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PLACE BRANDING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: SAINT-MALO – THE DESIGN IDENTITY OF A HISTORIC, CULTURAL AND TOURIST DESTINATION IN FRANCE

Fotini Maniou [1,*], Maria Poli [2], Ioanna Maniou [3], Ioanna Gkioni [4] and Maria Manola [5]

[1] Department of Economy and Sustainable Development, Harokopio University of Athens, Greece.
[2] Department of Interior Architecture, University of West Attica, Greece.
[3] Medical School, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.
[4] School of Film, Faculty of Fine Arts, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.
[5] Department of Tourism Management, University of West Attica, Greece.
* Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Saint-Malo offers a case study of the relationship between maritime heritage and the construction of a tourism destination identity. This article examines how the image of the "city of corsairs" connects fortified urban space, historical figures, and visitor attractions into a coherent tourism narrative. The methodology is based on an analysis of selected institutional websites and scholarly literature addressing place branding, authenticity, and resident participation. The analysis shows that the promotion of Saint-Malo is closely linked to recognizable spatial evidence, without, however, providing by itself evidence of economic success. It also highlights tensions between heroic representation, historical complexity, and everyday inhabitation. The post-war reconstruction of the city and the design of L'Hydro, the maritime museum, allow for a broader reading of local identity. Studies concerning sustainable development in Lesvos, literary festivals, and coastal ecotourism are used comparatively within the framework of cultural entrepreneurship. The article proposes an evaluation approach based on historical understanding, local economic benefit, social participation, and environmental protection. The study does not measure tourism impacts; rather, it develops an interpretive framework for the management of historic maritime cities.

Keywords: Saint-Malo; Corsairs; Place Branding; Urban Identity; Maritime Heritage; Cultural Tourism; Sustainable Development.

1 INTRODUCTION

The use of history in city promotion creates a relationship between collective memory and contemporary development choices. The historical theme influences what visitors recognize, which spaces they visit, and which images they carry away. For residents, the same choice concerns the way in which the city is publicly represented. Place branding—the construction and management of the image and meanings of a place—therefore needs to be examined as a process with cultural and social consequences.

Saint-Malo, in Brittany, is systematically promoted as the "Cité Corsaire" ("City of Corsairs"). The official tourism presentation uses this designation in connection with the city walls, the historic Intra-Muros core, and monuments associated with corsairs [1]. This makes Saint-Malo a useful case because the theme is not limited to a single attraction but functions as an interpretive starting point for a set of spaces and experiences. The central question is how this association can produce differentiation without reducing the city to a one-dimensional historical image.

This article examines three interrelated issues: the connection between the corsair narrative and urban space; the relationship between authenticity and tourist presentation; and the conditions under which brand management can be socially acceptable. It avoids treating coherence in communication as proof of economic success. Establishing a relationship between a narrative and arrivals, expenditure, or length of stay would require a different type of empirical data. The focus here is therefore on heritage presentation and the conditions under which it may be connected to sustainable development.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kavaratzis [2] situates city branding within a broader framework of city communication. The image of a city is shaped not only by communication but also by design, infrastructure, and the functioning of the urban environment. Kavaratzis and Ashworth [3] discuss the opportunities and difficulties involved in transferring the logic of commercial branding to cities. A city has multiple users, needs, and histories; consequently, image management must remain connected to lived reality.

Ashworth and Kavaratzis [4] broaden the discussion beyond the logo. For the purposes of this study, the "city of corsairs" acquires value when it is supported by understandable routes, historical interpretation, and appropriate services. Consistency therefore refers to the relationship between expectation and experience, rather than to the repetition of the same symbol everywhere. What matters is the ability to connect different experiences to a common historical basis.

Kavaratzis and Kalandides [5] conceptualize the place brand as an outcome of interactions among materiality, practices, institutions, and representations. In Saint-Malo, the city walls constitute materiality, guided tours represent practices, the tourism organization functions as an institution, and the corsair designation operates as a representation. Meaning emerges from their combination. The same name acquires a different meaning if it is not connected to accessible spaces and activities.

The role of residents is equally important. Braun, Kavaratzis, and Zenker [6] regard residents as part of place identity, as communication agents, and as citizens who can legitimize policies. In Saint-Malo, it is therefore necessary to consider whether the corsair theme represents different resident groups. A popular image does not necessarily indicate consensus; the ability of residents to intervene in promotional content and related decisions is also relevant.

Authenticity constitutes another central dimension. Wang [7] identifies different approaches to authenticity and emphasizes its experiential dimension. It is useful to distinguish between historic buildings, post-war reconstruction, and contemporary representations. All may provide a meaningful experience if their provenance is clearly explained. Credibility rests on clarity: the mere sense of a historic environment does not determine its age or evidentiary value.

Konecnik and Gartner [8] propose a framework for destination brand value based on image, awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty. Richards [9] broadens the discussion of cultural tourism toward experiences and intangible heritage. The corsair theme may therefore constitute a starting point for visitor interest, but its actual effect requires empirical investigation.

3 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The study is based on an analysis of publicly available documents and scientific studies. The material includes three official tourism-organization webpages, one presentation of the Demeure de Corsaire, and three municipal or museum sources concerning reconstruction and L'Hydro. These sources were selected because they connect the corsair designation with spaces, historical figures, and cultural uses. Links and bibliographic information were checked on 2 October 2026.

The analysis focuses on the relationship between name and space, forms of historical presentation, the distinction between originals and representations, and conditions for sustainable management. The scientific literature provides the interpretive concepts, while three studies on cultural entrepreneurship and sustainable tourism are used as comparative references. Findings from Greek regions are not automatically transferred to Saint-Malo; rather, they are used to formulate questions and evaluation criteria.

Institutional websites document promotional practices and stated intentions, but they do not constitute independent evidence of tourism effectiveness or social acceptance. The study includes no field observation, interviews, or economic measurements. Its conclusions therefore concern the communicative construction of identity, while the management proposals are presented as possibilities for future evaluation.

4 THE CORSAIR IDENTITY AS A HISTORICAL CHOICE

The distinction between a pirate and a corsair is important in the local tourism presentation. A corsair is associated with state authorization to attack enemy vessels during wartime, through a letter of marque or an equivalent order. The official tourism page presents this distinction before introducing well-known figures [10]. This allows the image of maritime action to be connected with state and local history.

The legitimation of privateering does not imply an absence of violence. A responsible presentation can explain the legal status of corsairs while also keeping visible the consequences for crews and trade. Otherwise, the corsair category risks becoming morally idealized. Historical understanding requires attention to authorization, economic organization, and conflict. Differentiation through branding can instead be based on knowledge.

René Duguay-Trouin and Robert Surcouf are central figures in the tourism narrative. The official presentation connects their memory with monuments, the cathedral, and routes through the city [10]. Personalization makes a complex history more recognizable. At the same time, the emphasis on famous men raises questions concerning the representation of crews, artisans, families, and other groups. Expanding the narrative in this direction should be understood as an enrichment proposal rather than as an already established feature.

Historical selection is also a question of exclusions. The city has multiple temporal and social dimensions. The corsair image can function as a gateway if communication moves from the recognizable toward the complex. Repetition of exclusively heroic episodes would restrict that potential. The brand should therefore be evaluated according to the breadth of historical questions that it opens up.

5 URBAN SPACE AS A CARRIER OF THE BRAND

The city walls provide the spatial basis of Saint-Malo's fortified-city image. The tourism presentation connects them with Intra-Muros and the successive historical expansions of the city [11]. A visitor route can link views of the sea with perceptions of defense and port activity. Its interpretive value, however, depends on the information accompanying movement through space. The form of the urban environment raises questions but cannot, by itself, explain the social history behind it.

The relationship between the walls and the horizon allows the corsair narrative to become a spatial experience. The city can be presented as a point of connection with maritime routes rather than merely as a closed historic setting. Viewpoints could, for example, be connected with maps showing trade, movement, and maritime work. This is a proposal and would require appropriate documentation and design for different levels of visitor knowledge.

The post-war reconstruction of Saint-Malo requires separate consideration. Municipal sources refer to the destruction of 1944 and the subsequent reconstruction [12]. The historic appearance of the city should therefore not be interpreted as proof of uninterrupted material continuity. Reconstruction constitutes an independent historical layer associated with choices concerning form and memory. Highlighting this layer can enrich the understanding of urban identity.

The Demeure de Corsaire/Hôtel Magon provides a specific example in which architecture and maritime history intersect. According to its operator, the building was constructed between 1723 and 1725 for François-Auguste Magon de la Lande, a shipowner and corsair associated with the French East India Company [13]. The residence offers an opportunity to explore maritime activity and urban wealth, and it can also open questions concerning trade and social differences.

The mansion does not automatically represent all residents. Connecting it with the ships, urban labor, and the wider maritime system could make different positions within that system more visible. Linking buildings, monuments, and the port can organize a coherent route, but the route must explain the relationships among its stops. The shared word "corsair" alone is insufficient to establish historical coherence.

6 AUTHENTICITY OF THE EXPERIENCE AND TOURIST DIFFERENTIATION

The corsair theme is also transferred to representations of historic vessels. The official tourism page presents Le Renard and L'Étoile du Roy as replicas that provide maritime-heritage experiences [10]. Distinguishing a replica from an

original object is important for the credibility of the brand. A modern vessel can help visitors understand dimensions, equipment, and maritime work, but it does not possess the same evidentiary status as a historic object.

Following Wang [7], a representation may support experiential authenticity when visitors participate meaningfully and understand the context of the experience. This does not eliminate the need for clear labeling. Information about construction and historical sources can combine enjoyment with knowledge. The experience becomes more credible when visitors can distinguish between preserved elements, reconstructed elements, and objects created specifically for educational or recreational purposes.

Saint-Malo's differentiation can therefore be interpreted as a connection among name, architecture, and visitor activities. This relationship is observable in the selected communication material, but it does not prove that visitors assign equal importance to all these elements. Some visitors may be primarily interested in the landscape, the beach, or other cultural references. Evaluation should consequently examine visitor motivations rather than attribute every visit to the corsair image.

Different interests also make multiple narratives possible. The corsair identity can remain one recognizable axis, while other routes can highlight reconstruction, fishing, and the contemporary relationship with the sea. This reduces the risk that every attraction becomes part of the same story. Brand coherence can instead be based on the relationships among different themes and on the clarity with which these relationships are communicated.

7 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Sustainable development requires tourism use to be connected with the conservation of cultural and natural resources and with residents' quality of life. For Saint-Malo, the success of the corsair image cannot be assessed only through recognition or visitor numbers. It is also necessary to examine who benefits economically, how monuments are maintained, and what pressures are placed on urban and coastal spaces.

Cultural entrepreneurship connects knowledge and heritage with services, employment, and collaboration. Maniou et al. [15], in their study of Lesvos, identify local perceptions as well as limitations related to financing, infrastructure, and seasonality. The comparative value of this research lies in the need to examine organizational conditions alongside cultural assets; it does not demonstrate that the same limitations exist in Saint-Malo.

Potential collaborations could involve museums, guides, small businesses, educators, and other local actors. A cultural route could connect interpretation, local services, and activities designed for different audiences. Economic evaluation should record revenues, maintenance costs, employment stability, and the proportion of visitor expenditure retained locally. An increase in turnover alone does not demonstrate equitable distribution or resilience.

Maniou and Mitoula [14] examine literary festivals as a form of cultural entrepreneurship linking events, local culture, tours, and participatory activities. Such approaches could enrich the corsair theme through narratives, workshops, and public discussions. In Saint-Malo, this could create connections among the sea, literature, and everyday life. Any contribution to extending the tourist season, however, would require separate measurement.

The social dimension requires meaningful resident participation. Braun et al. [6] emphasize the role of residents in place identity and legitimacy. Consultation could therefore involve different neighborhoods, age groups, and occupational groups in discussions about routes and cultural uses. Participation becomes meaningful when proposals can influence decisions and when institutions explain which suggestions have been adopted.

Everyday life should remain a central criterion: services, mobility, public spaces, and access to culture need to be considered alongside visitor experience. The present analysis does not document congestion or displacement in Saint-Malo; it proposes these issues as subjects for monitoring.

The environmental dimension is essential for a coastal destination. Manola et al. [16] examine ecotourism in the Nestos Delta, Keramoti Lagoon, and Thasopoula Island through visitor research and attention to environmental protection and services. The use of a convenience sample limits generalization. For Saint-Malo, the comparison supports examination of mobility, waste management, visitation, and coastal environmental pressures without equating the ecosystems.

Environmental responsibility should also be reflected in promotion through information about public transport, walking routes, and visitor rules. Dispersing visitors requires care; pressure should not simply be transferred to areas with lower capacity. Routes should therefore take into account protection, safety, accessibility, residents' needs, and the technical characteristics of each site.

Historical responsibility is likewise part of sustainability. Maritime activity involved labor, captivity, and unequal distributions of wealth. Colonial or coercive practices require specific evidence. Broadening the narrative can increase educational value and reduce idealization, but unsupported attributions should be avoided. The quality of public history affects trust.

L'Hydro provides an opportunity to broaden the maritime narrative. A municipal source presents fishing, trade, exploration, and corsair activity alongside the archaeological discoveries of La Natière, while the architectural presentation connects the project with the former naval school [17,18]. This allows discussion of new uses of heritage. The sources document the design and intended interpretation of the project, but not its functional or developmental outcomes.

The constructive role of digital technologies in cultural entrepreneurship education must be emphasized. To strengthen this field, we must encourage digital integration across all educational areas. We should adopt paradigms like mobile devices [20], diverse ICTs [21-22], and AI & STEM Robotics [23-27] to enhance core educational processes like evaluation, intervention, and instruction. Furthermore, connecting these ICT tools with models of metacognition, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence development [28-30] accelerates and optimizes educational practices. This holistic approach yields significant results, particularly for cultural entrepreneurship, where psychological resilience and empathy are essential for success.

8 MANAGEMENT AND EVALUATION PROPOSALS

Identity management requires common principles of historical documentation and collaboration among the tourism organization, cultural institutions, businesses, and residents. Kavaratzis and Kalandides [5] understand the place brand as being produced through interactions. A coordination framework could therefore be developed for routes, information, and cultural activities, with clearly defined responsibilities and regular review. Collaboration should allow different interpretations rather than impose a single heroic narrative.

Evaluation could be organized across several fields. Destination image can be assessed through awareness, associations, perceived quality, and intention to revisit, following the logic of Konecnik and Gartner [8]. Historical understanding should include the ability to distinguish between corsair and pirate, original and replica, and historic building and reconstruction. Visitor satisfaction should be measured separately because satisfaction does not necessarily demonstrate learning.

Economic indicators may include cultural expenditure, operating costs, local collaborations, and employment seasonality. Social indicators may include residents' views, access to cultural resources, and institutional responses to consultation. Environmental indicators may include modes of transport, waste, and pressure on individual sites. Each indicator should have a defined unit of measurement, data collector, and reference period.

Visitor questionnaires, resident interviews, and route observation across different seasons could be used. Before-and-after comparisons would be particularly useful following interventions. Attribution of tourism outcomes to branding should account for prices, accessibility, and broader tourism conditions. Digital searches can provide supplementary information, but online attention should not be equated with actual visits or local economic benefit.

The strategy should connect promotion with services and measurable commitments. Historical interpretation should become broader; cultural collaborations should be evaluated in terms of local benefit; and routes should be designed with attention to carrying capacity [19]. Saint-Malo can thus function as a field for examining relationships among promotion, participation, and sustainable management rather than as a one-size-fits-all model.

9 CONCLUSIONS

The selected material shows that Saint-Malo's image as a city of corsairs is supported by connections among names, historical figures, and visitor sites. This provides a recognizable basis for tourism differentiation. Its strength as an economic and social mechanism, however, remains an empirical question. The article therefore distinguishes a coherent narrative from evidence of its effects and connects evaluation with economic, social, and environmental criteria.

Historical complexity is a prerequisite for responsible place branding. The distinction between corsairs and pirates, the history of reconstruction, and the status of replicas should be made explicit. Broadening the narrative toward maritime work and residents' everyday lives can enrich the brand. For other historic cities, the Saint-Malo case provides a framework for examining the relationship among attractive promotion, participation, and documented public history.

The comparative studies on Lesvos, literary festivals, and coastal ecotourism enrich this framework by highlighting collaboration, infrastructure, and environmental care [14–16]. Sustainable development requires a recognizable image to be accompanied by heritage conservation, local benefit, and protection of everyday life.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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