

# Branding and Digital Marketing Strategies for Inbound Tourism in Sri Lanka: A Strategic Framework for a First of Its Kind Travel Planning Platform

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## ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka tourism is distanced from dire times and with the arrival of Spaniards in droves. But there remains a real-world problem: the absence of tailored, language-specific services to directly link these visitors with qualified local professionals. To address this gap, this design-based applied research project involved the development of a curated brand identity and an organised three-month integrated marketing strategy for a localised travel planning platform called "Vamos Lanka." This methodology uses a design-based approach during pre-production, production, and post-production phases. Pre-production: thorough research on tourism marketing, target audience psychographics and cultural adaptation. This project contains the following design outputs: a brand guideline, original multimedia assets, and localised social media content. provide empirical grounding, a visual identity and marketing material's comprehension was confirmed through a survey with the target audience that evaluated knowledge of brand perception as well as clarity on what the platform is about. The study results reveal that the visual elements tailored to a specific culture, in this case, logo, colour palette and content, successfully evoke the perception of energy and tropicality in line with the Spanish market. This research adds to the body of work within destination branding scholarship by showing how localised digital design and contextual multimedia marketing can successfully fill service gaps and enable brand trust in nascent tourism emergences.

**Keywords:** Destination Branding, Travel & Tourism, Tourism Marketing, Digital & Print Marketing, Travel Experiences

## INTRODUCTION

This design-based applied research project resulted in the development of a culturally resonant brand identity and a strategic three-month digital marketing campaign for "Vamos Lanka," a localised travel planning platform. This applied project aims to tie together destination branding theory with multimedia design practices to develop brand awareness among Spanish-speaking tourists. As a virtual portal between international travellers and regional service providers, the design must capture quintessential traits of Sri Lankan heritage while being relatable to a Spanish demographic.

The motivation for carrying out this research is the flourishing post-pandemic recovery of the tourism sector in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka saw a 17.3% increase in foreign tourist arrivals in April 2025, reaching a total of 174,608. Simultaneously, the number of Spanish tourists has risen dramatically, creating a shortage of Spanish-speaking travel tour guides within traditional travel agencies. Familiarisation tours, such as the one for elite travel agents from Spain in October 2024, highlight the increasing national focus on this market demographic.

## Research Problem

Language barriers, safety fears, and a lack of culturally tailored services are common challenges faced by Spanish-speaking tourists visiting Sri Lanka. Reviewed literature on the Sri Lankan tourism sector illustrates that infrastructure limitations, such as inadequate road networks and inconsistent service quality, still impede the country's ability to cater to increasing premium tourism demand, often reducing tourist satisfaction. At the

same time, qualified local tour guides experience severe seasonal unemployment and lack the digital tools to directly market their specialised language skills to these international travellers. A digital-first solution that addresses these pain points is greatly needed, but bringing such an offering to the market demands a meticulously crafted visual and marketing strategy to instil early marketplace trust.

## Research Objectives

To address this gap, this design-based applied research project aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To create a culturally relevant brand identity (logo, typography, and colour palette) that bridges Sri Lankan heritage with Spanish cultural expectations.
- To create and document a focused three-month digital content plan designed to connect Spanish-speaking tourists with qualified local guides.
- To create comprehensive brand guidelines that optimise the visual user journey for both primary and secondary audiences.

## Methodological Approach

Using a design-based applied research methodology divided into pre-production, production, and post-production phases, this study materialises destination branding principles in the form of digital assets. The brand voice and key messaging are directly influenced by target market research. The visual identity combines facets of both Sri Lankan and Spanish culture, ensuring it stands out within a saturated tourism market. During the production phase, original photography and videography will be produced to create a digital photo album celebrating lesser-known locations to tackle the negative impact of overtourism. The final outputs include detailed brand guidelines and a completely designed social media content calendar, offering a replicable framework for culturally adapted tourism marketing in Sri Lanka.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of existing studies have identified and addressed several areas where the current body of literature has provided substantial support for our project. There are 3 major themes that are directly applicable to this project. Those themes are the strategic role that visual identity plays in developing effective destination branding strategies, the need for culturally relevant digital storytelling methods in international travel marketing campaigns, and the ongoing sustainability challenges that exist within Sri Lanka's travel and tourism sector. These themes provide a solid base from which to identify the theoretical gaps that will be addressed through the actual design work of Vamos Lanka.

### The Strategic Role of Visual Identity in Destination Branding

Destination branding and visual design are more than just aesthetics, as visual elements in destination branding represent critical strategic tools that establish trust, define perceptions of a destination or brand and promote loyalty to travellers in a highly competitive environment (Jahan et al., 2024). When it comes to travel, destinations become the "brands" of their respective locations. Logos, carefully chosen colours, and other design elements contribute to establishing a distinct visual identity for a location, thereby fostering an emotional connection with potential visitors to a destination (Nasir et al., 2023).

There is a significant gap in destination branding theory in that while many scholars have focused on the larger scale of national destination branding at the macro-level, few have studied the applied research of how intermediary digital platforms can develop their own visual identities as bridges between two distinct cultures. This project aims to address this gap in the form of both the conceptual visual trust and cultural identity ideas developed by Bresciani and Eppler (2010), and Escobar-Farfán et al. (2024), and, ultimately, these ideas will influence the practical outputs of this project including the visual brand guidelines, typography selections and logo design for Vamos Lanka, thereby allowing the final product to reflect and honor the heritage of Sri Lanka while still meeting the visual expectations of Spain.

## Culturally Tailored Digital Storytelling and Social Media Marketing

Social media has revolutionised tourism marketing. It transferred the power of influence away from advertisers and directly into user generated content and storytelling online (Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2025). Platforms such as Instagram brought attention to visual storytelling, which leads audiences to experience emotions that motivate them to visit (Hussain et al., 2024). Given that user generated content originates from actual tourists, it is also far more credible than traditional marketing messages (Xiang et al., 2022).

To take advantage of this, marketing has to be culturally and linguistically relevant to the audience. General research on tourism well notes what I refer to above, such as that audiences should be segmented by culture and thus use local colloquialisms, and highlight culturally relevant factors like gastronomy or activities appealing to families (Hogan, 2019). New AI, big data technologies enable predictive and hyper-personalised advertising even based on the online behavior or geomarketing (Ferhataj, 2024; Nkatekho, 2024; Peñarrubia-Zaragoza et al., 2019). But the literature is all too frequently abstract, leaving creators without specific approaches that they can adopt. In this study, such abstract concepts are transposed into a concrete output. The literature on cultural adaptation directly informs the language, pacing and visual themes employed in the production phase for the three month social media content strategy targeted toward -selected groups.

### Contextualising Sri Lankan Tourism: Past, Present and Future

From a multi-platform digital storytelling perspective, Sri Lanka's recent national marketing campaigns offer indications of former attempts at this new dynamic. Campaigns such as the digital-first "So Sri Lanka" (Tourism Promotion Bureau, 2018), "Fall in Love Again" initiative (Sri Lanka Tourism Alliance, 2022) and the emotional appeal of the "Ramayana Trail," employed influencer marketing and emotionally-driven storytelling to target niche international demographics effectively (STPB, 2024).

Yet recent academic discussions caution against the unfettered use of digital marketing. Scholars are tying viral social media platforms to overtourism and its negative impact on local communities, as locals are pushed out or face a divide in the level of service provided relative to foreigners (BBC, 2025; AsiaNews, 2025; LankaNow, 2025). Social media could contribute to crowding, but Gretzel (2019) argues that it can also play a role in the solution by facilitating sustainable behaviors and early warning crowd control. Marketing green tourism is becoming even more essential, which emphasizes eco friendly practices and low impact travel (Cizreliogullari & Günay, 2024). This study purposefully engages with this debate by utilizing its design outputs to combat these very issues. The digital photo album being produced here as a form of marketing material openly showcases less known places and sustainability initiatives that avoids greenwashing through the emphasis of genuine transparency (Font & Tribe, 2001). This has a direct impact on the creative production processes as per theories of green tourism.

### Conclusion and Methodological Alignment

Putting these thematic arguments together makes one thing clear. Digital tourism platforms are expected to deliver far more value than simply functionality. What they require is a rigorously researched visual and cultural identity. We are using the literature discussed to serve as a theoretical framework which informs the project deliverables rather than merely provide background context. Destination branding theories rebel against our colour palette and logo design. The three month content plan is framed by cultural storytelling discourse. And finally, arguments around sustainability affect what is chosen to be photographed. This synthesis logically flows into the design based applied research methodology, a systematic framework embedding theory to practice in delivering academically sound yet market ready design assets.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This project used a design based applied research methodology. This can characterize a connection between the theoretical components of destination branding and practical multimedia design. The research was divided

into three consecutive stages: Pre-Production (needs assessment and data gathering), Production (asset production and visual identity development), and Post-Production (refinement and evaluation).

### Phase 1: Pre-Production and Data Collection

As with any design project, research and data collection happened first to lay out the base-line parameters for the brand. This phase was further divided into secondary and primary research techniques. The study firstly undertaken a comprehensive literature review followed by an exploration of current industry practices in the local tourism landscape in Sri Lanka. This secondary data collection is intended to inform Vamos Lanka's strategic positioning in the current market.

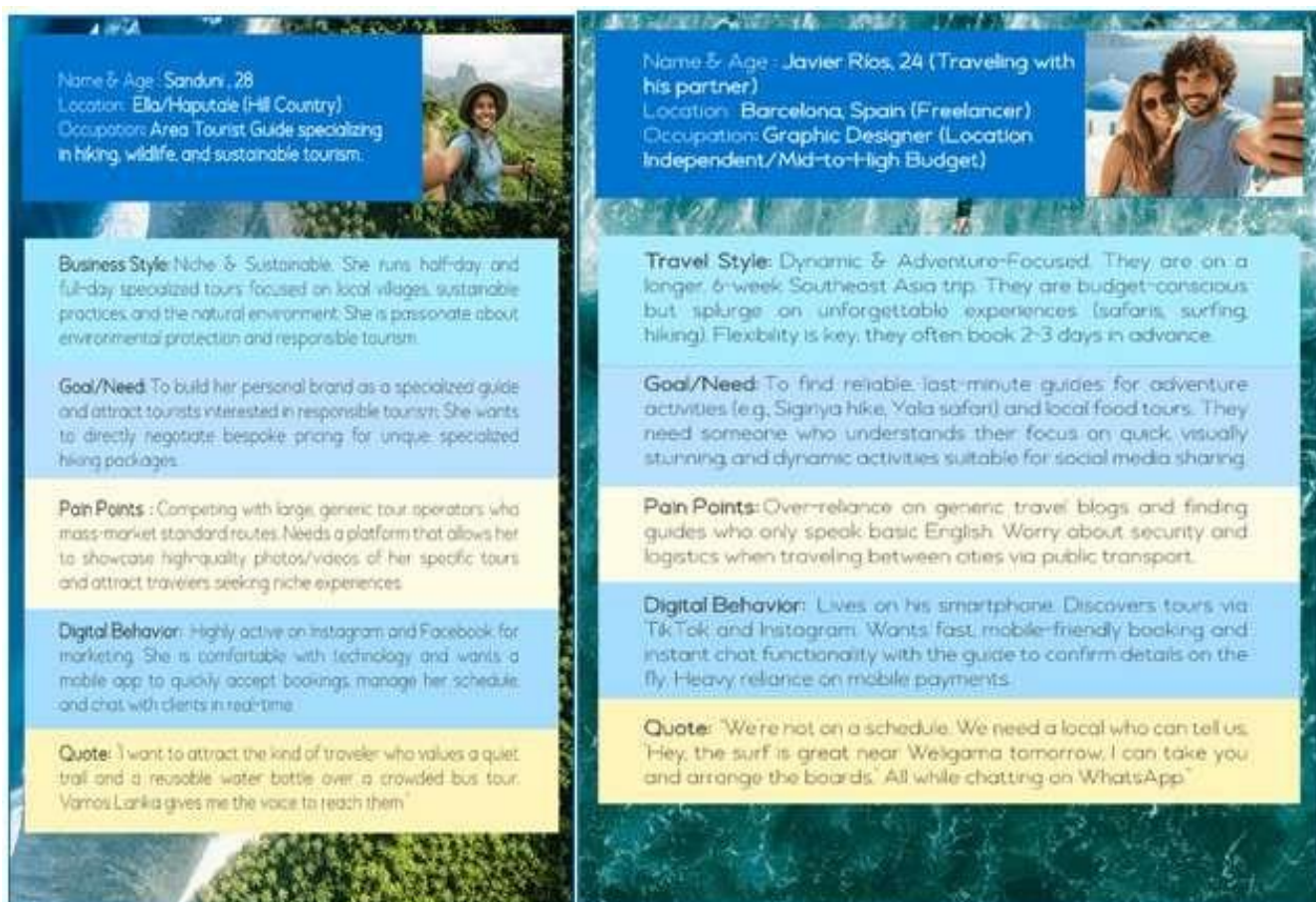
Secondly, we conducted primary target audience research which allowed us to get direct insights from Spanish speaking tourists and the local tourism service providers. Results: A quantitative survey was conducted with a purposive sample of the primary target audience (n=24) to assess travel behaviors, language barriers, and visual preferences.

Using the collected data, two separate target audience profiles were created to guide the next design phase:

**Primary Target Audience:** Primarily discovered by group type to be Millennials (25 to 40 years) and Generation Z (18 to 24 years). Psychographic data revealed that this audience segment has a particular appreciation for authenticity, true local experiences, and sustainable travel habits. Electronic word of mouth helps in validating their products and visual social media enhances their visibility. Safety and comfort with the language were noted as their main reasons for travel.

**Secondary Target Audience:** Local licensed guides and chauffeur guide colleagues, 22 to 40 years of age. The second set of comments highlighted this group's desire to market their specialized Spanish language services effectively on their own, thus driving direct bookings and avoiding commission paid to third party agencies.

Figure 1: Primary and Secondary Target Audience Personas





**Phase 2: Production & Asset Creation**

During the production stage, we turned our visualizations and multimedia assets into tangible content in strict accordance to the insights learned during Research.

Visual Brand identity for Vamos Lanka designed in Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop Multiple sketch iterations, working on concept development across the brand purpose and cultural context to finalize a logo profile. The finished logo merged a stylized 'V' and the silhouette of a traditional Sri Lankan stilt fisherman to visually create a location pin. In parallel, overall colour palette and typography system were created to elicit the tropical and energetic perception adjusted exactly to the visual needs of the Spanish market. These elements were then written up into a formal brand guideline document.

Figure 2: Logo Design Process



A structured three month digital content plan was then developed to follow on from the brand identity. Sri Lanka: Part of the campaign also had original photography and videography taken on location across Sri Lanka to capture real landscapes, cultural sites and tourist attractions. Generative AI tools and licensed stock assets

were also used to augment the original media. This data was blended with Spanish-language social media posts, reels and digital ads.

Figure 3: Social Media Posts Creation inside Adobe Photoshop



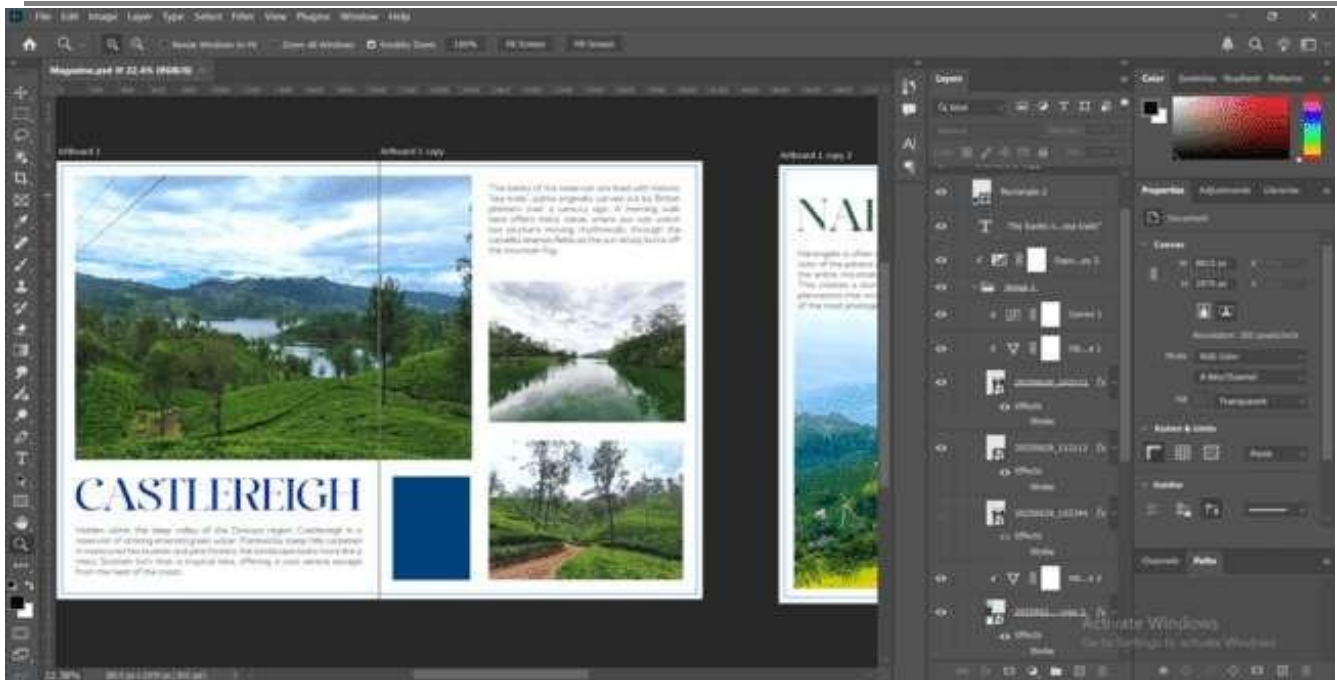


Figure 4 Photo & Videography Process in Tourism Destinations

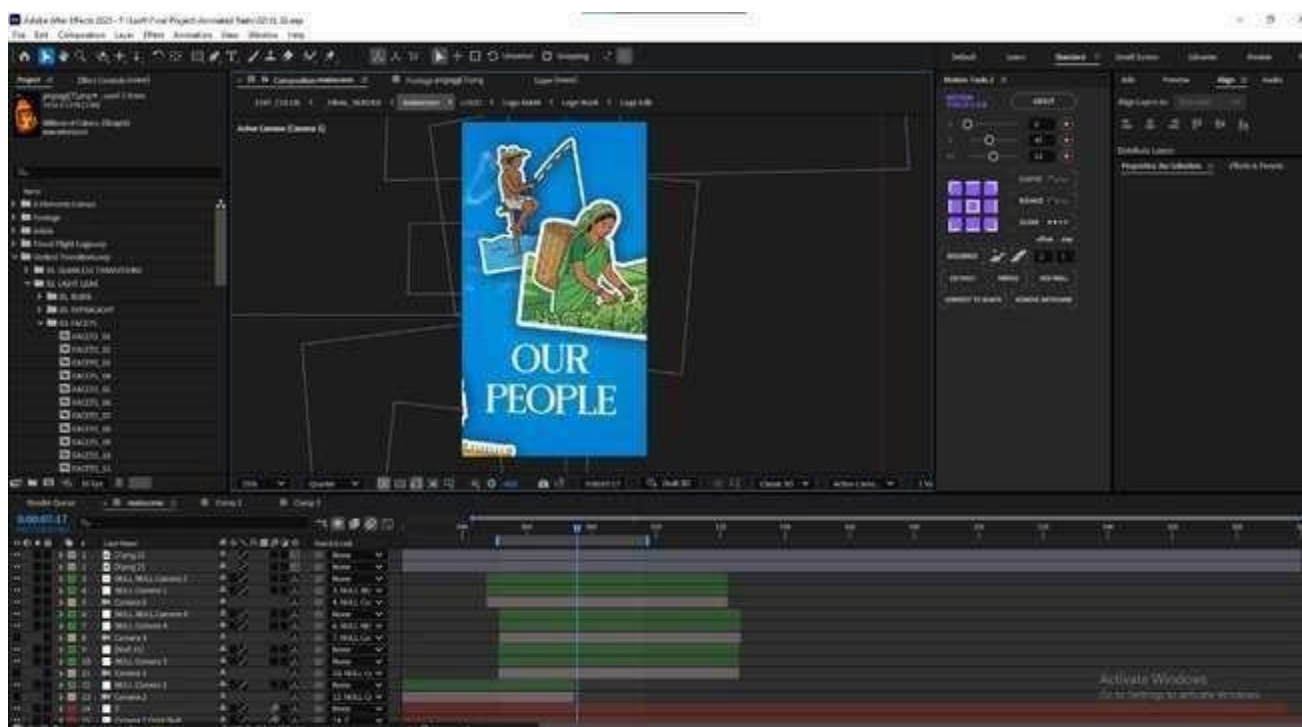




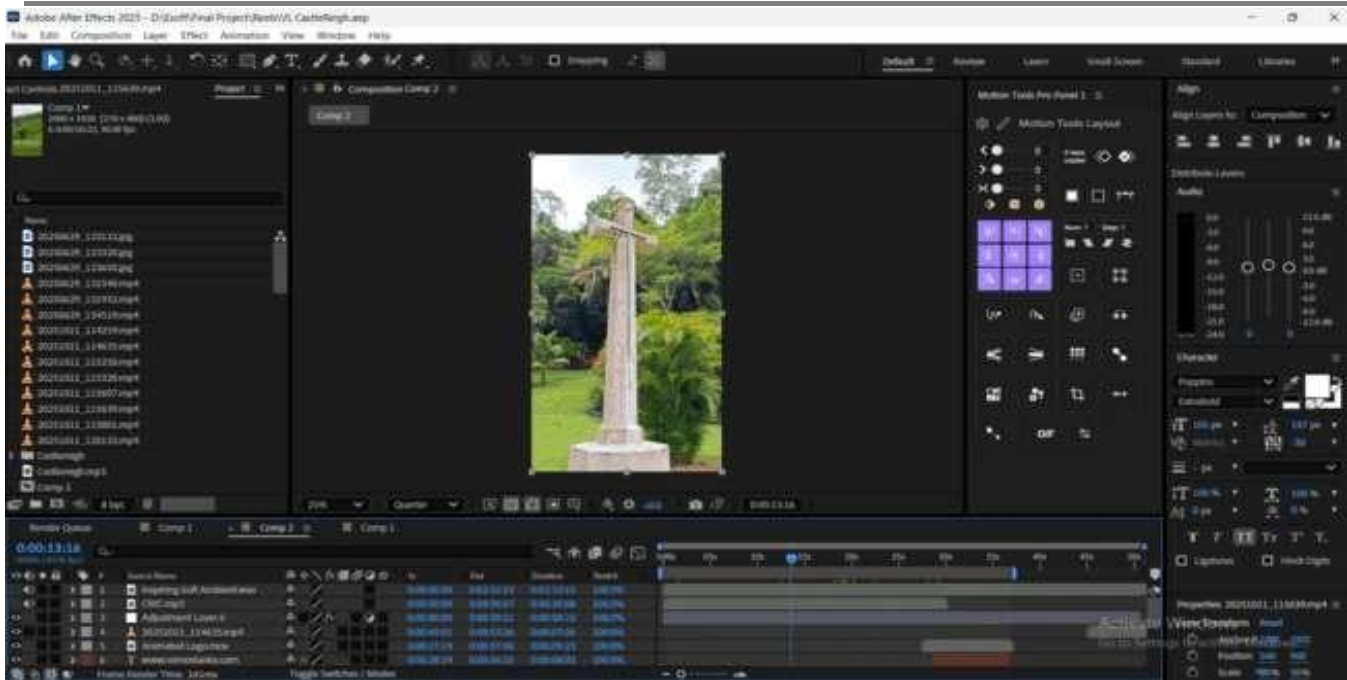
Phase 3: Post-Production and Evaluation This was the stage in which marketing assets were refined, edited for publication, and qualitatively evaluated. All the video and photographic materials were meticulously edited in post-production. This involved colour grading, touch-up and treatment of visual effects to deliver pixel perfect consistency across all forms of digital media in line with the brand guidelines.

An evaluation loop was added to ensure the outputs of the design were valid. The resulting digital photo albums, mockups for social media (Facebook and Instagram profiles as examples), and printed pieces were then compared to the original research goals. Quantitative affirmation that the right group understood both the brand identity and the core message of the platform prior to everything being finalised was derived from this audience survey (n=24) mentioned before.

Figure 5 Post Production







## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the result of this design-based applied research project is presented together with the assessment of the developed branding and marketing strategy. Rather than judging these outputs according to purely aesthetic criteria, they were validated empirically against the underlying research objectives. The survey quantitatively validated visual identity and strategic focus within a target audience (n=24), measuring consumer perceptions of brand equity, positioning, and messaging clarity over the market.

### Verifying Visual Identity & Destination Branding

The visual identity of Vamos Lanka was designed to connect Sri Lankan heritage with Spanish cultural expectations. The final design used the initial 'V', combined with a silhouette of a traditional Sri Lankan stilt fisherman, creating an iconic map location pin. A primary colour palette of "Ocean Blue" and "Sun Yellow" was selected.

Figure 6 Logo Design Process, Finalised Logo Variations, Social Media Mockups & Print Material



Figure 7 Brand Guidelines



In order to assess the efficacy of these design decisions, target audience respondents were polled on their emotional perception of brand colour palettes. 79.2% of respondents associated the palette with a "Warm / Tropical / Energetic" sensation, which perfectly ties back to the destination brand position we wanted to create within the Spanish market. Just 25% picked it as a "Professional / Corporate" feel, confirming that the design had not ended up feeling too much like some corporate horror.

Figure 8 Target Audience’s Emotional Perception on Brand Guidelines

The brand uses a primary palette of Ocean Blue and Sun Yellow. Which of the following emotions do these colors primarily evoke for you regarding this brand? (Select all that apply)

24 responses

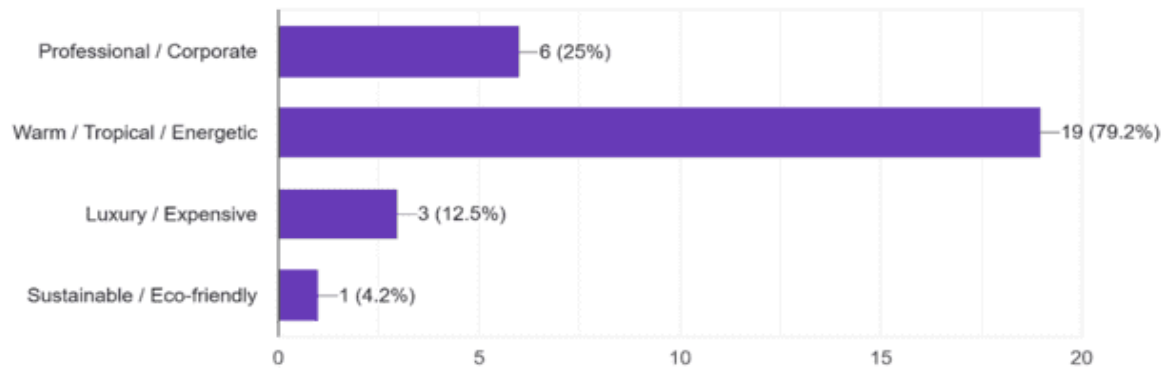


Figure 09 Tourists analysing the final outputs of the research



These results directly support the theoretical claims indicated by Bresciani and Eppler (2010) and Escobar-Farfán et al. (2024), highlighting how curated visual identity elements (logos and colour palettes) can actually shape consumer perception, effectively creating a distinct sense of place before the tourist ever arrives.

**Efficacy of Culturally Tailored Digital Storytelling**

The production stage resulted in a complete three-month social media content calendar, as well as geography-specific print materials aimed at service providers. To test the clarity and cultural relevance of this digital storytelling, we presented respondents with example Spanish language social media posts and mock-ups (Facebook and Instagram).

Figure 10 Social Media Posts



When asked whether the sample posts made it clear they connect tourists with local guides in Spanish (of course, Vamos Lanka’s service is much larger and connects them to general tourist guides), 70.8% said “yes, very clear.” A further 29.2% understood the link to guides but needed more context on the Spanish language element of the question, which supplied useful insights for subsequent versions. 0% of respondents had a complete misunderstanding of the service.

Figure 11 Target Audience perception on Social Media Content

After viewing the sample social media posts, is it clear to you that Vamos Lanka specifically connects tourists with Spanish-speaking local guides?

24 responses



This empirical evidence endorses the literature on culturally adapted digital storytelling. As argued by Hussain et al. (2024), Hogan (2019) and Gracia et al. (2023), localized marketing that uses native vernaculars and culturally relevant graphics, is a particular effective means of communicating complex services. The data shows the digital assets deftly translated an abstract platform proposition into a concrete consumer offering.

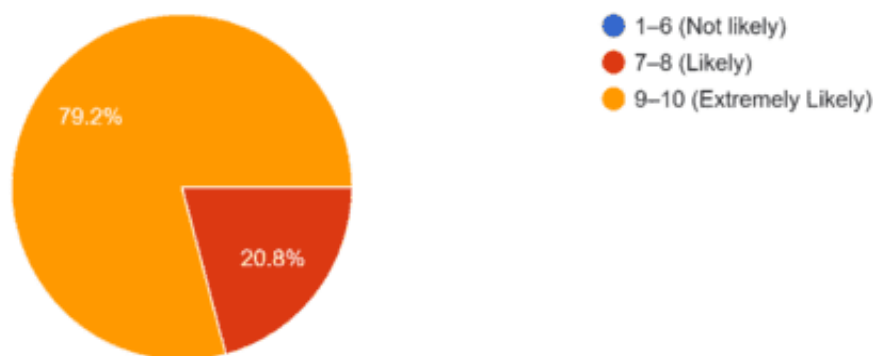
### Market reception and Trust in the brand

The main purpose of this applied project was to create immediate place trust and brand awareness within an over saturated tourism market. So to measure this, the survey used a standard Net Promoter Score (NPS) format, asking respondents how likely they would be to recommend Vamos Lanka to a Spanish-speaking friend planning a holiday, based only on the branding materials presented.

Figure 12 Target Audience's Trust in the brand based on the Creative Outputs

Based on the branding and marketing materials you have seen, how likely would you be to recommend Vamos Lanka to a Spanish-speaking friend planning a holiday?

24 responses



The findings showed extraordinarily high initial brand trust with 79.2% of the general population responding they would "Extremely Likely" (9-10 rating) recommend the platform and the remaining 20.8% saying they "Likely" (7-8 rating). No negative / neutral responses (ratings 1-6). The tremendous positive response reaffirms the thesis that branding of high quality and cultural relevance is a priority for new tourism enterprises. It also reaffirms existing literature demonstrating that user-oriented design and tailored digital media support immediate credibility and emotional engagement (Jahan et al., 2024).

Finally, these empirical outcomes validate that the design outputs of this research project solved the identified research problem. This created Vamos Lanka, not just as a booking mechanism but as an agency capable of strong destination branding to build a trustworthy, culturally savvy brand contemporary and ready for market.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, this design based applied research project proffering the strategy of a culturally resonant brand identity and digital marketing plan for Vamos Lanka platform was successfully achieved. Beyond speculative aesthetics, the project rigorously connected design outputs to empirical validation. Target audience survey feedback supported both, the visual identity as well as localised social media content communicated clearly around what the platform aimed to do and generated high initial brand trust amongst Spanish speaking tourists.

### Theoretical Contributions

This research makes a unique theoretical contribution to the literature of destination branding. Although previous literature mainly focuses on macro level national branding campaigns, this paper provides an

empirical framework for micro level intermediary platforms. It is a proof of concept for precisely how theoretical notions of visual trust and cultural identity (Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024) can be translated in to material design vectors. This study closes the gap between abstract tourism marketing theories and design based application of those theories by investigating visually tested outputs empirically.

### Practical Implications

These findings have practical implications for emerging digital tourism platforms. This is evident from the empirical evidence showing that not only are visually attractive level elements and local digital narrative texts are significant contributors to market penetration and trust of consumers (Tarigan et al., 2024). Moreover, the intentional inclusion of lesser-known locations in the digital photo album represents a model that can be replicated to address issues with overtourism through green tourism marketing (Cizreliogullari & Günay, 2024). It demonstrates how private booking platforms can meaningfully contribute to sustainable tourism efforts via content creation that is more intentional, rather than relying exclusively on branding initiatives at the national level.

### Limitations

This study is not without limitations, although positive empirical results have been reported. Brand validation was based on a purposive but rather small sample size (n=24). Although adequate for preliminary design evaluation, this limits the general statistical applicability of the results. Moreover, the research scope was highly constrained to the Spanish speaking demographic. These cross cultural design principles may produce opposite results when applied to other parts of the world. The survey gauged initial brand recognition and likelihood of use, not actual deep user retention or real-time booking conversion rates.

### Directions for Future Research

These limitations should be addressed in future research, especially when deploying the Vamos Lanka platform in an authentic market setting to measure longitudinal engagement metrics, conversion rates and actual economic impact on local tour guides. Finally, this design based methodology can be replicated by scholars to test branding adaptations for other emerging tourist demographics in Sri Lanka. A larger sample base, along with comparative research on more cultural blocks, would reinforce the academic foundation for localised digital tourism platforms.

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