

METHODOLOGY FOR CREATING GRAPHIC MARKS BASED ON CULTURAL ICONOGRAPHY: AN APPLICATION TO QUITO, A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE (ECUADOR)

Ingrid Ninoshka RUIZ-RUIZ ^{1*}, María Dolores TERUEL-SERRANO ^{1,2}

¹ Universitat Politècnica de València, Valencia, Spain; iruirui1@upv.edu.es (I.N.R.R.); dteruel@upv.es (M.D.T.S.)

² Research Center in Architecture, Heritage and Management for Sustainable Development (PEGASO)

Citation: Ruiz-Ruiz, I.N., & Teruel-Serrano, M.D. (2025). Methodology for creating graphic marks based on cultural iconography: An application to quito, a Unesco world heritage site (Ecuador). *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 62(4), 2542–2549. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.62449-1615>

Abstract: Destination brand management has been widely explored in the scientific literature; however, the development of graphic brands for heritage destinations—grounded in cultural interpretation and visual symbolism—has received limited scholarly attention. This article proposes a protocol for constructing an identity graphic brand tailored to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, using local cultural iconography as a key resource for communicating site identity. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach was implemented, structured in three sequential phases. The first involved a systematic review of specialized literature in history, archaeology, and archaeoastronomy, complemented by the collection of documentary data related to the heritage site. In the second phase, fieldwork was conducted using an observational technique applied to a random sample of 150 organizations from three strategic sectors in Quito: cultural centers, tourism operators, and commercial establishments. This allowed for the identification of iconographic elements within their visual identities. The third phase consisted of in-depth interviews with organizational leaders, aimed at exploring their perceptions, branding strategies, and the symbolic use of cultural references. Findings demonstrate a strong appreciation for cultural iconography among key stakeholders, yet reveal a limited integration of these elements into institutional and commercial communication strategies. This gap highlights the need for more culturally informed branding practices. The results also offer insights into how design decisions are made in heritage contexts and the extent to which they reflect authentic local identity. This interdisciplinary framework offers a transferable model for other heritage destinations seeking to enhance their visibility and cultural relevance through meaningful and context-specific graphic branding.

Keywords: graphic brand, cultural iconography, heritage site, authenticity, Identity Graphic Brand Protocol (IGBP)

* * * * *

INTRODUCTION

Brand creation is a powerful tool for graphically expressing the identity of a product or destination (Morgan et al., 2002). In this regard, scholars such as Foroudi et al. (2016) and Pino et al. (2019) have studied and proposed methods for building successful destination brands, integrating concepts such as brand, image, and reputation into strategic design.

The promotion of heritage sites faces multiple challenges, including aligning stakeholders, managing perceptions, and ensuring brand coherence through the use of appropriate symbols and slogans (Tasci & Gartner, 2009).

Cultural iconography emerges as a bridge between past and present, serving as a distinctive element that fosters the cultural revaluation of territories (Ruiz-Ruiz et al., 2022). A graphic brand that is integrated into the heritage context and narrative can become a central element of communication, capturing attention and fostering loyalty through emotional resonance and shared values (Bertola Garbellini & Ramallal, 2022). However, the process of constructing graphic brands for heritage destinations remains an underexplored topic; Ruiz-Ruiz & Teruel-Serrano (2023) highlight the lack of studies specifically addressing this issue. This research identifies key iconographic elements from a heritage site and introduces the Identity Graphic Brand Protocol (IGBP), applied in Quito (Ecuador), a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The structure of this paper is as follows: first, it emphasizes the relevance of cultural iconography in the construction of heritage brands, drawing on theoretical foundations related to Quito's identity symbols.

In particular, the study highlights the cultural and symbolic contributions of the Kitu Kara civilization, regarded as one of the ancestral foundations of the territory. Their legacy, still perceptible in the spatial layout of Quito's Historic Center, reveals an urban planning system based on astronomical and symbolic principles. The representation of solar cycles through signs such as the Kitu Kara star serves as a key visual referent that enriches the graphic narrative of this heritage site.

Although ancestral iconography in Quito is not as immediately visible as in other regions with more preserved Indigenous traditions, archaeological research and symbolic studies have helped recover meaningful visual elements from pre-Columbian cultures linked to Andean worldviews (Lozano Castro, 2016; Rodas Espinel, 2019; Velasco, 2018). This symbolic recovery not only adds historical depth to the graphic approach, but also allows design to connect with a cultural identity that has often been rendered invisible in traditional branding and communication processes.

* Corresponding author

The methodology is then presented, which employs both qualitative and quantitative techniques to develop the IGBP — this study's core contribution. Cultural symbols/icons were identified through interviews with managers of cultural centers, tourism operators, and local businesses, as well as through an analysis of 150 organizations from Quito's cultural, commercial, and tourism sectors. The results highlight the value attributed to cultural iconography in the projection of heritage, but also reveal its limited use in branding and communication efforts, which hinders the transmission of identity, beliefs, and values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical review reveals various approaches to brand creation in heritage sites, although none place cultural revaluation at the core of their proposals. Balmer (2001) and Rangan et al. (2006) argue that stakeholder engagement is fundamental to ensuring value coherence and suggest the use of participatory tools that reflect local perspectives. Along these lines, Ruiz-Ruiz et al. (2022) emphasize that a brand that incorporates local actors can contribute significantly to the construction of a place's identity. Symbolic elements such as naming, slogans, and logos are essential for disseminating the culture of a destination and assessing visitor perception (Mohamad et al. 2022). Chaves (2012) classifies graphic signs into two categories: those focused on naming, such as logos, and those that prioritize non-verbal signs, namely symbols. Within this framework, Dopico Castro (2021) highlights that custom typography serves as a bridge between tradition and local identity, thereby enhancing the value of naming. Similarly, Chaves (2012) underscores that non-verbal signs, due to their graphic quality and cultural relevance, become consolidated as strategic corporate assets.

The reviewed studies propose models that focus on place image and reputation (Foroudi et al., 2016). However, there remains a gap in the development of branding processes based on iconography aimed at enhancing the value of World Heritage Sites. As noted by Torres Zamudio et al. (2021), logos, colors, and icons play a key role in representing a destination.

Iconography plays a central role in brand identity and management for heritage sites due to its symbolic and visual significance. Panofsky (1972) recognizes it as a valid source for understanding the history and territorial identity of a place. Its application in graphic branding facilitates identification, historical connection, and cultural dissemination (Ruiz-Ruiz et al., 2022), while symbols and myths strengthen emotional bonds with target audiences (Ruiz-Ruiz & Teruel-Serrano, 2024). In this sense, heritage valorization requires interpretation to convey its significance, with iconography serving as a key support. Its dissemination fosters respect and promotes the perception of heritage as a living entity (Arias Benavides, 2018). Likewise, the study of archaeological artifacts and archaeoastronomy reveals significant social connections (Lozano Castro, 2016).

Furthermore, community communication and participation effectively project cultural identity (Ruiz-Ruiz et al., 2022). As a result, communities influence place branding through their social practices and interactions (Reyes-Guarnizo, 2014).

Within this framework, the present research focuses on the millenary city of Quito, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978. Its urban planning reflects symbolic and astronomical principles based on the Nazca Cross, which embodies the multidimensional conception of Andean space (Lozano Castro, 2016). Moreover, its complex geography, equinoctial location, and historical ties to pre-Hispanic societies—evident in natural landmarks and cyclical events such as solstices and equinoxes—further reinforce its heritage value (del Pino Martínez, 2018; Velasco, 2018).

Archaeological research and cultural preservation efforts have revealed pre-Columbian symbolic elements that shaped local identity. Rodas Espinel (2019) affirms that this information is essential for understanding the identity and culture of Indigenous peoples. Likewise, the study of symbolic manifestations during the Integration Period (400–1500/1532 A.D.) and their relationship with the destination's culture enabled the identification of elements applicable to the heritage site, aligning with the objectives of this research. The Kitu Kara people, who settled in what is now Quito, gave name to the "middle of the world" (Cabascango Collaguazo, 2019). Their ceremonial center corresponds to the present-day Historic Center, and the symbol of the "8," associated with their numerology, reflects the city's urban organization into two four-part divisions (Naranjo, 2018). Their astronomical and ritual expressions—marked by solstices and equinoxes—are represented in the solar star Kitu-Kara (Figure 1), with precedents in earlier equatorial cultures (Velasco, 2018).

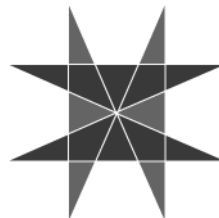


Figure 1. Digitalization of the image in archaeology of the Kitu Kara culture (Source: Self elaboration based on Velasco, 2018)

Archaeological evidence found in the La Florida necropolis, located north of Quito, reveals funerary customs involving ceramic artifacts, *spondylus* shells, and metal objects (Molestina Zaldumbide, 2006). Notably, a gold seal bearing the "stepped triangle" motif—a symbol of power—was uncovered (Guinea, 2004). Although the Chaupicruz culture lacks distinctive iconography, it played a significant role in the historical development of the city (Ontaneda, 2010). Today, however, its legacy remains largely invisible, with its descendants residing mainly in rural parishes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach conducted in Quito and structured into three phases:

Phase 1 – Theoretical Framework: A systematic literature review was carried out, encompassing works in history,

archaeology, and archaeoastronomy, as well as scholarly articles, to examine the relationship between graphic branding and cultural iconography. Additionally, data pertaining to the heritage site was collected.

Phase 2 – Data Collection: Using an observation sheet, 150 out of 875 organizations listed in the database of the Metropolitan District of Quito were analyzed. These included cultural centers, tour operators, and commercial establishments—key sectors in the city. The aim was to identify the presence of cultural iconography in graphic brands and assess its alignment with corporate identity. The sample was randomly selected.

Phase 3 – Interviews: Eight interviews were conducted with executives from cultural centers, commercial enterprises, and tourism-related companies, following a common interview guide. The discussions explored communication strategies and yielded critical insights into the use of iconography in graphic brands and its connection to the identity of the heritage site. This methodological design enabled a comprehensive understanding of perceptions regarding iconographic elements in brand graphics and their influence on cultural valorization, contributing to the development of the Identitary Graphic Brand Protocol (IGBP). Figure 2 illustrates the detailed structure of the applied methodology and its three phases, which provided the foundational inputs for the construction of the IGBP.

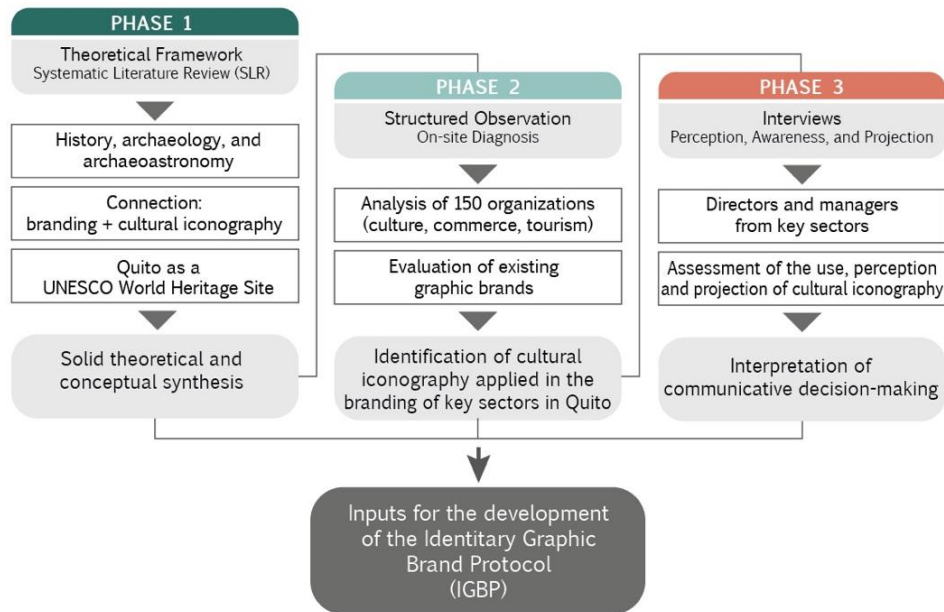


Figure 2. Applied Methodology as a Basis for the IGBP (Source: Self elaboration)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study on cultural iconography within industries located in the heritage site (Phase 2) revealed that only 21% of the 150 organizations analyzed incorporate such elements into their graphic branding, while 79% do not utilize cultural icons (Figure 3). This finding suggests a possible lack of awareness regarding the value or relevance of these symbolic elements.

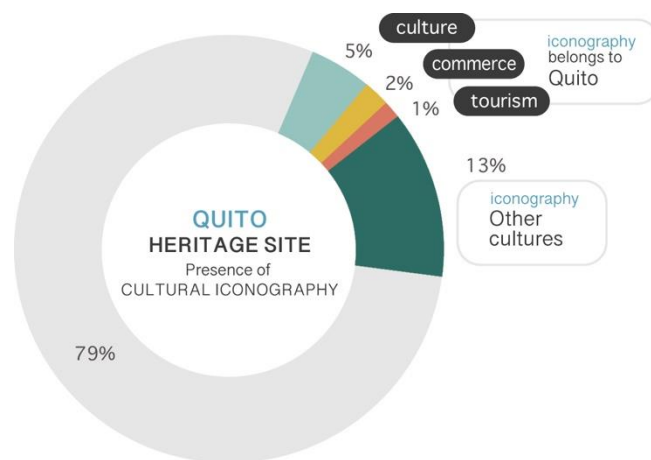


Figure 3. Presence of cultural iconography in commercial, tourist and cultural graphic brands of the city of Quito (Source: Self elaboration)

The findings for the cultural, commercial, and tourism sectors are presented below, organized around three key aspects: the use of cultural iconography, its interpretation and application within each sector, and the assessment and coherence of corporate identity.

Cultural Sector

- **Use of Cultural Iconography:** Only 8% of the organizations observed employ symbols or icons to differentiate themselves, and a mere 5% incorporate iconography specific to Quito's cultural heritage.
- **Interpretation and Use:** Museums such as Intiñán, Quitsato, La Florida, and MAAEC reflect Quito's history in their brand identities, thereby strengthening their institutional image. In contrast, institutions like the Fundación Museos de la Ciudad and the San Francisco Museum fail to represent this iconography appropriately, underestimating its cultural significance. Some include symbols from other regions, which may lead to confusion among audiences.
- **Assessment and Coherence of Corporate Identity:** The Quitsato Museum and the La Florida Site Museum stand out for their coherent corporate identities, which are reinforced by consistent visual elements that enhance the visitor experience and deepen audience engagement.

Commercial Sector

- **Use of Cultural Iconography:** Only 11% of businesses in the commercial sector utilize cultural icons, with just 2% incorporating iconography specific to Quito.
- **Interpretation and Use:** Apuk Eco Apparel is notable for offering garments that feature unique iconographic designs. Galería Latina, Pimkay, and Yuwik also integrate such elements to enhance the cultural value of their crafts and souvenirs. However, a lack of organization by cultural origin indicates limited understanding and challenges in distinguishing among Ecuadorian cultures.
- **Assessment and Coherence of Corporate Identity:** Few companies adopt cultural iconography, but some do so coherently. The Quitus shopping center employs Quito-specific iconography across its name, brand, and signage, while Ankaylli integrates it into packaging and products. In contrast, businesses like Kinku display inconsistencies that may create confusion in brand perception.

Tourism Sector

- **Use of Cultural Iconography:** Only 2% of the tourism-related businesses surveyed incorporate cultural icons into their graphic branding, and of this group, only 1% include iconography directly related to the heritage site.
- **Interpretation and Use:** Two hotels—Chakana Hotel Boutique and Kitu Hotel—stand out for using representative symbols of Quito, showcasing the city's cultural richness to their guests. However, the use of local symbols is nearly absent in restaurants and tour operators, with the exception of Quimbaya Tours, which integrates some iconographic elements, albeit not exclusively from Quito.
- **Assessment and Coherence of Corporate Identity:** Chakana Hotel Boutique exemplifies brand coherence by incorporating symbols from the broader Andean region across its identity, including its physical spaces, social media presence, and promotional materials. An in-depth analysis of the interviews was conducted to identify the vision, awareness, and actions related to the communication strategies of these organizations. This evaluation focused on how graphic branding influences the projection of the heritage site of the City of Quito (Phase 3). The results are categorized into two main areas: (1) communication strategies and (2) awareness and appreciation of ancestral culture, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories for interview analysis (Source: Self-elaboration)

Category	Subcategory	Analytical units
1. Communication strategies	1.1. Use of ancestral iconography as graphic Brand identifier	1.1.1. Identification of the meaning of the brand's elements
		1.1.2. Identification of the culture in the iconography used in the brand
		1.1.3. Ancestral iconography as a hallmark in the brands of major industries
2. Awareness and appreciation of ancestral culture	2.1. Cultural iconography as a valuation tool	2.1.1. Cultural iconography to communicate the origin of the territory
		2.1.2. Lack of knowledge about cultural iconography leads to poor practices
	2.2. Knowledge of the culture belonging to the territory	2.2.1. Visitors' understanding of Quito's cultures

1. Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are essential in the branding management of heritage sites. Planning based on ancestral iconography strengthens identity and promotes cultural and tourism-related activities. This category assesses whether ancestral iconography is used as a primary identifier, linking it to the cultural meanings of the brand. The subcategory addressed is: Use of ancestral iconography as a graphic identifier.

1.1 Use of ancestral iconography as a brand's graphic identifier: This subcategory is divided into:

1.1.1. Identification of the meaning of brand elements: In the cultural sector, all stakeholders demonstrate a deep understanding of the meanings associated with the brand's visual elements (E1, E2, E3):

"...it is the equatorial line based on parallel 68, which is a circle of latitude located 68 degrees north of the Earth's equatorial plane; the name of the museum means 'Path to the Sun'..." (E1).

In the tourism sector, although solid knowledge is present, one interviewee highlighted differences in how brands are presented: hotels and restaurants tend to use symbols/icons, whereas tour operators primarily rely on logotypes (namings) for identification.

"...it is very common to see, for instance, that restaurants and even hotel chains use symbols, but that is uncommon among tour operators, where the name of the place with a particular font is usually enough..." (E4).

Interviews with commercial enterprises revealed varying levels of understanding. While one respondent expressed uncertainty regarding the meaning of the brand's symbols, another showed confidence in their interpretation:

"...it doesn't include icons, but its name means 'women of the sun.' It is a purely typographic brand, and its meaning is inspired by the sun as the center of the universe and the woman as the creator of life..." (E7).

1.1.2. Identification of culture in the iconography used in the brand: Four types of responses were identified across the three sectors. In the cultural sector, some brands referenced Quito-related cultures, such as *Kitus Karas* and *La Florida*. However, one museum director clarified the rationale behind the brand's visual elements:

"...it aligns with the Kitus Karas, but the choice was based on the equatorial aspect, not on the culture that once inhabited the territory..." (E1).

In the tourism sector, two types of responses emerged: iconography associated with Quito culture, and iconography without a specific cultural attribution.

"...in the brand, you can see the chakana, which belongs to all Andean cultures. We chose it as an emblem, and in the interior decoration, you can see how the spaces are divided according to different cultures, including the Kitus..." (E4).

In the commercial sector, responses showed partial identification or absence of specific cultural references. This could foster diversity and inclusion, particularly if communities are involved and their stories reflected in the brand narrative.

"...it belongs to a culture from the city of Loja, but I can't recall which one at the moment..." (E6).
"...it is not based on any specific culture, but it is inspired by the sun as a guiding element..." (E7).

1.1.3. Ancestral iconography as a hallmark of the main industries' brands: Interviewees noted that ancestral iconography, as a communication strategy, reinforces local culture and history. Symbols such as the sun and its associated astronomical events (solstices and equinoxes), as well as the equatorial line, were emphasized as representations of ancestral peoples from the middle of the world.

"...it helps to understand history—something as important as the origin of solstices, equinoxes, and the Milky Way, which aligns with this iconography..." (E2).

There is a clear intention to incorporate this iconography into brand elements, though participants mentioned a lack of necessary resources—such as communication specialists or adequate information—for its correct implementation. This is reflected in statements like:

"...we have wanted to integrate icons from our ancestors, but we can't find a repository to source them from..." (E7).

Their discourse emphasizes that the core concept of corporate identity goes beyond mere brand representation; this foundational identity should inform and guide all communication efforts and organizational actions.

"...it is valid as a communication strategy, but it must be coherent. In recent years, iconography has been used purely for commercial purposes without alignment to Andean thought. Its use must be consistent across all company actions..." (E4).

Respondents agreed that the use of such symbols presents an educational opportunity for younger generations and underscores their value as learning tools. They also noted that organizational involvement in cultural iconography could strengthen the connection between businesses and the community in Quito.

"...it is highly valid to include it in brands from the city of Quito—not only to raise general awareness but also to reach younger people who have become detached from their identity..." (E3).

2. Awareness and Appreciation of Ancestral Culture

The category *awareness and appreciation of ancestral culture* refers to the perception of cultural iconography as a tool focused on communicating the identity and history of local communities. The subcategories include: *Cultural iconography as a tool for appreciation* and *Knowledge of cultures belonging to the territory*.

2.1. Cultural Iconography as a Tool for Appreciation: Iconography, as a representation of historical and cultural wealth, has the potential to attract tourism and serve as a means for revaluing the territories.

2.1.1. Cultural Iconography as a Medium for Communicating Territorial Origins: Interviewees emphasized that icons and symbols are essential for understanding the past, while also revealing a disconnection from national identity and a lack of appreciation for culture, as their identification often requires greater effort.

"It is highly appropriate to use symbols to understand where we come from; first, we must identify ourselves as Ecuadorians in order to share this with the world..." (E2)

2.1.2. Lack of Knowledge Regarding Cultural Iconography Leads to Misuse: The interviews revealed a growing awareness of the importance of understanding cultural symbols. Their appreciation fosters respect, while ignorance may result in cultural appropriation.

"Yes, it leads to misuse. First, the lack of knowledge results in a lack of appreciation, and second, by not knowing, many symbols that do not belong to the city of Quito are used and accepted. It is very common to find brands and merchandising with iconography from all over Ecuador, without being able to identify which ones actually belong to this heritage site..." (E3)

2.2. Knowledge of Cultures Belonging to the Territory: Historical knowledge of the territory enhances the sense of belonging and attracts visitors who are interested in cultural heritage.

2.2.1. Knowledge of Quiteño Cultures Among Site Visitors: This knowledge enables a coherent positioning of the brand identity, drawing attention and favoring the heritage site. Those familiar with local traditions tend to value them more and support local enterprises. However, many visitors neither recognize nor properly value the local culture, which is more appreciated by foreigners than by Ecuadorian nationals.

"They have never come to ask about specific cultures. Among our visitors, 20% are foreigners, and they are the ones who inquire the most about Quito's culture..." (E5)

IDENTITARY GRAPHIC BRAND PROTOCOL (IGBP)

The preceding phases lead to the development of the Identitary Graphic Brand Protocol (IGBP), which integrates identity, graphic branding, and cultural iconography within a heritage site in Ecuador. This approach is especially relevant given the limited attention Ecuador has received in the heritage branding literature.

The proposed model revalorizes local culture, strengthens residents' connection with their heritage, and projects the site's cultural uniqueness internationally. The process is detailed in Figure 4.

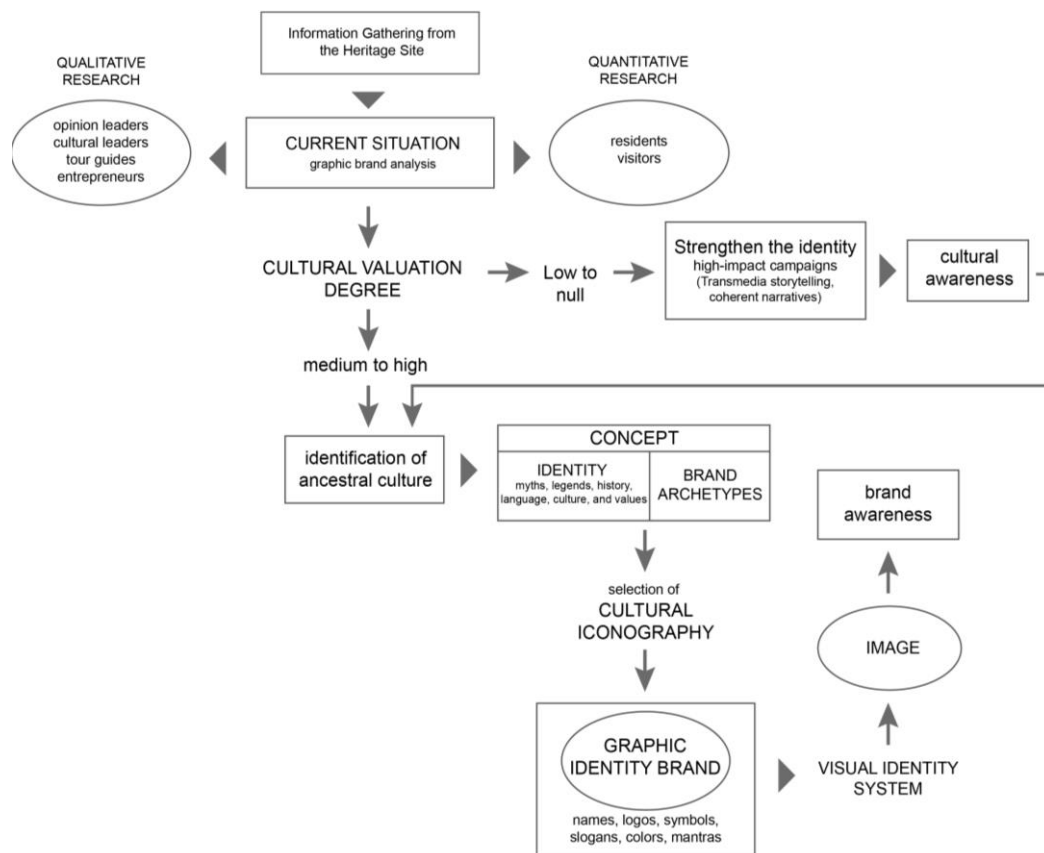


Figure 4. Identitary Graphic Brand Protocol (IGBP) (Source: Self elaboration)

1. Preliminary Research

The initial phase of the PMGI involves an in-depth investigation of the heritage site, taking into account both tangible and intangible aspects. Quito, known as the “Middle of the World City,” stands out for its historic center.

A diagnostic analysis is conducted on the use of cultural iconography across the cultural, commercial, and tourism sectors, employing qualitative and quantitative methods such as direct observation and interviews with key stakeholders to assess the perception of heritage and its iconography.

2. Degree of Cultural Valuation

This stage is essential for strengthening identity through indicators that assess appreciation for culture among heritage site stakeholders. Two key dimensions are emphasized: the presence of cultural iconography and the level of awareness regarding it. Table 2 presents a matrix with criteria, indices, and coefficients designed to measure cultural valuation. The presence dimension focuses on the diversity and relevance of the icons, while awareness examines their use, interpretation, recognition of representative cultures, and interest in ancestral heritage.

Table 2. Cultural valuation matrix (Source: Self elaboration)

CRITERIA	Indexes for presence of cultural iconography	Coef.	CRITERIA	Indexes for cultural iconography awareness	Coef.
Diversity	– Cultural icons present in graphic brands – Variety of cultural icons	0.015	Use and interpretation	– Official communication aligned with the site's culture	0.02
		0.05		– Culture symbols as an essential part of identity	0.01
Cultural relevance	– Iconography related to the culture/history of the site. – Ancestral culture as an influential factor in visitor's experience	0.01	Acknowledgement	– Iconography as a promotional element	0.03
		0.025		– Knowledge of representative cultures of the heritage site	0.01
				– Identification of the most representative iconography of the site	0.015
				– Interest in ancestral culture	0.01

This assessment quantifies the value attributed to the heritage site by key stakeholders through the cultural symbols embedded in graphic brands. A scale from 0 to 5 is applied, where higher values indicate greater cultural valuation. A 5% (0.05) significance coefficient serves as a threshold for evaluating the relative importance of these aspects in the cultural perception of the site. In this context, a lower significance coefficient indicates a stronger and statistically significant relationship between the indicator and cultural valuation. The 5% significance level has been used as a baseline for understanding and comparing the relative importance of different cultural aspects in the valuation of the city of Quito within the 0-to-5 scale. The assigned significance coefficients serve as guiding indicators, highlighting which factors hold greater weight in the cultural valuation, using the city's iconography as a key reference for measurement.

3. Definition of Key Brand Elements

The concept of the brand is defined based on the research findings (symbols, icons, colors, shapes, etc.), taking into account the heritage site's identity and its tangible and intangible elements, such as history and values. Core archetypes are established, including authenticity, hospitality, and architectural beauty.

4. Identity Graphic Brand

With elements agreed upon by the local community, the identity graphic brand is designed. It includes logos, symbols, color palettes, and slogans that reflect the defined identity.

5. Visual Identity System

The visual identity system encompasses the color palette, typography, and graphic elements, accompanied by a brand manual to ensure consistency across various media and contexts.

6. Brand Monitoring

Ongoing monitoring of public perception is conducted to adjust the brand as necessary, ensuring its authenticity and effectiveness in communication and marketing strategies.

CONCLUSION

Key information about Quito highlights its rich cultural heritage and the presence of three principal cultures: Kitu Kara, La Florida, and Chaupicruz. Known as the Middle of the World City, its location at latitude 0°0'0" was determined by the 18th-century French Geodesic Mission. The significance of solstices and equinoxes in the indigenous worldview further reinforces its link to this unique geographic position.

For the branding of the heritage site, local stakeholders prioritized the solar star of the Kitu Kara culture - a symbol that connects ancestral heritage with the present. Its cultural significance and association with Quito's location enhance the site's authenticity and enrich the visitor experience.

Interviews and surveys indicate that 79% of organizations do not use cultural icons, while 13% employ iconography unrelated to Quito's native cultures, primarily in the commercial sector. Only 8% incorporate elements tied to the heritage site: 5% in the cultural sector, 2% in the commercial sector, and 1% in tourism. These figures underscore the need to align brand identity with local culture to achieve coherence and authenticity.

Integrating cultural icons provides businesses with a competitive advantage and strengthens their market positioning. It also contributes to the revaluation of local heritage, reinforcing territorial identity and a sense of belonging. In the tourism sector, this integration enriches the visitor experience. The underuse of local symbols represents a missed opportunity to highlight Quito's cultural wealth and to offer more authentic experiences.

Leaders from the cultural, commercial, and tourism sectors regard cultural iconography as a distinctive element that conveys local history. The sun and the equatorial line stand out as representative symbols of Quito. While recognizing their value in promoting the city, some organizations lack the resources for implementation. They emphasize the need for consistency in iconographic usage and its educational potential for younger generations, reinforcing ties between businesses and the heritage site. While cultural iconography is appreciated, stakeholders also point out challenges regarding its application and local acceptance.

Data triangulation revealed that the combination of graphic branding and ancestral culture plays a fundamental role in shaping the perception of the heritage site, contributing to the creation of a distinctive identity and the revitalization of local culture. This approach appeals to both rational and emotional motivations, while also strengthening residents' sense of belonging. Consequently, the graphic brand and the integration of cultural elements emerge as powerful tools to positively project the heritage destination both locally and internationally.

In conclusion, this study proposes, for the first time, a protocol for creating a heritage brand grounded in authenticity and the recovery of ancestral iconography. This approach establishes a foundation for strategic management aimed at cultural valorization. By enriching local identity, it also fosters national unity and a deeper sense of belonging. Active participation from all stakeholders—ranging from local residents to leaders of key industries—is essential.

Additionally, continuous brand monitoring is required to ensure alignment with public expectations. Raising awareness among decision-makers in leading industries about the cultural significance of heritage sites and their impact on the local community is a critical need.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, I.N.R.R.; methodology, I.N.R.R.; software, I.N.R.R.; validation, I.N.R.R.; formal analysis, I.N.R.R.; investigation, I.N.R.R.; data curation, I.N.R.R.; writing – original draft preparation, I.N.R.R. and

M.D.T.S.; writing – review and editing, I.N.R.R. and M.D.T.S.; visualization, I.N.R.R. and M.D.T.S.; supervision, I.N.R.R. and M.D.T.S.; project administration, I.N.R.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study may be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgements: The research undertaken was made possible by the equal scientific involvement of all the authors concerned.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Arias Benavides, A. (2018). Más allá del patrimonio monumental. Apuntes sobre la gestión pública. In *Quito Patrimonios* 42–48. Quito: Instituto Metropolitano de Patrimonio.
- Balmer, J. (2001). Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing Seeing through the fog. *European Journal of Marketing*, 35(3–4), 309–0566. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560110694763>
- Bertola Garbellini, A., & Ramallal, M. (2022). Museos e identidades visuales dinámicas. Mecanismos de las marcas gráficas como vehículo de transmisión cultural. *Artseduca*, 32, 239–254. <https://doi.org/10.6035/artseduca.6355>
- Cabascango Collaguazo, F. (2019). Las comunas y comunidades son territorios con continuidad histórica. In *Kitu Kara* 21–23. Quito: Editorial Fundación Paradocs.
- Chaves, N. (2012). *La imagen corporativa, teoría y práctica de la identificación institucional*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.
- del Pino Martínez, I. (2018). *La huella prehispánica*. Quito: Instituto Metropolitano de Patrimonio.
- Dopico Castro, M. (2021). La tipografía como generadora de identidad en la imagen de marca de países europeos en el siglo XXI. *I+Diseño. Revista Científico-Académica Internacional de Innovación, Investigación y Desarrollo En Diseño*, 16, 37–60. <https://doi.org/10.24310/Idisenio.2021.v16i.12802>
- Foroudi, P., Gupta, S., Kitchen, P., Foroudi, M. M., & Nguyen, B. (2016). A framework of place branding, place image, and place reputation. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 19(2), 241–264. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-02-2016-0020>
- Guinea, M. (2004). *Simbolismo y ritual en los andes septentrionales*. Quito: Editorial Complutense.
- Lozano Castro, A. (2016). *Quito - Quito - El oculto legado ancestral. Imagen simbólica del cenro ecuatral*. Quito: Don Bosco.
- Mohamad, B., Adetunji, R. R., Alarifi, G., Ismail, A. R., & Akanmu, M. D. (2022). A Visual Identity-Based Approach of Southeast Asian City Branding: A Netnography Analysis. *JAS (Journal of ASEAN Studies)*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v10i1.7330>
- Molestina Zaldumbide, M. del C. (2006). El pensamiento simbólico de los habitantes de La Florida (Quito-Ecuador). *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'études Andines*, 35(3), 377–395. <https://doi.org/10.4000/bifea.3931>
- Morgan, N., Pritchard, A., & Piggott, R. (2002). New Zealand, 100% pure. The creation of a powerful niche destination brand. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4–5), 335–354. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540082>
- Naranjo, H. (2018). Geobiología Kitu-Kara-Inca en Quito. In *Kitu Milenario: Paisajes Culturales 1* 105–121. Quito: Kinti Editores.
- Ontaneda, S. (2010). *Las Antiguas Sociedades precolombinas del Ecuador*. Quito, Ecuador: Nuevo Arte.
- Panofsky, E. (1972). *Estudios sobre iconología*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Pino, G., Peluso, A. M., Del Vecchio, P., Ndou, V., Passiante, G., & Guido, G. (2019). A methodological framework to assess social media strategies of event and destination management organizations. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 28(2), 189–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19368623.2018.1516590>
- Rangan, V., Elberse, A., & Bell, M. (2006). *Marketing New York City*, Harvard Business Case Studies. Boston: Business School of Publishing.
- Reyes-Guarnizo, A. B. (2014). De los imaginarios colectivos a la apropiación del territorio: Un recorrido conceptual. *Revista Bitácora Urbano Territorial*, 24(1), 1–21.
- Rodas Espinel, M. (2019). Introducción. In *Kitu Kara* 17–19. Quito: Editorial Fundación Paradocs.
- Ruiz-Ruiz, I. N., & Teruel-Serrano, M. D. (2023). La importancia de la marca en destinos patrimoniales. Revisión descriptiva de la literatura. *ARTSEDUCA*, 36, 221–236. <https://doi.org/10.6035/artseduca.3614>
- Ruiz-Ruiz, I. N., & Teruel-Serrano, M. D. (2024). Gestión de marca cultural y digital: estrategias para promover sitios del patrimonio de la humanidad. *Santander. Estudios de Patrimonio*, 7, 475–498. <https://doi.org/10.22429/Euc2024.sep.07.14>
- Ruiz-Ruiz, I. N., Teruel-Serrano, M. D., & Miranda-Sánchez, S. I. (2022). Visual Identity Based on Ancestral Iconography: A Strategy for Re-Evaluation of the Caranqui Cultural Heritage in the Gualimán Archaeological Site (Ecuador). *Heritage*, 5(4), 3463–3478. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage5040178>
- Tasci, A. D. A., & Gartner, W. C. (2009). Chapter 11 A Practical Framework for Destination Branding. In *Tourism Branding: Communities in Action* 149–158. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S2042-1443\(2009\)0000001013](https://doi.org/10.1108/S2042-1443(2009)0000001013)
- Torres Zamudio, M., González Castro, Y., & Manzano Durán, O. (2021). Methodological elements to design a city branding with the use of grounded theory. *Cuadernos de Gestión*, 21(1), 125–134. <https://doi.org/10.5295/cdg.191093mt>
- Velasco, D. (2018). A la búsqueda del Kitu Milenario: El reino de los colobries. In *Kitu Milenario: Paisajes culturales 1* 53–67. Quito: Kinti Editores.