

Research Paper

Theme Hotels, Cultural Heritage and Destination Image: The Case of Portugal

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of themed hotels represents an innovative strategy within the hospitality sector aimed at offering guests unique and personalised experiences. This study examines how literary themed hotels contribute to cultural tourism and heritage enhancement, as well as to destination image formation, experiential marketing dynamics and territorial branding processes linked to cultural identity. A multiple case study approach was applied to three themed hotels in Portugal, using content analysis with categories generated a posteriori. The findings highlight the integration of aesthetic and functional elements inspired by both traditional and contemporary sources, which support the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage while generating symbolic value that strengthens destination image and reinforces cultural identity within the visitor experience. The results further demonstrate the potential of themed hotels to act as agents of change in the tourism and hospitality sector, functioning as cultural mediators and experiential marketing platforms capable of shaping tourist perceptions and contributing to territorial branding processes. The originality of the research lies in revealing how themed hotels create immersive experiences through narrative-driven design that connects guests to the history and cultural identity of destinations, influencing destination image and territorial brand formation. Moreover, the study shows that themed hotels operate as experiential micro-destinations, where narrative construction and sensory engagement reinforce destination branding dynamics and support culturally grounded experiential marketing strategies.

Keywords: Tourism, Theme Hotels, Cultural Heritage, Hospitality and Leisure, Territorial Brand, Destination Branding, Experience Marketing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of themed hotels as an innovative strategy within the hospitality industry signifies a paradigm shift, offering guests unique and personalized experiences. Their approach transcends mere accommodation and decoration, incorporating components of tourism, hospitality, and experiential marketing to forge a more profound connection with guests (Rahde, 2006; Ferrari, 2013; Carvalho & Baptista, 2015; Franco et al., 2017; Henriques & Ramos, 2017) while helping to maintain the discourse of the destination's territorial brand (Almeida, 2018; Almeida & Almeida, 2024).

In the context of hotels that adopt literary themes, as exemplified by the Art and Soul Group, cultural narrative emerges as a strategic instrument for attracting tourists, concurrently serving to augment the historical and cultural heritage of the locales in which they are situated.

The integration of literary themes within the hotel context serves to enrich the guest experience, while concurrently playing a pivotal role in the preservation and promotion of local cultural heritage. In contexts where cultural and literary tourism are significant economic drivers, these hotels serve as conduits between local heritage and the visitor experience, thereby contributing to the fortification of regional identities and the engagement of local communities (Figueiredo, 2013; Carvalho & Baptista, 2015; Silva & Marques Júnior, 2016; Franco et al., 2017; Henriques & Ramos, 2017).

The objective of this research is to investigate how the adoption of literary themes in themed hotels contributes to the promotion of cultural tourism and the appreciation of local heritage. To this end, a case study of three themed hotels from the Art and Soul Group was conducted. The analysis's objective is to ascertain the replicability of these strategies to stimulate sustainable development in the sector.

The present study is relevant in light of the mounting interest in authentic and culturally significant experiences in contemporary tourism (Franco et al., 2017; Henriques & Ramos, 2017). Moreover, the integration of literary themes into the hotel industry confers numerous advantages, including the revitalization of historic buildings, the strengthening of local economies, and the promotion of

the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly with regard to the preservation of cultural heritage (Carvalho & Baptista, 2015; Alves, 2016; Franco et al., 2017; Henriques & Ramos, 2017). However, the growing academic interest in themed hotels, the literature remains limited in addressing these developments from a marketing and communication perspective (de Sousa, 2008; Henriques & Ramos, 2017). Existing studies tend to focus on architectural, cultural, or operational dimensions (Brito et al., 2024; Kaleandson & Fernandes, 2024), while less attention has been given to how thematic narratives influence experiential marketing strategies, destination image formation, and heritage-based territorial brand (Franco et al., 2017; Almeida & Almeida, 2024; Pistorello et al., 2024). This gap is particularly relevant in the case of literary-themed hotels, which merge symbolic narratives, spatial aesthetics, and cultural identity (Carvalho & Baptista, 2015; Mancini & Heredia, 2024). Therefore, this study responds to a research gap by examining how literary themes function as cultural assets and as strategic communication tools within tourism marketing (Carù & Cova, 2003; Almeida & Almeida, 2024).

The present paper is structured in four sections. First, it presents the context and theoretical basis for themed hotels and experience marketing. Next, it analyzes examples from the Art and Soul Group and the practices implemented. Then, it discusses the implications of this approach. Finally, it presents recommendations for future initiatives in the tourism industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cultural Heritage

The notion of cultural heritage in the context of tourism entails the preservation and appreciation of cultural elements that embody the identity of a specific locale, encompassing monuments, traditions, festivals, and social practices (Alves, 2016; Silva & Marques Júnior, 2016). Consequently, cultural tourism plays a pivotal role in the promotion and conservation of this heritage, as it facilitates a connection between tourists and the local history and culture. Themed hotels, which incorporate elements of cultural heritage, function as mediators of the tourist experience, providing a deep immersion in the traditions and history of a region (Bravo et al., 2024; Mancini & Heredia, 2024; Pistorello et al., 2024).

2.2 Local Community

The concept of "local community in tourism" signifies the active involvement of the destination's residents in the development and management of tourism. Therefore, interaction between tourists

and the community becomes essential to ensure that the economic, social, and cultural benefits of tourism are distributed fairly (Andrade & Mello, 2023; Zanetoni et al., 2023). In the context of themed hotels, the local community can be involved in a variety of ways, such as offering authentic products and services, collaborating in the design of cultural experiences, or maintaining traditional practices that are valued by tourists (Almeida & Emmendoerfer, 2022; Almeida & Emmendoerfer, 2024).

2.3 Experiential Marketing

The concept of experience marketing in the tourism industry entails the creation of memorable and emotionally resonant experiences for tourists (Pine II & Gilmore, 1998).

While classical frameworks such as Pine and Gilmore (1998) and Carù and Cova (2003) remain foundational, recent studies in tourism marketing and communication have expanded the discussion by emphasizing the role of narrative, visitor engagement, and symbolic meaning-making in experience design (Canella et al., 2023; Bravo et al., 2024; Mancini & Heredia, 2024). These contemporary perspectives highlight how themed environments contribute to destination image formation and brand communication in cultural tourism.

Experience marketing, in contrast to conventional marketing strategies that primarily focus on the promotion of products or services, involves engaging customers on a sensory and emotional level (Carù & Cova, 2003), thereby fostering a more profound connection with the destination. In the context of themed hotels, experience marketing emerges as a pivotal strategy for attracting tourists. This approach enables guests to engage with distinctive facets of local culture and history through elements such as décor, activities, and immersion in the hotel's distinct theme. This assertion is supported by the research of Carú & Cova (2003), Araújo Júnior (2020), and Canella et al. (2023). Although the field has recently incorporated studies focused on cultural heritage, design and identity (Bravo et al., 2024; Brito et al., 2024; Mancini & Heredia, 2024), updated research specifically addressing experiential marketing, sensory engagement, or destination branding within themed hotels remains limited.

2.4 Architecture and Design in Tourism

The field of architecture and design in tourism is of paramount importance in the creation of environments that not only satisfy the needs of tourists but also effectively convey the identity of the locale and elevate the visitor experience (Brito et al., 2024). The strategic design of space in themed hotels is of paramount importance, as it is the foundation upon which the hotel's theme is

manifested. Architecture and design in this context serve a dual purpose: to reflect the hotel's theme in an authentic and functional manner. The integration of architectural and design elements, including the selection of materials, colors, and spatial configuration, has been demonstrated to transform a hotel into an extension of the local culture and history (Brito et al., 2024; Kaleandson & Fernandes, 2024).

Despite the variety of studies addressing cultural heritage, themed hotels, and experiential components in tourism, the existing literature remains predominantly descriptive and focused on operational or architectural aspects (Kaleandson & Fernandes, 2024; Pistorello et al., 2024). Less attention has been given to how thematic narratives function as communication devices capable of shaping experiential meaning, influencing destination image construction, and contributing to cultural or territorial branding (Henriques & Ramos, 2017; Almeida & Almeida, 2024); . Furthermore, few studies critically explore the intersection between narrative identity, experiential marketing, and symbolic place communication (Carù & Cova, 2003; Canella et al., 2023; Mancini & Heredia, 2024). This gap positions the present study as a contribution that advances the field by examining literary-themed hotels not only as cultural assets but also as strategic communicational platforms that produce meaning, shape visitor perceptions, and reinforce destination identity.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study employed the multiple case study method (Yin, 2018) with the objective of comprehending the manner in which literary themes are integrated into the hotel experience and contribute to the appreciation of cultural heritage. A selection of three themed hotels located in Portugal was identified for further analysis. The Art & Soul Group, a prominent entity in the hospitality industry, has garnered recognition for its innovative approach to integrating artistic and cultural elements into its various hotel establishments. This approach, exemplified by the Lisboa Pessoa Hotel, the Porto A.S. 1829 Hotel, and the Évora Hotel, has been met with acclaim, underscoring the Group's commitment to infusing its hotels with a sense of artistry and cultural richness. The cases were selected on the basis of their explicit adoption of literary themes, drawing inspiration from both classic and contemporary works, which served as the central axis of the hotels' ambiance, narrative, and value proposition.

The cases were selected according to a set of criteria, including thematic relevance, data accessibility, and geographical representativeness. The objective was to capture a range of literary

expressions in diverse urban contexts. The hotels examined integrate aesthetic and functional components drawing from both classic and contemporary works, thereby fostering a distinctive experience for guests and promoting the conservation and dissemination of literary heritage.

The data collection process entailed a multifaceted approach, encompassing document analysis (institutional websites, promotional materials, interviews, and publications), direct observation of themed spaces, and a comprehensive review of extant literature on cultural tourism and hotel theming. Thematic analysis (Bardin, 2011) was employed to process the data, facilitating the identification of categories and subcategories associated with the symbolic construction of themed hotels. This methodological approach facilitated the systematic organization of the narrative, aesthetic, and functional elements inherent in the developments. These elements were then meticulously arranged into an analytical table, thereby providing a structured framework for the research findings.

The coding procedures followed standard qualitative protocols to ensure analytical rigor. First, an open coding stage was conducted to identify recurrent narrative, aesthetic, spatial and experiential elements across the data sources. These initial codes were then grouped through axial coding, allowing the emergence of thematic relationships related to cultural identity, narrative communication and experiential components. Finally, selective coding refined the core categories presented in Table 1. Throughout the process, iterative reading, constant comparison and cross-verification of codes enhanced reliability and transparency of the analysis, in line with established qualitative content analysis procedures (Bardin, 2011; Yin, 2018).

3.1 Theme Hotels

Themed hotels are distinguished by their capacity to provide immersive and distinctive experiences for their guests. In contradistinction to conventional hotels, which prioritize functional aspects such as comfort and practicality, themed hotels integrate narrative and symbolic elements to create a unique atmosphere, often drawing inspiration from historical, cultural, cinematographic, or literary themes (Rahde, 2006; Ferrari, 2013; Carvalho & Baptista, 2015; Franco et al., 2017; Henriques & Ramos, 2017). The concept is predicated on the notion that travelers are increasingly seeking authentic experiences that extend beyond the scope of their stay. In the context of the hotel industry, this phenomenon signifies a paradigm shift, wherein hotels transcend their traditional role as mere places of accommodation, instead emerging as destinations in their own right (Silva

& Marques Júnior, 2016). These destinations possess the capacity to offer guests meaningful and memorable experiences.

The Art and Soul Group has adopted the use of literary themes in its ventures. By integrating aesthetic and functional components inspired by both classic and contemporary works, these hotels not only captivate guests but also contribute to the preservation and promotion of literary heritage. This strategy, which will be analyzed in depth in the following sections, demonstrates how themed hotels can act as agents of transformation in the tourism and hospitality sector.

3.1.1.Case 1: Lisboa Pessoa Hotel

The Lisboa Pessoa Hotel, located in the heart of Lisbon, Portugal, draws inspiration from the life and oeuvre of Fernando Pessoa. The hotel boasts a variety of amenities, including a restaurant offering panoramic vistas, a spa catering to guests aged 16 and over, a fitness center, meeting facilities, and a library. The Mensagem Restaurant boasts an intimate ambiance, featuring eight alcoves and two terraces that offer sweeping views of the Portuguese capital. The products are meticulously curated by Chef Manuel Ferreira, drawing inspiration from Portuguese culinary traditions (Booking, 2024). The Lisboa Pessoa Hotel incorporates a cultural theme into its design, guest experiences, and appreciation of local heritage. Drawing inspiration from the historical and cultural elements of the life of Portuguese author Fernando Pessoa, the hotel employs this narrative as a strategy that permeates all aspects of its operation, from architecture to the services offered. The hotel's design is not merely superficial; it delves into the intricacies of Fernando Pessoa's presence across diverse settings and the itineraries curated by the Lisboa Pessoa Hotel. Adorning one of the hotel walls is the phrase "I have within me all the dreams of the world," penned by Fernando Pessoa. According to Tormenta (2024), this phrase has been adopted as a kind of mantra by the hotel management. The selection of these cultural and iconic elements serves to reinforce the local cultural identity and to create a unique aesthetic experience for guests, thereby providing a sense of cultural immersion.

The marketing strategy employed by the Lisboa Pessoa Hotel is predicated on the notion of experiential marketing. In this sense, it provides a variety of literary resources, including the works of Fernando Pessoa, which are available in the library. The institution also organizes various cultural events, such as literary events, hotel tours, and tours of Lisbon. Additionally, it facilitates reading circles, painting exhibitions, book launches, and special events to commemorate the birthday of the renowned Portuguese author, Fernando Pessoa. These activities appeal to tourists

seeking authentic experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), thereby reinforce the hotel's thematic focus on cultural heritage appreciation (Franco et al., 2017).

Consequently, it can be posited that the hotel plays a substantial role in the preservation and promotion of local cultural heritage. The hotel has established partnerships with local artisans, thereby enriching its decor with authentic pieces and providing a platform for traditional artists to exhibit and sell their work. This approach has the potential to contribute to the strengthening of the region's creative economy and the preservation of traditions that might otherwise be at risk of being lost over time. Thematic hotels, therefore, exceed the mere function of accommodation, becoming instruments of cultural appreciation and local development. The hotel's strategic integration of themed design and immersive experiences exemplifies the potential of hospitality to serve as a catalyst for the revitalization of cultural identity and the promotion of community engagement.

3.1.2.Case 2: Porto A.S. 1829 Hotel

The Porto A.S. 1829 Hotel, situated in the historic center of Porto, serves as a notable illustration of a themed hotel. The hotel's design and concept are inspired by the rich cultural heritage of Porto, offering guests a multifaceted experience that combines rest and historical immersion. This environment fosters a connection between guests and the city's present and traditions, contributing to a comprehensive cultural understanding.

The hotel building is approximately 200 years old and formerly served as the residence and commercial establishment of the Araújo & Sobrinho family. The edifice has undergone a process of revitalization, with the objective of preserving the family's estate, a goal that is manifested across various domains of the hotel. The rooms are characterized by a vintage aesthetic, drawing inspiration from the historical context of Papelaria Araújo & Sobrinho. Tormenta's (2024) assertion that the museum hotel is characterized by the continued presence of the estate in the collective spaces is a valid point. However, a comparative analysis reveals that, in contrast to the Lisboa Pessoa Hotel, the Porto A.S. offers a more limited array of experiences, a circumstance that can be attributed to its comparatively smaller spatial dimensions. "Guests do not always realize the cultural richness of themed hotels," which can cause some frustration for hotel management (Tormenta, 2024, s.p.). Accordingly, the proposal's objective encompasses not solely the attraction of tourists but also the establishment of a sense of belonging, thereby ensuring that visitors experience a sense of integration into the city's historical fabric during their sojourn.

Tormento (2024) posits that the existence of themed hotels demonstrates the potential for a symbiotic relationship between the hospitality and commercial sectors, resulting in mutual benefits for both parties and the broader urban environment. The preservation of authentic local history is of paramount importance for both the city and the country (Mancini & Heredia, 2024), and this authenticity must be maintained in order to achieve a harmonious reconciliation with business interests, as exemplified by the development of themed hotels.

The Porto A.S. 1829 Hotel serves as a case study, illustrating how a themed hotel can function as a strategic instrument for augmenting cultural heritage while offering tourists a distinctive historical immersion experience. Its approach, which combines historical architecture, cultural experiences, and involvement with the local community, reinforces the importance of themed hotels as accommodation spaces and active agents in the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage, contributing to the sustainable development of the city..

3.1.3.Case 3: Évora Oliva Hotel

The Évora Oliva Hotel exemplifies the efficacy of incorporating historical and cultural themes into hotel design, offering guests a comprehensive immersion in the cultural fabric of various Portuguese regions. The hotel is situated in the city of Évora, which is classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The hotel revives local traditions and history, with a particular focus on olive groves, which are a hallmark of the region's landscape and economy.

The hotel is housed in a building that features traditional Alentejo architecture, with features that reflect the historical legacy of the city and the region. The structural design draws inspiration from the region's rustic and welcoming aesthetic, incorporating elements such as burnt cement, tiles, wood, and natural stone. These elements serve to reference the identity of both the city and the Alentejo region. Moreover, the hotel has been meticulously designed to preserve the original façade and several architectural elements, while incorporating contemporary design elements. This approach ensures the continued comfort of guests while preserving the cultural identity of the location. The interior decoration is replete with regional elements, including artwork, tapestries, and furniture that refer to the tradition of the Alentejo (Brito et al., 2024). These elements include direct references to olive groves and olive oil production, such as prints of olive groves and decorative elements that evoke the importance of olive growing for the region (Évora Oliva Hotel, 2024).

The Évora Oliva Hotel is distinguished by its experiential marketing strategy, which provides guests with an immersive cultural and sensory experience in addition to a comfortable stay. The hotel offers immersive experiences that include guided tours of the olive groves around the city, visits to traditional olive groves, and visits to some of the best olive oil wineries in the region. At these wineries, guests can learn about olive oil production and taste different varieties. Furthermore, traditional Alentejo cooking workshops are organized, with an emphasis on dishes that use local olive oil. Events are also held that celebrate olive grove culture, such as exhibitions and local product fairs (Évora Oliva Hotel, 2024). These activities are designed to facilitate a deeper connection between guests and the region's agricultural bounty, offering an authentic gastronomic experience.

The hotel plays an instrumental role in preserving the city's cultural heritage (Bravo et al., 2024) by integrating historical and traditional elements into both its architecture and the experiences offered to guests. The hotel's commitment to preserving the architectural integrity of the building while promoting local culture has resulted in a significant contribution to the appreciation and recognition of Évora as a tourist destination of historical and cultural value.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The examination of themed hotels as a strategy for augmenting cultural heritage in the hotel sector unveils numerous facets that merit deliberation, from the perspectives of tourism and the local community, as well as from the standpoint of experience marketing. It was observed during the course of this study that these hotels function as active agents in the preservation and promotion of local heritage and cultural identity (Pistorello et al., 2024), while creating unique experiences for tourists. This finding aligns with the extant literature on experiential tourism.

The empirical findings also align with theoretical constructs from experiential marketing and destination branding. The narrative and aesthetic strategies observed in the three hotels illustrate how experiential stimuli and symbolic elements contribute to destination image formation, reinforcing the communicational roles of themed environments. These connections demonstrate that literary-themed hotels operate as experiential communication platforms that articulate cultural identity, enhance brand authenticity, and function as branding agents within tourism marketing. Compared with existing studies on themed hotels, which often emphasize architectural design, historic ambience, or operational dimensions (Rahde, 2006; Ferrari, 2013; Franco et al., 2017), the

present research advances the discussion by foregrounding the communicational and experiential functions of literary narratives within themed hotels. While previous works acknowledge the importance of immersive environments, few explicitly analyze how narrative-based theming contributes to destination image formation, experiential marketing structures, and symbolic branding processes. This study therefore expands the scope of prior research by examining themed hotels as platforms that actively construct cultural meaning and communicate territorial identity. In the context of cultural heritage enhancement, it has been observed that themed hotels offer a range of accommodation options that serve as conduits for the transmission and enrichment of local cultural heritage. The incorporation of historical, literary, cultural, and traditional elements into the design of themed hotels, encompassing their architecture, decoration, and service offerings, contributes substantially to the preservation of the memory and identity of a region and the country.

Although the three cases share a common foundation in cultural and narrative theming, their comparative analysis reveals meaningful distinctions in how each establishment operationalizes experiential and communicational strategies. The Lisboa Pessoa Hotel demonstrates the most coherent and immersive narrative integration, whereas the Porto A.S. 1829 Hotel offers a more spatially constrained experience with limited interpretive depth, and the Évora Oliva Hotel emphasizes sensory and gastronomic components linked to regional identity. This cross-case comparison highlights that themed hotels vary significantly in their capacity to influence destination image, cultural positioning, and experiential value, reinforcing the importance of understanding thematic cohesion as a differentiating factor.

However, the extent to which the commercial appropriation of cultural heritage may potentially compromise the authenticity and symbolic value of destinations, cities, and regions is a matter that merits further examination. The existence of themed hotels has the potential to generate heightened interest and awareness regarding cultural heritage. However, this phenomenon may also be perceived as a process of "touristification," wherein heritage becomes a commodity to be consumed. The crux of this discourse pertains to the delicate equilibrium between the imperative to safeguard cultural heritage and the concomitant necessity to attract tourists and thereby generate revenue for the local economy. This point gives rise to further inquiries concerning the conflict of interests among various stakeholders and their relationship to local heritage, as well as the criteria by which heritage is defined.

The present study also emphasizes the relationship between themed hotels and the local community. The establishment of such hotels has been demonstrated to engender economic advantages, including the augmentation of employment prospects, the stimulation of local commerce, and the fortification of the regional economy. However, it is imperative to ensure that the local community benefits equitably and sustainably from these projects. The crux of the issue lies in the challenge of achieving this transition in a socially responsible and sustainable manner. This is predicated on the recognition that market logic frequently prioritizes profit over the needs and aspirations of local communities. The absence of community participation in the planning and management of these initiatives can result in the misappropriation of cultural elements, the devaluation of traditions, and the exclusion of direct economic benefits. Furthermore, there is a risk of gentrification and cultural alienation when themed hotels begin to serve the interests of tourists more than local dynamics. Therefore, it is imperative to adopt practices that promote community empowerment, including their active participation in decisions about the use and representation of their cultural heritage. This includes the implementation of sustainable tourism policies that ensure profits are reinvested locally, the establishment of partnerships with local artisans and producers, and the respect of cultural authenticity, with the objective of avoiding excessive commercialization.

The advent of themed hotels in a given locality has the potential to engender profound transformations in the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of the area. The issue of how to prevent mass tourism from resulting in cultural displacement or the exclusion of certain groups from the local economic dynamic is a significant challenge in this case. This reflection constitutes the foundation for ensuring that themed hotel projects contribute positively and in a balanced way to the community.

Themed hotels offer a distinctive experience for tourists seeking immersion in specific themes, such as literature, history, or local traditions. Personalization and sensory experience are two fundamental components of experience marketing (Canella et al., 2023). However, it is imperative to contemplate the potential for these experiences to transcend mere consumption, thereby facilitating a genuine interaction with local culture and heritage. The proposed reflection further entails fostering an emotional bond between the guest and the location. A themed hotel distinguishes itself from other types of accommodation by offering an immersive and

transformative experience. Nevertheless, ascertaining the genuine impact of these experiences on tourist behavior and their relationship with cultural heritage poses an additional challenge.

The role of architecture and design in shaping the guest experience is paramount. Themed hotels employ these elements to cultivate atmospheres that evoke history, culture, and selected themes. However, it is imperative to deliberate on the methods through which the architecture and design of themed hotels can be crafted to honor the local architectural identity while preserving their originality and modernity, thereby ensuring the continued satisfaction of guests. Furthermore, design can serve as a means of balancing tradition and innovation, respecting the historical and cultural context while offering an innovative lodging experience. However, the manner in which this is achieved can serve as a differentiating factor.

The findings of the present study lay the foundation for future research, which will explore the proposed reflections in greater depth. These inquiries, despite the absence of definitive responses, serve as a foundation for subsequent reflection and discourse on the role of themed hotels in the preservation of cultural heritage and their influence on local communities and the tourist experience.

The analysis of themed hotels enables us to reflect on the role that these hotel units play in constructing tourist experiences and enhancing cultural heritage. In this context, the following questions are particularly salient and merit consideration:

- a) The rationale behind the association of themes with hotels merits examination. The selection of a particular theme for a hotel constitutes more than a rudimentary marketing strategy; it serves as a means to engender a distinctive and immersive experience for guests. By transforming accommodation into a cultural or historical experience, the hotel becomes part of a larger narrative, thereby providing visitors with the opportunity to connect more deeply with the destination. However, the efficacy of all themes must be evaluated, and the selection process should be informed by the local, cultural, and historical context of the region.
- b) The impetus behind the establishment of themed hotels is a subject that merits examination. The impetus behind the establishment of themed hotels can be attributed to various factors. The increasing inclination of tourists toward seeking authentic experiences has precipitated a demand for environments that extend beyond the conventional provision of accommodation services. Themed hotels possess the capacity to appeal to tourists who seek to experience an alternative to the conventional hotel stay. Moreover, the integration of cultural or literary

themes can facilitate the preservation and promotion of specific aspects of local culture, thereby generating a positive impact on tourism and the local economy.

- c) The primary question guiding this study is whether these hotels contribute to the enhancement of the hospitality industry. Themed hotels contribute to the enhancement of the hospitality industry by offering a distinctive proposition in a highly competitive market. These attractions can serve as points of reference for tourists seeking unique experiences, offering services and environments that facilitate complete immersion in the selected theme. Furthermore, these hotels frequently serve to bolster local identity, thereby contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage and fostering community engagement.

The aforementioned issues collectively underscore the notion that themed hotels represent a multifaceted strategy that extends beyond the realm of mere accommodation. These destinations resonate profoundly with the contemporary tourist's inclination towards quality services and experiences that encompass culture, history, and identity. A critical examination of the value of these hotels, the thematic relevance of their offerings, and their impact on both the local community and the hotel sector is imperative to comprehending the progressively strategic function of themed hotels in the tourism industry.

In methodological reflexivity, it is important to acknowledge that the interpretation of narrative, aesthetic, and symbolic elements is influenced by the researcher's analytical positioning and prior familiarity with cultural-tourism contexts and territorial brand. Although triangulation and iterative coding enhanced trustworthiness, the interpretive nature of the analysis means that meaning construction is inherently co-produced between data and researcher. Recognizing this reflexive dimension reinforces the transparency of the study and clarifies the epistemological grounding of its qualitative approach.

Furthermore, the ensuing discourse yielded thematic categories and subcategories, thereby underscoring the nexus between themed hotels, cultural heritage, the local community, and, to a certain extent, sustainable development (Table 1).

Table 1. Category and subcategories of themed hotels.

Thematic Category	Subcategories	Case 1: Lisboa Pessoa Hotel	Case 2: Porto A.S. 1829 Hotel	Case 3: Évora Oliva Hotel
Cultural Identity and Local Narrative	- Inspiration from historical figures - Reference to local history and traditions	Narrative based on Fernando Pessoa and Portuguese literature	História da Papelaria Araújo & Sobrinho e do edifício histórico	Reference to olive growing and traditions of the Alentejo
Design and Thematic Architecture	- Local architectural elements - Themed decoration	Design inspired by Pessoa's work; Integrated phrases and literary elements	Estilo vintage com espólio da papelaria; hotel-museu	Alentejo architecture; use of regional materials and olive grove-themed decoration
Guest Experience (Sensory Marketing)	- Cultural activities - Sensory immersion - Local gastronomy	Library, literary events, tours, exhibitions, Portuguese gastronomy	Experiência histórica mais discreta; foco na ambientação	Olive grove tours, food workshops, olive oil tastings
Community Engagement and Sustainability	- Local partnerships - Enhancement of regional products	Partnerships with local artisans; Valuing the creative economy	Preservação do edifício histórico; menor envolvimento direto com a comunidade	Events with local producers; promotion of regional agricultural and gastronomic culture
Territorial Brand Strategy	- Tourism positioning - Brand authenticity	Brand strongly associated with Lisbon's literary culture	A brand linked to the history of Porto, but with less external visibility	Territorial Label Associated with Agricultural Tradition and UNESCO Heritage
Challenges and Limitations	- Physical space - Guest perception	High coherence between proposal and execution	Reduced space limits experiences; Limited perception by guests heritage appreciation	Good integration between proposal and practice; Logistical challenges in seasonal events

The identified connections indicate that this category of hotel is sustainable, albeit in a limited capacity. It is important to acknowledge that, while the strategy of themed hotels may embody contemporary and innovative elements, the structural design of these buildings may not always align with principles of sustainability. In essence, the proprietor must make adjustments to ensure the viability of the enterprise. However, there are circumstances in which, despite the proprietor's best efforts, sustainability is unattainable. For instance, the installation of larger windows for illumination purposes and the reduction in electricity consumption may not be feasible in certain situations. The feasibility of installing larger windows and doors is contingent upon the structural integrity of the building. In the event that the structure does not permit such modifications, it is not

possible to install larger windows and doors. Conversely, the hotel can adopt circular practices, which would undoubtedly be considered sustainable. These scenarios illustrate the numerous challenges confronting the tourism industry, with the hotel sector representing but one such challenge.

From a marketing and communication perspective, the findings reveal that literary-themed hotels function as spaces of value co-creation, in which guests actively engage with symbolic narratives and contribute to the experiential meaning of the brand. The thematic environments, aesthetic coherence, and cultural storytelling observed across the cases operate as brand experience components that extend beyond functional service attributes. Such experiential narratives reinforce destination image formation and strengthen the perceived authenticity of both the hotel brand and the place brand. By understanding themed hotels as communicational interfaces that shape visitor emotions, expectations, and interpretations, this study demonstrates their strategic relevance for tourism communication, experiential branding, and the symbolic positioning of destinations.

5. CONCLUSION

Themed hotels, particularly those drawing inspiration from literary themes, signify a convergence of tourism, culture, and experiential marketing. This study underscored the potential of such initiatives to transcend conventional hospitality practices by integrating creativity and authenticity. These initiatives have the capacity to serve as strategic catalysts for the promotion of tourist destinations, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the fortification of local communities. The analysis of the characteristics of themed hotels demonstrated their ability to create memorable experiences, exploring narratives that connect guests to the history and cultural identity of a destination. The Art and Soul Group is a prime example of this approach, utilizing local literature and culture as a unifying element to attract tourists seeking unique and culturally enriching experiences.

From economic, social, and cultural vantages, the merits of these enterprises are evident. The impact of these festivals on the economy is twofold: first, they generate economic impact through tourism and job creation; second, they promote the preservation and dissemination of cultural and historical elements. By collaborating with local communities and adopting sustainable practices, these hotels reinforce their relevance as agents of positive change in the destinations where they are located. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the challenges inherent in the operation of

themed hotels. Ensuring thematic consistency, achieving balance between innovation and authenticity, and addressing the evolving expectations of consumers are pivotal to long-term success. Furthermore, the integration of these enterprises into the local community, coupled with a steadfast commitment to sustainability, is instrumental in ensuring that these ventures contribute meaningfully to the advancement of the local community.

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for managers operating in themed hotels, as well as for policymakers and destination marketing organizations. First, the results demonstrate that narrative-based theming can be strategically managed as a communication asset. Managers should therefore invest in coherent storytelling across architecture, interior design, service scripts and cultural programming, ensuring that all touchpoints reinforce the hotel's thematic identity and contribute to destination image formation.

Second, the study highlights that experiential elements—such as sensory stimuli, cultural activities, and curated interactions—play a decisive role in shaping visitor perceptions and enhancing experiential value. Hotel managers can leverage these insights by designing experiential pathways that encourage emotional engagement, strengthen brand authenticity, and generate memorable experiences aligned with the destination's cultural identity.

Third, the cross-case comparison indicates that the degree of thematic consistency influences guest satisfaction and the perceived uniqueness of the experience. Managers should evaluate the alignment between spatial constraints, thematic coherence and service delivery to avoid fragmented experiences. Investment in staff training focused on cultural mediation and narrative communication can strengthen experiential delivery.

Finally, the findings suggest strategic opportunities for collaboration with local communities and creative producers. Partnerships with artisans, cultural institutions and local tourism actors may enhance authenticity while reinforcing territorial branding efforts. For destination managers, literary-themed hotels represent a valuable node in the cultural tourism ecosystem and should be incorporated into broader communication and destination-branding strategies.

The limitation of this study is that only three themed hotels were studied, which could be an opportunity to compare this study with themed hotels in other countries.

It has been acknowledged that literary-themed hotels possess considerable potential to enhance tourism and culture; however, effective management is imperative to ensure a balance between creativity, relevance, and sustainability. This study underscores the significance of sustaining

investments in initiatives that integrate cultural preservation with tourism innovation, thereby enabling these enterprises to become cornerstones of the development of authentic and enriching destinations. However, it is also necessary to be attentive to the positive and negative transformations that these ventures generate in local dynamics and in what is considered local cultural heritage.

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