



Stakeholder Communication in Heritage Place Branding: The Case of Yogyakarta's UNESCO Cosmological Axis

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Abstract

The 2023 designation of the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta as a UNESCO World Heritage Site created opportunities to strengthen its global identity, preserve its philosophical values, and support local communities. However, how stakeholders translate these values into a coherent place brand remains insufficiently understood. This study examines stakeholder roles, communication processes, and coordination constraints in heritage place branding. A qualitative case study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with seven informants representing the Balai Pengelolaan Kawasan Sumbu Filosofi (BPKSF), three local administrative units, and two Tourism Awareness Groups (Pokdarwis). The interviews were supplemented by UNESCO, heritage-management, regulatory, institutional, and communication documents, and the data were analyzed thematically. The findings demonstrate that BPKSF functions primarily as a coordinator, facilitator, and institutional bridge; local administrative units mediate communication between higher-level authorities and local communities; and Pokdarwis translates institutional heritage narratives and philosophical values into locally grounded cultural activities, tourism experiences, and kampung narratives. Communication occurs through coordination meetings, working groups, community consultations, heritage education, and cultural events. Nevertheless, information remains unevenly distributed, stakeholder initiatives are fragmented, and local potential has not been integrated into a coherent heritage place brand. The study contributes by conceptualizing heritage place branding as a multilevel heritage-value translation process involving institutional coordination, local contextualization, and community-based experiential translation.

Keywords: *Stakeholder communication, Heritage place branding, Heritage governance, UNESCO World Heritage Site, Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta*

INTRODUCTION

World Heritage designation can transform cultural heritage into a source of place identity, international visibility, tourism development, and economic opportunity (Van der Zee et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). However, heritage place branding should not be reduced to UNESCO labels, campaigns, logos, or slogans. Heritage sites are living environments embedded in local identities, practices, livelihoods, and everyday experiences. Branding must therefore balance conservation, tourism, and community interests to avoid commercialization, disruption of livelihoods, and stakeholder conflict (Liu et al., 2022).

Heritage place branding is a communication process that interprets and translates cultural meanings into recognizable place identities. Heritage-management institutions formulate formal narratives, local administrations contextualize them, and community organizations connect them

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to lived cultural practices. Because these stakeholders have different mandates, resources, knowledge, and authority, multilevel communication is required to coordinate roles, incorporate community aspirations, and establish feedback. Nevertheless, limited research explains how heritage values are translated across institutional, local-administrative, and community-tourism levels.

The Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta and its Historic Landmarks was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List on September 18, 2023. Extending from Panggung Krapyak through the Yogyakarta Palace to Tugu Pal Putih, it represents Javanese understandings of the human life cycle and of relationships among humans, God, and nature (Syahdani & Kardanardi, 2022; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2023). As both a monumental arrangement and a living cultural landscape, its management must reconcile conservation and international visibility with community practices, mobility, and livelihoods (Hendariningrum et al., 2025; Kresnanto et al., 2025).

This study examines how communication among BPKSF, local administrative units, and Pokdarwis supports the heritage place branding of Yogyakarta's Cosmological Axis. It analyzes stakeholder roles, communication channels, the translation of heritage values, and coordination constraints. It contributes by conceptualizing heritage place branding as a multilevel process of institutional coordination, local contextualization, and community-based experiential translation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage Place Branding

Heritage place branding draws on tangible heritage, intangible cultural values, collective memories, and local narratives to construct and communicate a distinctive place identity. Unlike conventional destination promotion, it links heritage preservation to the meanings and experiences of local communities (Csurgó & Smith, 2022; Taha & Abdelfattah, 2023). UNESCO designation can enhance a place's international visibility and legitimacy; however, effective branding requires more than promoting monuments and physical attractions. It must also incorporate local traditions, collective memories, cultural values, and everyday community practices (Amer et al., 2023). Consequently, heritage place branding is increasingly understood as a collaborative socio-spatial process rather than a purely promotional activity, with growing attention to lived historic environments and local community participation (Logar, 2025; Jafarli & Canavari, 2025).

Stakeholders in Heritage Place Branding

Recent studies emphasize that effective heritage branding requires collaboration among government institutions, local communities, tourism organizations, and other stakeholders (Nobre & Sousa, 2022; Taha & Abdelfattah, 2023). Heritage place branding involves multiple stakeholders, including government institutions, heritage managers, businesses, local communities, and visitors. Local communities are particularly important as co-creators, cultural knowledge holders, and ambassadors who communicate a heritage place's identity and values (Amer et al., 2023; Jain et al., 2022). However, stakeholder participation is often unequal because government and business actors possess greater authority and resources, while community involvement may remain consultative rather than influential (Reynolds et al., 2022; Källström & Siljeklint, 2024).

Stakeholder Communication in Heritage Management

Stakeholder communication in heritage management encompasses the processes and power dynamics through which government institutions, local communities, experts, tourism organizations, and private actors exchange information, negotiate heritage values, articulate community aspirations, and coordinate conservation decisions (Li et al., 2026; Seila et al., 2025).

Communication strategies tailored to stakeholders' information needs can strengthen collaboration and support conservation outcomes (Raś et al., 2023). Communication characterized by openness, transparency, empathy, mutual trust, role clarity, and a shared vision can strengthen collaboration, reduce conflict, and facilitate joint decision-making (Reta & Beldados, 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative case-study design to examine stakeholder communication in the heritage place-branding process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The unit of analysis was the communication process among selected heritage-management authorities, local administrative units, and community-based tourism organizations. The analysis focused on stakeholder roles, communication channels, heritage-value translation, community engagement and feedback, and coordination constraints.

Seven informants from six organizational units were purposively selected based on their institutional roles, direct involvement in the Cosmological Axis, and experience in heritage management, community engagement, or local cultural and tourism initiatives. They comprised two BPKSF representatives, three representatives of local administrative units, and two Pokdarwis representatives. Panggungharjo is designated as a *kalurahan*, whereas Prawirodirjan and Patehan are *kelurahan*. Therefore, this study uses the collective term "local administrative units."

Table 1. Profiles of the Research Informants

Code	Stakeholder category	Institution or locality	Institutional relevance
BPKSF-1	Heritage-management authority	BPKSF	Heritage management, institutional coordination, and communication
BPKSF-2	Heritage-management authority	BPKSF	Heritage management, documentation, and stakeholder coordination
LA-1	Local administration	Panggungharjo <i>kalurahan</i>	Local cultural programs and buffer-zone development
LA-2	Local administration	Prawirodirjan <i>kelurahan</i>	Local heritage, cultural, and tourism initiatives
LA-3	Local administration	Patehan <i>kelurahan</i>	Community communication and local heritage management
PW-1	Community-tourism organization	Mantrijeron Pokdarwis	Community-based tourism and local cultural activation
PW-2	Community-tourism organization	Panembahan Pokdarwis	Heritage interpretation and community-based tourism development

Data were collected between May and August 2026 through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews examined institutional roles, communication relationships and channels, interpretations of the Cosmological Axis and its philosophical values, the translation of heritage values into local programs and tourism activities, community engagement, feedback mechanisms, and coordination barriers. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Indonesian. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Relevant quotations were translated into English and cross-checked against the original Indonesian transcripts to preserve their contextual meaning. Documentary data included the UNESCO nomination dossier, heritage-management plans, regulatory and institutional documents,

institutional publications, and communication materials. These documents provided institutional context and enabled comparison between formal heritage narratives and stakeholder accounts. Interview transcripts and documentary data were coded manually and analyzed thematically through familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Trustworthiness was strengthened by comparing interview accounts across stakeholder groups and triangulating them with documentary evidence. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and participants' identities were protected through anonymized codes and secure data management.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Stakeholder Roles in the Heritage Place-Branding Process

The findings reveal that the heritage place-branding process for Yogyakarta's Cosmological Axis involves differentiated yet interdependent roles across institutional and community levels. BPKSF, local-level administrations, and community-based tourism organizations contribute through distinct communication functions. BPKSF coordinates institutional actors and formal heritage narratives; local-level administrations contextualize heritage policies within local settings; and Pokdarwis translates heritage meanings into cultural and tourism experiences. These complementary roles demonstrate that the heritage place brand is not produced or controlled by a single institution but is collectively constructed through multilevel stakeholder communication.

1. BPKSF as Coordinator, Facilitator, and Institutional Bridge

BPKSF occupies a central but primarily non-executive role in the heritage place-branding process. Its main functions include coordinating government agencies and other stakeholders, facilitating cross-institutional meetings, documenting issues and management developments, communicating recommendations to relevant authorities, and aligning regional government directions with sectoral institutions. BPKSF lacks the authority or resources to implement all policies related to conservation, spatial planning, transportation, tourism, and community empowerment. Consequently, its effectiveness depends on its ability to facilitate coordination and influence institutions with the relevant mandates and resources.

As one representative explained, "Our role is primarily coordination because we do not have the formal instruments to execute policies directly" (BPKSF-1). BPKSF also frames UNESCO recognition as a means rather than the final objective of heritage management. Its representatives emphasized that the Cosmological Axis should not be promoted merely as a collection of physical landmarks or as a UNESCO label. The more important objective is to internalize its philosophical values and to connect heritage conservation with community well-being. BPKSF therefore communicates an institutional vision in which the Cosmological Axis is understood as a living cultural landscape that embodies the human life cycle and harmony among humans, God, and nature.

2. Local-Level Administrations as Administrative Mediators and Local Activators

Local-level administrations serve as intermediaries between provincial institutions and local communities. They facilitate socialization programs, connect government agencies with neighborhood organizations, communicate local aspirations, and integrate heritage-related values into local cultural and development programs. However, their capacity to perform these functions varies with local leadership, resources, institutional relationships, cultural assets, and access to decision-making.

Panggunharjo demonstrates relatively strong local activation by translating *sangkan paraning dumadi* into Merti Panggung Krapyak, the Cosmological Axis batik motif, the

Cultural Independent program, and buffer-zone development. Prawirodirjan activates local heritage through historical sites, cultural and culinary festivals, community products, Kampung Sayidan, and walking tours, though the link between these initiatives and the broader Cosmological Axis narrative is not always clearly communicated. Patehan presents a more critical position, particularly regarding limited community involvement, insufficient follow-up on local aspirations, and unclear benefits for residents. These differences demonstrate that -level administrations are not merely channels for policy dissemination; they also interpret, negotiate, and activate heritage identity according to local conditions.

3. Pokdarwis as Translators of Heritage into Tourism Experiences

The participating Pokdarwis organizations operate closest to local cultural practices, tourism businesses, community products, and visitor experiences. Their primary role is to identify local assets and translate them into tourism narratives, routes, activities, products, and experiences. In this sense, Pokdarwis serves as an experiential translator, connecting institutional heritage narratives with the everyday cultural life of communities. In Mantrijeron, this role is expressed through religious tourism in Jogokariyan, traditional dance activities in Mangkuyudan, cultural markets, and local microenterprise products.

As the Panembahan representative stated, “Our role as a Pokdarwis is to package the area’s potential more effectively to strengthen its identity and tourism appeal” (PW-2). Nevertheless, the relationship between local tourism initiatives and the overarching Cosmological Axis narrative remains inconsistent. Some Pokdarwis actors possess extensive knowledge of tourism products and local cultural practices but have a more limited understanding of the full philosophical narrative. Consequently, their initiatives may be culturally relevant and locally meaningful without being clearly connected to a unified Cosmological Axis place brand. Strengthening interpretive capacity and cross-locality coordination is therefore necessary to align local tourism experiences with the broader heritage narrative.

Multilevel Heritage Place-Branding Framework

The findings indicate that heritage place branding along the Cosmological Axis operates through a multilevel translation process. The official values associated with UNESCO recognition and the Cosmological Axis are not transmitted directly and uniformly to communities and visitors. Instead, they pass through institutional and community levels, where they are coordinated, contextualized, translated, and experienced.

At the heritage-management level, BPKSF interprets formal heritage principles, conservation priorities, and philosophical values as institutional narratives and coordination agendas. At the local-administrative level, local administrative units adapt these narratives to local histories, cultural assets, social conditions, and development priorities. At the community-tourism level, Pokdarwis transforms these contextualized narratives into cultural routes, festivals, performances, crafts, culinary products, kampung identities, and tourism experiences.

These expressions are intended to be interpreted by residents and visitors through participation, everyday experiences, and mediated communication. However, their actual interpretations were not directly examined in this study. In the proposed framework, their responses could inform community organizations and government institutions, although the interviewed stakeholders perceived the available feedback mechanisms as inconsistent.

Table 2. Multilevel Heritage Place-Branding Framework

Level	Main actor	Communication function	Translation outcome
Heritage-	BPKSF and relevant	Interpret UNESCO	Official heritage-

institutional	government agencies	documentation and formulate heritage values, conservation priorities, and institutional narratives	management direction and overarching narrative
Local-administrative	Local administrative units	Contextualize institutional narratives according to local histories, needs, and cultural potential	Local programs, <i>kampung</i> identities, cultural events, and development initiatives
Community-tourism	Pokdarwis and community organizations	Translate local heritage into participatory and experiential forms	Tourism routes, performances, crafts, culinary products, stories, and visitor experiences

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that heritage place branding along Yogyakarta's Cosmological Axis is a multilevel communication process rather than merely a promotional activity. BPKSF performs institutional translation by linking UNESCO principles and philosophical values to conservation priorities; local administrative units contextualize these narratives to local histories and community needs; and Pokdarwis transforms them into cultural activities, tourism products, routes, and visitor experiences. These differentiated yet interdependent roles align with previous studies that conceptualize place branding as collectively constructed through stakeholder networks (Kalandides et al., 2012; Muñiz Martínez, 2016). However, the findings further show that heritage communication is not linear because meanings are repeatedly interpreted, negotiated, and reconstructed across institutional and community levels.

The presence of multiple levels does not automatically produce integrated communication. Vertical fragmentation occurs when institutional information is not fully understood or acted on locally and when community aspirations do not reach higher-level decision-making. Horizontal fragmentation arises when local administrative units and Pokdarwis develop initiatives without shared interpretive principles or cross-locality coordination. Unequal authority, resources, institutional access, and feedback mechanisms further shape stakeholder participation (Reynolds et al., 2022). Consequently, formal consultation may remain procedural rather than provide meaningful influence, thereby weakening community ownership and brand legitimacy.

The study's theoretical contribution is conceptualizing heritage place branding as a multilevel, recursive process of translating heritage values. It extends stakeholder-based place-branding research by identifying distinct institutional, contextual, and experiential translation functions. Unlike studies that focus primarily on the effects of World Heritage designation on tourism, visibility, and community livelihoods (Liu et al., 2022; Van der Zee et al., 2024), this study explains how formal heritage values are transformed into locally meaningful narratives and experiences. It also extends collaborative heritage-governance research by showing that incomplete feedback loops and unequal institutional authority can disrupt heritage-value translation and produce narrative fragmentation (Bashir & Sawhney, 2023; Kim et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that heritage place branding along Yogyakarta's UNESCO Cosmological Axis is collectively constructed through multilevel communication. BPKSF coordinates institutional narratives, local administrative units contextualize heritage values, and Pokdarwis translates them into cultural activities and tourism experiences. This process is

conceptualized as multilevel heritage-value translation.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

The study is limited by its sample of seven informants, three stakeholder categories, and a qualitative single-case design. Future research should employ longitudinal, comparative, or mixed-methods approaches with broader stakeholder groups to examine how communication, institutional power, participation, and feedback influence community ownership and brand legitimacy.

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