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Cultural Branding in Azerbaijan: Structural Imbalances in Socio-Cultural Projects

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Abstract. *This article analyzes structural imbalances in cultural branding within socio-cultural projects in Azerbaijan. Despite considerable investment in cultural infrastructure since independence, Azerbaijan's cultural branding remains uneven because the relationship between visibility, authenticity, and participation has not been systematically addressed. The study proposes an analytical framework built on these three dimensions and applies it to three cases: the Heydar Aliyev Center, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, and Icherisheher (the Old City of Baku). The Heydar Aliyev Center achieves high international recognition through architectural spectacle and state-backed symbolic projection, yet its connection to everyday cultural practice and local community involvement remains limited. YARAT demonstrates strong artistic credibility and curatorial sincerity through its engagement with the local contemporary art scene, but its audience base is narrow and its presence in the broader public cultural consciousness is weak. Icherisheher holds deep heritage authenticity and historical memory, but increasing tourism-oriented commercialization risks converting lived cultural meaning into staged experience. The article argues that these are not isolated weaknesses; rather, they reflect a systemic pattern in which Azerbaijani cultural projects tend to develop one branding dimension at the expense of others. The conclusion suggests that sustainable cultural branding requires the integration of all three dimensions within a coherent institutional and communicative strategy.*

Keywords: *cultural branding, Azerbaijan, socio-cultural projects, visibility, authenticity, participation, place branding, cultural policy, brand identity*

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Azərbaycanda mədəni brendinq: sosial-mədəni layihələrdə struktur tarazsızlıqlar

Ağahüseyn Şirəliyev

Xülasə. *Bu məqalədə Azərbaycandakı sosial-mədəni layihələrdə mədəni brendinqin vəziyyəti təhlil edilir. Azərbaycan müstəqillikdən sonra mədəni infrastruktura böyük investisiyalar yatırıb, lakin bu səylərə baxmayaraq mədəni brendinq həmişə effektiv olmayıb. Bunun əsas səbəbi layihələrin görünürlük, həqiqilik və iştirak arasındakı tarazlığı qura bilməməsidir. Məqalədə bu üç ölçü əsasında təhlil çərçivəsi təklif olunur və üç konkret nümunə üzrə tətbiq edilir: Heydər Əliyev Mərkəzi, YARAT Müasir İncəsənət Məkanı və İçərişəhər. Heydər Əliyev Mərkəzi beynəlxalq tanınma və memari görkəmlilik baxımından güclü brenddir, lakin yerli icmaların gündəlik mədəni həyatına bağlılığında boşluqlar var.*

YARAT müasir incəsənət sahəsində ciddi və səmimidir, yerli rəssam və yaradıcı insanlarla sıx işləyir, amma onun auditoriyası dar qalıb və geniş ictimai məqamda tanınması zəifdir. İçərişəhər tarix və miras baxımından dərindir, amma turizm və kommersiyalaşmanın artması bu yerin real mədəni mənasını zəiflədə bilər. Məqalənin əsas iddiası budur ki, bu zəifliklər ayrı-ayrı problemlər deyil, Azərbaycanda mədəni brendinqin ümumi sistem problemini əks etdirir. Nəticədə göstərilir ki, davamlı və effektiv mədəni brendinq üçün görünürlük, həqiqilik və iştirak birlikdə və uygunlaşdırılıb qurulmalıdır.

Açar sözlər: *mədəni brendinq, Azərbaycan, sosial-mədəni layihələr, görünürlük, orijinallıq, iştirak, məkan brendinqi, mədəni siyasət, brend kimliyi*

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Introduction

Cultural branding has become a central concern for cities, nations, and institutions that seek to articulate their identity within a competitive global environment. Unlike commercial branding, which is oriented primarily toward market differentiation and consumer loyalty, cultural branding is concerned with the construction and communication of meaning, shared identity, and social belonging. For countries undergoing political and economic transition, this process carries additional weight, because it serves not only external positioning but also internal identity consolidation, post-independence nation-building, and the mediation between inherited heritage and newly constructed modernity (Dinnie, 2016).

Azerbaijan offers a particularly instructive case. Since regaining independence in 1991, the country has pursued an ambitious program of cultural infrastructure development. Flagship architectural projects, heritage restoration initiatives, and independent art spaces have all contributed to an increasingly visible cultural landscape. International events such as the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012, the inaugural European Games in 2015, and the Formula 1 Grand Prix have further amplified the country's global cultural profile (Rojo-Labaien, 2018). Visibility on its own, however, does not constitute effective cultural branding. Recognition that is not supported by depth, coherence, and sustained engagement tends to produce fragile and ultimately shallow brand identities (Dinnie, 2016). This article argues that the central challenge of cultural branding in Azerbaijan is structural rather than resource-based. The country does not lack cultural assets; it lacks a balanced integration of the three dimensions that define strong cultural brands, namely visibility, authenticity, and participation. By examining three representative socio-cultural projects, the Heydar Aliyev Center, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, and Icherisheher, the study shows how each develops particular branding dimensions while neglecting others, and how these individual imbalances combine into a broader systemic pattern.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design. Its aim is not to measure brand performance statistically but to understand how the dimensions of cultural branding are distributed, and unevenly developed, across different types of cultural institutions in Azerbaijan. The comparative approach makes it possible to identify patterns that would remain difficult to see in the analysis of a single institution (Tijani et al., 2024).

Three cases were selected purposively: the Heydar Aliyev Center, YARAT Contemporary Art Space, and Icherisheher (the Old City of Baku). They were chosen because they represent three distinct models of cultural branding in the country. The Heydar Aliyev Center exemplifies state-supported flagship architecture; YARAT represents an independent contemporary art institution; and Icherisheher is a historic heritage site inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Because they differ in institutional logic, governance, funding, and audience, their branding dynamics can be compared along consistent lines.

The analysis is organized around three dimensions. Visibility refers to public recognition of a project's existence and profile. Authenticity refers to the perceived depth, sincerity, and cultural grounding of the project (Morhart et al., 2015). Participation refers to the degree to which audiences and communities actively engage with and help to shape the project's identity (Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021; Li et al., 2020). This framework was synthesized from the literature on cultural branding (Briciu & Briciu, 2020; Scarpaci et al., 2018), place and nation branding (Kavaratzis et al., 2015; Dinnie, 2016), brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), and community participation in cultural institutions (Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021; Li et al., 2020).

The method of analysis is theoretical and comparative. Each case is assessed against the three dimensions using institutional materials, scholarly studies, and publicly available documentation. The principal limitation follows from this design: the article rests on conceptual and secondary-source analysis rather than on field interviews or survey data. Its conclusions are therefore interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. The intention is to clarify a structural pattern and to generate propositions that future empirical research can test.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural branding draws on several intersecting traditions. The vocabulary of brand management, including awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty, continues to inform how the strength of a cultural project is assessed, although recent place and nation branding scholarship has reframed these constructs for collective and territorial actors rather than individual products (Dinnie, 2016; Kavaratzis et al., 2015). Translated into the cultural sphere, this vocabulary maps onto the three dimensions used here: visibility corresponds to recognition and association, authenticity to perceived quality and credibility, and participation to the relational depth that sustains loyalty over time.

A recurring theme in this literature is coherence. Strong brands depend on alignment between intended identity, projected image, and perceived image (Tijani et al., 2024; Dinnie, 2016). For a cultural institution, what it claims to represent, what it actually does, and how audiences experience it must remain broadly consistent; when these diverge, credibility erodes. Work on cultural and iconic branding extends the argument by suggesting that the most resonant brands do more than reflect existing preferences: they articulate identity myths that resolve cultural tensions and give audiences a narrative through which to interpret themselves (Briciu & Briciu, 2020; Scarpaci et al., 2018). At heritage sites in particular, such narratives shape how iconic status is constructed and experienced (Steriopoulos, 2025).

Place and city branding scholarship adds a further dimension. National and urban brands are built through sustained policy, institutional behavior, and communication rather than through promotional campaigns alone, and they depend on stakeholder participation and lived experience (Kavaratzis et al., 2015; Tijani et al., 2024). Cultural institutions function as anchor points within this wider ecosystem. When they communicate coherently and involve their communities, they reinforce the surrounding place brand; when they operate in isolation or pursue contradictory strategies, that brand fragments.

Authenticity has become a central condition of brand strength. It can be understood through continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism (Morhart et al., 2015). In cultural contexts, authenticity depends on whether a project is perceived as arising from genuine cultural practice rather than from institutional calculation or external imitation. Heritage sites derive it from historical continuity, contemporary art spaces from artistic seriousness and curatorial independence, and state-supported institutions must earn it through the quality and inclusiveness of their programming. Crucially, authenticity cannot be manufactured through communication; it has to be grounded in practice, a point underscored by research on cultural heritage brands (Schroeder et al., 2015).

Participation completes the framework and is often the most neglected dimension. Contemporary scholarship on cultural heritage management and museum experience treats audiences and communities not as passive recipients but as co-creators of meaning and value (Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021; Li et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2023). On this view, a cultural brand becomes durable only when communities recognize themselves in it and contribute to its ongoing definition. This shifts attention from one-directional projection toward shared ownership, and it provides the analytical lens through which the three Azerbaijani cases are examined below.

Results and Discussion

Cultural Branding in the Azerbaijani Context

Azerbaijan's post-independence cultural trajectory has been shaped by several converging forces. The first was the need to construct a national identity distinct from the Soviet framework within which Azerbaijani culture had been institutionally organized for decades, a task that involved both recovering pre-Soviet heritage and articulating a forward-looking, modern identity suitable for international positioning. The second was the availability of substantial oil revenues in the 2000s, which financed large-scale investment in cultural infrastructure, the restoration of historical sites, and the hosting of global events. The third was a deliberate strategy of international visibility that used architecture, sport, and cultural diplomacy to raise the country's profile abroad (Rojo-Labaien, 2018). These forces produced a visibly rich cultural landscape. Baku now contains internationally recognized architectural landmarks, restored heritage quarters, modern museums, and active art spaces. Yet the pace of infrastructure development has not been matched by comparable attention to the communicative, participatory, and identity dimensions of cultural branding. Large projects were frequently conceived with external audiences in mind, prioritizing spectacle and recognition over local engagement, while smaller independent initiatives grew organically but without the institutional support or communicative reach needed for broad public presence.

The result is a fragmented branding landscape. State-supported institutions, independent art platforms, and heritage sites operate according to different logics, address different audiences, and rarely coordinate their strategies. This fragmentation undermines the coherence that place and nation branding scholarship identifies as essential to brand strength (Kavaratzis et al., 2015; Tijani et al., 2024). Azerbaijan possesses the raw materials for powerful cultural branding, including heritage, modernity, artistic talent, and architectural ambition, but it has not yet developed the integrative frameworks required to convert these assets into a coherent and sustainable brand system.

The Heydar Aliyev Center: Visibility Without Participation

The Heydar Aliyev Center, designed by Zaha Hadid and opened in 2012, is arguably the most internationally recognizable cultural building in the South Caucasus. Its fluid, curving form has become a symbol of Baku and of the country's ambition to project a modern, globally connected identity. The building has received numerous architectural awards and appears regularly in international media, travel guides, and architectural publications. In terms of recognition it scores

exceptionally high: it is immediately identifiable and widely associated with modernity, scale, and national prestige.

From a branding perspective, the Center operates primarily at the level of symbolic projection. Its architecture communicates ambition, openness, and progress, and its programming of international exhibitions and cultural events reinforces this positioning. In this sense it functions as a tangible proof point for a national brand narrative, a physical manifestation of the story the country wishes to tell about itself (Rojo-Labaien, 2018; Dinnie, 2016). Its visibility is not accidental but strategically constructed, serving both domestic legitimation and international reputation.

The limitation lies in the participatory dimension. The Center's programming, although varied, is largely curated from above and oriented toward a visitor experience that remains primarily receptive. Community co-creation, local artistic dialogue, and sustained neighborhood engagement are not central to its operating model. This produces a projection gap: the institution broadcasts a strong identity outward but does not embed that identity in the cultural practices and daily lives of surrounding communities. Research on museum and heritage engagement suggests that without participatory depth, even highly visible institutions struggle to convert recognition into lasting attachment, because durable value is co-created with audiences rather than delivered to them (Yang et al., 2023; Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021).

YARAT Contemporary Art Space: Authenticity Without Scale

YARAT Contemporary Art Space, founded in 2011, occupies a very different position. Operating as a non-governmental organization, it has established itself as the principal institutional platform for contemporary art in the country, with a program that includes exhibitions, residencies, public art installations, educational workshops, and publications. Its curatorial decisions engage both local artistic communities and international contemporary art discourse. Unlike state-supported institutions, YARAT's credibility derives not from scale or spectacle but from the consistency and seriousness of its artistic work.

In branding terms, YARAT demonstrates strong authenticity. Assessed through continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism, its profile is coherent: it has maintained a consistent artistic direction since its founding, its curatorial choices are credible within the art community, its institutional behavior aligns with its stated mission, and it carries symbolic weight as a space of independent creative thought (Morhart et al., 2015). It has also cultivated an engaged audience that identifies with its values and takes part actively in its activities, a community that approximates the co-creative relationship described in recent scholarship on cultural participation (Yang et al., 2023; Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021).

The limitation is one of scale and reach. YARAT's audience, though loyal, remains relatively narrow. Contemporary art addresses a specialized public by its nature, and the institution has not fully bridged the gap between art-world credibility and broader civic engagement. Its presence in the wider public consciousness of Baku, let alone of the country as a whole, is considerably weaker than that of state-supported landmarks. The case raises a pointed question: can an institution be authentically branded yet remain structurally marginal? It suggests that authenticity without communicative scale limits the cultural impact of even the most sincere initiatives, and that making serious cultural work broadly accessible without diluting its integrity remains an unresolved challenge (Yang et al., 2023).

Icherisheher: Heritage Between Continuity and Commercialization

Icherisheher, the walled Old City of Baku, represents a third model. Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000, it carries deep historical significance, compressing layers of medieval architecture, religious structures, residential fabric, and commercial history into a compact urban

territory. Its brand, to the extent that it can be called one, is rooted in historical continuity and collective memory. For residents and visitors alike, Icherisheher symbolizes the oldest stratum of Baku's identity, a physical link to a pre-modern, pre-Soviet, and pre-oil past.

This form of authenticity differs qualitatively from YARAT's. Where YARAT builds authenticity through contemporary practice, Icherisheher's is inherited, deriving from physical permanence, architectural form, and the accumulated significance of centuries. Its continuity dimension is exceptionally strong (Morhart et al., 2015), and its symbolic value functions as an identity myth, a place that embodies a foundational narrative of origins, endurance, and belonging (Briciu & Briciu, 2020; Steriopoulos, 2025).

The site's trajectory, however, is increasingly shaped by commercialization. Tourism development has introduced souvenir shops, restaurants, and hotels into spaces that were once residential and communal. Guided tours present a curated version of heritage that favors visual consumption over lived experience, residents have gradually been displaced, and the everyday cultural practices that gave the place its meaning have thinned. Research on heritage tourism shows that as commercialization advances, perceived authenticity and visitor satisfaction can decline, because staged presentation erodes the qualities that made a site compelling in the first place (Zhang et al., 2021). The deeper risk is participatory: as top-down tourism management displaces the resident community, it crowds out the bottom-up involvement that sustains heritage as a living practice rather than a preserved surface (Li et al., 2020; Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021).

Comparative Analysis

Placing the three cases side by side reveals a clear pattern. The Heydar Aliyev Center is strongest in visibility: its architectural profile, international media presence, and state-backed positioning make it the most recognized cultural institution in the country, yet its authenticity is largely constructed through design and narrative, and its participatory dimension is limited. YARAT is strongest in authenticity: its curatorial integrity, engaged audience, and consistent behavior give it genuine credibility, but its visibility beyond a specialist public is low and its participatory base, while committed, is small. Icherisheher is strongest in inherited authenticity, yet its participation has declined as residents have been displaced, and its visibility now depends heavily on tourism-oriented presentation rather than on a living cultural fabric.

None of the three achieves a balanced integration of all three dimensions. This is the central finding of the study: the challenge for cultural branding in Azerbaijan is not the absence of cultural resources or institutional ambition but the difficulty of combining visibility, authenticity, and participation within a single coherent strategy. Each project develops the dimension most accessible to its institutional type, with state institutions producing visibility, independent spaces producing authenticity, and heritage sites inheriting it, while the dimensions that require more deliberate cultivation are left underdeveloped.

The imbalance is therefore systemic rather than incidental. It reflects a policy environment in which large-scale infrastructure investment, independent artistic activity, and heritage management operate as parallel tracks rather than as components of an integrated ecosystem. Place and nation branding scholarship indicates that branding succeeds only when policy, communication, and practice are aligned (Kavaratzis et al., 2015; Tijani et al., 2024). The task for Azerbaijan is not to choose among visibility, authenticity, and participation but to build institutional frameworks and communication strategies that bring the three together.

Conclusion

The analysis presented here indicates that cultural branding in Azerbaijan is constrained not by a shortage of cultural assets but by the structural separation of the dimensions that constitute effective branding. Visibility without participation yields impressive but shallow identities. Authenticity without scale yields credible but marginal ones. Heritage without community engagement yields culturally rich sites that gradually lose their grounding in lived experience.

The three cases examined, the Heydar Aliyev Center, YARAT, and Icherisheher, each embody a distinct branding logic and a distinct form of imbalance. Together they illustrate a broader pattern in which Azerbaijani cultural projects develop unevenly across the visibility, authenticity, and participation spectrum. This unevenness is not a failure of individual institutions but a reflection of the current structure of cultural policy, funding, and institutional coordination.

For cultural branding in Azerbaijan to become more effective and sustainable, it will need to move toward models that combine public recognition with genuine cultural depth and active community involvement. This does not require abandoning the investments already made; it requires complementing them with participatory programming, stronger connections among institutions, and communication that addresses local audiences with the same seriousness currently reserved for international ones (Grcheva & Oktay Vehbi, 2021; Kavaratzis et al., 2015). At its strongest, cultural branding is not the projection of identity to the outside world but the process through which a society recognizes itself.

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