



The Role of Digital Media in Positioning Buddha's Birthplace as a Global Heritage Site

Milan Kumar Poudyal

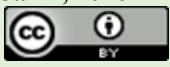
Affiliation: Polygon College, Kathmandu, Nepal

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Abstract: Lumbini is the birthplace of Gautama Buddha, protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, embraces deep religious, cultural, and archaeological implications for global Buddhist communities and beyond. Despite increasing international tourist arrivals and growing digital visibility,

Lumbini has not fully leveraged its global distinction to achieve sustainable socio-economic benefits and a strong digital heritage character. This study examines the role of digital media in promoting Lumbini as a Buddhist pilgrimage destination and its influence on sustainable Buddhist tourism development. Using a qualitative, descriptive research design based on secondary data, the study is grounded in Digital Heritage Theory, Soft Power Theory, Participatory Culture Theory, and Heritage Branding Theory. The findings indicate that digital platforms like social media campaigns, virtual reality experiences, mobile applications, and user-generated content have played a critical role in enhancing global awareness, intercultural dialogue, and symbolic soft power related to Buddhism. However, uneven digital strategies, weak institutional coordination, infrastructural limitations, and ethical anxieties in representative sacred heritage limit their effectiveness. The study concludes that an integrated, participatory, and ethically grounded digital heritage strategy is crucial for enhancing Lumbini's global presence, fostering sustainable Buddhist tourism, and promoting Nepal's cultural heritage in the digital era.

Keywords: Branding, Buddhist, Cultural Soft Power, Digital Heritage, Lumbini, Tourism.

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Introduction

Lumbini is known as the birthplace of Buddha and is promoted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is known as a popular Buddhist pilgrimage destination among the Buddhist communities, as well as other visitors, as a holy place for Buddhist prayers worldwide. According to the Nepal Tourism Board, there is more than 400,000 Buddhists and non-Buddhists visit Lumbini per year. Lumbini also holds massive archaeological and religious significance. The Sacred Garden marks the site where Prince Siddhartha Gautam, who later on became the Buddha and born in 623 BC. This birth site is honored by a pillar established by the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka of India, during his pilgrimage areas visiting for visiting purposes in Lumbini in 249 BC (Nepal Tourism Board, 2025). Lumbini's request as a spiritual destination continues to develop in 2025. It is drawing 140,969 foreign visitors in 2025, which is an increase of 26 percent in the year 2024. Despite this flow, tourism industrialists note that Lumbini has taken only limited economic benefit from the invasion (Paudel, 2026). Lumbini has welcomed international tourists and pilgrims from 106 countries in 2025, which has reflected one of the broadest geographic pictures among foreign visitors. Another key pillar of Lumbini's global branding is digital conversion. Virtual reality has also experienced that Lumbini can bring serenity to people worldwide, permitting them to explore its spiritual prosperity without traveling. An interactive mobile app features virtual tours, historical insights, and meditation guides that connect worldwide audiences to Lumbini (Sapkota, 2024).

Buddhist cultural preservation offers some advantages as a predictable approach. Zen and Nurhaqeem (2023) observed that immersive technology enhances openness for overcoming geographical, financial, and physical barriers that prevent people from accessing knowledge of cultural heritage sites and artifacts. Additionally, Oladokun et al. (2024) highlights that the metaverse can serve as a pathway to connect with the past, further advancing cultural protection through immersive technology. Nepal's tourism sector is crucial to the national economy, employment, and cultural identity, contributing six percent of the country's GDP. In this context, the Government of Nepal introduced the Tourism Policy 2025, as a unique global destination to have peace and knowledge. The policy includes six different directives, one overarching strategy and ninety-four action plans, a central feature is the prioritization of modern technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and digital promotion. Lumbini is recognized for Buddhist scriptures as one of the four most pilgrimage sites, alongside Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, where Gautama Buddha himself acknowledged its significance. As a religious and historical site, Lumbini serves not only as an archaeological destination but also as a hub of meditation, knowledge,



and peace. With the establishment of Lumbini Buddhist University, the area has further changed into a center for the study of Buddhist history, culture, literature, and philosophy. Lumbini has a connection with Tilaurakot, Devdaha, and Ramgram; it has aimed to promote itself as a part of the broader Buddhist circuit. It is necessary to increase international tourists in these areas as well as to extend their stay in Lumbini, which can contribute to the sustainable development of Buddhist tourism in Nepal (Ghimire, 2024).

The 'Lumbini Development Trust' has initiated and organized an award distribution program, conveying the slogan of "Let's Visit Lumbini TikTok Challenge". The initiative has aimed to promote Lumbini as the birthplace of Buddha, the destination of global cultural and religious tourism for the people of the worlds. By leveraging TikTok, the programs sought to engage youth audiences, expand cultural outreach, and improve Lumbini's importance nationally and internationally. This step of the trusty has been reflected for promoting Buddhism and the role of digital media as a tool of soft power. It has been enabling cultural heritage promotion, tourism development, and global engagement, the entire reason (Lumbini Development Trust, 2023). It is demonstrated that Buddhism is a soft power campaign for the slogan "Let's Visit Lumbini TikTok Challenge" (Pandit & Sharma, 2025). It has also examined the technological and ethical considerations characteristic of using digital platforms for cultural preservation and promotion, particularly in a developing nation like Nepal (Ghimire, 2023).

Problems

Lumbini has futile to convert its increasing international prominence into equitable and long-lasting socio-economic benefits for the local population, despite its unmatched religious, historical and symbolic significance as the birthplace of Gautam Buddha. In spite of a noteworthy increase in tourists, especially foreign visitors, Lumbini's tourism-related income, length of stay and value-added activities have not increased. The development as an effective destination, numbers are structurally at odds, as this illustrates. Lumbini's ability to compete as a global center for spiritual tourism has been limited by the poor integration of digital innovation, heritage conservation, and local economic engagement.

Though digital technologies like virtual reality, mobile application and social media campaigns (like the "Let's Visit Lumbini TikTok Challenge") have become new instruments for approaching a global audience, little is known about the actual support for cultural preservation, international image-building, and sustainable Buddhist tourism destination. The extent to which such digital initiatives have a significant impact on travelers' perceptions, travel engagement beyond virtual consumption, is not well supported by



empirical data. So, the digital tourism strategies have been made for developing nations like Nepal with digital infrastructure, the ethical portrayal of sacred heritage, and unequal access to technology.

Also, in spite of the importance of digital marketing and artificial intelligence (AI) in national tourism policies, heritage sites like Lumbini lack well-thought-out implementation frameworks. A significant knowledge gap has been created with the lack of systematic research relating to Buddhist cultural diplomacy, digital soft power, and sustainable tourism outcomes. In order to reinforce Nepal's cultural soft power internationally, Lumbini must mitigate this gap and strike a balance between inclusive development, technological modernization, and spiritual legitimacy as well.

Research Questions

- How does digital media affect the global awareness of Lumbini as a Buddhist pilgrimage destination?
- What role does digital media play in encouraging sustainable Buddhist tourism in Lumbini?

Research Objectives

- To examine how digital media affects the global awareness of Lumbini as a Buddhist pilgrimage destination
- To analyze the role does digital media plays in encouraging sustainable Buddhist tourism in Lumbini

Limitations of the Study

The study has focused basically on Lumbini and may not fully represent other Buddhist heritage sites in Nepal. Similarly, this study has tried to limit the analysis of digital initiatives as per the available documents, campaigns, and excluding informal digital practices.

Methods and Materials

This study is based on qualitative methods, whereas secondary data sources have been used to generate proper findings and conclusions. It is based on a positivist research philosophy to have a thematic analysis of the secondary data and the information. It has ensured the methodological approaches as a qualitative research design and a descriptive research design to connect the qualitative inquiry with the prominent theoretical approaches of different scholars.

Digital Media and Cultural Heritage Communication

Digital media like social media, websites, mobile applications, and digital storytelling tools are essential mechanisms for enhancing cultural heritage communication for Lumbini. These technologies encompass Buddhist heritage descriptions outside the geographical boundaries, which have enabled global



audiences to participate actively in acquiring Buddhist cultural traditions. In particular, social media platforms have facilitated the information dissemination about heritage-related content. It can foster intercultural dialogue in the world society. In the meantime, technologies like virtual reality (VR) and three-dimensional (3D) modeling enrich the visitors to collect live experiences to provide interactive and accessible modes of engagement, also (IFLA, n.d.).

Many scholars have emphasized that digital heritage extends beyond the mere digitization of archival resources. It involves creating participatory experiences that connect heritage to contemporary social and cultural contexts. Similarly, digital tools that enable interactive storytelling have enhanced the interpretation of Buddhist communication, but it also depends on the understanding of cultural values and identity among the diverse audiences. These types of approaches democratize access to heritage, permitting individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate expressively with artistic content. Moreover, digital heritage initiatives can foster community involvement that ensures heritage communication has inclusive, dynamic, and responsive ways to fulfill societal needs. So, digital media helps as both a technological and cultural bridge, strengthening heritage preservation to promote global connectivity.

Theoretical Approaches

This study has landed on multidimensional theoretical approaches that include Digital Heritage Theory, Soft Power Theory, Participatory Culture Theory, and Heritage Branding Theory. All these theoretical approaches provide a strong lens for examining digital media strategically for the promotion of Lumbini as a world heritage site, as the birthplace of the Buddha.

Heritage Branding and Place Branding Theory

As per the perspectives of Anholt (2007), the Heritage Branding Theory has informed a broader scholarship on place branding. It provides a critical dimension to construct positive meaning to look at Buddhism as a basic foundation for all religions and the communities (Kavaratzis, 2010). Similarly, Lumbini is a big asset for Buddhist communities as a Heritage, so it can construct meaningful messages that can be communicated through narratives, media representations, and visitor understandings. It must have branded its message globally as a soft strategy that can shape novel perceptions, and it can enhance competitiveness in the cultural and tourism sectors as well. It has to contribute to the formation of national identity. In Lumbini's case, many challenges can be fragmented into digital marketing. So, the Heritage Branding Theory emphasizes the importance of unified digital storytelling and an integrated branding approach to strengthen Lumbini's international visibility.



Participatory Culture Theory

According to Jenkins (2006), participatory culture theory has enhanced the basic approach by highlighting a shift from passive consumption to active participation in media and heritage communication. So that digital platforms can empower international visitors, Buddhist communities, local stakeholders, and youth to create heritage descriptions to foster a sense of ownership. Some important campaigns like user-generated content campaigns, TikTok challenge programs, and interactive storytelling democratize heritage communication to expand the reach and quality of Lumbini's cultural messages.

Perspectives of the Nepal Government

State actors like editors from print media, television, online, government officials, youth leaders within political parties, Civil Services Organizations, and tourism entrepreneurs have participated in proper initiatives to protect heritage sites, and they disseminate positive messages. The perspectives of these groups can be essential to have a clear understanding of the policy frameworks, governance structures, and organizational challenges that help to shape heritage communication in Nepal. Similarly, the participants have highlighted systemic opportunities and limitations, connecting with institutional dynamics to construct a broader context of Lumbini's digital location. Tourism entrepreneurs have provided appreciated insights into the connection of heritage branding, economic development, and the sustainability of tourism industries. So, the institutional dimension has illuminated the policy, organizational, and economic landscape to communicate the Buddhist message through heritage communication.

Results and analysis

Audience Perspectives

This perspective is quite different to understand social and religious realities or capture the everyday realities of digital heritage communication. So, this study has comprised general users to consume, interact with, and share heritage messages. Their participation has revealed that digital audiences can receive, interpret, and co-create Lumbini's heritage uniqueness. The voices of digital citizens, such as youth and other ordinary audiences, have underscored the role of participatory culture and user-generated content for democratizing heritage communication. This dimension looks so critical to assess the reception, engagement, and inclusivity of digital strategies, enlightening the heritage narratives to resonate with diverse audiences.

Current Challenges in Global Positioning



In spite of Lumbini's recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and its philosophical, religious, and historical significance, the land of Lord Buddha has still struggled to build a strong, global identity in this 21st-century digital era. Even though the prime limitation is imperfect for the digital visibility as a major international heritage and tourism platform. It has been compared with globally documented pilgrimage destinations. Lumbini, the place of Buddha, remains diminished in imposing digital spaces, which has made global heritage awareness and influence travel decisions. This inadequate digital presence has limited Lumbini's incorporation into broader global heritage narratives and cuts its openness for its international audiences. Same as another

critical challenge is the fragmented digital marketing and communication efforts of the Nepalese government. In the absence of a combined digital marketing strategy, this has led to unpredictable narratives, unequal promotional activities, and limited coordination among the government agencies, heritage institutions, and tourism stakeholders. So, the lack of unity and Lumbini's inability to plan a compelling, integrated identity reduce the effectiveness of digital outreach and diminish its competitiveness in the heritage tourism sector.

With the active global community engagement campaigns undermining Lumbini's ability to stand in participatory heritage communication. Lack of positive initiatives that can target international Buddhist communities, scholars, and digital natives hinders collaborative storytelling and limits the potential for transnational solidarity and intercultural dialogue. For Lumbini's global recognition, international participation, and digital connectivity as a cultural heritage center, these types of challenges might have arisen. So, we have to mitigate it properly to address these gaps as a vital phenomenon for boosting heritage branding, preservation, tourism, and Nepal's global ties in the digital age.

Conclusion

This study concludes that digital media has emerged as a powerful instrument in positioning Lumbini as a global Buddhist pilgrimage and heritage destination. While initiatives such as virtual tours, mobile applications, and social media campaigns, particularly the "Let's Visit Lumbini TikTok Challenge," have expanded international visibility and youth engagement, their contribution to sustainable tourism development remains uneven. The inability to convert increased digital exposure and tourist inflow into long-term economic, cultural, and community benefits highlights structural weaknesses in heritage governance and digital implementation. The findings reveal that fragmented digital branding, limited



coordination among government agencies and heritage institutions, and inadequate digital infrastructure constrain Lumbini's global competitiveness. Moreover, the absence of inclusive participatory mechanisms reduces opportunities for international Buddhist communities, scholars, and digital audiences to co-create heritage narratives. Ethical challenges related to the commodification of sacred spaces further complicate digital heritage promotion in a developing-country context.

Drawing on heritage branding, participatory culture, and soft power perspectives, the study emphasizes the need for an integrated digital heritage communication framework that balances spiritual authenticity with technological innovation. Such a framework should align national tourism policies, local stakeholder participation, and global digital outreach. Strengthening participatory digital storytelling and institutional collaboration can enhance Lumbini's symbolic value as a center of peace, knowledge, and Buddhist philosophy. Ultimately, strategic and ethical use of digital media can contribute significantly to sustainable Buddhist tourism, cultural preservation, and Nepal's global cultural diplomacy in the 21st-century digital landscape.

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