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From Destination Branding to Strategic Regional Branding: Reframing Kumaun Beyond Tourism

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Abstract: This paper presents the theoretical necessity of moving beyond the current tourism-oriented destination-branding perspective for Brand Kumaun to the more comprehensive strategy of regional branding. This paper adopts a theoretical and contextual approach. The analysis reveals that Kumaun has partial and limited visibility through tourism, pilgrimage, spirituality, and images of its mountain landscape. This image forms a basis but fails to reflect the multifaceted nature of the region. The paper offers a theoretical redefinition of Kumaun as a strategic regional brand, which can be developed by extending its tourism-led visibility through identity, territorial capital, participatory stakeholders, and coordinated governance.

Keywords: place branding, destination branding, regional branding, Kumaun, territorial capital, tourism image, stakeholder participation, regional development

Introduction

The concept of place does not refer simply to geography. Instead, places are lived, experienced, commemorated, constructed and managed using various socio-cultural, economic, environmental and symbolic dynamics. As a result, place branding is inherently distinct from the branding of commodities. A place is created and recreated by a myriad of stakeholders, including inhabitants, tourists, migrants, producers, institutions, histories, landscapes, political actions and development plans. Therefore, place branding cannot be limited to an image or slogan or an advertisement or presentation strategy. Rather, it should be viewed as a more comprehensive process of branding that encompasses identity, image, reputation, stakeholder engagement, governance and development (Hanna et al., 2021; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019).

Kumaunis a region in the state of Uttarakhand, popularly known for its hill stations, lakes, religious centers, forests, spiritual geography, beauty, and mountain tourism. However, the region includes much more beyond these images— such as the rural areas, local foods, local festivals, dialects, handcrafts, local goods, women labour, migrations, ecology, borders, market limitations, and developmental gaps at the level of districts. Thus, a tourism-based image can help to make

ISSN-2319-8478
Vol-15 Issue-4, July 2026

Kumaunjust partially(Institute for Human Development, 2019; Rural Development and Migration Commission, 2018; Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, 2018).The core argument of the paper is that Kumaun needs to be positioned not only as a tourism-based destination but as a strategic regional brand as well. Strategic regional branding, must be adopted for Kumaun and in addition to tourism must include including culture, gastronomy, products, environment, livelihoods, migration, and local engagement. Strategic regional branding is not meant to act as a replacement for development policy but rather as a framework.

This paper is conceptual and contextual in nature. It takes its base from the literature on the evolution of place-branding theory, the distinction among destination branding, place branding, and regional branding, and the context of the territorial capital of Kumaun and its developmental limitations. The purpose of this paper is to set the base for the need to take Kumaun forward from its destination branding stage.

From Place Promotion to Strategic Regional Branding

Academic developments in place branding have progressed from promotional and marketing-focused perspectives towards identity-based, relational, stakeholder-informed and development-oriented approaches. The early approach of place-marketing was heavily influenced by conventional marketing assumptions. A place can be differentiated, positioned, and marketed to attract tourists, investors, residents, consumers, and general attention. At this point, the concept of branding was related to favourable imagery, visual identity, promotion, competitive positioning, and brand equity variables like awareness, associations, perceived quality, and brand personality(D. A. Aaker, 1992; J. L. Aaker, 1997; Moilanen and Rainisto 2009; Morgan et al., 2011; Papadopoulos, 2004; Van Ham, 2008).

Destination branding played an important role in developing the discipline further. This approach helped to realize the connection between destinations and meanings, images, experience, satisfaction, loyalty, and intention. Some useful destination branding concepts were awareness, image, perceived quality, satisfaction, and recommendation intention (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike, 2010). Nonetheless, the approach has the limitation of privileging visitors over other important stakeholders such as locals, producers, migrants, and institutions. This is a crucial limitation for Kumaun since it is not simply a destination for visitors to visit but also a livelihood space, cultural region, ecological system, migration-affected society, and context of internal development differentiation.

Further advancements in the field have expanded place branding by emphasizing the importance of identity, image, reputation, culture, relational meanings, governance, and co-production of the brand among stakeholders (Anholt, 2010). Modern conceptualizations of places highlight their nature as complex socio-spatial constructions that require more than just one-sided communication in order to be managed (Campelo et al., 2014; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Rinaldi & Cavicchi, 2016; Zenker et al., 2017).

The governance and development-oriented turn in place branding makes a stronger case for regional branding in particular. A brand for a place should not be viewed as a campaign but as a long-term strategic process of shaping a brand's position, pattern, and perspective (Mintzberg, 1987). Otherwise, the place brand will collapse due to separation from infrastructure, markets, livelihoods, coordinated policies, sustainable ecology, and stakeholder trust. A place brand cannot

ISSN-2319-8478
Vol-15 Issue-4, July 2026

be considered only as a product of marketing but as an outcome of social, cultural, and environmental policies (Florek & Kavaratzis, 2014). Likewise, governance approaches recognize branding as much of a coordination problem as a communication task (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2021). In regard to Kumaun, this implies a holistic approach combining the tourism industry with locally made products, producer institutions, ecology, migration considerations, and coordination across districts.

As a result, regional branding comes into place. This is necessary because a region cannot be reduced to a single destination, let alone a homogeneous administrative entity. Regions are territorial constructions that share certain identity, internal diversity, economic linkages, institutional structures, and development paths. Thus, strategic regional branding requires balancing unity and diversity. Regional branding should articulate a regional identity that does not homogenize its diversity. For Kumaun, this means the expression of a unique Kumauni identity while acknowledging that there are significant differences within and among its districts.

Table 1: Difference between destination branding, place branding and regional branding

Dimension	**Destination branding**	**Place branding**	**Regional branding**
Primary focus	Tourism markets, visitor image, destination experience, satisfaction and loyalty.	Broader identity, image, reputation, investment, culture, governance, residents, visitors and external audiences.	Region as a territorial, cultural, economic and developmental formation with shared identity and internal diversity.
Main audience	Tourists, pilgrims, visitors and travel intermediaries.	Residents, tourists, investors, migrants, businesses, policymakers, media and civil society.	Internal and external stakeholders, including residents, migrants, producers, tourism actors, institutions, consumers, investors and district communities.
Typical tools	Tourism campaigns, itineraries, destination logos, events and visitor experience management.	Identity articulation, stakeholder engagement, reputation-building, governance alignment and communication.	Integrated territorial narrative, district-sensitive positioning, policy coordination, product systems, local value capture and stakeholder participation.
Risk if used alone	Can overemphasize scenery and visitor appeal while ignoring lived realities.	Can remain too broad unless grounded in a specific territorial scale.	Can become symbolic unless linked with governance, markets, ecological responsibility and development conditions.
Relevance for Kumaun	Useful because Kumaun already has tourism	Necessary because Kumaun is also a cultural, ecological,	Most appropriate because Kumaun needs a common regional identity that

ISSN-2319-8478
Vol-15 Issue-4, July 2026

	visibility through hills, lakes, pilgrimage and spiritual landscapes.	productive and migration-affected place.	includes district diversity, culture, products, ecology, livelihoods and governance.

Kumaun as a Living Regional Formation

Kumaon region is one of the two main administrative divisions of the state and encompasses six districts, namely, Almora, Bageshwar, Champawat, Nainital, Pithoragarh and Udham Singh Nagar (Kumaon Division, Government of Uttarakhand, n.d.). The regional identity of the area emerges from its Himalayan geography, sacred landscape, lakes, forest, rivers, glaciers, hill towns, local cuisine, fairs, migration histories, local products, pilgrimage, rural culture and tourism. Simultaneously, Kumaon is marked by its uneven development, limited diversification, ecological vulnerability, market connectivity challenges, out-migration trends and district level disparities (Aayog, 2018; Institute for Human Development, 2019; Rural Development and Migration Commission, 2018).Therefore, the region cannot be perceived as a homogenous hill-cultural entity. The districts of Almora, Bageshwar, Champawat and Pithoragarh are mostly characterized by hills and associated concerns related to rurality, agriculture, ecology and migration. Nainital stands out as a mixed case, combining features of both hills (e.g. hill tourism) and water bodies (e.g. lake tourism). Finally, Udham Singh Nagar is distinct from all of the above-mentioned districts, being the only plains or terai district with agricultural and industrial characteristics and a stronger degree of urbanization and migrant-reception.

Socio-cultural resources of the region make a good starting point for regional branding initiatives. The region boasts a series of fairs such as Nanda Devi Fair, Uttarayani Fair, Devidhura Bagwal and Purnagiri Mela as well as various ritual-culture gatherings and events (Kumaon Division, Government of Uttarakhand, n.d.). Other socio-cultural resources include local art traditions, dialects, cuisine heritage, village rituals, pilgrimage traditions, oral folklore and collective memory of the region. All of these resources constitute an integral part of living culture experienced by the region's internal stakeholders as an expression of regional identity.

Ecological resources of Kumaon constitute yet another important component. The region is known for its mountain landscapes, forests, rivers, glaciers and biodiversity, all of which contribute to its symbolic potential and offer livelihood opportunities at the same time. The vulnerability to natural pressures, climate change and carrying capacity limitations demand that the regional branding strategy be ecologically mindful. Regional branding efforts based on exploitation of nature alone could achieve short-term success but would prove to be unsustainable in the long term.

Local products of Kumaon can serve as a bridge between cultural identity and economic development. The examples include traditional food products like Bal Mithai of Almora, artisanal goods like Aipan products of Nainital, woollen goods of Pithoragarh, copper-based products of Bageshwar, Himalayan honey of Champawat and Moonj grass products of Udham Singh Nagar (Invest India, 2025). These products embody the culture and traditions, skills, ecology and identity of the region and its individual districts. Yet to achieve a positive developmental

ISSN-2319-8478
Vol-15 Issue-4, July 2026

impact, local products need to be packaged, certified, marketed and delivered to the markets (Government of Uttarakhand, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

The Limits of Tourism-Centred Branding

Kumaun's existing image revolves around its mountains, lakes, temples, forests, pilgrimage, hill stations, peace, spirituality, and natural beauty. This image is important because it makes the region known and visible. Also, it provides a pre-existing entry point for external visitors. In terms of tourism policy, many tourism themes have been identified for Kumaun, such as adventure tourism, pilgrimage tourism, cultural and festival tourism, health and spiritual tourism, wildlife and bird sanctuary tourism, ecotourism, and rural tourism (Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, 2018). The problem lies with this tourism image being incomplete. Tourism image makes Kumaun synonymous with natural beauty, spirituality, and adventure. However, it fails to mention issues related to livelihoods in the region, women workers, indigenous foods, craft systems, district-wise products, ecological knowledge, migrations, economic problems, market connectivity and aspirations of youths in the region. The issue here is that the tourism image tends to cater only to the visitor's perspective and forgets that a region-based branding should also take into account the region's identity and needs. A region that focuses on only attracting visitors and neglecting local identity will become attractive externally but vulnerable internally (Govers & Go, 2009; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).Lastly, there exists a distributional issue. Tourism brings about income generation and publicity in the area. But, the distribution of this income and publicity will be unequal in the absence of connection between tourism activities and the local production sector, local entrepreneurs, tour guides, homestays, women associations, producer organizations, etc. Tourism should be considered an entry point rather than the foundation of Brand Kumaun for this reason.

Territorial Capital, Under-Conversion and the Regional-Branding Problem

Territorial capital will be useful in conceptualizing the challenge for Kumaun’s regional branding. Territorial capital comprises the natural, cultural, social, institutional and economic resources of a region's developmental potential (Camagni & Capello, 2010, 2013; Kemeny & Storper, 2015). Territorial capital of Kumaun consists of its landscapes of mountains, its sacred geographies, its pilgrimages routes, its foods, its horticulture, its medicinal and aromatic plants, its handloom and woollen products, its forestry-based knowledge systems, its festivals, village tourism, its homestays, the work done by women, its migrants' attachments and its cultural memories.

Territorial capital, however, is not enough for development. There needs to be a conversion process into livelihoods, market accesses, quality perception, stakeholder trust, institutions and value capture. It is this conversion process that makes up what is called an under-conversion problem. Even as Kumaun possesses great symbolic and productive potential, there is no coherence in the use of such potential due to dispersion of policies across different sectors and the poor integration of territorial positioning. Tourism exists but not always locally based, products have unique cultural appeal but are faced with marketing and quality challenges, migration has identity links but is often seen only as a challenge, ecological resource is highly valued but not always managed by credible sustainability regimes. The under-conversion problem shows up even in the policy landscape. Several assets related to tourism, MSME, export, local product,

ISSN-2319-8478
Vol-15 Issue-4, July 2026

food processing, start-up, handloom, handicrafts and horticulture exist as branding relevant items in the various policies and schemes of the Uttarakhand government (Government of Uttarakhand, 2015b, 2021a, 2021b). All of this is important for the development of specific sectors but not quite as an integrative Brand Kumaun approach. The strategic branding of a region should, thus, seek a coherence among these policy tracks through a regional rationale.

Migration brings further complications in this context. Migration out of the hill areas happens due to lack of employment in the local area, shrinking of the agricultural base, fewer non-farm opportunities, geographical features, education aspirations, market deficiencies and perceptions of a lack of future opportunities (Rural Development and Migration Commission, 2018;Pathak et al., 2017; Institute for Human Development, 2019). While a credible brand cannot ignore migration reasons for a romanticized view of rural Kumaun, migrants can continue to be stakeholders in Kumaun through familial ties, festive and cultural links, food consumption, language retention, property ownership, visits home, remittances, consumption of local products and possibly investment decisions.

Reframing Brand Kumaun: A Strategic Regional-Branding Perspective

The conceptual shift required in the case of Kumaun is illustrated in Figure 1. The first stage involves the tourism-focused destination image. This is what gives Kumaun its present-day external image. The second stage involves place-branding logic, which sees identity, image, experience and reputation all being taken together. The third stage involves strategic regional branding, with stakeholders, governance, territorial capital and development orientation as key aspects. Finally, stage four involves Brand Kumaun beyond tourism, i.e. regional identity involving culture, ecology, local products, migration-related attachment and district-specific diversity.

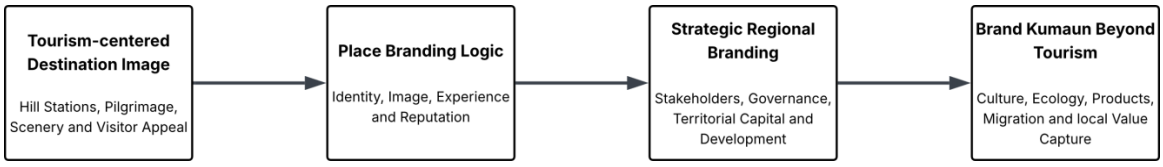


Figure 1: Conceptual movement from tourism promotion to strategic regional branding

The implications of such a reframing of the situation include the following points:

- Brand Kumaun should be identity-driven rather than campaign-driven. In other words, the regional brand should emanate from authentic regional resources and meanings, including the region's culture, language, cuisine, sacred landscapes, locally made products, ecology, rural economy, women's work, memories of migration and district-specific diversity. Communication should supplement identity and not replace it.
- Brand Kumaun should be stakeholder-driven. The various people living, moving out and visiting the region— including migrants, producers, artisans, SHGs, tourism providers, youth, external visitors, consumers, entrepreneurs, policymakers and institutions— are responsible for building the region's meaning. While the top-down approach of a

ISSN-2319-8478
Vol-15 Issue-4, July 2026

promotional brand would increase visibility, its lack of legitimacy owing to non-compliance with regional aspirations and constraints would undermine its effectiveness.The reason is that regional branding cannot happen without stakeholder involvement, which constitutes a critical credibility requirement in regional branding (Braun et al., 2013; Rinaldi & Cavicchi, 2016; Zenker et al., 2017).

- Brand Kumaun should involve governance. Merely creating an external image of Kumaun as a brand would neither solve the structural problems of the region nor facilitate development there. Such a move would have to be combined with activities such as policy coordination, local products, tourism development, infrastructure, quality assurance, ecological protection, producer institutions and market facilitation.
- Brand Kumaun should incorporate the concept of district sensitivity. While it is imperative for Kumaun to develop a regional identity, this regional identity should not reduce it to the image of just one hill-station or the spiritual nature of the area. The Almora district could contribute through its rich cultural and food heritage; the Bageshwar district through its pilgrimage sites, rural hill character and copper-based products; the Champawat district through its pilgrimage sites, honey and ecological concerns; the Nainital district through its tourism potential and Aipan products; the Pithoragarh district through its high-Himalayan identity and woollen products; and the Udham Singh Nagar district through its agricultural and industrial nature along with its connection to the Moonj grass products.
- Brand Kumaun should be development-oriented without being overly optimistic. The process of regional branding might fail to address some of the problems facing Kumaun like migration and employment, branding would help organize recognition, increase coherence and build stakeholder confidence.

Implications for Theory, Policy and Practice

1.1. Theoretical implications

The article adds to the place-branding literature by highlighting the reason why destination branding may not be enough for cultures and development-challenged places. As Kumaun shows, the fact is not the lack of an image but the partiality of an image. The distinction is crucial because many of the branding initiatives operate on the assumption that being visible is the ultimate aim. Visibility is already there in Kumaun because of tourism. The challenge lies in matching image with identity and development.

In relation to regional branding, this article is helpful since it introduces the importance of territorial capital and under-conversion in the process. Regions like Kumaun might have symbolic, cultural, environmental

ISSN-2319-8478
Vol-15 Issue-4, July 2026

and productive potential, but the transformation of these potentialities into something that is actually useful for development depends on institutional processes, markets and stakeholders. Regional branding would thus be understood as a stakeholder-oriented process of articulating and coordinating territorial capital conditionally for development.

1.2. Policy implications

To the policymaker, it is implied that Brand Kumaun should not focus solely on tourism. Regional branding needs to be done through a process that involves tourism, cultural heritage, agriculture, MSMEs, exports, local products, food processing, handloom, handicrafts, ecology, infrastructure, and migration-sensitive development. It is observed that the existing policy frameworks also have taken into account the many aspects that can be branded about Kumaun, but the sectoral treatment of these issues does not provide any hope for the creation of a regional brand identity.Thus, a framework for creating a policy-oriented Brand Kumaun should involve strategies related to local product quality management, certification, packaging, aggregation, e-commerce, buyer linkages, responsible tourism, carrying capacity, solid waste and water management, migration-sensitive branding, and value capture.

1.3. Managerial and community implications

For tourism managers and regional-branding practitioners, the implication is to use tourism as a gateway into the wider Kumaun story. Visitor experiences should connect destinations with local foods, crafts, festivals, village experiences, ecological interpretation, producer stories and district-specific products. Instead of presenting Kumaun only as a scenic escape, communication should show Kumaun as a culturally rooted, ecologically distinctive, product-rich and developmentally complex Himalayan region.

For communities, producers and migrants, the regional-branding approach highlights the importance of participation and representation. Local products, cultural practices and migrant networks should not be used merely as promotional symbols. They should be connected to producer benefit, authenticity protection, fair value capture and community confidence. A credible Brand Kumaun should be useful to those who live, work, produce, remember and invest in the region, not only to those who visit it.

1.4. Limitations and Future Research

The article has a purely conceptual and contextual focus. Further studies can go in the direction of empirical examination of interpretation of the image of Kumaun, culture, products, ecological image, support from governance and developmental potential among different stakeholder groups. Further comparisons between Kumaun and other Himalayan areas are possible to explore whether there exists a common pattern in moving from destination branding to strategic regional branding among developmentally limited and culturally rich regions.

ISSN-2319-8478
Vol-15 Issue-4, July 2026

Conclusion

In this article, it was pointed out that there is a need for a regional branding strategy for Kumaun rather than just destination branding. This is because while destination branding can account for the present-day visibility of Kumaun due to hill stations, pilgrimage, spirituality, natural beauty and Himalayan landscapes, it cannot sufficiently describe the complex reality of living, breathing Kumaun with its cultural richness, its local products, ecological obligations, migration-based identity, governance requirements and district-level differences.

The key contribution of this article has been to show that the branding problem of Kumaun does not consist in its invisibility. Kumaun is well-known and well-perceived. However, what is missing is not invisibility but narrowly tourism-related visibility; hence there is a need for branding that can take advantage of tourism to create a broader regional identity based on territorial capital creation and local benefit realisation.

A redefined Brand Kumaun would make use of tourism as a starting point, but expand the scope of the regional branding story to incorporate matters relating to culture, food heritage, local products, ecological awareness, attachment by migrants, work done by women, ambitions of youth, producer structures and district-level differentiation. It will not be claimed that branding is capable of addressing development challenges on its own terms; but rather, branding can function as a coordination and meaning-creation process.

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