

# Exploring Cultural Branding Strategies in Aligning with African Thought and Collective Heritage

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## Abstract

*The article is an outcome of research that assessed branding approaches to align African thinking and group legacy in African museums. The research aims to address a knowledge and practice gap regarding the ability of African heritage institutions to rebrand themselves outside the colonial past to create cultural identity, sustainability and Pan-African awareness. The review of heritage governance, museum definitions and branding practices is a qualitative approach that has helped to explore potential solutions to the problem of balancing authenticity, participation and global relevance. Results are that, African museums need to embrace hybrid strategies, incorporating bottom-up community-based participation with novel brand-focused practices to be credible, inclusive and impactful. It is concluded that adherence to museum branding to African collective heritage will bring resilience, cultural ownership and wider social value. The article suggests placing more emphasis on inclusive government, green branding and heritage-based cultural diplomacy.*

**Keywords:** branding, museums, African identity, Pan-African awareness, cultural identity, inclusive governance.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Museums have long operated as repositories of cultural heritage, places of memory and places of identity-making around the world (ICOM, 2022). Instead, in Africa, museums are filled with colonial heritage that has defined their patterns, collections and systems of interpretation (Williamson, 2020). It is this lineage that in the majority of situations has generated public institutions with greater focus on Western histories of knowledge production than on local histories of epistemology, creating a disconnection between communities and their own histories (Manetsi, 2023). With the growing intensity of debates over decolonisation, cultural representation, and the inclusion of minorities governing, the branding of African museums is becoming an increasingly key strategy to reposition such institutions as drivers of cultural identity, social cohesion, and Pan-African consciousness (Jopela, 2023; Mlilo, 2023).

Museums Branding is a new research area which is beyond logos and marketing campaigns, it is an entire process where the museums prove themselves useful and worthy, valid and present themselves to the various viewers (Paek *et al.*, 2021). This, in the African case, means working with heritage as a vital living resource that can underpin the stories of togetherness, toughness, and genuineness. According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2022), museums are participatory and inclusive organisations with operations that benefit society through the promotion of sustainability and dialogue of heritage and culture. This clearly demonstrates the importance of making branding practices consistent with the history of a community as a whole, instead of placing museums in isolated, high-brow areas.

Addressing the challenges of heritage governance in Africa calls for strategies that reconcile political, local, and market demands. On one hand, there are frictions between state-led policies and

local engagement in heritage governance involving local voices, which are often marginalised in decision-making in post-colonial African society (Escallon, 2020; Seyhan and Russo, 2020). For example, the tension between the gazetting (legal protection) of historic buildings by national authorities and the local community's interests, needs, and participation in Pangani. Therefore, the agents of globalisation and markets also require that museums, too, be competitive, economically viable and relevant to people and cultures (Riviezzo *et al.*, 2022). A compromise between these competing forces must be achieved using strategies that involve bottom-up participation and professional branding practices in such a way that identifies African ways of thinking and shared values.

In the meantime, global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have accelerated the need to rethink how museums interact both physically and digitally. The closure of different organisations throughout the world demonstrates that a museum must be more than just a preservation site, it must be innovative and flexible (Agostino *et al.*, 2020; Henkel, 2021). This will be an opportunity to rebrand African museums as sites of dialogue, learning and cultural diplomacy that foster Pan-African consciousness, as opposed to being pure repositories of the past. According to Young (2015), Pan-African consciousness refers to a shared awareness, self-understanding, and political-cultural identification among people of African descent on the continent and throughout the diaspora that emphasises collective identity, historical connectedness, and solidarity against global structures of racial, economic, and colonial domination.

The study examines ways in which cultural branding can bring African thought and heritage to museums. It attempts to bring into focus the strategies of cultural ownership, inclusion and sustainability and recognises the opportunities of global

interaction as well. In such a manner, it is hoped that the article can contribute to the current discussions on the topic of decolonisation, heritage governance and cultural identity in Africa and provide practical insights into how museums can use the concept of branding as a means to effect social change (Zhang, 2022; Henkel, 2023).

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The governance of heritage, branding and cultural identity of a particular place is the conceptual framework of the study. Museums internationally are increasingly viewed as both archives of tangible and intangible heritage and as strategic brands used to construct identity, legitimacy, and a sense of belonging, as discussed by Paek *et al.* (2021) and Riviezzo *et al.* (2022). Literature shows that branding activity must also contend with a colonial past that has historically marginalised indigenous and local voices, and therefore requires strategies that foster inclusivity and cultural ownership such as co-curation with source communities, collaborative interpretation, and the implementation of ethical return or shared-custody practices (Jopela, 2023; Manetsi, 2023). The ICOM (2022) definition of museums as participatory, inclusive, and community-centred institutions, provides a normative foundation for aligning museum branding with values and Pan-African consciousness at the community level. Within this framework, the concept emphasises museums as spaces where diverse publics actively contribute to meaning-making, governance, and cultural stewardship. Applying this to branding repositions museums from passive repositories of objects to active cultural agent institutions which present themselves as visible, relevant, authentic and accountable to local communities. This includes integrating community participation, shared decision-making, transparent governance and long-term sustainability into branding and transformation strategies (Zhang, 2022; Mlilo, 2023). Examples such as the

collaborative re-interpretation projects at the National Museum of Kenya or South Africa's Iziko Museums, where community co-curation and heritage dialogues have reshaped institutional identity, illustrate how similar participatory frameworks have strengthened institutional credibility and public trust. These cases demonstrate the practical value of embedding ICOM's participatory ethos into museum branding within African contexts.

### **THEORIES UNDERPINNING THE STUDY**

The Cultural Identity Theory and the Brand Equity Theory form the basis of this study as they offer the background to explore ways museums can integrate branding strategies to reflect African thinking and heritage. The Cultural Identity Theory, initially articulated by Collier (1988), and later expanded within intercultural communication studies, posits that individuals and communities construct and negotiate identity through shared symbols, narratives, and cultural experiences. This theory emphasises how heritage, memory and collective meaning-making shape an African sense of self-being.

The Cultural Identity Theory focuses on how individuals and communities create and negotiate their sense of belonging by sharing history, symbols and practices. The museums were deemed to be one of the most important elements that embody group memory and manifested identity in the African setting. However, the colonial powers that imposed their rules on the locals have often forgotten the locals (Williamson, 2020; Manetsi, 2023). Through this theory, the research article determines that branding could be an instrument to assist communities in re-establishing connection with their heritage, promoting inclusivity and unifying Pan-African consciousness (Jopela, 2023; Mlilo, 2023).

In line with this, the Brand Equity Theory describes value strong, credible, and authentic brands can have on institutional legitimacy and stakeholder engagement (Paek *et al.*, 2021; Prados-Pena and Del Barrio-Garcia, 2021). The theory supports strategic gains in reputation, trust, and positioning of museums as part of society and as competitive actors at the global level (Riviezzo *et al.*, 2022; Liu and Xiong, 2023). Even though brand equity has been utilised in African museums with regard to market performance, it assumes cultural relevance, social cohesion, and development of heritage-based diplomacy.

Collectively, these theories present a two-pronged perspective: cultural identity places museums in their historical and socio-political surroundings, whereas brand equity focuses on how museums are strategically managed in terms of image and value. This synthesis informs the research in exploring how museums can work to create branding approaches that are both authentic to African culture and reactive to global cultural forces (Zhang, 2022; Henkel, 2023).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The African museum heritage branding literature conveys a developing world argument regarding the purpose of cultural organisations in modern society (Hankel, 2021). Historically, museums have been imagined as depositories of the past, art and material culture and in many cases as custodians of national stories. In post-colonial settings, however, African museum space is much more complicated. It embodies both the burden of colonial heritage and the hope of cultural change. The potential of branding as a way of repositioning museums as active agents of identity, inclusivity and socio-political involvement, rather than as passive repositories of artefacts, has been raised again and again by scholars and practitioners. This literature contains the necessary clues to comprehend how

African museums should balance branding approaches with shared heritage and Pan-African awareness.

African museums have a long history of being governed and defined by their colonial past. Williamson (2020) notes that the practice of naming places with colonial implications was transferred to the institutions of heritage, such as museums and archives that retained colonial-era naming conventions. Manetsi (2023) takes a similar position that the governance of heritage in post-colonial Africa still reflects a form of colonial imbalance and that the process of decision-making is often centralised and exclusionary. This poses a structural problem with repositioning museums to be places of genuine expressions of local and indigenous values. Jopela (2023) expands on the argument by asserting that heritage sites are typically trapped in political frames, where the failure of people to interact effectively within communities is the order of the day rather than the liberatory attribute of cultural heritage. The continued existence of colonial structures, therefore, requires active measures to decolonise museums, and branding is one of the conceivable means to re-contextualise the image of the museum and its role in society.

Museums' branding does not necessarily involve logos, slogans or marketing campaigns. Instead, it includes the wider strategies by which institutions convey their mission, identity and value to different parties. In line with Paek *et al.* (2021), heritage-based branding adds value to institutions by linking them to authenticity and historical heritage, which translates into monetary and social wealth. Riviezzo *et al.* (2022) develop this discussion by showing how corporate museums can strategically align themselves to cultural value as well as business output, implying that heritage organisations can also deliver on two goals of social impact and institutional sustainability. They shed light on the value of branding as an

instrument to be seen and stay in place within Africa, where museums are underfunded and questioned about their relevance.

Participation as a role in heritage governance is a common theme in the literature. Escallon (2020) discusses the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in heritage management and reveals the strength and authority of these organisations in developing cultural discourse. This poses some vital questions of which voices prevail during heritage branding, and whose voices are suppressed. Jopela (2023) reinforces this criticism, as well as cautions against superficial or tokenistic approaches to participation. Rather, it will have to be substantive, allowing communities to articulate and convey their heritage in ways of significance. One such comparison that can assist is provided by Seyhan and Russo (2020), who show that bottom-up approaches to the management of heritage tourism are more sustainable and inclusive than top-down or state-based approaches. In the case of African museums, this means that community voices must be actively engaged in branding, as opposed to the recreation of hierarchical, exclusionary practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic put even more pressure on the question of the role and relevance of museums. Agostino *et al.* (2020) underline that the closure of state museums in Italy created the necessity to change the means of communication to digital, unveiling the challenges and opportunities of institutional branding. In a similar way, Henkel (2021) narrates the pandemic as a catalyst of sustainable change in the museum sector, making these institutions reconsider their operations, increase access, and adopt new models of engagement. The insights can be especially applied to African museums, which can use branding both to adapt to crises and to develop as future-oriented and resilient institutions. Later on,

Henkel (2023) builds up on this argument by connecting culture to sustainability by insisting that branding should be based on values that go beyond economic utility to promote cultural change. Such a view is consistent with the mounting argument that African museums must position themselves as places of resilience, identity and cultural diplomacy in a globalised world.

Authenticity emerges as one of the central questions of heritage branding. According to Carreira *et al.* (2021), authenticity and destination image determine visitor behaviour and intentions in heritage sites, and credible storytelling is crucial to branding. Kumar and Kaushik (2020) also reveal the role of destination brand engagement as an advocacy and loyalty-creating tool, implying that museums can gain additional benefits by building a more emotional bond with their audience. Lv and Wu (2021) go even further to demonstrate how tourism destinations use extraordinary sensory experiences to inspire brand love, which can also be implemented in museum settings where visitors experience immersion in exhibitions and engaging learning activities, which create closer connections between the visitor and the museum. In this regard, branding approaches, which focus on genuine and cultural experiences, are more likely to connect with audiences and establish long-term relationships.

At the same time, theories of global branding such as country-of-origin effects, global consumer culture positioning and cultural branding can provide useful insights into how museums can strike a balance between local authenticity and global relevance. Mandler *et al.* (2020) examine the impact of perceptions of 'globalness/globality' and 'localness' on brand credibility and note that it is important that institutions balance these processes. Nguyen and Alcantara (2020) also examine the reaction of consumers to brand perceived localness, proposing that in some situations, such as in Africa, the local authenticity

might have a stronger impact than the efforts to adopt global trends. This is also observed by Li, Tan and Jiao (2024), who state that globalness and localness are the phenomena that result in brand identification and that strategic positioning is vital. These lessons will be critical to African museums aiming at enhancing their brand without necessarily compromising their cultural identity.

The interplay between heritage and branding is also evident within discussions of brand extensions and the accumulation of brand equity. Deng and Messinger (2022) address the idea of brand-extension fit, which presupposes that credibility hinges on the consistency of a brand identity and brand extension effort. This is supported by Prados-Pena and Del Barrio-Garcia (2021), who define the following main antecedents of brand equity in heritage brand extensions: tourist experience as a moderator of the relationship. In the case of museums, this underscores the need to ensure that new initiatives, exhibitions and digital projects are aligned with the heritage-based brand name. Liu and Xiong (2023) build on this argument by highlighting the importance of brand reputation in consumer response to service failure, noting that the good brand image that may be provided might have. Equity and credibility have the potential to shield institutions against reputational risks within the museum setting and increase long-term involvement.

The museum branding dimension of governance is also important. Mulcahy (2020) warns of the dangers of privatising American museums and warns about the policy of prioritising money over culture. It is a warning to Africa that it must not simply mimic the pattern of market-driven branding strategies by undermining the inclusiveness and genuineness in a new setting. Other versions of the same idea have been responded to in Mlilo (2023), but in Mlilo, the answer to this is that heritage management should be made more inclusive in South Africa

and why so many voices and cultural landscapes must be consulted. Zhang (2022) also deplores the conservative mechanisms of preservation and suggests something broader and more inclusive, including social heritage. Collectively, these views highlight the importance of museum branding being rooted in participatory governance that is responsive to shared values and cultural ownership.

Another similar body of literature deals with visitor interest and readiness to pay for heritage experiences. Garcia-Madariaga *et al.* (2020) investigate the willingness of museum-goers to pay and find that branding and value perception a key factor influencing financial sustainability. This is in line with the results of Kumar and Kaushik (2020) on brand advocacy which support the need to engage in activities that lead to both cultural and economic outcomes. When viewed through an African lens, what this means is that those museums able to effectively brand themselves as authentic, inclusive, as well as culturally relevant, can rally greater community and visitor support, thus increasing their sustainability.

To begin with, many African museums continue to grapple with their colonial legacies, which constrain their institutional leadership and undermine their ability to reflect a truly African identity (Chitima, 2021' Abungu and Ndoro, 2023). One example is the National Museums of Kenya, originally founded by colonial authorities in the early 1900s, emphasising natural history and archaeology priorities that marginalised local art and knowledge traditions long after independence. Second, branding provides an effective source of rebranding museums as multi-racial, strong, and culturally rooted institutions. Third, an effective branding should be authentic and participatory, or, in other words, strategies should be oriented towards a community voice and collective heritage. Fourth, certain lessons implied by the theories of global branding are also helpful, just

that they must be adapted to the African reality where cultural ownership and local relevance are increasingly taking centre stage. Lastly, the issues of sustainability, innovation and governance are as topical as ever and require systematised efforts to match cultural, social and economic demands. All these insights are used to inform the analysis of branding strategies that can be used to bring African thought and collective heritage together to offer both theoretical support and practical guidance.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate how the Museum of African Liberation in Harare, Zimbabwe, can be branded to reflect collective heritage and Pan-African consciousness. The museum was selected as the study site because of its symbolic role in narrating Africa's liberation struggles and its potential to serve as a continental hub for heritage governance and identity formation. Harare, as the capital city, provides a strategic location where cultural policy, heritage management, and Pan-African discourse intersect, making it an ideal context for exploring branding strategies that balance local authenticity with global presence.

Three complementary methods of data collection were used: in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and documentary review. In-depth interviews were conducted with heritage practitioners, cultural managers, and museum professionals to capture their lived experiences and perspectives on branding, inclusivity, and governance. Key informant interviews targeted policymakers, academics, and cultural stakeholders with specialised knowledge of heritage management, institutional frameworks, and governance systems. The documentary review, conducted as a desktop study, examined policy frameworks, institutional definitions, and scholarly literature, including the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2022) definition of

museums, theories of branding, and debates on heritage governance.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that only individuals with relevant expertise and experience in heritage management, museum practice, and cultural policy were included. Snowball sampling was also employed to identify additional participants through professional networks, thereby broadening the range of perspectives while maintaining relevance to the research objectives.

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, where interview transcripts and documentary sources were coded to identify recurring themes, patterns, and conceptual gaps. Triangulation of the three methods enhanced validity and reliability by combining subjective insights with broader contextual evidence. Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained prior to interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and sensitive cultural information was handled with respect to local traditions and institutional protocols. Limitations of the study included restricted access to certain policy documents, the relatively small sample size due to time and resource constraints, and the challenges of generalising findings across the diverse African museum landscape. By adopting this qualitative design and triangulated methodology, the study achieves a holistic understanding of museum branding as both a cultural practice and a strategic exercise within African contexts. The approach illuminated how African systems of thought and local cultural practices are incorporated—or at times disregarded—in branding strategies, while also highlighting adaptive possibilities revealed during the post-crisis phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Agostino *et al.*, 2020; Henkel, 2021).

## **FINDINGS**

The analysis identified several overlapping aspects of museum branding in Africa, both in terms of opportunity and difficulty in the integration of institutional policy with collective heritage and Pan-African awareness. In-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and document analysis reveal that there are six major themes: governance and institutional positioning, community participation and inclusivity, authenticity and cultural representation, sustainability and resilience, global-local brand balancing, and engagement and experiential strategies.

Governance was found to be a decisive feature of African museum branding strategy. The participants noted that institutional positioning can be a historical and structural legacy of colonial governance. Many museums continue to use the methods of top-down governance, in accordance with which the largest part of their decisions is made by state representatives, institutional boards, and other individuals, without considering the influence of local communities or even of cultural stakeholders (Jopela, 2023; Manetsi, 2023). As observed by key informants, branding strategies are often used to meet institutional goals of improving reputation, attracting funding, or promoting tourism, but seldom merge collective cultural priorities in a holistic approach. These document analyses have demonstrated that most institutions have institutional policies that are designed to be operationally effective and global, rather than to be communally relevant, and thus the governance arrangements need to be re-scaled to predict participatory practices (Seyhan and Russo, 2020). In this respect, branding is not only a promotional activity, rather it is interwoven with governance decisions that form museum identity and social legitimacy.

One of the more frequent results was a restricted but developing role of local communities in the development of the brand of the museum. When it comes to community involvement, informant interviews with practitioners in the field of heritage and the employees of the respective museums found that community participation is frequently consultative and not decisional, and therefore, the strategies are designed in a way that might not fully represent the values, stories, and ambitions of the community (Escallon, 2020; Mlilo, 2023). The respondents highlighted that active involvement helps build authenticity, cultural ownership and Pan-African consciousness by providing a voice to historically marginalised communities. Key informants also noted that inclusive branding practices can help address any conflict related to representation, especially in post-colonial contexts where groups are sensitive to symbolic theft (Jopela, 2023). These were supported by document analysis, and demonstrated that successful branding of global heritage sites is most commonly composed of bottom-up approaches and that an African museum can similarly use participatory models to increase the legitimacy and interest in the people (Seyhan and Russo, 2020).

Authenticity became imperative in branding ideologies. Interviews suggested that museums aiming to enhance their influence on culture emphasise stories and displays that embody indigenous knowledge, historical continuity and African modes of thinking (Zhang, 2022; Manetsi, 2023). The respondents added that branding strategies that lack authenticity are likely to drive away local viewers and lack credibility. An analysis of heritage policies and museum reports demonstrated that authenticity is more about the quality representation of artefacts and also includes how stories are retold, how experiences are packaged and how cultural symbols are interpreted. Brand strategies based on the foregrounding of culturally based narratives were found to encourage greater

emotional affiliation, repetitive visitation, and social acknowledgement. Further, the interviewees reported that authenticity can reinforce wider Pan-African agendas through reaffirmation of shared cultural values and awareness of history across countries.

Another key area of research was that of sustainability and institutional resilience in museum branding. The key informant interviews indicated that financial resources, workforce shortages, and museum facilities, all pose a threat to continuity and credibility. The participants stressed that branding strategies should, therefore, convey, besides cultural meaning, institutional reliability and social responsibility. It was revealed through document analysis that museums that incorporate sustainability into branding, including adaptive programming, online interactions, and diversified financing, are more resilient in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Agostino *et al.*, 2020; Henkel, 2021). According to the key informants, sustainable branding goes beyond financial sustainability into environmental, cultural, and social sustainability, and is in line with wider African developmental concerns.

The other theme was how to balance global attractiveness and local relevance. Interviewees emphasised that museums can experience conflict between globalised forms of branding and their localised identity (Mandler, Bartsch and Han, 2020; Li, Tan and Jiao, 2024). Branding approaches that focus excessively on global trends, branding purely through local approaches, might reduce global reach and financing, and nationalism. Interviewees shared that strategic hybridity, when museums express indigenous stories and at the same time meet global professional standards, helps increase both legitimacy and reach. The analysis of documents further shows that literature on corporate branding and the practices in the international museums can be valuable to African museums in

attempts to walk this fine line (Paek *et al.*, 2021; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2022).

The results indicate that effective branding in African museums is multidimensional, and it involves a combination of governance, participation, authenticity, sustainability, global-local alignment and engagement. Branding is not a cosmetic activity in marketing, but a planning process that achieves the intended institutional identity, values and cultural diplomacy of a community. The data suggest that museums that can embrace inclusive, culturally-based and adaptive branding practices are in better positions to cement Pan-African consciousness, build collective heritage, and enjoy sustainable social and cultural influence.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study has highlighted a multifaceted relationship between governance, participation, authenticity, sustainability, the balancing of global-local brands, and engagement in branding of African museums. Viewed in the perspective of the Cultural Identity Theory and the Brand Equity Theory, these results indicate that culturally based, participatory, and strategically controlled branding is at the core of increasing the relevance, credibility, and impact of museums.

Governance became a critical element that affected branding results. Museums with top-down organisational structures are likely to find it difficult to align branding goals with communal heritage and community expectations. This observation is not new to the literature on heritage management on the post-colonial African continent, as it reveals that despite their post-independent status, centralised, state-oriented frameworks still dominate at the expense of local stakeholders (Jopela, 2023; Manetsi, 2023). Ideally, the Cultural Identity Theory underscores the impact of this type of government on identity

formation. When the community is not represented in the making of decisions, then museums would proliferate into colonial pasts and deconstruct the reality of cultural representation. The results indicate that branding initiatives should be incorporated into an inclusive governance framework that actively engages local communities, thus increasing the legitimacy of their institutions and social acceptability. Inclusive governance helps to co-create a narrative that can capture IKS systems, historical continuity, and common African values, and helps strengthen both cultural identity and Pan-African consciousness.

The key factor to effective branding surfaced as participation. The research concludes that the superficial or tokenistic interaction does not lead to the creation of the image of authenticity and cultural ownership to ensure proper branding (Escallon, 2020; Seyhan and Russo, 2020). Being an active participant in the communities, whether in a consultative or advisory council, or by co-creating programmes, helps museums to mirror local epistemologies and priorities, enhancing social unity. In practical terms, the results indicate that museums need to stop viewing community engagement as an obligatory step to embracing it as a strategic resource that could help increase brand credibility and relevance. This perspective concurs with Mlilo (2023), who holds that inclusive approaches to heritage site management that are not harmful to the integrity of the cultural landscape, but rather result in the empowerment of the local people, are true. Branding strategies in this sense, therefore, serve not only as marketing tools but also as cultural democracy, by giving voice to the locals and strengthening group identity.

The concept of authenticity was always deemed one of the pillars of African museum branding. The results suggest that the successful use of the culturally embedded narratives, along

with the proper presentation of indigenous practices in museums, results in increased visit rates, patronage, and social impacts (Zhang, 2022; Manetsi, 2023). Brand strategies that overlook authenticity will lose local customers as well as global viewers who are more demanding of culturally sensitive practices. The results can be analysed in terms of the Brand Equity Theory which presupposes credibility, trust, and interest among long-term stakeholders by influential and authentic brands (Paek *et al.*, 2021; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2022). Museums can create lasting equity by integrating authenticity into the branding process, which strengthens institutional reputation and increases the cultural and social capital of the communities they serve. These results indicate that authenticity needs to be operationalised by storytelling, exhibition design, programming, and digital interaction to produce immersive experiences that convey heritage in a meaningful way.

The theme of sustainability was developed as a multi-dimensional theme, such as financial, cultural, and operational. The interviews indicated that museums are being challenged by resource management and staff shortages, as well as infrastructure issues, and because of this, branding practices that reflect credibility and long-term investment in the organisation are needed (Riviezzo *et al.*, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic made these problems even worse as museums across the globe had to find a way to quickly address the issue of closures and limitations (Agostino *et al.*, 2020; Henkel, 2021). The results indicate that adaptive branding strategies, including digital exhibitions, online activity, and diversification of funding sources, not only affect resilience, but also lead to social sustainability, as they provide future access to heritage experiences. These lessons confirm that the first characteristic of branding to be sold in African museums is not visibility, but has to convey institutional plausibility, cultural culpability, and

long-term vision, and that is why Henkel (2023) considers culture the origin of sustainable change.

Striking a balance between international and local presence was found to be a major challenge facing African museums. The results suggest that excessive globalisation makes local stories peripheral, and over-localisation restricts funds and acknowledgement (Mandler, Bartsch and Han, 2020; Li, Tan and Jia, 2024). Respondents emphasised that hybrids, i.e. the tendency of institutions to combine internationally accepted professional norms with locally based narratives, contribute to the increase of both trustworthiness and coverage. This is also consistent with the Brand Equity Theory, which assumes the joint influence of perceived brand globalness and localness on the perception of stakeholders and their loyalty (Nguyen and Alcantara, 2020; Liu and Xiong, 2023). In practice, this requires museums to produce branding options that are culturally authentic, but professionally polished, that create local appeal and global authenticity. These approaches affirm Pan-African awareness by allowing museums to exchange common values across borders and, at the same time, remain faithful to the local heritage.

Visitor engagement has been identified as one of the key mechanisms by which branding strategies have an impact. Multisensory experiential, immersive, and interactive experiences were identified to enhance emotional attachment, repeat visitation, and advocacy (Kumar and Kaushik, 2020; Carreira, Gonzalez-Rodriguez and Diaz-Fernandez, 2021; Lv and Wu, 2021). It was discovered in interviews that museums, which use digital platforms, storytelling and participatory exhibits, have a stronger connection with the audience and develop brand loyalty. These results were supported by document analysis that proved experiential strategies have social and economic implications, such as willingness to pay

and brand advocacy (Garcia-Madariaga, Recuero Virto and Blasco Lopez, 2020). It has been argued that experiential branding is especially applicable to African settings where museums aim to re-link communities to their heritage and contribute to communal memory. Museums can reshape branding as an educational, cultural diplomacy and Pan-African identity re-inforcer by marrying sensory experiences with culturally authentic stories.

When understood within the context of the Cultural Identity Theory, the results indicate that museums are arenas of creating and expressing shared identity. Communal, participatory and authentic branding initiative enables communities to access heritage in their own time, strengthening local identity and Pan-African solidarity at large. The Brand Equity Theory supports this statement since the validity, authenticity, and relationship with stakeholders are assumed to determine long-term sustainability of an institution and its impact on society (Paek *et al.*, 2021; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2022). An overview of the theories shows that African museum branding falls at the intersection of culture, governance, and strategic management and requires a combined methodology that can address identity, legitimacy, and performance simultaneously.

The study has some practical implications. To be inclusive and culture-owned, the first thing the museums need to do is involve participatory governance in the branding strategies. Second, all elements of branding, such as exhibitions and storytelling, digital presence and community engagement, should be led by authenticity. Third, the strategies should be localised and global at the same time to achieve the highest relevance, visibility and mobilisation of resources. Fourth, branding must be based on sustainability, which will include financial strength, operational stability, and cultural

responsibility. Lastly, both immersive and experiential initiatives are important for developing loyalty, advocacy, and Pan-African consciousness, as well as engagement strategies. Combined, the findings suggest that the branding of African museums is a cultural, strategic project, which may potentially lead to identity, heritage, and social impacts (Henkel, 2023; Mlilo, 2023).

The results support the literature on the subject of heritage governance and museum branding. Like Williamson (2020) and Manetsi (2023), the paarticleper does not turn a blind eye to the history of colonialism and the need to achieve decolonisation. It helps to justify the bottom-up approach to participation offered by Seyhan and Russo (2020) and the attention to innovation and sustainability proposed by Henkel (2021, 2023). Additionally, the results build on the insights provided by the Brand Equity Theory by Paek *et al.* (2021) and Riviezzo *et al.* (2022) and place them in the context of the African museum, demonstrating that brand credibility, authenticity, and engagement are critical to economic performance, as well as to cultural and social relevance.

Finally, the discussion shows that the African museums' branding strategies are multidimensional practices that combine governance, community involvement, authenticity, sustainability, global-local equilibrium, and participation. Based on the Cultural Identity Theory, coupled with the Brand Equity Theory, such approaches provide a route by which museums can empower shared heritage and Pan-African awareness and build institutional resilience. The results indicate that culturally informed and strategic, as well as participatory branding, are critical to rebranding African museums as active, diverse, and globally oriented cultural institutions.

## **CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION**

The foregoing analysis shows that branding practices of African museums play a key role in strengthening community heritage, fostering Pan-African identity, and increasing institutional authority. The results show that successful branding depends on multiple factors, including strong leadership, active community involvement, authenticity, sustainability, balancing global and local perspectives, and meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Governance and participation will allow local people to be incorporated in the construction of the museum discourses and break the hold of colonialism of the past, which discourages the ownership of culture. Realism in depicting native knowledge and continuity of history enhances emotional relationships, trustworthiness and authenticity and aligns the identities of the museums with the social values. It is noted that strategic inclusion of sustainability, financial and operational, enhances institutional strength, and strategies that are hybrid, global-local, and maximise the visibility and relevance in an interconnected world. Visitors are more assured to stay loyal and advocate or learn through experiential and immersive interactions. This research concludes that branding African museums is not a promotional practice, but a strategic cultural practice that could have been used in the process of reducing the difference between local authenticity and international celebrity as proposed by the Cultural Identity Theory and the Brand Equity Theory. As a result, museums with culturally informed, participatory and adaptive branding strategies, will be better placed to promote heritage preservation, social cohesion and Pan-African consciousness.

Museums seeking to strengthen their branding must prioritise inclusive and participatory governance. By involving local communities and cultural stakeholders in the creation of branding narratives, institutions can ensure that their messaging is both authentic and reflective of shared cultural

heritage. Making participatory decision-making a formal part of museum governance allows branding to emerge as a co-created endeavour that resonates with the people it represents (Escallon, 2020; Mlilo, 2023). Equally important is a commitment to authenticity and accurate cultural representation. Effective branding should reflect indigenous knowledge, historical continuity, and African ways of thinking, thereby fostering credibility, meaningful engagement, and a sense of Pan-African identity among audiences (Zhang, 2022; Manetsi, 2023). Finally, branding strategies should intertwine experiential engagement with sustainability. By designing immersive, multisensory experiences that captivate visitors while supporting operational resilience and financial stability, museums can reinforce their institutional impact and cultivate long-term audience loyalty (Carreira, Gonzalez-Rodriguez and Diaz-Fernandez, 2021; Henkel, 2021).

Future research could explore the long-term impacts of branding strategies on museum relevance, community engagement, and responsiveness to sociopolitical changes over time, using longitudinal case studies or mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative interviews with quantitative audience analysis. Additionally, investigating the role of specific digital and immersive technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and interactive mobile applications in enhancing brand equity, accessibility, and participatory engagement across diverse audiences would provide actionable insights. Comparative studies across selected African nations, such as South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, could identify country-specific best practices in museum branding and their alignment with local and continental heritage. Finally, research could examine how sustainability models, through eco-friendly operations, community co-curation, or social impact initiatives, can be integrated into

museum branding strategies to strengthen long-term resilience and cultural influence.

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