

Territorial marketing as a lever for sustainable tourist attractiveness: the case of the imperial city of Meknes

Marketing territorial comme levier d'attractivité touristique durable : le cas de la ville impériale de Meknès.

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Abstract:

This article examines how territorial marketing can enhance the tourist attractiveness of the imperial city of Meknes while promoting sustainable development. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, based on 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with three groups of participants: tourism professionals (5), institutional and community stakeholders (3), and domestic and international visitors (5). This approach made it possible to capture diverse perspectives on Meknes's image, sustainable tourism initiatives, and governance practices. The findings reveal three major results: (1) Meknes suffers from an unclear and poorly differentiated brand image compared to other Moroccan destinations; (2) sustainable tourism initiatives exist but remain fragmented and lack visibility; (3) effective collaboration between stakeholders is still weak, limiting the coherence of local territorial marketing strategies. These results suggest that repositioning Meknes as a sustainable destination requires the development of a coherent brand identity, greater visibility of sustainability projects, and strengthened multi-stakeholder governance.

Keywords: Territorial marketing, sustainable tourism, attractiveness, local governance, brand image

Résumé :

Cet article analyse comment le marketing territorial peut renforcer l'attractivité touristique de la ville impériale de Meknès tout en favorisant un développement durable. La recherche adopte une approche qualitative, fondée sur 13 entretiens semi-directifs réalisés auprès de trois groupes de participants : professionnels du tourisme (5), acteurs institutionnels et communautaires (3), et visiteurs nationaux et internationaux (5). Cette méthodologie a permis de recueillir des perceptions variées sur l'image de Meknès, les initiatives en matière de tourisme durable et les pratiques de gouvernance. Les résultats mettent en évidence trois constats principaux : (1) Meknès souffre d'une image de marque peu claire et mal différenciée par rapport aux autres destinations marocaines ; (2) les initiatives de tourisme durable, bien que présentes, demeurent dispersées et peu visibles ; (3) la collaboration entre acteurs reste limitée, ce qui affaiblit la cohérence des stratégies locales de marketing territorial. Ces résultats suggèrent que le repositionnement de Meknès en tant que destination durable passe par la création d'une identité de marque cohérente, une meilleure visibilité des projets de durabilité et un renforcement de la gouvernance partenariale.

Mots-clés : Marketing territorial, tourisme durable, attractivité, gouvernance locale, image de marque

Introduction

In a global context marked by intensified competition between territories, heritage cities are being called upon to rethink their tourism development strategies. This challenge is all the more crucial given that it is no longer simply a matter of attracting visitors, but of doing so responsibly, respecting local resources, and generating lasting benefits. It is in this context that territorial marketing, as a tool for promoting and differentiating territories, emerges as a major strategic lever.

The city of Meknes, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, boasts an undeniably rich cultural, architectural, and artisanal heritage. Yet, despite this potential, it remains behind other, more visible Moroccan cities such as Marrakech or Fez. This paradox calls into question the way the city constructs and disseminates its image, as well as the manner in which it integrates—or does not integrate—the principles of sustainable development into its tourism promotion policy. Indeed, sustainable tourism, based on a balance between economic attractiveness, environmental preservation, and social inclusion, is today an essential requirement in destination management. It encourages territories to adopt a long-term vision, promote participatory governance, and promote more authentic, slower, and more respectful forms of tourism.

Therefore, the central question arises: **How can a sustainability-focused territorial marketing strategy improve Meknes's tourist appeal and foster balanced and respectful development?** This article attempts to answer this question.

To this end, the study uses a qualitative approach, through semi-structured interviews conducted with various stakeholders involved in the city's governance and tourism development. The objective is threefold: (1) to analyze current territorial promotion practices, (2) to identify stakeholders' perceptions and expectations, and (3) to propose avenues for improvement for a more sustainable and coherent territorial marketing strategy. By articulating the theoretical contributions of territorial marketing and the principles of sustainable tourism, this article aims to nourish reflection around a model of responsible territorial development, capable of repositioning Meknes as a competitive and sustainable destination on a national and international scale.

Theoretical Section: Territorial Marketing and Sustainable Tourism

I. Territorial Marketing: Concepts and Developments

1.1. Definition and Foundations of Territorial Marketing

Place marketing is a strategic approach aimed at promoting a region by highlighting its assets to attract visitors, investors, and residents. It relies on marketing techniques adapted to the specific local and cultural characteristics of the region.

According to Govers and Go (2009), place branding is an essential component of place marketing, enabling the construction of a coherent and distinctive brand image for a place. This approach is particularly relevant for tourist destinations seeking to differentiate themselves in a competitive market.

Recent studies highlight the importance of local identity and stakeholder participation in developing effective place marketing strategies (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

1.2. Territorial Marketing Tools and Strategies

Territorial marketing tools include the creation of a coherent brand image, targeted communication, and the involvement of local stakeholders. These strategies aim to strengthen the attractiveness of the territory while respecting its identity. Territorial marketing is used to achieve different goals which vary depending on the type of place (Rovira et al., 2022).

The use of digital platforms, identity narratives, and multi-stakeholder partnerships promotes greater visibility and public engagement (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011; Anholt, 2010).

Thus, territorial marketing, as a tool for differentiating and promoting local resources, offers a relevant framework for understanding how Meknes can strengthen its visibility on the tourism scene. However, to fully address contemporary challenges, this strategy must be aligned with the requirements of sustainable development.

II. Sustainable Tourism: Principles and Applications

2.1. Foundations of Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism aims to minimize the negative impacts of tourism while maximizing benefits for local communities and the environment. It is based on three pillars: economic, social, and environmental (UNWTO, 2005). Strategic place marketing planning begins with analyzing the distinct characteristics of territories, leading to the development of suitable strategies (Prete et al., 2025).

This model involves participatory governance, the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the equitable distribution of tourism benefits (Bramwell & Lane, 2011).

2.2. Implementation of Sustainable Tourism

Implementing sustainable tourism requires strategic planning, stakeholder participation, and the adoption of environmentally friendly practices.

Sustainability indicators are used to assess the performance of tourist destinations (Tanguay et al., 2013). Local authorities play a crucial role in coordinating efforts between the public and private sectors (Ruhanen, 2013).

These elements demonstrate that sustainable tourism is not only an ethical goal, but also a strategic necessity to ensure the long-term viability of tourist destinations. This raises questions about how territorial marketing policies can integrate these principles to reconcile attractiveness and sustainability.

III. Integration of Territorial Marketing and Sustainable Tourism

Faced with current ecological, social, and economic challenges, more and more authors are highlighting the need for convergence between territorial marketing and sustainable tourism (Codina et al., 2025; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). This integration is based on the idea that the competitiveness of destinations can no longer be considered independently of their environmental and social responsibility. From this perspective, sustainable territorial marketing emerges as a strategy combining territorial development, respect for resources, and stakeholder participation. However, this articulation raises tensions between market logic and sustainability, which merit critical analysis.

3.1. Synergies between Territorial Marketing and Sustainable Tourism

The integration of territorial marketing and sustainable tourism allows for the responsible promotion of destinations, highlighting local assets while preserving resources for future generations.

According to Rovira et al. (2022), marketing based on local resources such as non-timber forest products is an innovative lever for positioning rural areas in a sustainable tourism dynamic.

3.2. Practical Cases and Best Practices

Case studies show that using products derived from local know-how and cultural identities can strengthen social cohesion and stimulate the rural economy.

These approaches rely on close collaboration between institutions, tourism stakeholders, and local communities, with a view to long-term sustainability (Codina, 2023).

Ultimately, the experiences analyzed demonstrate that aligning territorial marketing with sustainability objectives not only strengthens a destination's image, but also increases its social acceptability and resilience. However, the success of this coordination depends heavily on the

ability of local stakeholders to adopt collaborative governance, develop authentic territorial narratives, and integrate sustainability as a central element of their tourism positioning.

In light of the literature reviewed and within the framework of this study on the city of Meknes, we formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Meknes's brand image is unclear and poorly differentiated in the eyes of tourists and professionals, limiting its ability to attract a targeted clientele.

Hypothesis 2: Sustainable tourism initiatives, although existing, lack visibility and coordination, thus preventing Meknes from positioning itself as a responsible tourism destination.

Hypothesis 3: Improving Meknes's tourist appeal depends on stronger collaboration between public, private, and non-profit stakeholders, as well as promoting authentic experiences beyond simply historical heritage.

In order to verify the hypotheses formulated from the theoretical analysis, an empirical study was conducted with stakeholders directly involved in the tourism dynamics of the city of Meknes. The objective was to compare the contributions of the literature with local realities, drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. This approach aims to explore in depth the perceptions, practices and issues related to territorial marketing and sustainability, through the voices of professionals, institutions and visitors. It also makes it possible to identify concrete avenues of action adapted to the specific context of Meknes.

Practical Section: Study of the Meknes Area – An Exceptional Heritage Facing the Challenges of Sustainable Development

An imperial city inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1996, Meknes holds significant tourism potential, both due to its cultural heritage and its geographical position. The city is home to a historic medina and monuments of great value such as Bab Mansour, the Kara Prison, and the Agdal Basin, while also being located near the Roman ruins of Volubilis. This unique heritage makes Meknes a potential cornerstone of Morocco's tourism offer, particularly in the cultural and heritage tourism segments.

However, despite these assets, Meknes lags behind other major destinations such as Marrakech or Fez. In 2023, the city recorded around 160,000 overnight stays in classified accommodation establishments, a number that is growing but still modest compared to its capacity (Maroc Diplomatie, 2023). This underperformance can be explained by several factors: lack of targeted communication, limited involvement of local stakeholders, fragile tourism

infrastructure, and the absence of a clear positioning in the national and international tourism markets.

Regional authorities are aware of these challenges and have launched several heritage enhancement programs. In 2022, the Prefectoral Tourism Council initiated a project to rehabilitate 17 historical monuments, as part of the regional development plan targeting 2030 (Visit Meknes, n.d.). At the same time, a tourist information center was established with the support of the Regional Investment Center (CRI), in a bid to modernize visitor reception and structure the tourism offer (CRI Fès-Meknès, 2022).

These initiatives form part of a broader strategic ambition: to reposition Meknes as a sustainable destination by combining heritage preservation, territorial attractiveness, and community involvement. However, for this transition to succeed, greater coherence between marketing initiatives and the principles of sustainable tourism remains essential. It is within this framework that the present study is situated, exploring the conditions for a sustainable territorial marketing strategy adapted to the Meknes context.

IV. Study of the Meknes Area: Potential and Challenges

4.1. An Exceptional Historical and Geographical Heritage

Located in northern Morocco within the Fès-Meknes region, Meknes is one of the Kingdom's four imperial cities. It possesses a rich architectural and historical heritage, primarily from the reign of Sultan Moulay Ismail, who made Meknes his capital in the 17th century. The city is particularly renowned for its ramparts, monumental gates (such as Bab Mansour), gardens, palaces, and royal granaries.

Inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1996, the medina of Meknes represents a remarkable synthesis of Islamic, European, and Maghrebi styles. This recognition testifies to the site's outstanding universal value, positioning it as a major hub of cultural and sustainable tourism potential. This heritage, both tangible and intangible, constitutes a genuine lever for the development of quality tourism, provided it is properly valued.

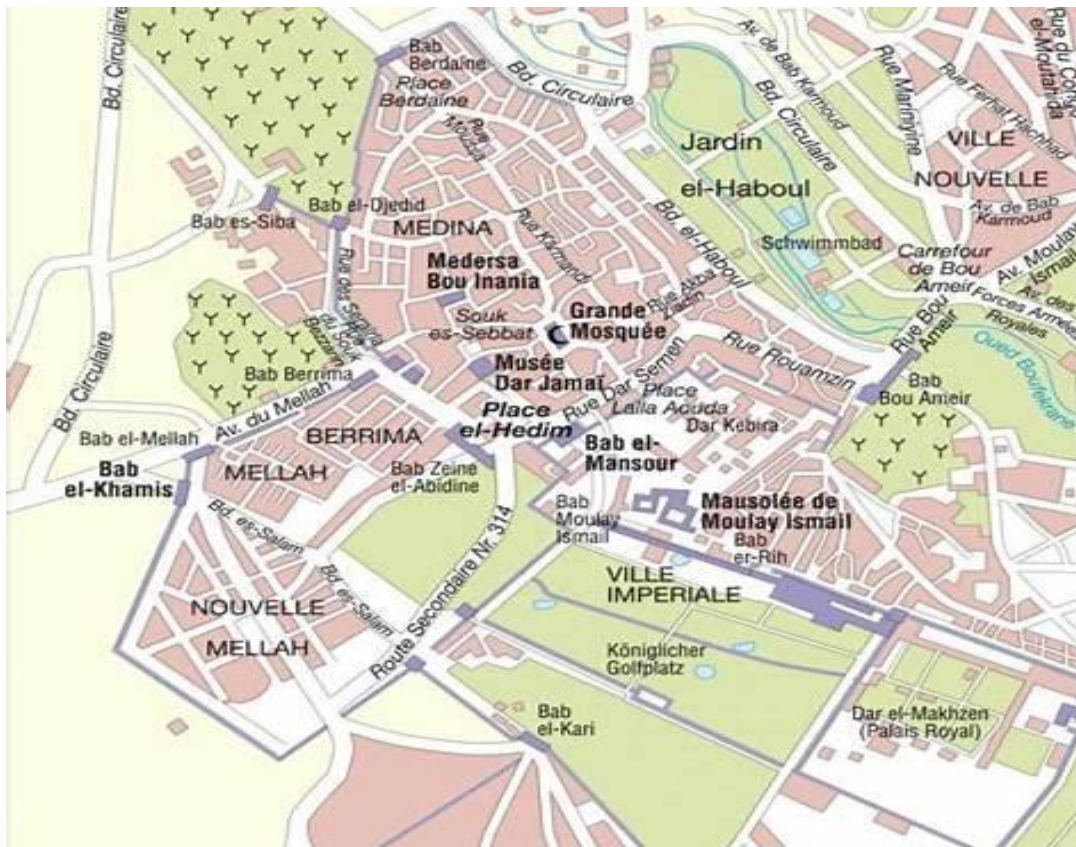
Figure 1: Location of Meknes within the Fès-Meknes Region



Source: Regional Council of Fez-Meknes. (2019). *Administrative map of the Fès-Meknès region*.

This map presents the Fès-Meknès region, one of Morocco's twelve administrative regions, located in the center-north of the country. It is composed of two prefectures (Fès and Meknès) and seven provinces (Taounate, Taza, Sefrou, El Hajeb, Boulemane, Moulay Yacoub, and Ifrane). The city of Meknes is clearly marked, emphasizing its strategic position between the Middle Atlas mountains and the Saïss plain. This location gives Meknes a central role in regional development, particularly in terms of cultural and sustainable tourism.

Figure 2: Main Heritage Sites of Meknes and UNESCO-Listed Heritage



Source: Regional Council of Fez-Meknes. (2019). *Map of the imperial city and the medina of Meknes*.

This map details the main heritage sites of the medina and the imperial city of Meknes, all listed as UNESCO World Heritage. It highlights the architectural and historical richness of the city, thus illustrating its cultural and tourism potential.

4.2. A Tourism Dynamic Misaligned with Existing Potential

Although Meknes enjoys recognized heritage assets, the city has not yet reached its full tourism potential. In 2023, it recorded approximately 187,000 overnight stays in classified accommodation establishments. This figure, while showing an increase compared to previous years, remains modest when compared to other destinations such as Marrakech or Fez. Tourism in Meknes remains predominantly national, characterized by short average stays and low visitor loyalty. The tourism offer, though present, lacks structure and diversity. Informal hospitality, the absence of a targeted communication strategy, and shortcomings in accessibility hinder the destination's competitiveness. As a result, a significant gap persists between the city's patrimonial potential and its actual tourism performance.

1.3. Challenges of Territorial Development and Limits of the Current Positioning

To address these challenges, several projects have been initiated by local authorities. Among them, the rehabilitation program of the Meknes medina, launched between 2019 and 2023, aims to restore 17 historical monuments. This program is part of a vision of heritage preservation and revitalization of the old city center. In addition, tourist information centers have been opened to improve the visitor experience.

Nevertheless, these initiatives remain sporadic and sometimes lack strategic coherence. Meknes's tourism positioning remains unclear, and the city's image, although promoted by institutions, struggles to establish itself in the minds of travelers. The absence of strong territorial branding, combined with poorly coordinated governance, limits the effectiveness of local policies. Moreover, sustainability is not yet fully integrated into territorial marketing efforts, which represents a central challenge to be addressed in order to ensure responsible and lasting attractiveness.

Methodology

This qualitative study is based on 13 semi-structured interviews, divided into three groups to combine perspectives:

Group 1: Tourism professionals (**5 people**): Hotel manager, travel agency, tour guide, restaurateur, craftsman.

Group 2: Institutional and community stakeholders (**3 people**): Representative of the Regional Tourism Council, local elected official, heritage association.

Group 3: Visitors (**5 people**): Two foreign tourists, three domestic tourists.

To justify this methodological choice, the study is positioned within an interpretive and constructivist epistemology, which seeks to understand the meanings attributed by actors to tourism and territorial marketing practices. A qualitative approach was therefore the most appropriate, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of perceptions, representations, and expectations that cannot be captured by quantitative methods. The use of semi-structured interviews made it possible to combine a flexible structure with the freedom for participants to express their views, thus enriching the analysis. The reasoning adopted is essentially inductive, as the results emerge progressively from the empirical material collected, before being compared to the theoretical framework.

Interview Guide

The interview guide is designed to explore the study hypotheses.

1. On Image and Positioning (Hypothesis 1)

- What is your first thought when you hear "Meknes, a tourist destination"?
- In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses that define its tourist identity?
- How does Meknes differ from Fez or Marrakech?

2. On Sustainable Tourism (Hypothesis 2)

- Are you aware of any local initiatives focused on sustainable development (ecotourism, solidarity tourism, etc.)?
- What actions do you think could make tourism in Meknes more respectful of the environment and local populations?
- Can sustainable tourism become a real marketing tool for the city?

3. On Governance and Experiences (Hypothesis 3)

- How do you assess the collaboration between the different stakeholders (private sector, public sector, residents)?
- Aside from historical sites, what authentic experiences could the city offer visitors? (E.g., themed tours, craft workshops, local encounters).
- What would be the three priorities for an effective territorial marketing strategy?

Summary of Expected Results

The study results should confirm the hypotheses and lead to a series of concrete recommendations.

- **Confirmation of Hypothesis 1:** The interviews reveal a lack of coherence in Meknes's communication. The city is perceived as "Fez's little sister," lacking a strong, distinct identity.
- **Confirmation of Hypothesis 2:** Stakeholders recognize the relevance of sustainable tourism but deplore a lack of concrete projects and visibility. The study could identify scattered initiatives that, if grouped under a single banner, would create a truly sustainable offering.
- **Confirmation of Hypothesis 3:** Meknes's success relies on a collective approach. The interviews highlight a need for coordination, pooling efforts, and developing experiences based on gastronomy, local crafts, and cultural exchanges.

Recommandations

Create a unique brand image: Position Meknes as the "authentic and serene imperial city," ideal for travelers seeking cultural immersion away from the hustle and bustle of large crowds.

Develop a "Sustainable Meknes" label: Highlight responsible tourism initiatives, from local production to eco-friendly hotel practices.

Promote vibrant experiences: Organize themed tours focusing on gastronomy, local vineyards, or artisanal know-how, in collaboration with local residents and small entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the crucial role of territorial marketing in enhancing Meknes's tourist attractiveness while aligning with the imperatives of sustainable development. Although the city possesses exceptional cultural and historical assets, its current positioning remains weak compared to other Moroccan destinations. The findings reveal that the absence of a clear brand image, the limited visibility of sustainable initiatives, and insufficient coordination among stakeholders constitute major obstacles to the city's full potential.

By integrating sustainability principles into territorial marketing, Meknes could reposition itself as an authentic and responsible destination. This requires creating a coherent brand identity, developing a recognized "Sustainable Meknes" label, and promoting immersive experiences rooted in local culture, gastronomy, and craftsmanship. Furthermore, a stronger governance framework involving public institutions, private actors, and local communities is essential to ensure coherence and long-term impact.

Ultimately, territorial marketing that embraces sustainability is not only a promotional tool but also a strategic pathway toward resilience and inclusive development. Meknes has the opportunity to become a model of balanced tourism growth, capable of reconciling heritage preservation with economic and social benefits for its inhabitants.

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Annex

Interview Guide Used:

What is your full name?

How old are you?

What is your profession?

What is your first thought when hearing “Meknès, a tourist destination”?

In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses that define its tourist identity?

How does Meknès differ from Fès or Marrakech?

Are you aware of any local initiatives focused on sustainable development (ecotourism, community-based tourism, etc.)?

What actions could, in your opinion, make tourism in Meknès more environmentally and socially responsible?

Can sustainable tourism become a genuine marketing argument for the city?

How would you evaluate the collaboration between different actors (private sector, public authorities, residents)?

Beyond historical sites, what authentic experiences could the city offer to visitors? (e.g., thematic tours, craft workshops, local encounters)

What would be the three main priorities for an effective territorial marketing strategy?