



Research Article

Cultural Diplomacy and Tourism Promotion: The Role of Uganda National Cultural Centre in Heritage Diplomacy

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Abstract

This study explores the contribution of cultural diplomacy to tourism promotion in Uganda, with specific focus on the Uganda National Cultural Centre (UNCC). Recognizing the growing role of culture as a soft power tool in international relations and destination branding, the research examines how cultural diplomacy initiatives influence Uganda's global image and attract tourism. Guided by Soft Power Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate the strategies, activities, and stakeholder perceptions surrounding UNCC's role in cultural tourism development. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations involving 45 stakeholders including UNCC officials, cultural practitioners, tourism operators, policymakers, and international visitors. Findings reveal that UNCC serves as Uganda's primary cultural heritage ambassador, employing multi-faceted strategies including performance-based diplomacy, international cultural exchanges, and digital engagement to promote cultural tourism. However, the study highlights significant challenges including limited funding, weak inter-institutional coordination, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient utilization of digital platforms. The research concludes that while UNCC plays a crucial role in tourism promotion through cultural diplomacy, greater institutional support, strategic partnerships, enhanced capacity building, and stakeholder engagement are essential for maximizing its impact. The study offers valuable insights for policymakers, tourism and cultural institutions, and development partners on harnessing cultural diplomacy for sustainable tourism development and international engagement in African contexts.

Keywords

Cultural Diplomacy, Tourism Promotion, Soft Power, Heritage Tourism, Uganda National Cultural Centre, Cultural Institutions

1. Introduction

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a critical instrument of soft power in contemporary international relations, particularly in the context of tourism promotion and destination branding [7, 32, 37]. As defined by Cummings [13], cultural diplomacy involves the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples

to foster mutual understanding. In the global tourism landscape, where travelers increasingly seek immersive and authentic cultural encounters, culture has become a central pillar of destination competitiveness [30, 40, 42].

Uganda, often referred to as the "Pearl of Africa," possesses rich cultural diversity with over 56 ethnic groups, each with

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distinct traditions, languages, and cultural practices [35]. Despite this cultural wealth, Uganda's tourism sector has historically been dominated by wildlife tourism, with cultural tourism representing a relatively underdeveloped segment [44]. The Uganda National Cultural Centre (UNCC), established in 1959 as the premier cultural institution in the country, serves as a focal point for cultural preservation, promotion, and international cultural exchange [25].

Countries such as South Korea, India, and Morocco have successfully employed cultural diplomacy to enhance their tourism appeal, translating national heritage and creative expression into global attraction [1, 26]. However, there remains limited empirical understanding of how cultural diplomacy is operationalized by institutions such as UNCC to promote tourism in African contexts. This research addresses this gap by examining the contribution of cultural diplomacy to tourism promotion in Uganda, using UNCC as a case study.

1.1. Research Objectives

The study was guided by three specific objectives:

- 1) To examine the role of the Uganda National Cultural Centre in promoting Uganda's cultural heritage abroad.
- 2) To explore the cultural diplomacy strategies used by UNCC to promote tourism.
- 3) To understand stakeholder perceptions of UNCC's contribution to tourism promotion.

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance for the fields of international relations and tourism studies. Theoretically, it extends the application of Soft Power Theory and Social Exchange Theory to a Sub-Saharan African cultural institution, offering empirical insight into how these frameworks operate under resource-constrained conditions rarely examined in existing literature. Practically, the findings are intended to inform policymakers, tourism boards, cultural institutions, and development partners on strategies for strengthening cultural diplomacy as a tool for tourism promotion and national branding. By documenting UNCC's strategies, achievements, and challenges, the study provides an evidence base that can guide institutional reform, funding decisions, and stakeholder collaboration, while enriching the broader literature on heritage diplomacy in developing countries.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Cultural diplomacy operates at the intersection of international relations, cultural policy, and tourism development. Nye's (2004) Soft Power Theory provides the primary theoretical foundation for understanding this phenomenon, defining

soft power as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. In tourism contexts, cultural institutions leverage soft power by showcasing national heritage and artistic expressions to international audiences, thereby enhancing destination appeal [28]. This process is closely linked to what Anholt [1] terms competitive identity, whereby nations strategically manage their culture, brand, and international reputation to strengthen destination image and global competitiveness.

Social Exchange Theory [5, 20] complements this framework by explaining the reciprocal relationships inherent in cultural diplomacy and tourism promotion. The theory posits that stakeholders engage in cultural diplomacy based on perceived benefits and costs, with sustainability depending on all parties perceiving net benefits from participation [2, 12].

2.2. Cultural Institutions as Heritage Ambassadors

Contemporary research emphasizes the dual role of cultural institutions as both heritage preservers and tourism promoters [4, 31]. Bennett [6] argues that cultural institutions serve as nation-building tools, helping countries establish distinct cultural identities. In African contexts, cultural institutions have been particularly important for reclaiming and celebrating indigenous cultures marginalized during colonial periods [46].

However, African cultural institutions face significant capacity and resource challenges affecting their international engagement [22]. Despite these constraints, some institutions have developed innovative strategies for maximizing international impact through partnerships and collaborative programming. The digital revolution has created new opportunities for heritage promotion, allowing cultural institutions to reach global audiences through virtual exhibitions and social media engagement [27].

2.3. Cultural Diplomacy Strategies for Tourism

Cultural diplomacy strategies vary widely and include international festivals, cultural exchange programs, exhibitions, and artistic collaborations [3, 7]. Performance-based cultural diplomacy represents a primary strategic tool, with traditional music, dance, and theatrical performances serving as powerful vehicles for communicating cultural narratives and attracting tourist interest [11, 21].

Digital cultural diplomacy strategies have gained prominence with internet expansion and social media platforms. Hayden (2012) [19] argues that digital technologies enable cultural institutions to reach global audiences with unprecedented scale and efficiency. Social media platforms have become essential tools for cultural diplomacy tourism promotion, allowing institutions to share cultural content and engage with international audiences through authentic storytelling [34].

2.4. Stakeholder Perceptions and Collaboration

Understanding stakeholder perceptions of cultural institutions' contributions to tourism promotion is crucial for evaluating program effectiveness and ensuring sustainable support [2, 16]. Government stakeholders typically evaluate cultural institutions through policy and economic development lenses, emphasizing quantitative outcomes such as visitor numbers and tourism spending [18, 23]. Ap's [2] foundational study on residents' perceptions of tourism impacts similarly demonstrates that community and stakeholder support for tourism-related initiatives depends on the perceived balance between socio-cultural, economic, and environmental benefits and costs.

Tourism industry stakeholders bring commercial perspectives, assessing cultural institutions based on their ability to attract visitors and provide authentic cultural experiences [39, 41]. Local community stakeholders represent another crucial group whose support depends on perceptions of tourism benefits and costs, including cultural preservation, economic opportunities, and quality of life impacts [43].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using a case study design, focusing specifically on the Uganda National Cultural Centre. The qualitative approach was appropriate for exploring the complex relationships between cultural diplomacy and tourism promotion, enabling in-depth understanding of stakeholder experiences and perceptions [38, 45]. The case study design allowed comprehensive investigation of UNCC's activities, strategies, and stakeholder relationships within the broader context of Uganda's cultural and tourism sectors.

3.2. Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised all stakeholders involved in or affected by UNCC's cultural diplomacy and tourism promotion activities, estimated at 180 individuals. Through purposive sampling, 45 participants (25%) were selected representing ten stakeholder categories: UNCC management (4), UNCC staff (6), government officials (5), cultural practitioners (8), tourism industry (7), local community (6), international visitors (4), development partners (2), academic institutions (2), and media representatives (1). This sample size ensured adequate representation across stakeholder categories while allowing for in-depth exploration [17, 33].

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through multiple methods to ensure comprehensive understanding and triangulation of findings

[14]:

- 1) In-depth interviews with key stakeholders using semi-structured interview guides.
- 2) Focus group discussions with cultural practitioners, community representatives, and international visitors.
- 3) Participant observation of cultural events, performances, and UNCC activities.
- 4) Document analysis of institutional reports, policy documents, and media coverage.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [8], involving six phases: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Both deductive coding (based on research objectives and theoretical framework) and inductive coding (allowing themes to emerge from data) were employed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) [15]. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) facilitated systematic analysis.

3.5. Data Quality Control

Data quality was ensured through triangulation (multiple sources and methods), member checking (sharing preliminary findings with selected participants), peer debriefing (regular discussions with academic colleagues), and maintenance of detailed audit trails (Carcary, 2009 [9]; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [29].

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for social research. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Data was stored securely with access limited to the research team [10, 24].

4. Findings

The thematic analysis revealed six major themes that comprehensively address the research objectives.

4.1. Theme 1: UNCC as Cultural Heritage Ambassador

Participants across all categories consistently described UNCC as Uganda's primary cultural heritage ambassador to international audiences. A senior UNCC management official explained:

"The Uganda National Cultural Centre serves as the window through which the world sees Uganda's rich cultural heritage. We are not just a performance venue; we are cultural

ambassadors who carry the responsibility of authentically representing our nation's diverse traditions to international audiences."

Government officials emphasized the strategic importance of this ambassadorial role. A Ministry of Tourism official noted:

"UNCC is our cultural embassy. When foreign dignitaries visit Uganda, when we participate in international cultural festivals, when we need to showcase who we are as Ugandans, UNCC is our go-to institution."

International visitors confirmed the effectiveness of this ambassadorial function. A cultural tourist from Germany observed:

"My visit to UNCC was my first real introduction to authentic Ugandan culture. The way they presented different tribal traditions, the storytelling, the music gave me a comprehensive understanding of Uganda that I couldn't get from guidebooks or regular tourist attractions."

4.2. Theme 2: Multi-Faceted Cultural Diplomacy Strategies

The study identified diverse strategies employed by UNCC to promote Uganda's cultural heritage internationally:

Performance-Based Cultural Diplomacy: Cultural performances emerged as UNCC's primary diplomatic strategy, serving dual purposes of cultural preservation and international promotion. A UNCC program coordinator explained:

"Our cultural performances are carefully curated to tell Uganda's story. We select music, dance, and theatrical pieces that showcase our diversity while maintaining authenticity. Each performance is a diplomatic mission that communicates our values, our history, and our aspirations as a nation."

International Cultural Exchange Programs: UNCC's participation in international cultural festivals and exchange programs provides platforms for reciprocal cultural learning and relationship building. A government official described:

"UNCC's international exchange programs are diplomatic investments. When our artists perform in China, South Korea, or European countries, they build goodwill and understanding that benefits Uganda beyond tourism."

Digital Cultural Diplomacy: Digital platforms have expanded UNCC's diplomatic reach beyond traditional geographical constraints. A UNCC marketing officer explained:

"Digital platforms have revolutionized our diplomatic reach. Through social media, virtual performances, and online exhibitions, we can engage global audiences without the costs and logistics of physical travel. Our YouTube channel has viewers from over 50 countries."

4.3. Theme 3: Tourism Promotion Integration

The research revealed complex relationships between UNCC's cultural diplomacy activities and tourism promotion objectives:

Cultural Tourism Product Development: UNCC's cultural

programming directly contributes to Uganda's cultural tourism products. A tourism operator explained:

"UNCC is a must-visit destination for our cultural tourism clients. Their programming provides authentic cultural experiences that tourists can't find elsewhere. We often structure our tour packages around UNCC's cultural calendar."

Destination Marketing Through Cultural Diplomacy: International cultural activities serve as marketing tools for Uganda as a tourism destination. A Uganda Tourism Board official explained:

"Every time UNCC performs internationally, they market Uganda as a tourism destination. We've tracked tourism inquiries that directly resulted from UNCC's international cultural activities."

Challenges in Tourism-Culture Integration: Despite positive connections, significant challenges affect the effectiveness of cultural tourism development. A cultural practitioner expressed concerns:

"Sometimes the pressure to make our culture tourist-friendly leads to oversimplification or commercialization. We struggle to maintain the depth and spiritual significance of our traditions while making them accessible to international visitors."

4.4. Theme 4: Stakeholder Collaboration Dynamics

The study revealed complex stakeholder relationships and collaborative patterns:

Government-Institution Partnerships: The relationship between UNCC and government agencies emerged as crucial yet inconsistent. A UNCC management official described:

"Our relationship with government ministries is essential for our international cultural diplomacy. However, this support is often inconsistent and depends on political priorities."

Private Sector Engagement: Tourism industry stakeholders described both collaborative opportunities and challenges. A hotel manager explained:

"We work with UNCC to provide cultural experiences for our guests. Their cultural performances enhance our hospitality offerings and create memorable experiences that guests associate with Uganda."

Community-Institution Relationships: Community representatives described mixed experiences. A community cultural leader explained:

"UNCC provides platforms for our cultural expressions, but we often feel like content providers rather than equal partners. Our communities preserve and transmit the cultural traditions, but the institutional benefits and recognition often don't flow back to us."

4.5. Theme 5: Resource Constraints and Capacity Challenges

Participants identified significant operational challenges affecting UNCC's effectiveness:

Financial Resource Limitations: A UNCC management official explained:

"Our international cultural diplomacy is severely constrained by financial resources. Participating in international festivals, organizing cultural exchange programs, maintaining quality facilities - all these require substantial funding that we often lack."

Infrastructure and Equipment Challenges: A UNCC staff member described:

"Our facilities need significant upgrades to meet international standards. The sound systems, lighting, stage equipment - these affect the quality of our cultural presentations."

Human Resource Capacity: A UNCC management official explained:

"We need specialized staff for cultural diplomacy - people who understand both cultural traditions and international engagement protocols. We also need language skills, cultural interpretation abilities, and diplomatic sensitivity."

4.6. Theme 6: Future Opportunities and Strategic Directions

Stakeholders articulated visions for enhancing UNCC's effectiveness:

Digital Innovation Opportunities: A UNCC marketing officer explained:

"Digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for cultural diplomacy. We can develop virtual cultural experiences, online cultural education programs, and digital cultural exchanges that reach global audiences cost-effectively."

Strategic Partnership Development: A development partner representative explained:

"International cultural institutions, universities, and development organizations offer partnership opportunities that could enhance UNCC's diplomatic effectiveness. These partnerships could provide resources, expertise, and networks."

Integrated Cultural Tourism Development: A tourism industry representative proposed:

"We need integrated approaches that align UNCC's cultural diplomacy with tourism marketing strategies. This requires coordination between cultural institutions, tourism operators, and marketing agencies."

5. Discussion

5.1. UNCC's Ambassadorial Role

The findings confirm Nye's (2004) conceptualization of cultural institutions as soft power tools, demonstrating how UNCC functions as Uganda's primary cultural heritage ambassador. This extends Nye's theory by showing how cultural institutions in developing countries can effectively leverage limited resources to achieve significant international cultural

influence. The ambassadorial role identified aligns with Bennett's (1995) argument about cultural institutions as nation-building tools, though the findings reveal unique post-colonial challenges in balancing indigenous authenticity with international accessibility. The study challenges Mazrui's (1997) assertion that African cultural institutions function more inwardly than outwardly. The evidence from UNCC demonstrates active international engagement that suggests African cultural institutions are evolving beyond traditional preservation roles toward more active diplomatic engagement.

5.2. Multi-Faceted Diplomatic Strategies

The diverse strategies employed by UNCC align with Bound et al.'s (2007) framework of cultural diplomacy approaches. The performance-based diplomacy extends Hughes' (2000) and Cohen's (2001) work by revealing how traditional performances can effectively communicate complex cultural narratives while maintaining authenticity. This challenges MacCannell's (1976) concern about tensions between authenticity and tourist accessibility. The digital cultural diplomacy strategies represent a significant extension of existing literature. While Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) discussed digital technologies' potential, the findings provide concrete evidence of how African cultural institutions are leveraging these platforms for international engagement despite resource constraints.

5.3. Tourism Promotion Integration

The integration of cultural diplomacy with tourism promotion addresses gaps identified in existing literature regarding connections between cultural events and tourism outcomes [36]. The findings provide empirical evidence that cultural diplomacy activities directly contribute to tourism development through destination marketing and cultural product development, supporting Richards' (2007) and Smith's (2009) findings about positive correlations between cultural programming and tourism performance. However, the challenges in tourism-culture integration align with Boniface and Fowler's (1993) concerns about tensions between heritage preservation and tourism promotion, suggesting these theoretical tensions remain relevant challenges for current practice.

5.4. Resource Constraints as Critical Barriers

The resource constraints confirm Jegede's (2004) observations about capacity challenges affecting African cultural institutions' international engagement. The findings provide detailed evidence of how financial limitations, infrastructure challenges, and human resource constraints fundamentally affect cultural diplomacy effectiveness, supporting theoretical emphasis on resource dependency as crucial for institutional performance.

6. Conclusions

Based on the data analysis, the study draws the following conclusions:

- 1) *UNCC's Heritage Promotion Role*: The Uganda National Cultural Centre plays a crucial and multifaceted role in promoting Uganda's cultural heritage to international audiences, functioning as the country's primary cultural heritage ambassador. The institution successfully bridges the gap between local cultural assets and global audiences through authentic and accessible presentations. However, this role faces significant challenges including resource constraints, capacity limitations, and competing demands for authenticity and accessibility.
- 2) *Cultural Diplomacy Strategies*: UNCC employs diverse and adaptive cultural diplomacy strategies that effectively contribute to tourism promotion, including performance-based diplomacy, international cultural exchanges, and digital engagement. These strategies demonstrate sophisticated understanding of both cultural preservation requirements and tourism market dynamics. The effectiveness depends on careful balance between cultural authenticity and tourist accessibility, though this balance requires ongoing attention and resources.
- 3) *Stakeholder Perceptions*: Stakeholders recognize UNCC's valuable contributions to tourism promotion while identifying significant challenges in collaboration, resource allocation, and benefit distribution. Government stakeholders evaluate UNCC primarily through economic development lenses, tourism industry actors focus on commercial viability and visitor satisfaction, while local communities express concerns about inadequate benefit-sharing and cultural representation. These diverse perceptions highlight the need for more inclusive stakeholder engagement and equitable partnership models.

7. Recommendations

Increase Institutional Funding: Government should significantly increase budgetary allocation to UNCC and establish dedicated funding mechanisms for international cultural diplomacy activities.

Develop Comprehensive Digital Strategy: Create and implement a strategic digital cultural diplomacy plan that includes virtual experiences, online education programs, and systematic social media engagement.

Strengthen Collaboration with UNCC: Develop flexible partnership agreements that accommodate both cultural preservation requirements and commercial needs through joint marketing and product development.

Provide Technical and Financial Support: Offer capacity building, technical assistance, and funding for UNCC's cultural diplomacy infrastructure and programming.

Abbreviations

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IRB	Institutional Review Board
NVivo	Qualitative Data Analysis Software
UNCC	Uganda National Cultural Centre
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics

Author Contributions

Katumba Daniel Isaac is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and no financial, institutional, or personal relationships influenced the design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, or writing of the manuscript.

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