

Cultural Heritage and Nation Branding: A Marketing Driver for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Until recently, brands and branding were used almost exclusively in a commercial context as tools employed in the promotion and sales of different goods and services. The extension of the scope of marketing to the societal level has expanded the area of branding applicability from economic to social, from profit to non-profit, and from individuals to nations. Valuable elements, an important part of them having a solid cultural background, can be identified and employed nowadays to build and capitalize on brands not only for products and services but also for individuals and communities, respectively organizations and nations. Does cultural heritage matter, and if so, to what extent, in the endeavors of building, promoting, and capitalizing on a nation's brand? Can cultural heritage contribute to the nation's branding effort and act together as a marketing driver to enable a country's sustainable development? These are the questions this paper aims to answer from a marketing perspective, after assessing the secondary data on cultural heritage, nations' branding, and dimensions of sustainable development for a group of selected countries.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, nation branding, cultural marketing, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage is a sensitive issue for all stakeholders. For those who manage it, this is the object of their activity, the importance, and necessity of which are indisputable. For those who benefit from it, after it is discovered and explored, it is a source of joy and satisfaction. Somewhere around the two sides are public authorities and non-governmental organizations which, through specific means, are trying, more or less successfully, to manage it by ensuring its conservation, restoration, promotion, and capitalization. The context created by these entities is one in which cultural heritage matters more for historical, traditional, or patriotic reasons or even ex officio and much less as a result of awareness of its role and importance for each of the individuals, the communities, and the places, nations or countries they belong to. The orientation towards the beneficiary of the cultural heritage is missing or is still insufficient: we preserve and restore the heritage only to protect it, often even by those who could discover, explore, experience, and enjoy it. A more thoroughly marketing approach would not only be welcome, but even necessary. Recent developments in the field, such as the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage, have brought to the fore the importance of reconsidering the role of cultural heritage both in terms of its actual importance and due to relevant connections with areas such as education, agriculture and rural development, regional development, social cohesion, environment, tourism, research and innovation by proposing four principles and ten

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initiatives (European Commission, 2018): 1. Engagement (1.1. Shared heritage: cultural heritage belongs to us all; 1.2. Heritage at school: children discovering Europe's most precious treasures and traditions; 1.3. Youth for heritage: young people bringing new life to heritage); 2. Sustainability (2.1. Heritage in transition: re-imagining industrial, religious, military sites and landscapes; 2.2. Tourism and heritage: responsible and sustainable tourism around cultural heritage); 3. Protection (3.1. Cherishing heritage: developing quality standards for interventions on cultural heritage; 3.2. Heritage at risk: fighting against illicit trade in cultural goods and managing risks for cultural heritage); 4. Innovation (4.1. Heritage-related skills: better education and training for traditional and new professions; 4.2. All for heritage: fostering social innovation and people's and communities' participation; 4.3. Science for heritage: research, innovation, science and technology for the benefit of heritage).

Approaching the cultural heritage from a marketing perspective requires an appropriate understanding of its content and mission. The definition given along with the principles proposed for its implementation by the ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee (2002) create an adequate conceptual and operational framework by explaining the content of the cultural heritage in connection to the heritage consumers' experiences. Thus, cultural heritage takes the forms of tangible (places of human habitation, villages, towns and cities, buildings, structures, artworks, documents, handicrafts, musical instruments, furniture, clothing and items of personal decoration, religious, ritual and funerary objects, tools, machinery and equipment, and industrial systems) or intangible (all forms of traditional and popular or folk culture, the collective works originating in a given community and based on tradition – oral traditions, customs, languages, music, dance, rituals, festivals, traditional medicine and pharmacopeia, popular sports, food and the culinary arts and all kinds of special skill connected with the material aspects of culture) heritage. This heritage should be capitalized by conducting responsible promotion programs, managing the dynamic relationships with tourism by involving host and indigenous communities to ensure a worthwhile visitor experience and provide benefits for the local communities. This process should be centered on the cultural tourist, seen as a cultural heritage consumer, passing through the inter-connected stages of the heritage cycle proposed by Thurley (2005): understanding, valuing, caring for, and, finally, enjoying it.

The qualitative complexity of the cultural heritage content represents a real challenge for identifying the indicators that allow its measurement. From this perspective, the most relevant remains the number of World Heritage cultural sites considered by the World Heritage Committee as having an outstanding value and included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, respectively the number of oral and intangible cultural heritage practices and expressions registered on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Beyond the fact that it allows a relatively objective quantitative measurement of the tangible cultural heritage, the extent to which inclusion on the World Heritage List contributes significantly to the capitalization of the cultural heritage is still under debate. As Hosseini et al. (2012) have observed, inclusion on this List impacts positively tourism and can be used as an effective promotional tool to attract more tourists, but the process itself is rather difficult for the developing countries due to contestable reasons such as weak and corrupt financial systems, crony capitalism practices, poor diplomatic tactics, and absence of effective

bureaucracy. The idea of enlisting World Heritage sites to stimulate tourist arrivals appears as a common belief although the generated effects differ among countries and regions (Huang et al., 2012). Similar reasoning can be made in the case of the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, with the important specification that enlisting of the intangible heritage has to recover a time lag of three decades (first registration of an intangible heritage object being done only in 2008 while the first registration of a heritage site in 1978).

Leaving from the term introduced by Anholt a quarter of a century ago, Kaneva (2011) has critically assessed the concept of “nation branding” and the subsequent research agenda identifying three approaches of the subject: technical-economic (predominant and focusing on economic growth, efficiency, and capital accumulation resulting in marketing, management, and tourism-related studies), political (focusing on the impact of national images within the global system of international relation resulting in international relations, public relations, and international communication-related studies), and cultural (rather peripheral and focusing on implications for national and cultural identities resulting in media and cultural related studies). Hassan and Mahrouz (2019) advanced the idea that nation branding is about building a sustainable differential advantage that defies existing or pre-existing national or regional stereotypes by strategically communicating a nation brand identity with diverse target audiences and stakeholder groups in ways that bring about positive perceptions. Asking “Why brand?” Anholt (2006) made several practical considerations for nation branding underlining the critical role culture can often play in building the brand image of a country and its status as a necessary component to make any place properly satisfying as a brand. Observing that culture is next door to tourism and a rich cultural life makes a complete place rather than just a tourist destination, worth visiting at different times of the year, with a broader social appeal, he suggests that countries should offer the visitors more than a range of cultural attractions in the forms of historical and heritage sights aiming to create a sense of the cultural life of the place. Global perceptions of each nation’s heritage and appreciation for its contemporary culture, including film, music, art, sport, and literature have been included under the pillar of Culture and Heritage in one of the methodologies used since 2008 to measure nation brands - The Anholt Ipsos Nation Brands Index, along with the exports, governance, people, tourism, investment and immigration. Nation branding should aim more than simply building a positive image by valuing and employing the cultural heritage as a ground on which to create consumer affinity due to its capacity, observed by Asseraf and Shoham (2017), to enhance the demand for products and/or services provided by a country, to counterbalance the common negative attitudes and overcome some of the negative effects of animosity and ethnocentrism, and, last but not least, to generate increases in the countries’ economic factors and tourism.

According to the most frequently mentioned definition, sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 1987). As the Sustainable Development Report (Sachs et al., 2019) reveals the adoption, in September 2015, of the seventeen specific goals has shaped the way towards achieving the overall objective of sustainable development identifying, under the perspective of the 2030 Agenda, six entry points and four levers capable to support the necessary transformations for reaching them: human well-being and capabilities, sustainable and just economies, food systems and

nutrition patterns, energy decarbonization with universal access, urban and peri-urban development, and global environmental commons, respectively governance, economy, and finance, individual and collective action, science and technology. Establishing and measuring the connection between sustainable development and nation branding represent a challenge under a context in which, on a hand, measuring sustainable development itself is not a very simple undertaking and, on the other hand, nation branding tends to be associated just to a dimension of sustainability, mainly the environmental one (Dinnie, 2008) or to the overall competitiveness of a country (Lee, 2011), while the place branding (introducing here a debate regarding the appropriateness employment of the terms “place”, “nation” or “country”) tends to relate in a mutually beneficial way to the sustainable development (Maheshwari et al., 2011).

Exploring the contribution of the cultural heritage to the nation branding effort and the capacity to act together as a marketing driver enabling sustainable development is the scope of this research approach.

2. Methodological Notes

To assess the relationships between cultural heritage and nation branding from the perspective of sustainable development a set of indicators describing these areas have been considered:

1. Regarding the cultural heritage:

1.1. WHS: Number of World Heritage cultural sites considered by the World Heritage Committee as having an outstanding value and included in the UNESCO World Heritage List at the level of 2019;

1.2. ICH: Number of oral and intangible cultural heritage practices and expressions, respectively the number of practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated and recognized by individuals, groups, and communities as part of their cultural heritage, registered on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage at the level of 2019;

1.3. CHT: Total number of the World Heritage cultural sites and oral and intangible cultural heritage practices and expressions registered in the UNESCO World Heritage List and UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage at the level of 2019;

1.4. CDD: Cultural and entertainment tourism digital demand described through the number of online searches related to the specific cultural brand tags (historical sites, local people, local traditions, museums, performing arts, UNESCO, city tourism, religious tourism, local gastronomy, entertainment parks, leisure activities, nightlife, and special events) measured through the D2 proprietary tool of Bloom Consulting.

2. Regarding the nation branding:

2.1. NBR: Value of the nation brands at the level of 2019 measured by the Brand Finance considering the pillars of goods and services, society, and investment;

2.2. GSP: Value of the global soft power index at the level of 2019 measured by the Brand Finance, respectively the values of the soft power components and pillars:

2.2.1. FAM: Familiarity: the extent to which the nation brand is known to and apprehended by the people;

2.2.2. INF: Influence: the extent to which a nation seems to exert an influence at the global

level;

2.2.3. REP: Reputation: the degree to which a nation is perceived positively and being strong;

2.2.4. BST: Business & Trade: the extent to which the economy, business, brands, taxation, trade, investment, and infrastructure support the soft power of the nations;

2.2.5. GOV: Governance: the extent to which rule of law, human rights, crime rate, security, constitution, and political elite support the soft power of the nations;

2.2.6. INT: International relations: the extent to which diplomatic relations, international organizations, conflict resolution, international aid, and climate action support the soft power of the nations;

2.2.7. CHE: Culture & Heritage: the extent to which tourism, sports, food, fine arts, literature, music, film, gaming, and fashion support the soft power of the nations;

2.2.8. MED: Media & Communication: the extent to which the traditional media, social media, and marketing support the soft power of the nations;

2.2.9. EDS: Education & Science: the extent to which the higher education, science, and technologies support the soft power of the nations;

2.2.10. PEV: People & Values: the extent to which the values, character, and trust support the soft power of the nations.

2.3. TTC: the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index measuring the level of overall competitiveness in terms of the enabling environment (business environment, safety and security, health and hygiene, human resources and labor market, ICT readiness), policy and enabling conditions (prioritization of travel and tourism, international openness, price competitiveness, and environmental sustainability), infrastructure (air transport, ground and port, tourist services infrastructure), and natural and cultural resources (natural, cultural resources and business travel).

3. Regarding sustainable development: SDG - the sustainable development goals index measuring the extent to which the countries have reached each of the seventeen goals (No poverty; Zero hunger; Good health and well-being; Quality education; Gender equality; Clean water and sanitation; Affordable and clean energy; Decent work and economic growth; Industry, innovation, and infrastructure; Reduced inequalities; Sustainable cities and communities; Responsible consumption and production; Climate action; Life below water; Life on land; Peace, justice, and strong institutions; and Partnerships for the goals. Hierarchies for the most valuable nation brands (Brand Finance, 2019), global soft power index (Brand Finance, 2020), and travel and tourism competitiveness (Uppink Calderwood and Soshkin, 2019) have been considered to identify and select 57 countries that appear in all these rankings and have been assessed. Data regarding the World Heritage sites (UNESCO, 2021a), enlisted intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2021b), and cultural and entertainment digital demand (Bloom Consulting, 2020) have been considered to describe the content of the cultural heritage under this exploratory approach. To avoid the assessment of the impact of pandemics, all considered data referred to the year 2019.

Rankings have been built for each of the research variables and sub-variables and selected countries have been hierarchized in descending order. Rankings have been used to calculate Spearman rho coefficients (using JASP, an open-source project supported by the University of Amsterdam) employed to assess the association relationships between the variables.

3. Main Findings

Data reveal the statistically significant associations between the overall cultural heritage of a country, the World heritage sites, the intangible cultural heritage, and the cultural and entertainment tourism digital demand. Both tangible and intangible heritage contribute in a relevant manner to its capacity to play a key role as an important asset to be employed by a country in the development efforts. Increasing the level of recognition of the value of this heritage, first by careful preservation and restoration actions, then by communicating about it with the public will improve the awareness and the overall perception and will act as a strong determinant in convincing the audiences to discover, explore, experience, and, finally, enjoy this heritage.

Table 1. Associations between cultural heritage, nation branding, global soft power, travel and tourism, and sustainable development

Variable	rCHT	rWHS	rICH	rCDD	rNBR	rGSP	rTTC	rSDG
1. rCHT Spearman's rho	—							
p-value	—							
2. rWHS Spearman's rho	0.912 ***	—						
p-value	< .001	—						
3. rICH Spearman's rho	0.753 ***	0.479 ***	—					
p-value	< .001	< .001	—					
4. rCDD Spearman's rho	0.408 **	0.525 ***	0.075	—				
p-value	0.002	< .001	0.580	—				
5. rNBR Spearman's rho	0.378 **	0.454 ***	0.082	0.635 ***	—			
p-value	0.004	< .001	0.544	< .001	—			
6. rGSP Spearman's rho	0.283 *	0.442 ***	-0.136	0.728 ***	0.789 ***	—		
p-value	0.033	< .001	0.314	< .001	< .001	—		
7. rTTC Spearman's rho	0.385 **	0.503 ***	0.025	0.848 ***	0.672 ***	0.854 ***	—	
p-value	0.003	< .001	0.852	< .001	< .001	< .001	—	
8. rSDG Spearman's rho	0.175	0.311 *	-0.139	0.333 *	0.224	0.560 ***	0.665 ***	—
p-value	0.193	0.019	0.300	0.012	0.094	< .001	< .001	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

More, the statistically significant association between the entire cultural heritage and the cultural and entertainment digital demand reveals, on a hand, the interest of the public for the cultural heritage sites and activities (among others), and, on the other hand, the essential role of the digital presence as the audiences tend to search for the cultural heritage components they are interested in, to build a favorable image of those who are actively and attractively present in the online environment and, later, to discover, explore, experience, and enjoy those places, products, services, activities, and events they know and appreciate. People tend to travel and visit destinations where they can find outstanding, valuable, and well-known tangible and intangible heritage. Tourism destinations succeeding to promote and capitalize more effectively on the cultural heritage tend to attract more visitors, generate higher revenues, create more workplaces, and, generally, be more competitive.

There is no surprise that the overall cultural heritage connects significantly to the nations' brands. Properly preserved, authentically restored, and effectively promoted, the cultural heritage can be a resource whose capitalization enhances significantly the image,

respectively the brand of a nation. Heritage consumers appear more interested to search and discover, first digitally, later physically, the tangible and intangible elements connected to the past and the present of nations that have a more favorable image, therefore a stronger brand. The relationship between the cultural heritage and nation brand seems to be mutual: a richer and valuable cultural heritage supports a stronger and favorable nation brand; also, a more powerful nation brand induces a stronger interest to discover, explore, experience, and enjoy the cultural heritage of that nation. World heritage sites do a better job in this respect as their association with the nation brands proved to be statistically significant. Intangible cultural heritage relates poorly to the nation brands: a greater interest for listing oral practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, as well as instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces and promoting them in front of the interested audiences will change things.

Nation branding connects strongly to the global soft power of a country and the cultural heritage tends to relate to the soft power of a country similarly. The diverse content of the country's cultural heritage provides a solid base for cultivating and later development of its soft power, richer and outstanding heritage associating statistically significant to the higher levels of soft power. World heritage sites support this association while intangible cultural heritage, although positively connected, does not have a significant contribution. Higher digital demand for cultural and entertainment-related items characterizes the countries with increased soft power and the relationship seems to be mutual as countries better positioned in the global soft power hierarchy tend to generate a higher interest among the digital audiences. Improving the online presence of the historical sites, museums, performing arts, religious sites and pilgrimage, sustainable and rural tourism, traditional markets, World heritage sites, and all other related products, services, activities, and events will draw attention, raise the interest, create the desire, and, finally, stimulate the action to discover, explore, experience, and enjoy the country's heritage.

Table 2. Associations between the cultural heritage and dimensions of soft power

Variable		rCHT	rWHS	rICH	rCDD	rFAM	rINF	rREP
1. rFAM	Spearman's rho	0.446 ***	0.610 ***	0.020	0.830 ***	—	—	—
	p-value	< .001	< .001	0.881	< .001	—	—	—
2. rINF	Spearman's rho	0.379 **	0.508 ***	-0.003	0.679 ***	0.897 ***	—	—
	p-value	0.004	< .001	0.985	< .001	< .001	—	—
3. rREP	Spearman's rho	0.145	0.302 *	-0.224	0.639 ***	0.655 ***	0.675 ***	—
	p-value	0.280	0.023	0.093	< .001	< .001	< .001	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The cultural heritage associates significantly with two of the soft power dimensions, familiarity and influence, and has a positive but rather poor connection with reputation. A more diverse and outstanding cultural heritage is better acknowledged and more capable to extend its high awareness over the owning countries making them more familiar, more interesting, and, with good marketing, more appealing to the people. The cultural heritage provides an appropriate background for building an improved capacity of the country to influence its internal and external audiences. Still, the cultural heritage does not seem capable to enhance the overall reputation of a country which may suggest that, from a communication perspective, cultural heritage may provide a good unique selling

proposition to increase the awareness of and the interest for a certain country but is less contributing in terms of influencing decisively the behavior of the public it is exposed to. Again, the tangible and intangible heritage behave extremely differently: while the World heritage sites are significantly associated with all three dimensions of soft power, the intangible cultural heritage associations with these are of very low intensity, insignificant, even negative (in the cases of influence and reputation). The reduced amount of intangible heritage enlisted as well as the differences in terms of awareness and interest between the tangible and intangible heritage explain the poor and a rather negative impact generated by the intangible cultural heritage over the familiarity, influence, and reputation expressing the soft power of a nation. The associations between the cultural and entertainment tourism digital demand and the dimensions of the nations' soft power suggest that a higher interest in tangible and intangible elements will increase the familiarity, influence, and, in the end, the reputation of a nation. Hence the need for a more intense and effective promotion of the cultural heritage, backed by an appropriate capacity to design cultural goods and services, resulting in a more effective capitalization with a strong impact over the soft power and brand of the nations.

Table 3. Cultural heritage and global soft power variables

Variable		rCHT	rWHS	rICH	rCDD	rBST	rGOV	rINT	rCHE	rMED	rEDS	rPEV	
1. rBST	Spearman's rho	0.180	0.301 *	-	0.151	0.651 ***	—						
	p-value	0.180	0.023	0.262	< .001	—							
2.rGOV	Spearman's rho	0.059	0.223	-	0.290 *	0.553 ***	0.915 ***	—					
	p-value	0.661	0.095	0.029	< .001	< .001	—						
3. rINT	Spearman's rho	0.242	0.382 **	-	0.153	0.578 ***	0.899 ***	0.812 ***	—				
	p-value	0.069	0.004	0.256	< .001	< .001	< .001	—					
4. rCHE	Spearman's rho	0.492 ***	0.635 ***	0.078	0.837 ***	0.719 ***	0.670 ***	0.677 ***	—				
	p-value	< .001	< .001	0.565	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	—				
5.rMED	Spearman's rho	0.125	0.296 *	-	0.260	0.611 ***	0.950 ***	0.951 ***	0.884 ***	0.716 ***	—		
	p-value	0.353	0.026	0.051	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	—		
6. rEDS	Spearman's rho	0.154	0.295 *	-	0.203	0.552 ***	0.920 ***	0.899 ***	0.878 ***	0.678 ***	0.919 ***	—	
	p-value	0.252	0.026	0.130	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	—	
7. rPEV	Spearman's rho	0.108	0.285 *	-	0.227	0.648 ***	0.728 ***	0.810 ***	0.531 ***	0.741 ***	0.782 ***	0.652 ***	—
	p-value	0.424	0.032	0.089	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	—

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Does cultural heritage lay a solid foundation for the soft power pillars? No matter how much it would surprise, the answer is, in fact, no! Even if the associations between the cultural heritage and the variables that describe the soft power of a nation are positive, they are of low or quite very low intensity in the case of six of the seven pillars – international relations, business and trade, education and science, media and communication, people and values, and governance. This suggests that no matter how much we want or would like to enjoy, the cultural background is not more than one of the elements that influence, but only to a limited extent, how a nation builds its soft power and, implicitly, its brand' strength. The seventh pillar, culture and heritage, makes the (expected) exception to the rule: the cultural heritage matters significantly for this pillar, which in turn accounts for the overall soft power of a nation. But we would certainly have

expected more in this respect.

Viewed in the mirror, the tangible and intangible sides of the cultural heritage are perfectly counterbalanced resulting in a major unevenness that impacts precisely and massively its contribution to the building of the nation's soft power. The number of the World heritage sites associates statistically significant to the international relations, business and trade, media and communication, education and sciences, people and values, and, definitely, culture and heritage, while the number of the enlisted oral and intangible cultural heritage practices and expressions associate in a significant manner only to the governance. This may mean that the tangible side of the cultural heritage may reflect in particular forms in how a nation conducts its diplomatic relations, encourages the free market economy and enjoys reputable brands, communicates and socializes using media, has good universities, solid values, and characters, not to mention an important of heritage sites recognized as outstanding through their inclusion on the World Heritage List. While the intangible side will reflect good governance by the respect given to the rule of law and human rights, as well as the state of the political elite. The obvious conclusion is that promotion and capitalization of the intangible area should follow the same path and generate the same results as in the case of the tangible one to allow the overall cultural heritage to impact significantly the nations' soft power and brand.

The statistically significant associations between the cultural and entertainment tourism digital demand and all seven pillars of soft power represent one of the strongest reasons to support the idea of more intensive and continuous promotion of cultural heritage. An increased amount of searches for elements related to the cultural heritage expresses a higher interest and a potential desire to discover, explore, experience, and enjoy this heritage and supports both the degree of awareness a nation has and the attitude of the domestic and international audiences toward it. The boost generated by improved awareness and attitude results in a more favorable image and a stronger brand of the nation that facilitates business and trade, improve governance, develop international relations, favor cultural life, enrich content and employment of media and communication, support education and science, and, last but not least, enhance people beliefs and values.

The relationships between sustainable development and cultural heritage remain controversial: although the first impulse is to link the overall development to the cultural background, further in-depth exploration of this connection reveals that, at least at the level of the selected countries, a higher level of sustainable is not significantly associated to a richer and valuable cultural heritage. Still, the presence and capitalization of this heritage account for sustainable development and the best proof in this respect is the statistically significant relationship between the number of World Heritage sites and the degree of reaching the sustainable development goals. Instead, the number of enlisted oral and intangible cultural heritage practices and expressions impacts negatively, but not statistically significant, the efforts to grow sustainably. These opposite associations may support once more the idea that more appropriate consideration of the intangible cultural heritage through an increasing enlisting of its outstanding practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces will provide the needed content to design the goods and services to be promoted effectively and, as a result, the capitalization of this heritage component will contribute together with the tangible cultural heritage to the sustainable development of the country.

The statistically significant association between the cultural and entertainment tourism digital demand and the level of reaching sustainable development goals expresses the same idea: the nations whose cultural heritage present more interest for the domestic and international audiences, as an obvious result of its appropriate promotion and capitalization tend to be those coming closer to reaching the sustainable development goals. This interest takes the concrete form of an increased level of competitiveness as tourism and travel destinations of these nations following the growth in the number of visitors, revenues generated by them, and the direct and indirect workplaces created.

The nation brand influences positively but not statistically significant the degree of reaching the sustainable development goals suggesting that stronger brands favor nations in their attempts to grow sustainably. More, the level of soft power influences significantly the capacity of a nation to address and, in the end, reach the sustainable development goals, higher equity, and performances in terms of business and trade, governance, international relations, culture and heritage, media and communications, education and science, people and values having as result a better positioning in the attempts of reaching the goals.

4. Conclusions and Limits of the Research

Cultural heritage represents a determinant for the nations' brands, soft power, and travel and tourism competitiveness. Taking heritage into consideration by appropriate initiatives and actions aiming to preserve, restore, promote, and capitalize its tangible and intangible components will provide the solid foundation on which nations will have the capacity to build their brands and soft power to get the needed domestic and international awareness and appreciation transforming them in interesting, attractive, and competitive travel and tourism destinations. The increasing flows of heritage discoverers and explorers will, on a hand, strengthen the brand and soft power of the nations and, on the other hand, will contribute to their sustainable development by generating incomes and workplaces in tourism and culture, as well as in the related sectors.

The need for consistent marketing activities is underlined by the statistically significant associations between the cultural digital demand and overall cultural heritage, respectively nations' brand, soft power, travel and tourism competitiveness, and even reaching the sustainable development goals. Developing, promoting, and even selling cultural products, services, events, and activities centered on tangible and/or intangible heritage provides content for all the searches made by the tourists and travelers across the World and make nations that capitalize their heritage more appealing, familiar, and, last but not least, interesting to be discovered, explored, experienced, and enjoyed.

The research approach has been limited by several factors. First, it was conducted at the level of a sample including 57 seven nations that form a group that is significantly different from the entire amount of nations across the World: they account for the most important part of the representative tangible (708 out of 908 accounting for 78 % in the total of the World heritage sites) and intangible (405 out of 549 accounting for 74 % in the total of the oral and intangible cultural heritage practices and expressions) cultural heritage in the World, is considered by the most respected methodologies employed to measure the nations' brand value and soft power, and are the most competitive travel and tourism

destinations across the World. For this reason, the observations made exploring the connections between the cultural heritage, nations' branding, soft power, travel and tourism competitiveness, and sustainable development could be extended with caution, yet still should serve as a reference for all the nations.

The second limit is related to the indicators used to describe the cultural heritage. It is obvious that World heritage sites – does not matter how outstanding they would be, intangible cultural heritage – does not matter how authentic they could be, and cultural and entertainment digital demand – with all its diverse content and technological dimension, express only to a certain extent how the culture, through its whole range of entities and offers, can contribute and influence the strength of the brand, degree of soft power, competitiveness of the travel and tourism, and level of sustainable development of a nation.

The third limit is represented by the poor accessibility of the detailed data regarding the brand value and the soft power of the selected nations. The available data allowed just establishing of rankings for most of the research variables and measurement of the associations between them using the Spearman's rho correlation coefficient. Also, only exploring the surface relationships between the research variables, such as between the cultural heritage and the pillars of the nation's soft power although a more in-depth exploration of some detailed connections (i.e. cultural heritage and brands, rule of law, human rights, diplomatic relations, tourism, fashion, traditional media, social media, marketing, values, character, and trust) could have provided interesting insights.

Finally, a fourth limit in the particular context of this research approach is represented by the concepts used to define respectively the indicators employed to measure sustainable development. A simple lecture of the list of the 17 goals of sustainable development as they are defined by Sachs et al. (2019) indicates truly precarious relationships between these, hence the sustainable development, and the cultural heritage, hence the culture at large. Although it may be presumed, there is no clear reference to a solid cultural background needed to understand and accept the “no poverty”, “zero hunger”, “good health and well-being”, “quality education”, “gender equality”, “clean water and sanitation”, “affordable and clean energy”, “decent work and economic growth”, “industry, innovation, and infrastructure”, “reduced inequalities”, “sustainable cities and communities”, “responsible consumption and production”, “climate action”, “life below water”, “life on land”, “peace, justice, and strong institutions”, and “partnerships for the goals” concepts. Still, the Report acknowledges that “culture has received insufficient attention as an intrinsic component of sustainable development and must be translated and embedded in national and local development” and it may be expected to see achieving an appropriate cultural level of development included on the list of sustainable development goals.

It is already acknowledged that culture can be a powerful driver for sustainable development due to the contribution to the economy and poverty alleviation, the range of non-monetized benefits, and the influence of the cultural factors over the lifestyles, individual behavior, consumption patterns, values related to environmental stewardship, and interaction with the natural environment (UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, 2012) and it is expected that in the near future culture will become the fourth pillar of sustainable development and culturally sustainable

development will encompass all its meanings and complex interactions with the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of human life (Sabatini, 2019). It is also accepted that culture and heritage represents one of the dimensions of the nation brands (Ipsos Public Affairs, 2021) and, also, one of the pillars of the nation's soft power (Brand Finance, 2020) and the specific contributions to the strength of the nation brand, respectively the degree of the soft power of a nation can be quantitatively assessed. In this context, the conducted exploratory research has established that at the level of the selected countries cultural heritage (including the World heritage sites and the enlisted intangible cultural heritage) is statistically significantly associated with the strength of the nation brands, level of the soft power, and level of the travel and tourism competitiveness, but not to the degree of achieving the sustainable development goals. A properly preserved, restored, promoted, and capitalized cultural heritage appears to support the content and employment of the nation's brands, enhance the soft power of the country, and increase the degree of competitiveness of the travel and tourism of a country. Yet, the contribution of cultural heritage to sustainable development remains debatable, at least from the perspective of the seventeen sustainable development goals. As Therkelsen et al. (2021) have observed, these goals have impacted mainly on the rhetorical level the concrete strategies and actions, and remains to be seen how they will influence the development practices across the World.

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