

# DESTINATION BRANDING THROUGH DIGITAL LENSES: A CASE STUDY OF PENANG'S HERITAGE SITES VIA INSTAGRAM

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**Abstract:** This research explores the complex role of social media, with a particular focus on Instagram, in transforming the branding of tourism destinations. It centers on the significant impact of user-generated content (UGC) on Instagram in contributing towards tourism destination branding. Focusing on Penang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site renowned for its rich multicultural legacy and historical significance, as a case study to illustrate the capacity of social media in destination branding. This paper aims to understand how UGC affects the process of destination branding by identifying the main associations of various elements related to popular tourist destinations in Malaysia, namely Penang. Through content analysis of both visual (images) and textual (hashtags) components from Instagram, this research aims to unravel the key associations and perceptions tourists hold about Penang, contributing towards the destination's branding. Findings from this study highlight the transformative impact of Instagram in the destination branding process, not only in enhancing the destination's identity but also in empowering tourists to become active participants in shaping its identity of the destination. This paper illustrates the evolving nature of destination branding in the digital era, where visual storytelling and shared experiences generated by users on social platforms like Instagram significantly influence the role in the branding process through visual and content sharing.

**Keywords:** User-Generated Content (UGC), Heritage Destination Branding, Penang Heritage, Instagram

## INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed the tourist business, making it an essential tool for destination promotion. Zeng & Gerritsen (2022) noted that travelers increasingly use new media for information, which affects tourism marketing methods. Instagram is a popular medium for sharing experiences, and its visual material helps brand destinations. UGC shapes social media brand identities (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020).

Tourism decision-making is increasingly influenced by the dynamic interaction between traveler's shared experiences and destination branding, with social media providing a rapid dissemination avenue for promotional messaging. This move to digital platforms requires a better knowledge of how social media boosts tourism destinations' identities. New media must be integrated into destination marketing strategies to stay competitive in the global tourism business (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2022).

This study examines how UGC on social media helps market Penang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It examines performers' associations with Penang, emphasizing the city's legacy. This method is influenced by destination branding literature, destination image affect, and city branding to attract visitors and

investment. The study uses Gilboa et al. (2015) to examine how social media, UGC, and city branding affect Penang perceptions. The study addresses these challenges and contributes to the discourse on social media in tourism marketing, particularly for Asian cultural sites.

Heritage helps shape Penang's image; thus, this study will examine it. Based on UNESCO accreditation, Penang's image attracts tourists, customers, events, and investors. From this perspective, the paper proposes to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does social media contribute to the configuration of the image in branding Penang?

RQ2: Does the heritage aspect emerge as the main category in association of Penang on social media?

RQ3: How do heritage associations relate to other association categories of branding Penang?

## METHODS

This study examined social media's involvement in tourism branding on Instagram, which has over a billion monthly users, using quantitative and qualitative content analysis. To prevent pandemic-related travel restrictions in Malaysia, it examined 5,646 #penangheritage Instagram postings from June 2021 to June 2022. The study examined visual and verbal content to identify Penang's main associations. To ensure reliability, inter-coder agreement was thoroughly evaluated, requiring a .7 index before data analysis. The study categorised the content into 10 established categories based on place branding literature, with two additional categories for outliers, and assessed up to three categories per image to find essential features of the city's Instagram portrayal.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Analysis of Visual Information*

Abu Hassan, Jailani & Abdul Rahim (2014) and Chia (2016) found that 20.56% of 5,646 Instagram posts tagged #penangheritage were "Tourism Facilities and Infrastructure" images,

highlighting Penang's cultural and heritage sites' tourist appeal. Then came "Scenic View," "Local Cuisine and Dining," and "People and Local Residents," promoting the city's beauty and cuisine. Mohamad et al. (2022) and Atikahambar et al. (2018) affirm Penang's position as a gastronomic hub, emphasizing the importance of local cuisine in authentic cultural experiences. These categories' prevalence in #penangheritage highlights the importance of heritage, scenery, and cuisine in developing Penang's destination brand, representing its historical and cultural diversity.

Category	Frequency (N=5646)	Percentage (%)
Cultural Events	57	1.01%
Entertainment	2	0.04%
Fashion	182	3.22%
Historic Building and Heritage	513	9.09%
Local Cuisine and Dining	752	13.32%
Parks and Gardens	35	0.62%
People and Local Residents	747	13.23%
Scenic View	771	13.66%
Tourism Facilities and Infrastructure	1161	20.56%
Others 1	1219	21.59%
Others 2	207	3.67%

**Table 1: Tabulation of categories frequency of Penang**

The research used an NVivo word cloud of the 20 most common #penangheritage hashtags in Instagram posts. This visual representation, where word size correlates with frequency, highlighted #penangheritage as the primary hashtag, followed by #penang, #georgetownpenang, #malaysia, #unescoworldheritage, and #georgetown, highlighting their connections to Penang's heritage. Bletzer (2015) says this strategy makes data understandable and highlights Penang's legacy. Specific hashtags for Penang indicate users' desire to categorise content around the destination's cultural and historical value. The "hashtag movement," which promotes collective narratives and social movements on digital platforms help to increase the visibility of the destination (Dejmanee et al., 2020; Dobrin, 2020) and allows users to interact and share experiences. However, "hashtag hijacking,"

where hashtags are used irrelevantly or in opposing settings, was also found, showing a disconnect or misuse in hashtag application to Penang's heritage content.



**Figure 1: Word Cloud on Most Used Hashtag**

Instagram users categorise and present their content using hashtags, indicating community building and personal expression (Xu & Zhou, 2020).

Category	1	2	3	4	5
Cultural Events	#penangheritage	#penang	#bollywooddressforrental	#georgetown	#bollywooddressforphotoshoot
Entertainment	#malaysia	#penang	#penangheritage	#beautiful	#beyourself
Fashion	#penangheritage	#bollywooddressforrental	#penang	#georgetown	#penangculture
Historic Building and Heritage	#penangheritage	#penang	#unescoworldheritage	#georgetownpenang	#malaysia
Local Cuisine and Dining	#penangheritage	#penang	#penangfoodie	#penangfood	#penangcafe
Parks and Gardens	#penangheritage	#penang	#georgetownpenang	#penangphotography	#georgetown
People and Local Residents	#penangheritage	#penang	#georgetownpenang	#malaysia	#georgetown
Scenic View	#penangheritage	#surise	#penang	#georgetownpenang	#malaysia
Tourism Facilities and Infrastructure	#penangheritage	#georgetownpenang	#penang	#lovepenang	#georgetown

**Table 2: Tabulation of frequency of most used hashtag based on category**

The analysis of Instagram hashtags reveals #penangheritage as the most prominent tag, highlighting Penang's significance as a heritage tourism destination. The frequent appearance of hashtags like #penang, #georgetown, and #georgetownpenang underscores the platform's Instagram hashtags show #penangheritage as the most popular, indicating Penang's heritage tourist potential. The platform's importance in destination discovery and branding is highlighted by hashtags like #penang, #georgetown, and #georgetownpenang, which express users' collective identity and community participation (Yang et al., 2012). This supports

Almeida et al. (2022) findings that hashtags help travellers access information and increase content visibility. Despite appearing unrelated to Penang's heritage, hashtags like #bollywooddressforrental and #bollywooddressforphotoshoot suggest niche cultural and fashion businesses, demonstrating hashtags' versatility in content categorization and business promotion. Given the vast daily content on Instagram, hashtags like these help businesses discover content and attract followers, engage users, and build community (Newberry, 2020; Chacon, 2020), highlighting their strategic value in social media marketing in Penang's heritage context.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study emphasises the unpredictable nature of UCG but its potential to shape destination brands by emphasising the role of social media in city branding co-creation. According to Almeida et al. (2022) and Fatanti & Suyadnya (2015), Instagram helps tourism brands by showcasing destination concepts. Based on the "Historic Building and Heritage" and "Local Cuisine and Dining" categories, social media users brand Penang through history and food. This answer addresses RQ1 by showing how social media affects Penang's brand.

According to Almeida et al. (2022) hashtags like #unescoworldheritage and #georgetown demonstrate Penang's heritage value and social media appeal, answering RQ2. These hashtags' interconnectedness and searchability corroborate and social media helps brands form.

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