional identity and place image in Istria and Kvarner, with a focus on its communicative function in spatial representation and destination branding. The research aims to examine how local heritage bearers perceive cultural heritage as an identity marker and how they evaluate its use in regional promotion. Empirical data were collected through an online survey conducted among 236 residents actively involved in cultural and heritage associations in Istria and Kvarner. The results indicate that respondents associate their regions with a diverse range of cultural symbols, reflecting a pluralistic and layered understanding of regional identity rather than reliance on a single emblematic element. Cultural heritage is widely perceived as a reflection of local identity, and respondents recognize the local population as an important factor in its preservation and communication. While heritage is considered sufficiently present in promotional materials, respondents emphasize the necessity of authentic and context-sensitive representation and express concerns over folklorization. The findings further highlight the perceived importance of inter-institutional cooperation among local authorities, cultural institutions, tourist boards, and educational organizations in sustaining and promoting regional cultural identity. Although many respondents expressed conditional willingness to participate in heritage-related initiatives, engagement depended on transparent communication and tangible community benefits. The study contributes to research on cultural heritage and destination communication by demonstrating that regional identity and image are continuously negotiated through communicative practices, underscoring the need for inclusive, locally grounded, and sustainable approaches to heritage-based regional branding.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Heritage, Image Building, Istria and Kvarner, Local Identity Bearers, Spatial Representation

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary communication and promotional strategies aimed at representing a specific geographical area, particularly one under significant touristic usage, critical questions arise regarding the selection and framing of communicative elements. This issue is especially pertinent in regions rich in cultural heritage, encompassing both tangible and intangible cultural assets. Although the sun and sea remain the most frequently used and commercially dominant narratives in attracting visitors to coastal areas, regions such as Istria and Kvarner offer a wealth of heritage resources. The preservation, cultivation, and interpretation of these resources depend not only on professional heritage institutions but also, often significantly, on the local population, who serve as the primary bearers of cultural heritage. This article aims to explore the perspectives of residents, those who live within, shape, and carry the identity of these spaces, on the role of cultural heritage in the construction of personal and collective identity, as well as in the spatial representation and image building of Istria and Kvarner. By doing so, the study seeks to provide a clearer foundation for professionals involved in heritage interpretation, regional branding, and destination management to develop communication strategies that are locally grounded and culturally sensitive. Given that place image creation is a complex and interdisciplinary process, encompassing elements of communication, cultural studies, heritage management, and tourism marketing, it is essential to start from those who embody the identity of the location. They are, after all, the origin points for shaping the narrative of any destination. The present study, therefore, attempts to answer how these local heritage bearers perceive and evaluate the role of their cultural legacy in the promotion of Istria and Kvarner, two of Croatia's leading tourist regions.

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SPATIAL COMMUNICATION

The notion of space is increasingly understood not as a neutral or static container of social life, but as a dynamic and symbolically charged construct shaped through cultural practices, identity politics, and communicative processes. Within this context, cultural identity plays a central role in the way space is perceived, represented, and communicated, both in academic discourse

and public life. Cultural identity is a fluid, multifaceted construct grounded in shared symbols, practices, memories, and narratives. It is deeply implicated in the production of space, as identities are always spatially situated and spatially expressed (Paasi 2003). According to Paasi (2003), regional identities are not inherent or pre-given but are constituted through social practices and institutional structures that delineate, symbolize, and communicate the meaning of a place (Paasi 2003). This understanding aligns with Hall's (1997) theory of representation, where meaning is constructed through cultural codes and signifying practices. The production of space is thus not merely physical but symbolic and discursive, rooted in the interplay of identity and power. Heritage constitutes a central axis through which cultural identity is inscribed into space. As Dragičević Šešić and Rogač Mijatović (2014) demonstrate, dissonant heritage in the Balkans reflects contested narratives of the past that shape spatial representations in tourism and public memory. Heritage here functions as both a medium of cultural memory and a political tool for legitimizing particular identities and territorial claims. Zhu (2025) explores how sacred spaces are reconfigured through state-led heritage policies, transforming religious sites into arenas of spatial and ideological negotiation. This underscores how heritage, as an expression of cultural identity, is instrumental in reshaping the communicative and institutional frameworks of space. In their foundational work, Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge (2000) emphasized that heritage is inherently selective and ideological, produced in contexts of political and social negotiation. Similarly, Littler and Naidoo (2005) focus on the politics of heritage in multiethnic societies, calling for re-imagining national heritage in post-nation contexts. Contemporary urban and regional development increasingly relies on place branding, a process in which cultural identity is commodified and strategically communicated to attract tourism, investment, and social cohesion. Lemmetyinen et al. (2025) emphasizes the role of creative and cultural industries (CCIs) in shaping inclusive and differentiated city brands across ten European cities. Cultural identity here is not a static backdrop but a dynamic resource mobilized through inclusive branding strategies that reflect local narratives, histories, and aspirations. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006) argue that city branding is more than a marketing tool; it is a socio-spatial practice that communicates a city's identity through symbols, spaces, and stakeholder engagement. This aligns with Paasi's (2003) view of the

region as an institutionalized and narrated space, where identity is continuously negotiated. Harvey (1990) contributes to this discourse by linking spatial representation with the conditions of postmodernity, arguing that space is reorganized through symbolic economies and narratives of differentiation, particularly in urban and touristic contexts. The role of cultural identity in spatial communication is particularly salient among youth populations. Ross, Puzić, and Doolan (2017) show that Croatian youth articulate their identities through complex spatial affiliations, oscillating between local, national, and European imaginaries. These place identifications reflect a nuanced interplay of belonging, aspiration, and differentiation, informed by historical narratives and contemporary geopolitics. Such findings resonate with Čapo (2017), who critiques essentialist and inventory-based approaches to national identity. Instead, she advocates for a pluralistic, inclusive, and dynamic understanding of identity that recognizes its spatial embeddedness and performative nature. Massey (2005) further emphasizes the relational nature of space, urging a conceptualization of space as a product of interrelations and trajectories, rather than as a static backdrop. Zukin (1996) also provides valuable insights by analyzing how the cultural economy of cities influences urban identity and the symbolic construction of space. Cultural identity is integral to the representation and communication of space. It shapes how places are imagined, narrated, and contested across multiple scales and through various mediums. From heritage and tourism to urban branding and youth identity, the spatial articulation of cultural identity reflects broader struggles over meaning, belonging, and legitimacy. In summary, cultural identity emerges as a dynamic and relational construct that is continuously produced through spatial practices and communicative processes. Rather than being fixed, it is negotiated across institutional, cultural, and everyday contexts, making it a key analytical lens for understanding how regions are symbolically constructed and represented.

CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A COMMUNICATIVE RESOURCE

Cultural heritage has traditionally been associated with the preservation of monuments, traditions, and artifacts. However, recent scholarships increasingly emphasize its role as a communicative practice embedded in the construction and representation of space. From this

perspective, heritage is not a static inheritance from the past but a dynamic and discursive resource through which meanings, identities, and territorial imaginaries are continuously negotiated and expressed. Smith (2006) introduced the influential concept of the “Authorized Heritage Discourse”, which frames heritage as a culturally constructed narrative maintained by institutions such as museums, state bodies, and conservation agencies. This discourse privileges certain histories while silencing others, thereby shaping what is remembered and communicated spatially. Harrison (2013) furthers this view by arguing that heritage is not merely about preservation but about performative acts that produce cultural meaning. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) views heritage as a form of metacommunication, a process through which culture is re-contextualized and aestheticized for public consumption. This framing of heritage turns space into a stage upon which curated narratives are enacted, particularly in tourism and museum contexts. Crooke (2007), but also Smith and Waterton (2009) emphasize the active role of communities in these processes, highlighting how local narratives challenge top-down interpretations of heritage. Littler and Naidoo (2005) situate heritage in the context of race, postcolonial memory, and national identity, arguing that heritage policies are often political strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Zukin (1996) and Massey (2005) similarly highlight that space is a product of cultural and economic practices, and heritage is central to the symbolic construction of place. Harvey (1990) connects this with postmodern conditions, suggesting that space is increasingly mediated by symbolic economies where heritage becomes a key tool in image production. Zhu (2025) provides a concrete example by analyzing how sacred heritage sites in China are transformed through state-led heritage tourism into politically charged communicative spaces. These sites are reinterpreted to serve economic and ideological agendas, illustrating the contested and strategic nature of heritage communication. Dragičević Šešić and Rogač Mijatović (2014) discuss “dissonant heritage” in the Balkans as an attractive but ideologically fraught asset in tourism. These narratives often involve unresolved conflicts, multiple layers of meaning, and divergent memories, making heritage a site of both communication and tension. Giaccardi (2012) explored how digital media and social networks reshape heritage communication by enabling participatory engagement and co-production. This shift reflects broader transformations in the public sphere, where heri-

tage becomes a more democratic and interactive process. Heritage institutions are thus reimagined as platforms for dialogue rather than repositories of fixed meaning. Lemmetyinen et al. (2025) analyzes how cultural heritage and creative industries intersect in city branding strategies across Europe. They argue that inclusive and creative interpretations of heritage enhance urban distinctiveness and contribute to competitiveness in global contexts. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006) conceptualize place branding as a form of spatial communication, where heritage serves as both content and medium of identity construction. In this framework, heritage is used not only to represent a place's past but to project desirable futures, making it a strategic resource in policy, planning, and identity politics. Cultural heritage should be understood as a communicative resource that shapes and is shaped by spatial practices. It functions as a vehicle for narrating identity, contesting memory, and negotiating meanings of place. Through institutional, community-based, and digital channels, heritage participates in the continuous (re)production of space. To conclude, cultural heritage should be understood not as a static legacy of the past, but as an active communicative resource through which meanings, identities, and spatial narratives are constructed, contested, and reinterpreted across institutional and community contexts.

IDENTITY AND IMAGE AS A STARTING POINT FOR DESTINATION COMMUNICATION

Understanding how destinations construct and communicate their identity, and image has become central in the increasingly competitive global tourism landscape. Destination identity, often rooted in cultural, historical, and geographic features, serves as the foundation upon which communicative strategies are developed. Conversely, destination image reflects how external audiences perceive a place, shaped by both strategic promotion and organic user-generated content (Tasci and Gartner 2007). The distinction and interplay between identity and image are fundamental to destination branding. While identity represents the self-concept of a destination as articulated by its stakeholders, image is the aggregate of tourists' and external audiences' perceptions (Anholt 2007; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2006). According to Anholt (2007), the construction of a destination brand follows a sequential logic: first, the destination must establish a clear and

authentic identity; second, it must foster a coherent and consistent image; only then can it achieve a strong and credible brand. This model underscores the foundational role of identity in any destination branding effort. Effective communication strategies strive for alignment between these two dimensions, ensuring that projected identity resonates with received image (Sirisuthikul 2024). Some authors emphasize the dynamic and performative nature of destination identity, especially in the context of digital platforms (Govers and Go 2009). Destination communication is no longer the sole domain of tourism boards and public institutions. Stakeholders such as local communities, influencers, and content creators co-construct destination narratives (Hankinson 2004; Aman et al. 2024). This democratization of voice necessitates a more nuanced understanding of branding as a networked process in which authenticity and cultural specificity are critical for differentiation. In this context, cultural and heritage institutions play a crucial role in maintaining and communicating the distinctiveness of local identity. Museums, cultural centers, and heritage preservation initiatives act as custodians of collective memory and provide substantive content that enriches a destination's narrative. Moreover, the involvement of residents in both preserving and communicating their cultural identity ensures the sustainability and credibility of destination branding. Their lived experiences and local knowledge serve not only as resources for authentic storytelling but also as mechanisms for resisting the erasure of cultural specificity under globalized trends. It is the local population that serves as the bearer of heritage, as defined by Urbinati (2011) and Pukl and Jerin (2018), who also clarifies the distinction between heritage bearers and heritage institutions. Heritage bearers are individuals and communities who actively live and transmit their cultural practices, whereas promoters are institutions and experts who interpret and present heritage to the public, often risking folklorization if collaboration with the bearers is lacking (Pukl and Jerin 2018). Furthermore, cultural and heritage institutions, together with residents, play a pivotal role in the construction and preservation of destination identity. These institutions act as custodians of collective memory and cultural narratives, providing a tangible and symbolic foundation for branding strategies (Kim et al. 2022). Meanwhile, local communities are not merely passive recipients of branding efforts but active co-creators whose engagement fosters authenticity, emotional attachment, and place-based distinctiveness (Braun, Kavaratzis and

Zenker 2013; Leal et al. 2022). In rural and heritage-rich areas, residents' participation is especially vital in sustaining cultural continuity and resilience against homogenizing global forces (Jafarli and Canavari 2025). As such, integrating the voices of local stakeholders is not only a question of inclusivity, but a strategic imperative for building sustainable and credible destination identities.

Furthermore, emotional and nostalgic appeals have gained prominence in influencing destination image and visitor behavior. Studies have shown that emotions such as nostalgia can positively shape visitors' perceptions and increase word-of-mouth intentions (Shizhen et al. 2025). This aligns with the growing importance of emotional branding in creating memorable and resonant destination experience. Achieving congruence between destination identity and image is fraught with challenges. Misalignments can emerge due to inconsistent messaging, fragmented stakeholder agendas, or rapidly changing digital discourses (Sirisuthikul 2024; Escobar-Farfán et al. 2024). Moreover, while destinations strive for distinctive branding, they are often caught in the tension between globalization and localization, risking the dilution of unique cultural elements (Lin et al. 2024). Current research highlights the need for sustainable and inclusive communication strategies that prioritize local voices, cultural authenticity, and long-term brand coherence (Aman et al. 2024). The integration of technological innovation, such as AI and data-driven personalization, further offers new avenues for crafting and disseminating identity in a way that resonates with target audiences while remaining grounded in local realities. Destination communication starts with a clear articulation of identity and a conscious projection of image. It requires not only strategic planning and stakeholder coordination but also critical reflection on cultural narratives, media channels, and emotional connections. By recognizing the complexity of identity-image interplay and the evolving media landscape, destinations can foster more authentic, inclusive, and effective brand communication. To summarize, destination communication depends on the alignment between identity and image, which is shaped through complex interactions between institutional actors, local communities, and digital media environments. Cultural heritage and local stakeholders play a crucial role in ensuring authenticity and long-term sustainability of destination branding strategies.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

As shown in the previous section of this paper, cultural heritage can play a crucial role in the creation of identity and, consequently, in shaping the image of a given area. Considering the exceptional tourism success of Istria and Kvarner in Croatia, regions that have recorded the highest number of visits and overnight stays in recent years (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), and the relatively limited use of cultural heritage in representing these regions (Dabo, Jakopović and Gluvačević 2025), this paper seeks to shed light on the views of direct bearers of cultural heritage and local residents of Istria and Kvarner regarding the use of cultural heritage in constructing and communicating local identity and regional image. It also explores how important cultural heritage is to them in building their personal and collective identities.

In this regard, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: Which cultural assets do respondents most associate with the areas where they live and work?

RQ2: Do respondents consider cultural heritage a reflection of the identity of the local population and how do they evaluate their own role in preserving the cultural identity and image of Istria and Kvarner?

RQ3: Do respondents believe that local cultural heritage is sufficiently included in the promotion and representation of the area in which they live?

RQ4: Do respondents believe it is extremely important that the cultural heritage of Istria and Kvarner is adequately presented to the public, in an authentic manner and with appropriate interpretation?

RQ5: Do respondents believe that inter-institutional cooperation (between local government, tourist boards, cultural institutions, and educational organizations) contributes significantly to the preservation and promotion of the region's cultural identity?

RQ6: Are respondents willing to participate in initiatives for the preservation and promotion of their region's cultural heritage?

Based on these research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated as exploratory assumptions intended to further examine the identified research objectives.

H1: Respondents from Istria most strongly associate the Pula Arena with their region, while respondents from Kvarner most strongly associate the Rijeka Carnival with their region.

H2: Respondents believe that cultural heritage is a reflection of the identity of the local population, and they positively evaluate their role in preserving the cultural identity and image of Istria and Kvarner.

H3: Respondents believe that local cultural heritage is sufficiently included in the promotion and representation of the area in which they live.

H4: Respondents believe it is extremely important that the cultural heritage of Istria and Kvarner is adequately presented to the public, in an authentic manner and with appropriate interpretation.

H5: Respondents believe that inter-institutional cooperation (between local government, tourist boards, cultural institutions, and educational organizations) contributes significantly to the preservation and promotion of the region's cultural identity.

H6: Respondents are generally not willing to participate in initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of their region.

To answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, a survey was conducted using an online questionnaire distributed through the snowball method. The sample consisted of adult residents of Istria and Kvarner who are active in non-governmental organizations dealing with culture and heritage, identified through official websites of selected counties, cities, and municipalities. Respondents, aged between 18 and 75, were selected based on their active involvement in culture and heritage as a form of voluntary or hobbyist engagement, rather than as professionals employed in public cultural institutions. Their activities reflect a commitment to living, transmitting, and promoting various forms of art and cultural heritage, driven primarily by personal enthusiasm. As such, they can be considered key local actors and impor-

tant bearers of cultural identity. Between January 1, 2025, and June 1, 2025, the survey was completed by 125 respondents from Istria and 111 respondents from Kvarner, for a total of 236 participants. The results are presented descriptively and comparatively for the residents of Istria and Kvarner.

Despite its suitability for reaching culturally active participants, the snowball sampling method introduces certain limitations. The sample was not statistically representative of the general population, as it primarily included individuals already engaged in cultural and heritage-related activities. This may result in a more positive evaluation of cultural heritage and its role in identity construction compared to the broader population. Furthermore, as the data are based on self-reported perceptions, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly in relation to attitudes toward cultural preservation and participation. In addition to these sampling-related limitations, several aspects of the research design should be noted. The questionnaire was designed specifically for the purposes of this research, drawing on existing theoretical frameworks in heritage studies, place branding, and identity research. Individual items were constructed to operationalize key concepts such as perceived identity reflection, visibility of heritage in promotion, and willingness to participate. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the analysis relies primarily on descriptive statistics, and no formal scale validation procedures were conducted, which should be considered when interpreting the findings. Participation in the research was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. The survey was conducted anonymously, and no personally identifiable data was collected. These methodological considerations provide an important context for interpreting the findings presented in the following sections.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results are presented in relation to the defined research questions and corresponding hypotheses, allowing for both descriptive and interpretative insights into the examined phenomena. Most respondents from Istria were women, 96 of them (76.8%), followed by 28 men (22.4%), while one respondent chose not to disclose their gender. Most respondents hold a higher education degree, 83 of them (66.4%), and are employed in permanent positions,

90 respondents in total (72%). The majority have lived in Istria since birth, 91 respondents (72.8%), or for more than ten years, 21 respondents (17.1%). They primarily reside in towns such as Pula, Pazin, Poreč, Rovinj, Labin, Medulin, Vodnjan, Buzet, Umag, Bale, Buje, Vižnada, Fažana, Raša, and others. Regarding respondents from Kvarner, the majority are also women, 96 of them (86.5%), while there are 15 men (13.5%). A large majority hold a higher education degree, 94 respondents (84.7%), and are employed in permanent positions, 62 of them (55.9%). Most have lived in Kvarner since birth, 82 respondents (73.9%), or for more than ten years, 20 respondents (18%). They mainly reside in Rijeka, 47 respondents (42.3%), but also in other towns such as Cres, Crikvenica, Dobrinj, Kastav, Krk, Matulji, Viškovo, Novi Vinodolski, and Opatija.

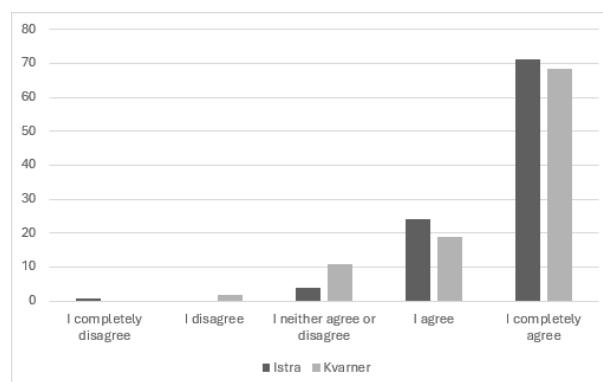
Respondents were asked which cultural symbols they most associate with Istria. 119 respondents fully associated the Arena in Pula with Istria; 110 respondents associated Istrian stew (supa), maneštra, truffles, olive oil, and other traditional gastronomy; 108 respondents associated Istrian kažuni (stone huts) and castles; 105 associated the Chakavian and Istro-Venetian dialects; 94 associated balun and other traditional dances; 93 associated sopile and roženice (traditional wind instruments); 89 associated the Pula Film Festival; 88 associated churches, frescoes, and sacred art (e.g., the Euphrasian Basilica); 66 associated the Glagolitic script; 55 associated the two-part singing in narrow intervals typical of Istria and the Croatian Littoral (Istria and Kvarner); 50 associated the Dance and Non-Verbal Theatre Festival in Svetvinčenat; 46 associated the Vlach (so-called Istro-Romanian) language and culture; 29 associated the maritime and port heritage.

Respondents were also asked which cultural symbols they most associate with Kvarner.

97 respondents fully associated the Baška tablet (Bašćanska ploča) with Kvarner; 95 associated the Rijeka Carnival; 91 associated the Trsat Castle; 88 associated the zvončari (bellmen, traditional masked figures); 84 associated the Chakavian dialect; 73 associated the Bela nedeja festival; 65 associated the Rab cake; 57 associated the Rab fair (fijera) and Rijeka as the European Capital of Culture 2020; 47 associated the maritime and port heritage; 46 associated the bell towers of Rab; 42 associated the Osor Musical Evenings and Rijeka Summer Nights; 41 asso-

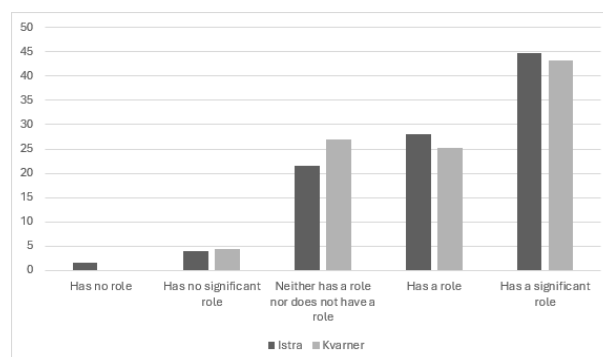
ciated the Krk tanac (traditional dance); 33 associated the two-part singing in narrow intervals of Istria and the Littoral; 32 associated churches, frescoes, and sacred art. Considering the presented results, hypothesis H1, which assumes that respondents from Istria most strongly associate the Pula Arena with their region, while respondents from Kvarner most strongly associate the Rijeka Carnival with their region, cannot be accepted.

Chart 1: Level of agreement with the statement that cultural heritage reflects the identity of the local population of a destination (%)



It is evident from the chart that the majority of respondents in both Istria (71.2%) and Kvarner (68.47%) fully agree with the statement that cultural heritage reflects the identity of the local population of a destination. This finding clearly indicates that cultural heritage is widely perceived as a core component of local identity among respondents in both regions.

Chart 2: Respondents' assessment of the role of the local population in preserving the cultural identity and image of the destination (%)

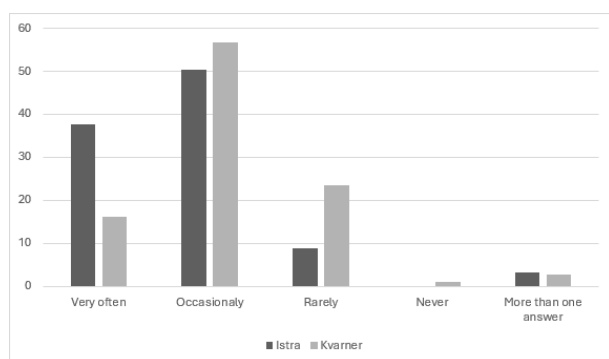


It is evident from the chart that the largest percentage of respondents in both Istria (44.8%) and Kvarner (43.24%) believe that the local population plays a significant role in preserving the cultural identity and image of the destination.

on. This finding further reinforces the perception of local communities as key actors in the maintenance and communication of cultural identity, highlighting the importance of bottom-up contributions alongside institutional efforts.

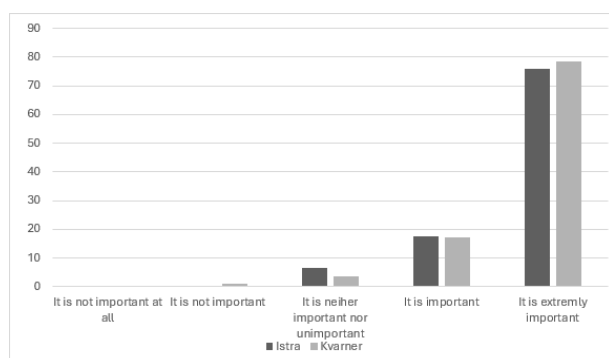
Considering the results presented in Charts 1 and 2, hypothesis H2, which assumes that respondents believe that cultural heritage reflects the identity of the local population and they positively evaluate their role in preserving the cultural identity and image of Istria and Kvarner, can be accepted.

Chart 3: Respondents' answers to the question of how often they see cultural symbols of Istria/Kvarner in promotional materials (brochures, advertisements, websites) (%)



Based on the data from the chart it is evident that most respondents in both Istria and Kvarner very often or occasionally see cultural symbols of Istria/Kvarner in promotional materials (brochures, advertisements, websites). Therefore, hypothesis H3 can be accepted, which assumes that local cultural heritage is sufficiently included into the promotion and representation of the area in which the respondents live. This suggests that cultural heritage is visibly present in promotional materials, at least from the perspective of local stakeholders.

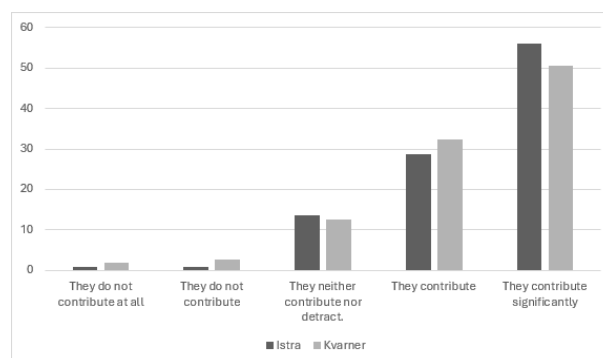
Chart 4: Levels of agreement with the statement that the cultural heritage of Istria/Kvarner is adequately presented to the public, in an authentic manner and with appropriate interpretation (%)



It is evident from the chart that the largest percentage of respondents in both Istria (76%) and Kvarner (78.38%) believe that adequate presentation of the cultural heritage of Istria/Kvarner to the public, in an authentic manner and with appropriate interpretation, is extremely important. This result underscores a strong normative expectation among respondents regarding the quality of heritage presentation, indicating that authenticity and appropriate interpretation are not perceived as optional, but as essential components of cultural communication.

Considering the results presented in Chart 4, hypothesis H4, which assumes that respondents believe it is extremely important that the cultural heritage of Istria and Kvarner is adequately presented to the public, in an authentic manner and with appropriate interpretation, can be accepted.

Chart 5: Respondents' answers to the question of how much they believe inter-institutional cooperation (between local government, tourist boards, cultural institutions, and educational institutions) contributes to the preservation and promotion of the region's cultural identity (%)

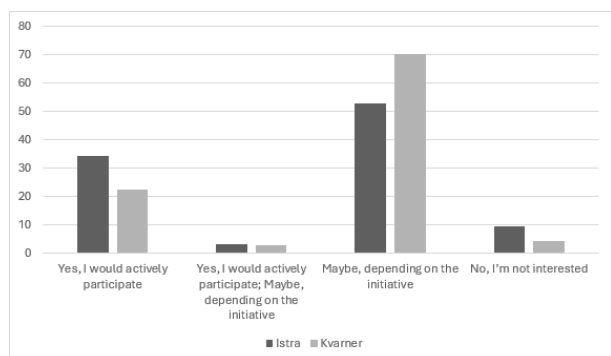


It is evident from the chart that the largest percentage of respondents in both Istria (56%) and Kvarner (50.45%) believe that inter-institutional cooperation (between local government, tourist boards, cultural institutions, and educational institutions) significantly contributes to the preservation and promotion of the region's cultural identity. This finding highlights the perceived necessity of coordinated governance and collaboration among different stakeholders, suggesting that effective heritage communication depends on an integrated and cross-sectoral approach.

Considering the results presented in Chart 5, hypothesis H5, which assumes that respondents believe that inter-institutional cooperation (between local government, tourist

boards, cultural institutions, and educational organizations) contributes significantly to the preservation and promotion of the region's cultural identity, can be accepted.

Chart 6: Level of respondents' willingness to participate in initiatives for the preservation and promotion of the region's cultural heritage (%)



It is evident from the chart that the most common response among respondents from both Istria (52.8%) and Kvarner (70.27%) is „Maybe, depending on the initiative“, regarding participation in initiatives for the preservation and promotion of Istria's cultural heritage. This result indicates that residents are not inherently unwilling to participate but rather condition their engagement on specific contextual factors.

Considering the results presented in Chart 6, hypothesis H6, which assumes that respondents are generally not willing to participate in initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of their region, cannot be accepted.

Overall, the results indicate that perceptions of cultural heritage among local stakeholders are shaped not only by visibility, but also by expectations of authenticity, participation, and institutional coordination.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide empirical insight into how local heritage bearers in Istria and Kvarner perceive the role of cultural heritage in shaping regional identity and spatial representation. Overall, the results confirm that cultural heritage functions as a central communicative and symbolic resource through which regional identity and place image are constructed and negotiated. These findings can be further interpreted through the lens of the communicative and performative understanding of heri-

tage (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013), suggesting that heritage does not operate merely as a representational tool, but as an active process shaped through everyday practices and interactions of local actors.

Regarding RQ1, which explored the cultural assets most strongly associated with the regions, the results demonstrate that respondents do not rely on a single emblematic symbol but instead identify a broad and diverse set of tangible and intangible heritage elements. This pluralistic pattern led to the rejection of H1, as neither the Pula Arena nor the Rijeka Carnival emerged as exclusive or dominant identifiers. Rather than contradicting existing theories of symbolic place identity, this finding supports Paasi's (2003) understanding of regional identity as layered, dynamic, and socially constructed through multiple narratives. Furthermore, this plurality can be interpreted in line with relational conceptualizations of space (Massey 2005), where identity is constituted through multiple, overlapping trajectories rather than being reduced to a single dominant symbol. The spatial embeddedness of identity is thus confirmed, but in a non-reductive form that resists simplification into a single iconic marker.

The results related to RQ2 and H2 clearly indicate that respondents overwhelmingly perceive cultural heritage as a reflection of the identity of the local population and recognize their own role in preserving and communicating that identity. This result supports Smith's (2006) notion of heritage as discourse, while simultaneously revealing a strong bottom-up dimension grounded in lived experience. In this sense, heritage emerges not only as an institutional construct but also as a socially embedded practice, which aligns with Harrison's (2013) conceptualization of heritage as performative. The respondents' emphasis on their own agency further suggests a partial shift away from the "authorized heritage discourse" towards more participatory and locally grounded forms of meaning-making.

Concerning RQ3 and H3, respondents generally consider cultural heritage to be sufficiently present in promotional materials. This perception partially contrasts with critical scholarship that emphasizes the risks of commodification and aestheticization of heritage for external consumption (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). However, this apparent contradiction becomes more analytically meaning-

ful when interpreted alongside responses to RQ4. While heritage is perceived as visible, respondents strongly emphasize the need for authentic and contextually grounded representation, leading to the confirmation of H4. This indicates a clear distinction between visibility and meaningful communication, suggesting that the mere presence of heritage elements in promotional materials does not guarantee their cultural adequacy. Such findings reinforce calls for participatory and culturally grounded branding practices (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2006), where local knowledge and context play a central role in shaping representation.

The importance of coordinated governance structures is evident in responses to RQ5, where strong support for inter-institutional cooperation led to the confirmation of H5. This finding aligns with recent place branding research that underscores cross-sectoral collaboration as a prerequisite for credibility, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability (Lemmetynen et al. 2025). At the same time, the data suggests that clearer role differentiation between institutions, promoters, and heritage bearers is needed to prevent folklorization or tokenistic inclusion, as previously noted by Pukl and Jerin (2018). This highlights the importance of balancing institutional frameworks with locally embedded knowledge and practices.

Finally, the results related to RQ6 challenge initial assumptions regarding community disengagement. The rejection of H6 indicates that respondents are not unwilling to participate in heritage-related initiatives, but rather condition their engagement on transparency, relevance, and tangible community benefits. This conditional engagement reflects broader tensions between top-down branding strategies and bottom-up expectations, which can be interpreted through Massey's (2005) relational understanding of space as continuously negotiated. Participation thus emerges as a contingent and communicatively mediated process rather than a fixed disposition. Importantly, these results contribute to bridging the gap between theoretical understandings of heritage as discourse and the lived experiences of local actors, demonstrating how these processes unfold in a specific regional context.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that regional identity and image in Istria and Kvarner are not

fixed attributes but outcomes of ongoing communicative practices involving multiple actors. Cultural heritage emerges as both a marker of belonging and a negotiated performative resource. The study thus reinforces the need for inclusive, locally grounded heritage communication strategies that balance institutional coordination with the lived identities and expectations of local communities, while also acknowledging the inherently dynamic and contested nature of spatial representation in contemporary destination contexts.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that cultural heritage plays a central role in shaping and communicating local identity and regional image in Istria and Kvarner. Most respondents recognized key cultural symbols as markers of regional belonging and expressed strong agreement that heritage reflects the identity of the local population. Several initial hypotheses were confirmed, particularly those related to the perception of heritage as an identity marker, the role of local communities in its preservation, and the importance of inter-institutional cooperation. However, the hypothesis suggesting that respondents would most strongly associate a single emblematic symbol (e.g., the Pula Arena or Rijeka Carnival) with their region was not supported, indicating a more nuanced and pluralistic set of cultural references among residents. Similarly, the assumption that residents would generally be unwilling to engage in heritage initiatives was not confirmed, as many respondents expressed conditional openness to participation, depending on the nature of the initiative. This is an important opportunity for more inclusive and participatory heritage practices. Nonetheless, the research is not without limitations. The use of the snowball sampling method, while effective in reaching culturally engaged individuals, may have introduced a degree of bias by overrepresenting respondents already active in the cultural sector. Furthermore, the survey's reliance on self-reported perceptions limits the ability to draw broader generalizations about the wider population. The findings should be interpreted with caution, given the exploratory nature of the study and the specific sample of culturally engaged respondents. Future research could benefit from complementary qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to capture deeper insights into motivations, obstacles, and intergenerational perspectives on heritage engagement. Despite these limitations,

the study offers valuable guidance for professionals in heritage interpretation, tourism promotion, and regional branding. It underscores the need for culturally grounded, communicatively strategic, and socially inclusive approaches that acknowledge the agency of local heritage bearers. By aligning the lived identity of a place with its mediated image, destinations like Istria and Kvarner can foster more authentic, resilient, and community-centered models of cultural representation. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that destination mana-

gement organizations and cultural institutions should move beyond purely promotional uses of heritage and actively involve local communities in communication processes. This includes transparent collaboration, participatory interpretation, and the development of initiatives that provide visible benefits to residents. Such approaches can enhance both the authenticity and long-term sustainability of destination branding strategies.

REFERENCES

- Aman, Eliyas Ebrahim, Árpád Ferenc Papp-Váry, Debo-rah Kangai, and Sebastian Ongango
- Odunga. 2024. Building a Sustainable Future: Challenges, Opportunities, and Innovative Strategies for Destination Branding in Tourism. *Administrative Sciences* 14(12): 312. DOI: 10.3390/admsci14120312.
- Anholt, Simon. 2007. *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Braun, Erik, Mihalios Kavaratzis, and Sebastian Zenker. 2013. My City–My Brand: The Role of Residents in Place Branding. *Journal of Place Management and Development* 6(1): 18–28. DOI: 10.1108/17538331311306087 .
- Croatian Bureau of Statistics. 2024. Tourism Turnover in Commercial Accommodation
- Establishments in 2024 - Preliminary Data. <https://podaci.dzs.hr/2024/hr/76895> (accessed 25.6.2025).
- Crooke, Elizabeth. 2007. *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues and Challenges*. Routledge.
- Čapo, Jasna. 2017. Simboli, procesi, prijepori: Prilog raspravama o hrvatskom identitetu. In *Zbornik radova 44. seminara Zagrebačke slavističke škole*, eds. Tatjana Pišković and Tvrtko Vuković, 71-86. Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu
- Dabo, Krešimir, Hrvoje Jakopović, and Dejan Gluvačević. 2025. Reprezentativnost kulturne baštine Istre i Kvarnera na najčitanijim hrvatskim portalima i društvenim mrežama turističkih zajednica. *EMC Review* 25(1): 176-194. DOI: 10.7251/EMC2501176D
- Dragičević Šešić, Milena, and Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović. 2014. *Balkan Dissonant Heritage Narratives (and Their Attractiveness) for Tourism*. *American Journal of Tourism Management* 3(1B): 10–19. DOI: 10.5923/s.tourism.201402.02 .
- Escobar-Farfán, Manuel, Alberto Cervera-Taulet, and William Schlesinger. 2024. Destination Brand Identity: Challenges, Opportunities, and Future Research Agenda. *Cogent Social Sciences* 10(1). DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2024.2302803 .
- Giaccardi, Elisa, ed. 2012. *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture*. Routledge.
- Govers, Robert, and Frank M. G. 2009. *Place Branding: Global, Virtual and Physical Identities, Constructed, Imagined and Experienced*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Graham, Brian, Gregory J. Ashworth, and John E. Tunbridge. 2000. *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy*. Arnold.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage.
- Hankinson, Graham. 2004. Relational Network Brands: Towards a Conceptual Model of Place Brands. *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 10(2): 109–121.
- Harrison, Rodney. 2013. *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. Routledge.
- Harvey, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Blackwell.
- Jafarli, Fatima, and Maurizio Canavari. 2025. Place Branding in Rural Areas: A Literature Review. *AIMS Agriculture and Food* 10(1): 129–152. DOI: h10.3934/agrfood.2025007.
- Kavaratzis, Mihalis, and Gregory Ashworth. 2006. City Branding: An Effective Assertion of Identity or a Transitory Marketing Trick? *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 2(3): 183–194. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990056 .
- Kim, Eun Gu, Deepak Chhabra, and Dallen J. Timothy. 2022. Towards a Creative MICE Tourism Destination Branding Model: Integrating Heritage Tourism in New Orleans, USA. *Sustainability* 14(24): 16411. DOI: 10.3390/su142416411 .
- Leal, Mário, Beatriz Casais, and João Proença. 2022. *Tourism Co-Creation in Place Branding: The Role of Local Community*. *Tourism Review* 77: 1322–1332. DOI: 10.1108/TR-12-2021-0542 .
- Lemmetyinen, Asta, Laura Nieminen, Jari Aalto, and Tuuli Pohjola. 2025. *Enlivening a Place Brand Inclusively: Evidence from Ten European Cities*. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 21: 67–80. DOI: 10.1057/s41254-024-00362-5 .
- Littler, Jo, and Roshi Naidoo. 2005. *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race'*. Routledge.
- Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage.
- Paasi, Anssi. 2003. Region and Place: Regional Identity in Question. *Progress in Human Geography* 27(4): 475–485.
- Pukl, Adela, and Anja Jerin. 2018. Who Owns Intangible Cultural Heritage? The Role of Bearers, Experts and the State in the Safeguarding of ICH in Slovenia. *Memoriamedia Review* 3(7): 1–10.
- Ross, Alistair, Saša Puzić, and Karin Doolan. 2017. Balkan and European? Place Identifications of Young People in Croatia. *Revija za sociologiju* 47(2): 125–150. DOI: 10.5613/rzs.47.2.1 .
- Shizhen, Liu, Kashif Hussain, Ari Ragavan N., and Qaiser Abbas Nisar. 2025. The Role of Destination Brand Experience, Emotions and Brand Credibility in Influencing Destination Brand Equity. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*. DOI: 10.1108/JHTI-09-2024-1000 .
- Sirisuthikul, Varintra Tui. 2024. Destination Brand Alignment: Exploring Identity, Image and Personality of Thailand. *Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research* 13(3): 415–430.
- Smith, Laurajane. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge.
- Smith, Laurajane, and Emma Waterton. 2009. *Heritage, Communities and Archaeology*. Duckworth.
- Tasci, Asli D. A., and William C. Gartner. 2007. *Destination Image and Its Functional*

- Relationships. *Journal of Travel Research* 45(4): 413–425.
- Urbinati, Simone. 2011. Communities, Groups and Individuals: The Bearers of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. In *Public Law and Regulation*, eds. F. Cicchetti, F. Frosini, and G. Gola, 163–189. Rimini: Maggioli Editore. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2710622>.
- Zhu, Yu. 2025. Contested Sacred Space: State Power, Spatial Politics, and Heritage Tourism. *Tourism Geographies*, 1–25. DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2025.2495192 .
- Zukin, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultures of Cities*. Blackwell.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was produced as part of the scientific project “Cultural Identities and the Branding of Tourist Destinations in Istria and Hrvatsko Primorje” (9-2024/2027), conducted by the Institute for Migration Research from Zagreb, Croatia. The project is funded by the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth of the Republic of Croatia, with the support of the EU Next Generation program. The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them.

KULTURNA BAŠTINA I NOSITELJI LOKALNOG IDENTITETA: KOMUNIKACIJSKE DIMENZIJE IZGRADNJE IMIDŽA ISTRE I KVARNERA

Krešimir Dabo, Danijel Knežević, Dejan Gluvačević

SAŽETAK: Ovaj rad istražuje ulogu kulturne baštine u oblikovanju regionalnog identiteta i imidža prostora u Istri i Kvarneru, s posebnim naglaskom na njezinu komunikacijsku funkciju u prostornoj reprezentaciji i brendiranju destinacije. Cilj istraživanja jest ispitati kako nositelji lokalne baštine percipiraju kulturnu baštinu kao identitetski marker te kako vrednuju njezinu uporabu u regionalnoj promociji. Empirijski podaci prikupljeni su putem online ankete provedene među 236 stanovnika Istre i Kvarnera koji su aktivno uključeni u kulturne i baštinske udruge. Rezultati pokazuju da ispitanici svoje regije povezuju s raznolikim skupom kulturnih simbola, što upućuje na pluralističko i slojevito razumijevanje regionalnog identiteta, a ne na oslanjanje na jedan dominantan simbol. Kulturna baština u velikoj se mjeri doživljava kao odraz identiteta lokalnog stanovništva, pri čemu ispitanici prepoznaju važnu ulogu lokalne zajednice u njezinu očuvanju i komunikaciji. Iako se smatra da je baština u dovoljnoj mjeri prisutna u promotivnim materijalima, ispitanici naglašavaju potrebu za autentičnom i kontekstualno osjetljivom prezentacijom te upozoravaju na rizik folklorizacije. Nadalje, rezultati ističu važnost međuinstitucionalne suradnje između lokalne samouprave, kulturnih institucija, turističkih zajednica i obrazovnih organizacija u očuvanju i promociji regionalnog kulturnog identiteta. Iako mnogi ispitanici izražavaju uvjetnu spremnost za sudjelovanje u baštinskim inicijativama, razina angažmana ovisi o jasnoj komunikaciji i vidljivim koristima za zajednicu. Rad doprinosi istraživanjima kulturne baštine i komunikacije destinacije ukazujući na to da se regionalni identitet i imidž kontinuirano pregovaraju kroz komunikacijske prakse, čime se naglašava potreba za uključivim, lokalno utemeljenim i održivim pristupima regionalnom brendiranju temeljenom na baštini.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: Istra i Kvarner; izgradnja imidža; kulturna baština; nositelji lokalnog identiteta; prostorna reprezentacija