



THE REPRESENTATION OF *MERU* IN BALI'S TOURISM VISUAL BRANDING: SYMBOLISM, IDENTITY, AND COMMODIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

Meru is a dominant visual element in tourism branding, particularly in culturally based destinations such as Bali. This study aims to analyze how the form of *Meru* is represented in tourism visual branding and how this symbol contributes to shaping the identity of tourism destinations. Using a qualitative research approach that integrates visual analysis and semiotic studies, this research explores the symbolic meaning of *Meru* across various tourism promotional materials, including posters, brochures, social media, and official websites. Additionally, the study examines the commodification of spirituality, specifically how the use of *Meru* in Bali's tourism branding can lead to the reduction of its religious significance, transforming it into a mere commercial icon. The findings indicate that *Meru* in tourism branding not only represents architectural beauty and cultural exoticism but also constructs a spiritual image that appeals to global tourists. However, the exploitation of this cultural symbol generates ambiguity among local communities, who perceive that the use of *Meru* in tourism promotion may shift its sacred value into a mere commercial attraction. Therefore, a balanced branding strategy is necessary to uphold cultural values while maintaining tourism appeal.

Keywords : *Meru*; Visual branding; Tourism; Cultural identity; Commodification of spirituality; Tourism promotion; Semiotics

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the global economy, contributing significantly to national income as well as to the social and cultural dynamics of destinations (UNWTO, 2021). Beyond driving economic growth, tourism plays a critical role in shaping and sustaining local cultural identity. A central concern in tourism development is how destinations are marketed to potential visitors through branding. Destination branding refers to the strategic effort to create, develop, and promote the unique characteristics of a destination to attract



tourists and distinguish it from others (Komariya & Misnawati, 2024). One of the most widely applied approaches is visual branding. Visual branding serves as an essential tool in highlighting the distinctive character of a destination while reflecting the identity of the local community (Mihardja et al., 2022). Effective branding not only enhances the appeal of the destination but also influences tourists' perceptions and expectations of their experiences.

In the context of cultural tourism, visual branding frequently draws on iconic symbols and elements that hold deep aesthetic and cultural significance for local communities. In Indonesia—particularly in Bali—religious architectural symbols such as the *Meru* are often featured in tourism promotional materials. *Meru* is a tiered structure that forms part of Balinese Hindu temples, symbolizing Mount Meru, the sacred cosmic mountain. According to Balinese Hindu cosmology, Mount Meru supports and centers the universe, consisting of three main realms: the peak representing the heavenly abode of deities, the body as a transitional realm, and the base as the earthly domain inhabited by humans (Paramadhyaksa, 2010). The use of *Meru* in tourism branding reinforces Bali's cultural identity as a destination that unites architectural beauty, spirituality, and distinctive tradition (Picard, 1996).



Figure 1. Structural Form of *Meru* Building in a Temple
(source: researcher documentation, 2025)

However, the use of cultural elements in tourism branding often raises debates around the commodification of culture and spirituality (Alfath & Permana, 2016). Branding strategies that exploit sacred symbols risk altering their original meanings and reducing their religious value to mere visual appeal for tourists (Dewayanti & Raafigani, 2016; Dewi & Husna, 2024). In Bali, this phenomenon of commodification is well-documented, wherein cultural elements originally imbued with sacredness have been transformed into consumable tourist attractions (Widana, 2017). The use of *Meru* in tourism promotion may go beyond highlighting architectural beauty, leading to the desacralization of its spiritual value due to the influence of tourism industry interests.

Numerous studies have examined the role of visual branding in shaping destination identity, including the use of cultural symbols in tourism marketing. However, few have specifically explored how *Meru* is represented in tourism visual branding. Most research has focused on the socio-cultural impacts of tourism or the preservation of culture, while the visual and semiotic dimensions of *Meru* representation remain underexplored. Thus, this study aims to fill that gap by analyzing how *Meru* is constructed in destination branding and the implications of such representations for cultural and spiritual meaning in Bali.

This study employs visual analysis and semiotic methodology to explore how the symbol of *Meru* is communicated across various tourism media, including brochures, digital advertisements, official websites, and social media platforms. Visual analysis is used to identify design elements and compositional strategies that contribute to the destination's image construction, while semiotic analysis enables the interpretation of symbolic meaning as received by different audiences. Through this approach, the study aims to reveal how *Meru* functions both as a marker of cultural identity and as a marketing instrument.

In addition, this study explores the commodification of spirituality within the context of tourism branding. Cultural commodification occurs when local cultural elements are reproduced for economic purposes, often in ways that alter or simplify their original meanings (Dewayanti & Raafigani, 2016). In Bali—widely known as the “Island of a Thousand Temples”—spirituality is a major draw for tourists. Yet, the commercialization of sacred elements may lead to the distortion of meaning and the loss of cultural authenticity (Dewi & Husna, 2024). This study seeks to examine how a balance can be achieved between cultural preservation and tourism industry demands through branding strategies that are more sensitive to local values.

This research contributes a new perspective to the discourse on destination branding, particularly through visual and semiotic analysis of sacred symbols in promotional media. Unlike prior studies that focus on the socio-economic impacts of tourism, this study offers insight into how *Meru* is constructed as a visual element in destination branding and how this representation is perceived by local communities. The findings are expected to inform tourism stakeholders in designing branding strategies that are not only effective in attracting visitors but also respectful of the cultural and spiritual values embedded in the symbols they use.

The representation of *Meru* in Bali's tourism visual branding reflects a complex intersection of cultural identity, aesthetic appeal, and spiritual commodification. This study is expected to contribute to academic discourse on the role of symbols in destination branding and their impact on local communities. Furthermore, it offers insights for developing more inclusive and sustainable branding strategies that account for both economic viability and the cultural and religious values that are integral to destination identity.

LITERATUR REVIEW

The Desacralization of Cultural Symbols

Research on visual representation in destination branding has expanded significantly, particularly in relation to the use of cultural symbols and their implications for local identity and commodification practices. The study by Iqbal et al., (2023) on the *Visual Identity Design of Tuk Mulyo Tourism Destination* emphasizes the importance of aligning visual symbols with the cultural values and characteristics of local communities. Appropriate visual branding not only creates an appealing image but also reinforces the local narrative in the minds of tourists. This approach aligns with the visual strategy surrounding *Meru* in Bali's tourism promotion, which relies on symbolic and spiritual appeal.

Darmiati et al., (2023), in their study titled *The Commodification of Dance in Cultural Tourism in the New Normal Era*, highlight how sacred dances such as *Tari Kecak* undergo a transformation of meaning when repackaged for tourism purposes. What was once a religious rite has shifted into a form of entertainment. This phenomenon reflects broader processes of

cultural commodification, which also affect architectural symbols like *Meru* that are aesthetically employed in tourism promotions without the accompanying spiritual context.

Hidayati, (2023), in her work *Cultural Commodification in Religious Tourism: “Ngalap Berkah” at Mount Kemukus*, examines how religious rituals are repurposed to meet tourist expectations. The transformation of sacred practices into spectacles demonstrates that religious symbols and rites are susceptible to shifts in meaning when placed within tourism marketing frameworks. Similarly, in the context of Bali, the visual representation of *Meru* in promotional materials carries a comparable risk of desacralization when it is consumed solely as a visual element. Hidayati further emphasizes the commodification of religious ceremonies in tourism marketing, warning that sacred values can become marginalized when rituals are framed as entertainment. She stresses the importance of ethical considerations in the use of religious symbols and rituals in promotional contexts. This perspective reinforces the need for branding approaches that are not only aesthetic but also educational and contextually grounded, ensuring that symbols like *Meru* remain respected within their cultural and spiritual framework.

(Putra, 2021), in his historical study *The Commodification of Fine Arts in Bali’s Tourism Branding during the Colonial Era*, provides a foundational perspective on the origins of cultural symbol commodification in Balinese tourism. He documents how Dutch colonial institutions such as KPM and VTV engaged in branding Balinese culture through fine arts and sacred architecture, including *Meru*, as primary visual elements in posters and international exhibitions. Initiatives like the establishment of *Pita Maha* in 1936 illustrate how artworks—once imbued with religious intent and community service—were recontextualized as aesthetic and commercial objects for European tourist markets. This process not only transformed spiritual meaning into exotic visual symbolism but also established patterns of cultural commodification that persist today. The article demonstrates that the visual representation of sacred symbols like *Meru* in branding is not a recent phenomenon but rather a historical legacy shaped by colonial power dynamics, global curiosity, and strategic cultural promotion. In this context, *Meru* functions not only as a spiritual symbol of Balinese Hinduism but also as a constructed visual narrative tailored to aesthetic expectations of international tourism. This underscores the importance of critically examining the use of sacred symbols in contemporary tourism media.

Collectively, these studies reveal the tension between visual promotion in tourism and the preservation of cultural meaning. The commodification of sacred symbols such as *Meru* poses a risk of desacralization if not accompanied by educational narratives and active engagement with local communities. Consequently, this study seeks to propose a branding approach that is more sensitive to the religious values and cultural identity of Bali.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using visual and semiotic analysis to explore the representation of *Meru* in tourism promotional branding. The data were obtained from two primary sources: primary data, which included visual analysis of tourism promotional materials—particularly from official websites that featured *Meru* as a central visual element—alongside in-depth interviews with destination managers, travel agents, and Hindu religious leaders in Bali, conducted between January and March 2025; as well as a tourist survey carried

out during the same period to capture visitor perceptions of this element. Secondary data were derived from scholarly literature on tourism branding, cultural commodification, and visual semiotics.

Data collection techniques included visual analysis to examine design elements, color composition, and the symbolism of *Meru*; in-depth interviews to uncover the perspectives of local communities and tourism industry stakeholders; and tourist surveys to evaluate the influence of visual elements on the attractiveness of Bali as a cultural and spiritual destination. The collected data were analyzed in several stages. Visual semiotic analysis focused on the construction of *Meru* as a visual element in tourism branding and its symbolic meanings, while thematic analysis of interview data identified patterns and recurring themes from respondents' perspectives. The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to illustrate tourists' perceptions.

Triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from the visual analysis, interviews, and surveys to enhance the validity of the research results. However, this study has certain limitations. It focused solely on the representation of *Meru* in tourism branding and did not address other branding elements that do not involve *Meru*. Additionally, the interviews and surveys were conducted on a limited scale, rendering the findings exploratory in nature and not broadly generalizable. Given the interpretative nature of semiotic analysis, the results may also be influenced by the researcher's perspective and the cultural context being analyzed.

II. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Visual Representation of *Meru* in Bali Tourism Branding

This study reveals that *Meru*, a sacred architectural structure in Balinese Hinduism, is frequently depicted visually across various Bali tourism promotional media, including brochures, posters, promotional videos, and digital platforms. These visual representations often highlight the vertical form of *Meru* against iconic Balinese natural landscapes, such as sunrise scenes or terraced rice fields, thereby creating a strong impression of exoticism and spirituality.



Figure 2. Forms of *Meru* in Various Website Promotions

(source: KPM to Bali (Murni's, 2025), Badung The Soul of Bali (Badung Regency Tourism Office, 2025) and Bali The Island of Gods (Bangli Regency Office of Tourism and Culture, 2025), access 2025)

From Roland Barthes' semiotic theory perspective, the representation of *Meru* embodies both denotative and connotative meanings. Denotatively, *Meru* refers to a sacred structure—part of the Balinese temple complex used for religious ceremonies and offerings to the gods. Connotatively, however, *Meru* becomes a symbol of serenity, spirituality, and Bali's exotic image in the eyes of tourists. This aligns with Barthes, (2007) assertion that an image is “both something real and something vague,” conveying literal meaning while also implying cultural and ideological messages.

The consistent use of *Meru* in visual branding indicates a deliberate aesthetic and symbolic choice. In branding contexts, *Meru* functions as a visual anchor representing Bali's uniqueness—a blend of spirituality and distinct cultural identity. Discourse, including visual discourse, is shaped by ideological intention (Amoussou & Ayodele A. Allagbe, 2018). The repeated imagery of *Meru* in promotional media constructs a dominant narrative that portrays Bali not merely as a physical destination, but as a spiritual experience.

The selection of background elements such as golden sunlight, *Meru* silhouettes, or reflective water surfaces enhances the mythical and majestic impression of *Meru*. This compositional strategy reflects the concept of “mythology.” Certain cultural symbols are recontextualized to support broader ideological narratives—in this case, the narrative of Bali as an eternal spiritual paradise untouched by modernity (Iswidayati, 2007).

In many tourism promotional visuals, *Meru* is often depicted in the absence of human figures. The omission of ritual activities or local characters shifts attention away from actual religious practices to mere aesthetic appreciation. In such promotional practices, the true reality (sacred religious/spiritual ceremonies) behind the *Meru* becomes obscured. This corresponds to Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, where the image replaces the reality it once represented (Asharudin, 2023). As a result, *Meru* becomes a hyperreal object: detached from its sacred function and reduced to a consumable symbol of “authentic” culture.

This visual strategy forms part of a broader cultural commodification process, wherein religious and cultural symbols are repackaged for tourism market consumption. Tourists consume destinations through selective gazes—views that prioritize aesthetics, exoticism, and spiritual allure (Urry & Larsen, 2011). The representation of *Meru* in tourism promotion aligns with this logic, reinforcing a mode of perception that seeks spirituality without engaging with its substance.

However, this process is not without consequence. By reducing *Meru* to a mere visual symbol, there is a risk of desacralizing a symbol that holds profound religious meaning for the Balinese community. Representation is not a neutral process; it constructs meaning based on the presence of objects (Hall, 1997). In this context, the image of *Meru* in tourism branding potentially shapes an understanding of Balinese spirituality that is visually appealing, yet culturally shallow.

Therefore, within the context of visual tourism promotion, it is important to question not only what is shown but also what is omitted from the visual narrative. The absence of explanations regarding the spiritual meaning of *Meru*, the exclusion of local communities (human figures as representations of cultural activity), and the lack of conveyed religious ritual context contribute to the aestheticization of the sacred. This tendency is exacerbated by a modern society that increasingly prioritizes appearances over reality, turning culture into spectacle (Debord, 2024).

Ultimately, the representation of *Meru* in Bali's visual tourism branding reflects a complex interaction between cultural identity, religious symbolism, and economic strategy. While such representation succeeds in capturing global attention and reinforcing Bali's image as a spiritual destination, it also raises critical questions of authenticity, appropriation, and representational ethics. Future branding practices should be more contextually grounded and respectful of sacred meanings, so that *Meru* remains a valued cultural symbol while serving as a meaningful tourist attraction.

The Symbolic Meaning and Sacredness of *Meru* in Balinese Hindu Tradition

Meru is not merely an architectural element serving as an aesthetic complement within the Balinese temple complex; it also embodies profound symbolic significance within the spiritual framework of Balinese Hindu society. Structurally, *Meru* is a multi-tiered building with an odd number of roofs—typically 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, or 11—each of which carries cosmological and spiritual meanings (Paramadhyaksa, 2010). Positioned in the most sacred area of the temple, known as the *jeroan*, it serves as the focal point of worship dedicated to specific deities.

In Balinese Hindu belief, *Meru* is considered a representation of Mount Mahameru, the cosmic mountain believed to be the center of the universe. Mount Mahameru is regarded as the dwelling place of the gods and the link between the physical world and the spiritual realm (Paramadhyaksa, 2010). Hindu teachings describe the universe as comprising three levels: *bhur loka* (the human realm), *bwah loka* (the ancestral and transitional spiritual realm), and *swah loka* (the divine realm). The tiered structure of *Meru* reflects these levels vertically.

The symbolic function of *Meru* as a connector between the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the human individual) illustrates the sacred relationship between humanity, nature, and the divine (Yudarta & Pasek, 2017). In Balinese Hindu cosmology, architecture is not merely a physical construction but a manifestation of cosmic order. Sacred architecture acts as an axis mundi that unites the heavens, the earth, and the underworld (Eliade, 1987).

Beyond its cosmological meaning, *Meru* also holds social and cultural values. Its construction is never arbitrary; it is preceded by specific rituals involving the community, from the selection of wood and spiritual cleansing to purification ceremonies. Thus, *Meru* serves not only as a symbol of divine presence but also as a socio-spiritual center for the local community. This reinforces the idea that religiosity and social life are inseparable within traditional Balinese society.

However, despite *Meru*'s rich symbolic and spiritual meanings, these are often left unarticulated in Bali's tourism promotional media. Its representation is typically focused on its aesthetic form and visual appeal. Without educational or contextual narratives, tourists are left unaware of the deeper significance attached to the structure. This leads to a loss of cultural context, transforming the symbol into a mere image.

When *Meru* is reduced to a purely visual element, a shift occurs from spiritual meaning to the commodification of symbols. This reflects a process of semiotic flattening, wherein complex layers of meaning are simplified for mass consumption. In this context, *Meru* is no longer perceived as a spiritual axis, but rather as an exotic icon used to enhance tourism appeal.

Furthermore, the use of *Meru* in tourism branding may also lead to ambiguity in its interpretation. For the local community, *Meru* is a sacred space, closed off to profane activities. Yet in tourism advertisements, its image is widely circulated without boundaries, and sometimes presented without regard for representational ethics. Representation does not merely reflect reality—it also shapes it (Hall, 1997). In this sense, the way *Meru* is represented will influence how tourists perceive and engage with the symbol.

It is important to note that the erasure of sacred meaning in tourism promotion is not merely an aesthetic issue, but also one of epistemology and ethics. When sacred symbols such as *Meru* are introduced into public discourse without consideration of their embedded spiritual and customary values, a narrative imbalance emerges between local meaning and global consumption. This should be examined critically to prevent sacred symbols from being detached from their meanings. The use of sacred symbols without explanation can negatively impact cultural understanding. This line of thought harks back to the Western gaze toward Eastern cultures, as critiqued by Edward Said. Eastern cultures have often been represented in exotic and aestheticized ways to satisfy Western worldviews, without consideration for the authentic contexts of such symbols (Irfanullah, 2015).

Therefore, it is crucial for Bali's tourism branding strategies not only to utilize *Meru* as a visual symbol but also to strengthen educational narratives that convey its spiritual meanings and functions. Collaboration between tourism stakeholders, academics, and traditional leaders is essential to ensure that the representation of *Meru* does not diminish its sacred value, but rather serves as a medium for cultural preservation and respectful appreciation of the ancestral wisdom that has been passed down through generations.

The Commodification of Spirituality: Shifts in the Function and Meaning of *Meru*

The use of *Meru* in Bali's tourism branding has raised significant concerns among indigenous communities and Balinese Hindu religious leaders. As a sacred symbol serving as a site of divine worship, *Meru* holds profound spiritual significance within Balinese Hindu tradition. However, in the context of tourism promotion, this sacred meaning is frequently displaced—or even obscured—reduced to a mere aesthetic element exploited for commercial visual appeal.

This transformation is part of a phenomenon that Marxist cultural theorists refer to as commodification—the process by which objects or symbols originally imbued with cultural or spiritual meaning are transformed into marketable goods. In this case, *Meru* as a spiritual element is reappropriated as a visual icon, sold to tourists as part of Bali's exotic and spiritual image.

One religious leader interviewed for this study remarked, “We are concerned because many tourists see *Meru* as nothing more than a unique structure to photograph, not as a sacred place. Some even approach *Meru* without ceremony or awareness of its sanctity.” This statement highlights a disconnect in meaning between local communities, who uphold the sacred values, and tourists, who consume the symbol purely through an aesthetic lens.

This form of spiritual commodification is further supported by content production patterns within the tourism industry, where images of *Meru* are frequently presented without any accompanying narrative that explains its spiritual value or underlying philosophy. When sacred symbols like *Meru* are reproduced in marketing contexts devoid of their original meanings, they become simulacra—images that replace reality. The symbol ceases to represent spiritual value and instead constructs a new, superficial reality.

Additionally, a tourism destination manager interviewed in this research admitted, “In our brochures and website, images of *Meru* are among the most popular because they attract attention. But we acknowledge that we've never included an explanation of what *Meru* is or why it is spiritually important.” This statement indicates that branding orientation is driven more by market demands than by cultural responsibility.

From a semiotic perspective, this commodification of *Meru* generates connotative meanings that obscure its denotative meaning. Connotation can construct new myths. In this case, *Meru* is no longer understood as a place of worship but is instead mythologized as a tourism symbol: a signifier of beauty, exoticism, and spiritual serenity tailored to the imagination of foreign tourists. This represents a form of modern mythologization, in which spirituality is framed as a consumable product devoid of religious practice.

Such commodification also has psychosocial impacts on local communities. One resident near the Ubud tourism area observed, “Young people today are more familiar with *Meru* through Instagram than through religious education. They see tourists using *Meru* as a backdrop for photos, portraying it as part of a temple's identity as a tourist destination rather than a place of prayer.” This indicates that the dominance of *Meru*'s visual image in digital media also shapes how younger generations understand their own cultural symbols—potentially leading to the internalization of distorted meanings.

This phenomenon reflects a disjuncture in the era of cultural globalization, where local symbols become detached from their original contexts as they enter global circulation. The visual depiction of *Meru* in tourism promotion not only creates new interpretations for tourists but also reshapes the reality of Balinese people themselves. When symbols are consumed repeatedly without context, their meanings are not only lost—they may be entirely replaced.

To address this challenge, it is crucial to adopt educational and participatory visual communication strategies that not only showcase symbols like *Meru* but also explain their embedded meanings and values. Collaboration among tourism practitioners, local communities, and academics is essential to foster ethical and contextual forms of representation. As one

academic informant noted, “Branding should not mean blind commodification. Rather, it is an opportunity to introduce local wisdom in ways that are engaging and educational.”

Tourists’ Perception of *Meru* Representation

The results of in-depth interviews conducted with 35 tourists between January and March 2025 reveal that the visual representation of *Meru* in tourism promotional materials significantly influences their interest in visiting Bali. Most respondents stated that the image of *Meru*—often depicted with a tropical natural backdrop and dramatic lighting—evoked both curiosity and attraction toward the spiritual and cultural aspects of Bali. They perceived the existence of this unique structure as adding depth to the destination, promising a travel experience distinct from other places.

However, these findings also reveal an interesting paradox. Although *Meru* successfully captures visual attention, most respondents admitted that they did not understand the religious meaning behind the structure. Some even described *Meru* as an “iconic building” or an “aesthetic photo spot,” unaware that it is the most sacred part of a Balinese Hindu temple. This indicates that meaning is not fixed but constructed by the audience through a decoding process influenced by their respective cultural backgrounds.

One respondent from Australia stated during an interview, “I thought it was some kind of tower or cultural monument. I only learned from you that it’s a place of worship. But it’s definitely very Instagrammable.” This statement illustrates how many tourists view *Meru* through a visual-aesthetic lens, without an understanding of its spiritual significance. They perceive its denotative meaning (a beautiful structure) but fail to grasp its connotative meaning, which is deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual values.

This gap also highlights the differing perspectives between local communities and tourists in interpreting cultural symbols. For the Balinese people, *Meru* represents the center of sacredness and a vertical connection between humans and the divine. For many foreign tourists, however, *Meru* is often merely a component of the tourist gaze—a way of seeing shaped by the visual narratives constructed by the tourism industry (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

In another interview, a tourist from Germany shared, “We saw *Meru* in many hotel ads and brochures, and the shape was very attractive. But there was no information about its meaning. We even once took close-up photos of it without realizing it was a sacred area.” This statement suggests that the absence of educational narratives in tourism promotion can lead to unintentional acts of disrespect, such as photographing sacred areas without an understanding of local etiquette.

From a semiotic standpoint, the failure to convey the connotative meaning of *Meru* results in what is known as under-coding—when visual signs are not fully processed by the receiver due to limited cultural knowledge. This leads to shallow symbolic interpretation, and within the context of sacred culture, can create imbalances in the relationship between local communities and tourists.

The impact of this perceptual gap is also felt by local communities. A temple guardian in the Gianyar area remarked, “Sometimes we see tourists enter the temple area without a sarong or without permission. They don’t know that *Meru* is the most sacred place. It makes us feel

disheartened.” This situation illustrates how differing interpretations of cultural symbols can lead to social friction and feelings of disrespect among locals.

In the context of destination marketing, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Effective destination branding must not only be attractive but also informative, fostering emotional and ethical connections with its audience. A representation of *Meru* that lacks spiritual narrative misses a vital opportunity to educate tourists and foster appreciation for local culture.

Therefore, Bali’s tourism promotion strategies must adopt a more educational and contextual approach when presenting cultural symbols such as *Meru*. Providing multilingual information on-site, incorporating explanatory narratives into promotional media, and involving local communities as guides or visual narrators can be effective solutions. Through these measures, the representation of *Meru* can remain visually captivating while preserving its inherent spiritual meaning.

Challenges and Ethical Strategies in Cultural Visual Branding

The imbalance of meaning in the representation of cultural symbols such as *Meru* calls for a new approach in visual branding strategies—one that is not only aesthetic but also ethical and educational. Branding that focuses solely on physical beauty and visual appeal, without offering cultural or spiritual context, runs the risk of creating misrepresentation, desacralization, and even symbolic conflict between visitors and local communities. Therefore, destination branding strategies must be renewed to incorporate local values and foster cross-cultural understanding.

Within the framework of visual communication ethics, the importance of visual literacy—the ability not only to perceive surface appearances but also to interpret the implicit meanings embedded in representations—becomes paramount. The visualization of *Meru* as a branding element should not be treated as a neutral symbol, but as a sign laden with spiritual significance and socio-historical meaning that must be communicated to the public, especially tourists.

Furthermore, an approach focused purely on aesthetics risks reinforcing Orientalism. Cultural representations of the East, including Bali, have often been constructed through an exotic lens by outsiders. If visual branding merely reproduces this gaze without involving local communities in the creative process, it results not in genuine representation but in the reproduction of stereotypes.

From an industry perspective, the greatest challenge lies in creating visual campaigns that remain commercially appealing without sacrificing cultural meaning. Destination branding must strike a balance between storytelling and place authenticity—ensuring that the images promoted do not obscure the authentic values of a place. In the case of *Meru*, this means integrating narratives of its spiritual, historical, and religious functions into its visual representation.

One applicable strategy is to incorporate educational narratives or captions into promotional materials featuring *Meru*, whether in print or digital formats. These narratives can explain the philosophy of *Meru*, the Hindu Balinese cosmological structure, and appropriate etiquette for visiting temples. This aligns with the interpretive branding approach, which not only conveys information but also fosters empathy and respect for local values.

Another equally important step is the involvement of indigenous communities and religious leaders in the creative process of visual branding. This ensures not only cultural validation but also that the representations produced remain true to sacred values. This participatory discourse reflects an ideal model of collaboration—one that places communities on equal footing with policymakers and industry practitioners.

Several community-based tourism initiatives in Bali have already begun implementing these principles. For instance, in some tourism villages, visitors receive cultural orientation sessions before entering sacred areas, including explanations about *Meru* and its role in Balinese Hindu spirituality. Such practices not only protect the sanctity of sacred sites but also create more meaningful tourist experiences and strengthen the appeal of educational tourism. This is consistent with the principles of slow tourism, which advocates mindful, reflective, and value-based travel.

In the context of digital marketing, ethical strategies can be implemented through interactive content, narrative videos, or the use of augmented reality (AR) technology that allows tourists to better understand the cultural context of the images they encounter. Such technology can bridge textual limitations and enrich the tourist experience, contributing to the development of smart tourism.

Ultimately, building an ethical visual branding strategy is not the responsibility of a single actor, but a collective effort. It requires cross-sector collaboration—among local governments, creative industry players, academics, religious leaders, and indigenous communities—to shape responsible visual narratives. When done thoughtfully, representations like *Meru* can function not only as tourist attractions but also as bridges for cross-cultural understanding, reinforcing local identity and safeguarding inherited spiritual values.

III. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that *Meru* plays a central role in the visual branding of tourism, particularly in constructing Bali's image as a cultural and spiritual destination. In various promotional materials, *Meru* is not only portrayed as a distinctive architectural icon but also as a symbol of serenity, exoticism, and spiritual depth. Through visual and semiotic analysis, it was found that the representation of *Meru* in tourism branding carries dual meanings: denotatively as a site of Hindu worship, and connotatively as an element of tourist appeal. This visualization has proven effective in attracting tourists and shaping destination identity, as reflected in survey findings indicating that many visitors expressed interest in traveling to Bali after encountering *Meru* in tourism campaigns.

However, beyond its visual allure, this research also reveals the potential commodification of spirituality. *Meru*, which holds sacred significance for the Balinese community, is subject to a transformation of meaning in certain marketing contexts. Insights from local communities and religious leaders highlight concerns about the exploitation of religious symbols, which may obscure the spiritual values inherent in *Meru*. Additionally, a perceptual gap between tourists and local communities presents another challenge—many tourists perceive *Meru* more as an aesthetic object than as a sacred site imbued with profound religious meaning.

As a contribution to tourism branding studies, this research underscores the importance of adopting ethical and inclusive approaches in destination marketing strategies. The use of *Meru* in tourism branding should not merely emphasize visual beauty but also convey its

accompanying spiritual and cultural significance. Therefore, tourism stakeholders are encouraged to develop more contextual and educational branding strategies, such as providing information about cultural values and respectful conduct when visiting *Meru*. In this way, a balance between tourism promotion and cultural preservation can be maintained, ensuring that *Meru* remains a respected symbol of Balinese identity while continuing to serve as an authentic and meaningful tourist attraction.

Looking ahead, further research could expand the scope by comparing the representation of *Meru* across different regions or by examining how tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds interpret this symbol. Moreover, exploring the economic and social impacts of culture-based branding may offer deeper insights into the role of tourism in balancing commercial value with the preservation of local cultural heritage.

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