Strategic Branding and Marketing of Religious Destinations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh

Sumit Sharma[1]　Kavya Tandon[2]

Research Scholar[1,2]

Department of Commerce, C.M.P. Degree College

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj

Email- 1. sumitsharmatkp@gmail.com

2. kavyatandon7@gmail.com

Abstract

The religious destinations of Eastern Uttar Pradesh offer immense potential for tourism, rooted in the region's rich spiritual, cultural, and historical heritage. This research paper examines the branding and promotional strategies for key religious sites including Varanasi, Prayagraj, Ayodhya, Chitrakoot, Kushinagar, Gorakhpur, and Mirzapur, utilizing secondary data sources such as government reports, tourism statistics, digital platforms, and academic literature.

The study highlights that while these destinations are deeply embedded in India's religious and cultural heritage, their current branding efforts are often fragmented, failing to effectively leverage the diverse audience base and modern marketing tools. The paper analyzes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of current marketing strategies and identifies a lack of cohesive, integrated branding efforts that target both domestic and international pilgrims.

The findings suggest a need for a unified, well-coordinated branding framework that combines traditional spiritual significance with contemporary digital marketing practices. This includes enhancing digital presence, storytelling through various media, and fostering public-private partnerships to ensure sustainable tourism growth. The research offers strategic recommendations for repositioning the region as a prominent global religious tourism hub, emphasizing the role of cultural authenticity, social media engagement, and infrastructure development. The paper concludes by underscoring the potential of these religious destinations to contribute significantly to the regional economy and spiritual tourism growth, with a holistic marketing approach.

Keywords: *Religious Tourism, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Cultural Tourism, Tourism Branding, Religious Destination Marketing.*

INTRODUCTION

Eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP) is a key region for religious tourism in India, with several cities closely linked to the country's spiritual, cultural and historical heritage. These cities, which include Varanasi, Prayagraj, Ayodhya, Chitrakoot, Kushinagar, Mirzapur and Gorakhpur, are centres of religious life for millions, drawing pilgrims and devotees from across India and the world. Yet, despite their enormous potential, these cities often lack a holistic and comprehensive branding strategy that integrates their spiritual, cultural and historical significance into a unique and compelling narrative.

Current Scenario of Branding and Marketing of Religious Destinations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh

The branding and marketing of religious destinations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh are becoming more modernized, with strong government support, private sector investments, and digital engagement. However, managing growth sustainably while maintaining cultural respect remains crucial for ensuring the region's religious heritage is preserved and enhanced for future generations.

1. Key Religious Destinations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh

1.1 Varanasi: (The Eternal City)

Varanasi the oldest city in the world and a renowned spiritual hub. It serves as a major pilgrimage site for Hindus seeking moksha. It is known for Kashi Vishwanath temple, iconic ghats (Dashashwamedh, Manikarnika and others) and Ganga Aarti. Varanasi's rich cultural and intellectual heritage, including music, philosophy, and learning, also contributes to traditional arts and education. It has a tourist footfall of over 9 crores annually.

1.2 Prayagraj: (The confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and mythical Sarasvati rivers)

Prayagraj, formerly Allahabad, is a sacred Indian city known for hosting the Kumbh Mela, the world's largest religious gathering, Triveni Sangam and for its historical and mythological significance. It is also important to Sikhs, known for Guru Nanak Dev's visit, and Muslims, with its historical Islamic monuments like Allahabad Fort. Its Kumbh Mela has a potential to attract over 30 crore tourists.

1.3 Ayodhya: (Birthplace of Lord Rama)

Ayodhya, located on the River Saryu, is a significant Hindu city known as the birthplace of Lord Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The Ram Janmabhoomi, the site of Rama's birth, has been a subject of intense religious

and political history. The construction of Ram Temple has elevated the city's importance, making it a key pilgrimage destination for millions of devotees seeking spiritual liberation. It attracts around 12–15 crore tourists per year.

1.4 Kushinagar: (The final resting Place of Gautam Buddha)

Kushinagar, a significant Buddhist pilgrimage site in Uttar Pradesh, is home to the Mahaparinirvana Temple, a reclining Buddha statue, and other notable sites like the Japanese Buddhist Temple and Reclining Buddha Statue. The city attracts pilgrims from Buddhist-majority countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Japan, making it an international spiritual destination. The city is also home to several Buddhist monuments. It has a pilgrim footfall of around 10–12 lakh visitors annually.

1.5 Mirzapur: (The Vindhyachal Dham)

Mirzapur, situated along the Ganges, is a revered pilgrimage site known for its Vindhyachal Temple, dedicated to Goddess Vindhyavasini. It is part of the 51 Shakti Peethas and is often linked to Varanasi, making it a key part of the sacred Ganges circuit. The city also hosts rituals like sacred bathing and ancestor ceremonies. It has a pilgrim footfall of around 1.5 to 2 crores annually.

1.6 Chitrakoot:(Ramgiri and Brahmpuri)

Chitrakoot, located on the border of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, is a significant Hindu site connected to Lord Rama's life during his 14-year exile. It is known as a "place of divine peace" and offers a serene landscape surrounded by forests and hills. The Ramghat, a key site where Lord Rama bathed, and the Sphatik Shila, a sacred rock where Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana stood, are also significant sites. Pilgrims visit Chitrakoot to pay homage, meditate, and reflect in its tranquil surroundings. It is also known as Brahmpuri, as it is believed to be the birthplace of Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh. It receives 50-60 lakh visitors annually.

1.7 Gorakhpur:(City of Glory and Medieval Mysticism)

Gorakhpur is a city of spiritual significance, especially for followers of the Nath tradition. The Gorakhnath Temple, dedicated to Guru Gorakhnath, is the focal point. The city attracts spiritual seekers from India for meditation, yoga, and devotion to Lord Shiva. Gorakhpur is also known for its vibrant festivals like Gorakhpur Mela and Maha Shivaratri. It has a potential to attract Over 1.2 to 1.5 crore visitors annually.

2. Tourism Footfall (Pre and Post Development)

Destination	Annual Tourists (2023 est.)	Expected Growth (2025 onwards)
Varanasi	7 crore+	10 crores (post-corridor revamp)
Prayagraj	6.8 crore (Kumbh year)	8-9 crore in Kumbh 2025

Destination	Annual Tourists (2023 est.)	Expected Growth (2025 onwards)
Ayodhya	2.5 crore (2023)	5 crore+ (post Ram Mandir)
Chitrakoot	50-60 lakh	1 crore+ (projected by 2026)

2. Government and Development Initiatives

The "UP Tourism" initiative promotes religious sites in the region, while ongoing infrastructure improvements like the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, Ram Mandir, Vindhya Corridor, Maha Kumbh 2025 and others are being made to boost tourism. The Local authorities of these places focus on improving facilities, cleanliness, and safety for tourists. UP has strategically developed themed circuits under the Swadesh Darshan and state tourism plans. It religious circuits includes Ramayan Circuit (Ayodhya, Chitrakoot, Shringverpur, Bithoor), Buddhist Circuit (Sarnath, Kushinagar, Kapilvastu, Sankisa), Spiritual Circuit (Varanasi, Prayagraj, Vindhyachal, Mathura-Vrindavan), Shaktipeeth Circuit (Vindhyachal, Devipatan, Lalitpur) and Krishna Circuit (Mathura, Vrindavan, Govardhan, Barsana, Gokul). These circuits are integrated with pilgrimage, heritage, and eco-tourism promotion.

3. Private Sector Participation

Private sector involvement in hospitality includes investments in hotels, resorts, and spiritual tour services for religious tourists. Travel agencies offer organized tours to multiple destinations, and wellness tourism promotes yoga and meditation retreats alongside traditional religious tourism.

4. Digital Marketing and Branding

Digital marketing and branding involve social media campaigns, live streaming of major events, and online platforms like websites and mobile apps. Influencers and religious figures promote destinations like Varanasi and Ayodhya globally, engaging virtual visitors through virtual tours and real-time information.

5. Current Challenges in Branding Religious Sites in Eastern UP

The fragmented marketing strategy fails to showcase the region's spiritual and cultural richness, and the inconsistent messaging across destinations lacks a cohesive narrative. Limited digital tools and poor stakeholder coordination hinder global audience engagement. The focus on pilgrimage tourism limits appeal to a broader audience, and inadequate infrastructure hinders tourism and branding efforts. Cultural sensitivity issues and insufficient private sector collaboration hinder the tourism experience. Traditional marketing methods fail to engage younger, tech-savvy audiences, and underrepresent local stories, missing opportunities for authentic tourism experiences.

6. Opportunities with Eastern UP

Eastern UP can be promoted as a destination for spiritual healing, yoga, and holistic wellness retreats. It has the potential to attract international pilgrims, particularly from countries with strong Hinduism, Buddhism, and spirituality ties. Promoting local culture through crafts, cuisine, and festivals can enhance the tourist experience and deepen the connection to the region.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. **Branding and Cultural Integration**

According to Sharma (2017), religious destinations in India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, often suffer from narrow branding that centers predominantly on pilgrimage. By integrating cultural, historical, and local experiences into the branding strategy, regions like Varanasi can appeal to a broader tourist base, attracting both pilgrims and cultural tourists. This integrated approach can enhance the appeal of these destinations, making them attractive not only for religious travelers but also for those interested in heritage, history, and local customs.

2. **Impact of Digital Marketing**

Digital marketing has been underutilized in promoting religious destinations in India. Dube and Rani (2018) argue that incorporating digital tools, such as social media and online content, can significantly enhance the global appeal of religious destinations. These tools provide a platform for sharing not only religious significance but also the cultural richness and local experiences associated with these places.

3. **Holistic Destination Marketing**

According to Singh (2019), religious destinations in Uttar Pradesh, such as Varanasi and Ayodhya, should adopt a more holistic marketing approach. This includes focusing on unique local festivals, crafts, and intellectual traditions. Singh stresses that such strategies not only promote tourism but also support local economies by creating sustainable tourism models that benefit the community as a whole.

4. **Stakeholder Collaboration**

Effective collaboration between public authorities, local stakeholders, and the private sector is essential for the successful branding of religious destinations. Kumar and Jain (2020) highlight that fragmented efforts often lead to inconsistent messaging and missed opportunities for global engagement. By fostering collaboration, these destinations can create a cohesive and attractive brand image that resonates with tourists from diverse backgrounds.

5. **Challenges in Infrastructure Development**

Infrastructure plays a pivotal role in attracting religious tourists. Mishra and Gupta (2021) discuss how poor infrastructure—such as inadequate transportation, accommodations, and amenities—hinders the branding and growth of religious tourism in Uttar Pradesh. They recommend focusing on improving connectivity and facilities to meet the expectations of both domestic and international visitors.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives behind this research study are as follows:

1.   Evaluate the effectiveness of current branding strategies for religious destinations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh.

2.   Assess the role and impact of digital marketing in promoting these destinations.

3.   Explore opportunities for creating an integrated, unified branding framework for the region's religious destinations.

4.   Provide strategic recommendations for repositioning the region as a global religious tourism hub.

5.   Investigate sustainable tourism practices in the region's branding efforts.

RESEARCH METHEDOLOGY

1. Research Design

- **Descriptive Research**: This study aims to describe the current state of branding and marketing strategies for religious destinations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, focusing on analyzing the available secondary data such as reports, tourism statistics, and existing literature.

2. Conceptual Framework

- Developed a conceptual framework for the study i.e. based on destination branding theory, integrated marketing communications, and cultural tourism management. It guides the analysis of branding practices and their alignment with global best practices.

3. Data Collection

- **Secondary Data Sources**:

  o   **Government Reports**: reports of tourism departments, ministry of culture, and state government publications to understand existing marketing strategies and tourism trends.

  o   **Tourism Statistics**: Analyze data from tourism boards, travel agencies, and other tourism-related organizations to understand the flow of tourists, demographic patterns, and preferences.

  o   **Academic Literature**: Review research articles, books, and journals related to religious tourism, destination branding, and marketing strategies in India and globally to understand theoretical frameworks and practical insights.

  o   **Digital Platforms**: Evaluate the presence of the religious destinations on digital platforms like social media, tourism websites, and online travel agency listings to assess their digital branding efforts.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

- **SWOT Analysis**: Perform a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis on the existing branding and marketing strategies of the religious destinations to identify key areas for improvement.
- **Content Analysis**: Analyze the content of existing promotional materials (brochures, websites, social media campaigns) for consistency, messaging, and alignment with target audiences.
- **Comparative Analysis**: Compare the branding strategies of other global religious tourism destinations (e.g., Jerusalem, Mecca) with those of Eastern Uttar Pradesh to identify gaps and best practices.
- **Trend Analysis**: Analyze trends from tourism statistics, such as increasing international visitors, demographic preferences, or shifts in digital consumption patterns, to recommend future marketing strategies.

Measures To Identify Gaps and Inefficiencies in The Current Branding and Promotional Approaches for Religious Sites in Eastern Uttar Pradesh

To identify gaps and inefficiencies in the current branding and promotional approaches for religious sites in Eastern UP, a comprehensive audience research is recommended. Existing marketing channels should be audited to ensure alignment with global audience preferences. Brand messaging and positioning should be consistent across sites, and international inclusivity should be evaluated. Coordination gaps between stakeholders should be identified, and digital marketing tools and technology should be evaluated. Infrastructure and accessibility should be reviewed, and cultural depth and authenticity should be promoted to enhance authentic tourism experiences. Marketing targeting should be customized for specific regions, and competition against successful global religious destinations should be benchmarked. Visitor feedback and reviews should be collected to refine marketing strategies. Global tourism platforms should be integrated and partnerships with international travel agencies should be explored. Crisis management and sustainability practices should be reviewed, and test campaigns and A/B tests should be run to optimize marketing effectiveness.

EFFECTIVE AND MODERN BRANDING AND MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING THE RELIGIOUS DESTINATIONS OF EASTERN UTTAR PRADESH

Here are effective and modern branding and marketing strategies for promoting the religious destinations of Eastern Uttar Pradesh:

1. Integrated Digital Marketing Social Media Campaigns: Use platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to showcase the spiritual and cultural heritage of destinations like Varanasi, Prayagraj, and Ayodhya through visuals, reels, and live-streamed events (e.g., Ganga Aarti, Kumbh Mela). Dedicated Destination Websites: Create user-friendly websites for each destination with virtual tours, event calendars, and visitor guides. Influencer Collaborations: Partner with travel bloggers, spiritual influencers, and photographers to promote these sites globally.

2. Thematic Branding Develop unique taglines for each destination to create a distinct identity (e.g., "Varanasi – The Eternal City"). Highlight their cultural stories and historical significance to appeal to both spiritual seekers and cultural enthusiasts.

3. Storytelling and Content Marketing Create engaging content such as blogs, podcasts, and videos narrating the myths, history, and traditions of these religious sites. Leverage storytelling to connect emotionally with visitors, emphasizing spiritual experiences and cultural richness.

4. Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) Use AR/VR to offer virtual pilgrimages, allowing tourists to experience the Ganga Aarti or temple tours from anywhere in the world. Install interactive kiosks with AR features at key locations for an immersive experience.

5. Event Marketing Organize grand festivals and cultural events, such as Navratri in Mirzapur or Ram Navami in Ayodhya, to attract more tourists. Promote events globally through online campaigns and collaborations with tour operators.

6. Public-Private Partnerships Collaborate with private tour operators, hospitality brands, and airlines to create pilgrimage packages. Invest in local infrastructure improvements like transport, accommodation, and amenities to enhance visitor experience.

7. Sustainable Tourism Practices Promote eco-friendly tourism by advocating for clean ghats, waste management, and responsible pilgrimage practices. Emphasize the preservation of the cultural and natural heritage of these destinations.

8. Customized Experiences Develop packages catering to different demographics: Spiritual Seekers: Meditation retreats, temple tours. Cultural Enthusiasts: Heritage walks, folk performances. International Tourists: Multilingual guides and curated itineraries.

9. Mobile Apps Launch mobile apps with features like pilgrimage guides, route planners, ticket booking, and local event notifications. Include interactive features like mythological stories, temple history, and audio guides.

10. Collaborations with Religious Institutions Partner with temples, monasteries, and local religious groups to promote festivals, rituals, and traditions. Create a network of spiritual ambassadors who can represent the destinations globally.

11. Brand Ambassadors Appoint influential figures or spiritual leaders as ambassadors to promote the destinations.

12. Targeted International Marketing Focus on countries with strong cultural or spiritual ties to India (e.g., Buddhist countries for Kushinagar). Use multilingual campaigns and international expos to draw global attention.

13. Data-Driven Marketing Leverage analytics to understand tourist preferences, behavior, and demographics. Tailor campaigns based on insights to optimize visitor engagement.

14. Infrastructure Development Ensure proper roads, clean ghats, hygienic accommodations, and transport facilities. Highlight these improvements in marketing to assure tourists of a comfortable visit.

15. PRASHAD Scheme (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive) by ministry of tourism. It is for development of pilgrimage sites like Ayodhya, Varanasi, Vindhyachal, Prayagraj.

16. Swadesh Darshan 2.0 it focuses on thematic circuits-based tourism development with sustainability.

17. **Dekho Apna Desh** encourages domestic tourism through promotions and packages.

18. **Smart City Mission** leads to tourism-oriented upgrades in Varanasi, Prayagraj with better transport, signage, sanitation.

By combining tradition with modern marketing approaches, Eastern Uttar Pradesh can position itself as a leading hub of religious tourism, appealing to both domestic and international audiences.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. The religious destinations in Eastern Uttar Pradesh have disjointed branding efforts, failing to present a unified image to global and domestic audiences.

2. Current marketing strategies do not effectively leverage modern   digital tools like social media, influencer collaborations, and digital storytelling.

3. The branding approaches do not adequately target international tourists, missing out on the global religious tourism market.

4. There is insufficient coordination among local governments, tourism bodies, and private sector players, resulting in fragmented marketing efforts.

5. The research highlights the necessity for a cohesive branding strategy that blends spiritual significance with contemporary marketing practices.

6. The study identifies potential for sustainable tourism growth through public-private partnerships and infrastructure development, enhancing visitor experience.

7. Emphasizing cultural authenticity and utilizing social media engagement are key to attracting a diverse range of tourists.

8. Religious tourism in the region has significant potential to contribute to the local economy and bolster spiritual tourism growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

The recommendations for stakeholders in Eastern Uttar Pradesh to foster sustainable tourism growth include a unified marketing strategy, a cohesive branding across religious sites, upgrading transportation hubs, enhancing accessibility, diversifying accommodation options, promoting immersive cultural experiences, implementing virtual experiences and apps, adopting sustainable tourism practices, fostering local community involvement, investing in cultural preservation, hosting international spiritual events, partnering with global travel agencies, monitoring visitor feedback, and tracking sustainability and community impact. These recommendations aim to improve marketing, infrastructure, and visitor experience, ensuring a cohesive and multi-channel approach to spiritual and cultural experiences. Additionally, the recommendations emphasize the importance of upgrading transportation hubs, providing facilities for differently-abled travelers, diversifying accommodation options, promoting immersive cultural experiences, implementing virtual experiences, adopting sustainable tourism practices, fostering local

community involvement, investing in cultural preservation, hosting international spiritual events, and monitoring visitor feedback.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is based on secondary data, which may be outdated, incomplete, or biased. It lacks primary data, such as surveys or interviews, which may limit the scope of understanding. The data may also be inconsistent in methodologies, time frames, and definitions, making it difficult to draw direct comparisons. The digital analysis may not fully capture real-time changes in online marketing trends or the evolving strategies of local stakeholders. The findings may not fully reflect the nuanced challenges and opportunities specific to each religious destination, potentially limiting the generalizability of the recommendations.

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

The research highlights the potential of Eastern Uttar Pradesh's religious destinations, despite their rich spiritual, cultural, and historical heritage. Despite their global prominence, their branding and marketing strategies are fragmented, limiting their appeal to tourists. To promote the region as a global religious tourism hub, a cohesive branding framework should be developed, combining traditional spiritual significance with modern marketing tools. Key strategies include enhancing digital presence, leveraging social media engagement, and fostering collaborations between public and private sectors. Cultural authenticity, infrastructure development, and sustainability are also crucial for long-term success.

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