

Developing a Strategic City Branding Framework for Sri Lanka: A Case Study of Anuradhapura

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Abstract

The study investigates the creation of a city branding framework for Sri Lanka combining Anuradhapura as a case study. The study identifies the gap in city branding strategies by integrating urban planning and cultural identity. A qualitative study was undertaken to study individuals or groups, where data was collected through interviews with planners, tourism officials, and community members, while also reviewing relevant documents. The study identified that Anuradhapura has a distinctive identity of sacred heritage, irrigation heritage, and architecture; however, this identity is still underleveraged for branding purposes. The unique identity is compounded by institutional fragmentation, poor infrastructure, underdeveloped digital presence, and other factors that limit the city's global appeal. A city branding framework that incorporates heritage conservation, collaboration among stakeholders, and sustainable tourism is presented to improve city competitiveness and recognition.

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Introduction

Increasingly the use of city branding has become a mechanism to help improve the international image of cities, enhance the global competitiveness of cities, and improve sustainability and development in cities. Global cities like Barcelona, Kyoto, and Dubai have successfully branded their cities around forms of distinct branding that utilizes culture, identity, and urban infrastructure. For Sri Lanka, the national tourism marketing campaign "So Sri Lanka" assists in developing a national brand for tourism, but formalized branding around the promotion of place-based city identities and urban development agendas have not occurred. This research is a development of a strategic city branding framework appropriate for Sri Lanka that integrates city branding with urban planning guidelines, heritage preservation, and sustainability concepts. Anuradhapura is examined as a case study based upon its historic, cultural and ecological significance. A qualitative approach is used, consisting of interviews with urban planners, architects and government tourism authorities to understand the current challenges and potential opportunities to develop a branding strategy for Sri Lankan cities. The framework seeks to develop a practical, relevant, and scalable model of branding agenda for local authorities and policymakers responsible for developing and implementing coherent branding initiatives that acknowledge local identities and heritage, but which will also assist in aligning branding with national development goals

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Objectives of the Study

General Objective

- To formulate an integrated city branding strategy and methodology for Sri Lanka with regard to Sri Lanka's unique cultural, historical, and economic situations as a way of possibly augmenting international branding, foreign investment, and eco-friendly urban growth in Sri Lanka's cities.

Specific Objectives

- To analyse Sri Lanka's existing city branding, city branding practices emerging on a national level, and existing city branding on the city level.
- To create an effective city branding structure that is made up of Sri Lanka's national identity, offering selected city, attributes, values and strengths.
- To implement the proposed city branding model on Anuradhapura, primarily for purposes of assessing its applicability, strengths and weaknesses, and impacts on Anuradhapura's brand recognition and image.

Literature Review

City branding has emerged as a strategic practice of urban governance, witness to growing recognition that cities compete for investment, tourism, and talent in the new world economy. Place marketing is necessary for cities in order that they can differentiate themselves and convey their unique character to a variety of stakeholders, maintained Kotler et al. (1999). Kavaratzis (2004) further argues that city branding extends beyond the advertising agenda in themselves since it aims to consolidate the urban identity, built environment, and image of the stakeholders. Branding is a comprehensive development tool utilized by cities across the world. Barcelona used its heritage architecture and urban regeneration following the 1992 Olympics to reimagine itself as a world center of culture. Amsterdam's "I Amsterdam" campaign also showed the way branding served to generate civic pride as well as international visitor appeal. Kyoto city branding in Asia is concentrated on cultural authenticity and eco-tourism, while Dubai illustrates the role of visionary city planning and foreign investment in generating a solid contemporary brand identity. Both examples illustrate how successful city branding balances hard assets such as heritage and infrastructure with soft assets such as reputation, culture, and lifestyle.

In the theory, Anholt (2007) has established the theoretical model of competitive identity, highlighting the fact that the cities must integrate governance, culture, and communication in building seamless stories. Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2010) suggest that city branding must never be a straightforward imitation of corporate branding practices but develop with urban diversity, such as planning, architecture, and civic engagement. Zenker and Braun (2010) also refer to the stakeholder participation in the construction of authentic and sustainable city brands. Literature in city branding is limited in Sri Lanka. Only one national campaign, "So Sri Lanka," responds to macro-level promotion of tourism and not city-level identity construction or urban development reconciliation. There are ad-hoc city branding elements for Colombo, Kandy, and Galle, but they are incoherent and devoid of a unified strategic direction. Therefore, developing a city branding strategy within an organized framework appropriate for Sri Lankan cities is a worthwhile scholarly and applied contribution. Originality of the research in this case is the application of global city brand theory to local contexts of Sri Lankan cities. Putting sustainability, stakeholder involvement, and urban identity into a holistic framework, research contributes to theoretical knowledge as well as actual urban policy. Versatility of the framework in various urban contexts provides a new tool to influential planners and policymakers for integrative, sustainable, and competitive city

brands.

Methods

This research adopted an analytical qualitative approach to develop a strategic city branding model for Sri Lankan cities using Anuradhapura as a case in point. The strategy was developed to examine the institutional, social, and cultural forces behind city branding and appreciate the voice of stakeholders involved in urban planning and tourism development. The study focused on professionals involved in city management, including urban planners, architects, local authorities, and representatives of Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. They were purposively sampled based on their specialization and relevance to the context of the study. Data were collected by conducting document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observation. Document analysis comprised an examination of national policy reports, city development plans, tourist master plans, and academic studies to ascertain the prevailing frameworks and loopholes in prevalent city branding practice. In-depth information regarding city identity, branding issues, infrastructure expansion, coordination between stakeholders, and sustainability was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Site visits to Anuradhapura provided an analytical interpretation of the physical settings, architectural characteristics, cultural features, and environmental conditions that made up the character of the city and possible branding character.

The data were subsequently analysed thematically, to identify and explain significant patterns and relationships. Inductive code and theme development was used to emerge overarching concepts such as identity formation, institutional coordination, stakeholder engagement, and policy integration. Triangulation of data from diverse sources enhanced validity and reliability of findings. This framework of methodology is developed to guarantee that the framework established is context-relevant and dynamic in nature to guide policymakers, planners, and tourism authorities on how to develop city identity, competitiveness, and sustainable urban development for Sri Lankan cities.

Results and Discussion

This study found that while Sri Lankan cities possess rich historical and cultural identities, they lack a structured city branding approach aligned with spatial planning, governance, and sustainable tourism. Based on literature synthesis and empirical evidence, a comprehensive City Branding Framework was developed consisting of seven key elements (Figure 1). When applied to Anuradhapura, the framework effectively identified the city's authentic identity and potential for strategic branding.

Figure 1

City Branding Framework – Seven Key Elements

Element	Description
1. City Identity	Defines the soul of the city its heritage, culture, landscape, and social character.
2. Stakeholder Engagement	Collaboration among government, private sector, communities, and cultural institutions.
3. Infrastructure & Service Delivery	Accessibility, urban design, hospitality, and sustainable mobility systems.
4. Branding & Communication	Visual identity, logos, narratives, online presence, and promotional channels.

5. Governance & Institutional Integration	Policy alignment, coordination among institutions, and long-term management.
6. Sustainability & Innovation	Eco-friendly tourism, digital transformation, and cultural preservation.
7. Monitoring & Evaluation	Performance indicators to track branding effectiveness and tourist satisfaction.

Source: Developed by Author, 2025

Key Findings from Stakeholder Interviews

UDA, SLTDA, and Department of Archaeological as well as Anuradhapura Municipal Council officers' interviews revealed recurring issues. Each participant emphasized Anuradhapura's identity can never be removed from sacred heritage, ancient irrigation systems, and forest cover. They agreed that current branding is disconnected due to poor inter-agency collaboration, weak digital presence, and infrastructure deficiencies.

The data collected via interviews represented obstacles and opportunities for developing Anuradhapura's city brand.

Challenges Identified

- Fragmentation of the institutional process: Poor coordination processes between UDA, SLTDA, and MC creates challenges in the implementation of the integrated branding initiatives.
- Infrastructure deficiencies: The lack of star-class hotels, modern sanitation, and amenable infrastructure limits visitors' experience of the city.
- Weak digital presence: There is no central city website or unified online platform that promotes attractions in the city.
- Limited visibility of marketing: The city has not been marketed globally to the extent warranted for a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- The semi-urbanized settlement of residents in the sacred city: Creates tension between conservation and urbanization.
- Lack of data systems for tourism: No formal tracking of arrivals or contribution to the economy to define success.

These constraints provide a rationale for a seminar developing a coordinated governance framework for social systems, which would encapsulate city branding as part of local development and planning systems.

Opportunities for Strategic Branding

Despite the challenges, the study identified several opportunities through stakeholder perspectives.

- Cultural and Religious Heritage: Being a UNESCO World Heritage City, Anuradhapura's identity is in its Atamasthana (Eight Holy Places) and Poson and Mihindu Peraheras that establish it as a city of living heritage.
- Architectural Identity: Architectural distinctiveness of the city is preserved by distinguishing elements like the Panchavasa system and hipped roof type and can be emphasized in urban planning and branding.
- Eco- and Agro-tourism: It is close to Wilpattu National Park and has enormous paddy lands and therefore has immense potential for sustainable eco- and agro-tourism ventures with its old irrigation system.

- Arts and Creative Industries: Close to Mihintale, pottery and food culture (such as kurakkan roti and fish dishes from the lake) enhance cultural identity.

Malwathu Oya: The Core Branding Opportunity

The branding theme that was found to be the most powerful and also the most sustainable of all was Malwathu Oya which is referred to as the lifeline of Anuradhapura's ancient irrigation system. It was acknowledged by the stakeholders as a sign of continuity, purity, and the coexistence of man and nature. The proposed concept, "The Living Waters of Heritage," gives Anuradhapura the identity of a city that flourishes because of its ancient water civilization, thus connecting culture, ecology, and spirituality.

An irrigation-based branding approach gives rise to experiential tourism opportunities like river excursions, cycling paths, and agro-tourism, and also eco-lodges along the Malwathu Oya corridor especially near the Eighteen-Arch Steel Bridge. The approach combines the preservation of heritage and the attraction of modern tourism while also encouraging local people to take part in and look after the environment. The results of the research are in accordance with the views of Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) who assert that a strong city brand is formed through the interplay of the internal identity and the external communication. Likewise, Anholt (2007) points out that the place branding that is real must come from what the city sincerely stands for. By making its brand revolve around irrigation heritage, Anuradhapura is, thereby, able to position itself as authentic, sustainable, and inclusive in the core narrative of its identity. The outcomes clearly illustrate that the proposed framework has the potential to catch the holistic elements that are necessary for a successful city branding. Although there might be some issues related to institutions and infrastructure after all, the irrigation-based approach which rests on Malwathu Oya still offers Anuradhapura a distinct, contextually rooted brand narrative that perfectly merges culture, environment, and community thus turning the city into a living symbol of Sri Lanka's hydraulic civilization.

Conclusion

This study discovers that Sri Lankan cities, as much as they are steeped in history and culture, lack an integrated system of city branding which is linked to city planning and governance. The proposed seven-factor model effectively integrates identity, stakeholder coordination, infrastructure, communication, sustainability, and governance. When the model was applied to Anuradhapura, it discovered that irrigation-based branding which stresses Malwathu Oya the heartbeat of the ancient city best defines its original and sustainable identity. Such a strategy promotes eco-tourism, culture conservation, and community engagement, along with the bridging of institutional gaps. Policymakers are called upon to adopt city branding strategies that merge heritage conservation with spatial planning and sustainable tourism development, and achieve national and local competitiveness within the international market.

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