

Original Article

Sustainability through the Lens of Semiotics: A Study on Tourism Symbols and Meaning

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Abstract: This study explores the confluence of semiotics and sustainability in tourism with a focus on how tourism symbols influence the perception and practice of sustainable tourism. Using a qualitative research design, the study analyses tourism materials from Kyoto, Bali, and New Zealand, applying semiotic analysis to decode meanings embedded in visual and textual symbols. The findings clearly show that for nature, cultural heritage, and eco-friendly activities, symbols are fundamental to promoting sustainable tourism behavior both in tourists and their perceptions toward sustainable travel. However, as a limitation of the study, the findings reflect the significance of cultural context with respect to interpretations of these symbols because meanings often differ for different demographic populations. Furthermore, the research underscores the potential risks of commodifying symbols, which may undermine their original meanings and dilute sustainability messages. This paper concludes by emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive, community-based approaches to creating tourism symbols that effectively communicate sustainability while respecting local values and heritage.

Keywords: Meaning, Semiotic Analysis, Sustainability, Symbols, Tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The overlap of semiotics and tourism provides a fascinating framework for ascertaining the symbolic and sign forces that mold both the experience and sustainability of destinations. Semiotics refers to the study of signs and symbols in terms of elements of communicative behavior. Coupled with this, substantial insights have been forthcoming as to how tourists interpret and engage varieties of cultural as well as natural signifiers when they travel. As Metro-Roland (2016) wrote, meaning is derivable from a city's landscape through the interpretation of signs in the built environment, which influences the all-inclusive experience and interaction with the place. In heritage tourism, the semiotic analysis would be how layers of meaning are unraveled in historical sites and cultural artifacts. As noted by Waterton and Watson (2014), heritage sites are more than just tangible locations; they are inhabited by symbols, which tell stories and values that need to be passed on to the visitor. Symbols are of importance in the heritage experience and meaning, influencing not only the protection of cultural identity but also tourism promotion and support for sustainable tourism.

The symbolism continues further down to the promotion of tourism destination material, where semiotics are used in decoding images and narratives. Specific symbols have been used in tourism promotional videos to construct ideal images of the destination, thereby influencing tourist expectations and experiences, according to Taşdelen and Sezerel (2016). This construction of imagery will attract visitors to a destination but also raises the stakes in terms of managing cultural representation and sustainability. The visual elements applied in destination branding are further used to communicate sustainable tourism offers. Studies show that local government units often apply logos and symbols representing sustainable development values like nature and cultural heritage in their promotion activities. In this regard, the effectiveness of these symbols relies on the design and the context in which they are interpreted culturally.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A) Semiotics in Tourism: Signs and Symbols

Semiotics play a significant role in tourism by determining the way tourists experience and interpret their destinations. The ideas of Saussure (1916) for signs and symbols and furthered by Eco (1986) establish a basis from which to view the narratives formed within tourism. Current research studies have shown the ways in which semiotics explain cultural heritage sites, thus leading to a stronger relationship between the tourist and their environment (Gretzel, U. and Collier de Mendonça, 2019). Tourist signs are formal and informal, that is, maps, boards with information, graffiti, or local art; these are the layers of meaning that reflect cultural identity and environmental stewardship. For instance, Jones, Miles and Beaulieu (2021) observe that natural landscapes have been interpreted by tourists differently through the cultural symbols in the environment as influencing their behavior and emotional attachment.



Destination branding also heavily employs semiotics, using logos, taglines, and imagery as media to communicate region-specific selling points. Recent research has shown how a destination like Kyoto, Japan, uses cultural symbols strategically to amplify stories of sustainability and heritage preservation (Nakamura et al., 2024). These studies highlight the linkage between semiotics and tourism in that symbols may be used as part of the framework for shaping tourists' perceptions. However, the semiotic meaning of symbols often depends on the sociocultural context of the viewer. According to Lim (2024), what might signify sustainability to one group might be misinterpreted by another, posing challenges for inclusive tourism marketing. This subtopic emphasizes that semiotics is integral to the tourism experience, shaping perceptions through cultural and symbolic lenses.

B) The Role of Semiotics in Destination Branding

Destination branding adopted symbolic visual and textual signs to communicate values ranging from sustainability and authenticity to heritage. Often, tourism boards and agencies use semiotic tools in crafting narratives appealing to the target audience (Tourism, 2024). Such as a green landscape or cultural artifact in advertisements conveys an element of eco-friendliness and cultural preservation, all vital aspects of sustainable tourism. Semiotics also allows for the distinction of destinations in competitive markets. For instance, with an analysis done by Marine-Roig in 2024, the strong symbolic identity of countries, such as New Zealand, which is associated with pristine landscapes and indigenous Maori culture, exploits such symbols to attract environmentally conscious tourists. Such strategies also reinforce cultural heritage but promote sustainable travel behavior.

However, overdependency on some icons leads to the stereotyping of things. Critics see this as the trading culture being commodified, where great customs are reduced into marketable logos (Blauner, 2019). Although these logos attract attention, they threaten the authenticity of these cultures and cause problems in maintaining them in the long run. The new destination brand approaches involve the co-creation of symbolic icon representations with communities. The study by Galarza et al. (2023) demonstrates how community participation ensures that symbols reflect authentic local values and sustainable practices, thus fostering equitable and inclusive tourism.

C) Symbolism and Sustainable Tourism Practices

The integration of symbols into sustainable tourism practices opens up new avenues for the expression of environmental and cultural stewardship. Examples include UNESCO World Heritage badges, which work as international marks of preservation and sustainability. There is research indicating that these marks influence the behavior of tourists: they become willing to practice activities that are friendlier to the environment and cultural heritage (Chen, 2023). Visual symbols by local governments in their campaigns to encourage sustainable tourism are very common. The "green leaf" symbol widely used in the city centers of Europe is for eco-certification for a hotel or attraction. Fuchs (2023) highlighted that these symbols enhance awareness and lead tourists to make the correct choices about sustainability while traveling.

Cultural symbols may even inspire tourists to adopt sustainable behavior. For instance, in Bali, the depiction of sacred mountains in tourism marketing campaigns reminds tourists of the importance of preserving the natural environment because of its spiritual value (Irawan and Hartoyo, 2022). These cultural connections help align tourism practices with local sustainability goals. However, the effectiveness of these symbols is often dependent on their recognition and understanding by tourists. According to Rosley et al. (2024), the absence of universal semiotic literacy reduces the impact of these sustainability symbols, hence indicating the need for education and cross-cultural communication in tourism.

D) Challenges with the cross-cultural interpretation of tourism symbol

Cultural differences also make up a huge challenge in the interpretation of tourism symbols. What may be interpreted as a symbol of sustainability in one culture may be misinterpreted in another. For example, according to Thompson et al. (2022), colors such as green are used to represent nature and eco-friendliness in Western cultures but may not carry the same connotations in other regions, thereby affecting the sustainability message. Misinterpretation may also evoke unintended consequences. For instance, tourism promotion using indigeneity symbols but the lack of deeper cultural background and context has faced criticism as stealing of cultures argued by Lam et al. (2024). From the cases above, not only do they work against the intended meaning, but they will also jeopardize the relationship that the community has with regard to the cultural heritage. Global campaigns for tourism sometimes manage to balance the need for universality with the demand for cultural specificity.

According to research by Zou et al. (2022), it would require careful semiotic analysis and collaboration from stakeholders to create symbols that resonate well globally but do not go against local values. Efforts to overcome these challenges include cross-cultural training for tourism professionals and participatory design processes that involve local communities. According to Nguyen and Nguyen (2025), dialogue between stakeholders can lead to the development of symbols that are culturally respectful and universally understood, promoting sustainable tourism practices.

III. METHOD

A) *Research Design*

It focuses on using qualitative research methodology to study tourism symbols' semiotics and impacts on sustainability. Qualitative analysis is the most ideal for understanding signs since it highlights the interpretation of meaning and contextual insight (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More precisely, this study applied the interpretive methodology by offering detailed examinations of signs and symbols within tourist settings in addition to cultural and contextual perspectives. The methodology combines semiotic analysis with thematic coding to view how tourism symbols are constructed, interpreted, and communicated. This helps ensure that the visual and textual aspects of the symbols are analyzed properly (Chandler, 2018).

B) *Data Collection Methods*

a. **Secondary Data Analysis:**

A substantial portion of the data used in this study was gathered from websites, brochures, videos, and destination logotypes that promote travel. To guarantee validity and applicability, these sources were sourced from well-known travel websites and official tourism boards. Additionally, there were secondary materials, such as scholarly publications and reports on sustainability and tourism, which were examined to provide context.

b. **Case Study Selection:**

Purposive sampling is used in this study to choose case studies from three popular travel locations: New Zealand, Bali, Indonesia, and Kyoto, Japan. The case studies were chosen based on their prior experience using symbols to promote cultural heritage and sustainability. Geographical and cultural diversity would be permitted by this choice, which could improve the study's generalizability.

c. **Stakeholder Interviews:**

Interviews with key stakeholders such as tourism professionals, local government representatives, and community leaders were conducted to gain insight into their views on the design and interpretation of tourism symbols. Semi-structured interviews ensured flexibility in probing different themes so that rich qualitative data could be obtained.

C) *Data Analysis Procedures*

a. **Semiotic Analysis:**

Visual and textual elements of tourism materials underwent semiotic analysis to decipher the latent meanings and messages. The analysis was done according to Barthes' (1967) two-tiered framework, which includes denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (cultural and symbolic meaning). This approach was used to understand the visual expression of nature, heritage, and sustainability in tourism symbols.

b. **Thematic Coding:**

The interview transcripts and secondary data were coded thematically using NVivo software. Initial coding involved the identification of recurring themes that related to sustainability, cultural representation, and symbol interpretation. Axial coding was then used to establish relationships between these themes, providing insights into how symbols influence tourism practices and perceptions.

c. **Comparative Analysis:**

In comparative analysis, similarity and difference analyses of symbol use across locations have been considered, and their outcomes are derived, indicating how similar and dissimilar symbol meanings influence cultural factors, leading to different impacts in different locations, especially in promoting sustainability. Results are cross validated using stakeholder input for validation.

D) *Ethical Considerations*

Institutional review board ethical approval was acquired to ensure research standards compliance. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, and data were anonymized to maintain their confidentiality. Also, care was taken to be sensitive to the cultural sensitivities of symbols, especially those that relate to indigenous or sacred traditions (Smith, 2012).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A) *Results*

The findings from this study are categorized into three key themes derived from semiotic analysis and thematic coding: (1) the representation of sustainability in tourism symbols, (2) cultural nuances in symbol interpretation, and (3) the implications of semiotics on sustainable tourism practices.

a. Representation of Sustainability in Tourism Symbols

Symbols of tourism in all the case studies under analysis highly reflect aspects that symbolize sustainability, such as nature, cultural heritage, and eco-friendly activities. For example, tourism material in Kyoto has used much imagery of cherry blossoms, Zen gardens, and traditional wooden architecture, which symbolizes harmony with nature and cultural preservation. Similarly, New Zealand has used the fern as a visual metaphor for growth, renewal, and ecological awareness. Semiotic analysis showed that these symbols operate on two levels: denotative, meaning direct representation of natural or cultural features, and connotative, which relates to associations with sustainability values. Stakeholders were keen to note that such symbols were deliberately chosen to project an image of ecological responsibility, thus aligning with global standards for sustainability (Chen, 2023).

b. Cultural Variations in Icon Meaning

Cultural and demographic groups had a profound difference in what they thought tourism signs meant. Here is an instance: green is color-the most eco-friendly color in most Western cultures-represented something else in countries from Asia symbol of fertility or prosperity, for example. Traditionally, stakeholders in Bali have pointed out that they hold sacred symbolisms, such as the representation of Mount Agung for commercial marketing of tourism activities, while the foreigners view it as a depiction of mere scenic beauty. These cultural differences suggest that the semiotic approach needs to highlight how sustainability issues might be addressed and conveyed more carefully (Rosley et al., 2024).

c. Implications of Semiotics on Sustainable Tourism Practices

Symbols of tourism influence tourist behavior. For instance, in New Zealand, the use of the “100% Pure New Zealand” campaign, focusing on pristine landscapes, was encouraging eco-friendly behavior among visitors. Tourism officials have revealed that campaigns of this kind are likely to encourage tourists to stay in and engage in more eco-certified accommodations and activities. However, overuse or misrepresentation of symbols is also known to bring about problems. The use of cultural symbols in Bali has been observed to dilute the original value that they carried, threatening cultural authenticity while doing less for efforts at sustainability. Participatory control among stakeholder groups in designating and managing these symbols is considered a preventive measure by stakeholders (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025).

B) Discussions

The results, hence, point to the dual role of tourism symbols in being both communicative agents and drivers of sustainability. Culturally and contextually relevant symbols have the potential to boost the effectiveness of tourism campaigns to sway perceptions and behaviors for betterment. According to Marine-Roig (2024), symbols that truly represent principles of sustainability not only attract an environmentally conscious tourist but also make one responsible toward the environment.

However, the strength of these symbols hinges on their relevance to the local value system. The common misinterpretations observed in Bali show the dangers of using non-specific symbols without acclimatizing to a culture. This underlines Thompson’s (2022) argument that symbols are necessary to be jointly created with people at the grassroots level for authenticity and representation.

Besides, the research opens the avenues of semiotics in supporting the sustainable tourism concept. Symbols representing cultural heritage as well as ecological values are good tools for furthering sustainability discourses. For instance, New Zealand’s fern symbol associated with indigenous identity and ecological conservation is an example of how semiotics can combine local values with global goals of sustainability (Fuchs, 2023).

Still, the challenge persists in balancing cultural representation with commercialization. While the marketing strategy of commodifying symbols might be effective, it undermines their original meanings and alienates the locals. There should be a participatory approach in this regard, as advocated by Herrera Leal et al. (2024), ensuring tourism symbols reflect the true cultural and environmental values.

The study concludes that semiotics is a valuable lens for understanding and advancing sustainability in tourism. This is due to the fact that, through tourism symbols, cultural narratives that are connected to ecological values can promote more meaningful and long-lasting engagements between destinations and tourists. Future studies could use augmented reality and digital media to improve the semiotic impact of tourism symbols.

V. CONCLUSION

Such findings indicate that the context of culture can be a source of meaning and an interpretive framework for symbols in tourism. For example, green landscapes or heritage sites might be a symbol of sustainability in one context, but they could carry a different meaning in another. This shows that there is a need for cultural sensitivity when designing a tourism campaign and that efforts should be made to engage with the local community so that such symbols are authentic and effective at promoting sustainable tourism.

Thus, beyond symbolic alignment for tourists, findings reveal that through a destination symbol and its message in, eco-activities inspire significant actions with these tourists taking responsible actions like ecological practices or not. “The case is a good demonstration because one can talk of the process: In Bali, as described above with Balinese culture, these symbols represent some values not related to or consistent with being part of such destinations’ cultural expressions.

In conclusion, semiotics provides especially important insights into how symbols may influence the development of sustainable tourism. To unlock this full potential, tourism authorities need to accept a holistic and culturally sensitive approach to creating symbols involving local stakeholders that resonate with both global sustainability goals and local values. As tourism continues to evolve, the strategic use of symbols will continue to be an important part of a more sustainable and culturally responsible tourism industry. Further research may be directed towards emerging digital platforms and technologies that offer new opportunities for enhancing the impact of tourism symbols on sustainability efforts.

Interest Conflicts

The author hereby declares that the study done and the results achieved are objective with no external influence and that there was no bias involved. In addition, I promise that full transparency is exhibited in conducting this research. If any kind of conflict arises at any time in the research, I promise to disclose such issues.

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