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SYMBOLISM, CULTURE SHOCK, AND INCLUSION IN HERITAGE BRANDING: A STUDY OF BRAND TRUST AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN GEORGIA

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Abstract
Georgia has become a growing destination for international students and tourists, but the way its cultural heritage is presented doesn't always speak to everyone. This research explores how international students experience *culture shock* and how that influences their ability to trust Georgian tourism brands. Focusing on four major heritage and leisure sites—Mtatsminda Park, Jvari Monastery, Fabrika Yard, and Tbilisi Sulphur Baths—the study combines insights from interviews and a survey of 385 international students across seven leading Georgian universities. While most students were not disoriented by their surroundings, many reported a quiet sense of emotional exclusion. Brand cues—such as language use, religious symbols, or staff behavior—often failed to create a sense of cultural connection. The findings reveal that emotional trust doesn't automatically follow visual familiarity. Inclusion must be actively designed. This study offers practical lessons for tourism authorities, heritage site managers, universities, and private operators aiming to make Georgia's hospitality feel as welcoming as its history is rich.

Keywords: culture shock, brand trust, tourism branding, international students, heritage spaces, symbolic inclusion, Georgia

1. Introduction
1.1 Background and Context
In recent years, the globalization of higher education has led to an unprecedented rise in international student mobility. As of 2024, Georgia has positioned itself as a notable destination for students from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, thanks to affordable tuition, English-language programs, and a growing portfolio of internationally recognized universities. Yet, for many international students, cultural adaptation is far more complex than academic orientation. One of the most psychologically salient aspects of this process is culture shock, defined as the emotional and cognitive disorientation that occurs when individuals encounter unfamiliar cultural norms and behaviors (Oberg, 1960).

This phenomenon extends beyond interpersonal interaction—it significantly shapes how individuals perceive and engage with local environments, including service brands embedded in tourism and hospitality sectors. Brands are not interpreted in a vacuum. Instead, they are filtered through the lens of cultural expectations, symbolic familiarity, and social norms. As international students attempt to decode the meanings behind signage, service behaviors, or spatial organization in leisure or heritage settings, their reactions are often shaped not by logic or branding strategy, but by emotional alignment—or misalignment—with the host culture.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Gap
While the literature on culture shock is well-established in psychology and international education (Hofstede, 2001; Yoo, Donthu, & Lenartowicz, 2011), its intersection with brand trust—particularly in culturally immersive tourism contexts—remains underexplored. Trust in a brand is not only a rational assessment of service quality or reliability; it also emerges from symbolic alignment and emotional resonance (Delgado-Ballester &Munuera-Alemán, 2001).

When consumers face culturally incongruent environments, the process of building brand trust may be delayed, resisted, or misdirected altogether.

Although branding scholars have examined cultural differences in consumer behavior, most rely on macro-level national culture frameworks (e.g., Hofstede's dimensions), which do not adequately capture the subjective and fluctuating nature of culture shock as experienced by international newcomers. Furthermore, branding research tends to prioritize transactional products and commercial services, often neglecting experiential and symbolic tourism brands, especially those embedded in sacred, communal, or heritage-based spaces.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the relationship between culture shock and brand trust in the context of tourism service spaces frequented by international students in Georgia. Specifically, it examines how foreign consumers interpret brand cues in four experience-centric locations:

1. Mtatsminda Park (a leisure and amusement brand),
2. Jvari Monastery in Mtskheta (a UNESCO-recognized sacred site),
3. Fabrika Yard (an urban cultural and creative space), and
4. Tbilisi Sulphur Baths (a traditional hospitality site).

These spaces are intentionally diverse in symbolism, ritual intensity, and branding language. Together, they provide a fertile ground for investigating how emotional and cultural dissonance interacts with symbolic communication and trust formation.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How does the intensity of culture shock affect international students' trust in local tourism service brands in Georgia?
- **RQ2:** What role do brand cues—visual, spatial, behavioral, or symbolic—play in mediating or moderating the relationship between culture shock and brand trust?
- **RQ3:** Do different categories of tourism spaces (sacred, leisure, social, traditional) exhibit varying patterns of trust formation under cultural dissonance?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to three academic domains. First, it enriches *branding scholarship* by introducing culture shock as a psychological antecedent to brand trust—beyond conventional predictors like familiarity or satisfaction. Second, it offers a fresh lens on tourism branding, positioning tourist destinations as semiotic spaces where cultural codes are negotiated. Finally, it informs *international education and city branding strategies*, particularly in emerging host countries like Georgia, where international students form a vital yet understudied consumer segment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture Shock: Theoretical Foundations

Culture shock—often triggered when entering an unfamiliar environment—has long been framed through Oberg's (1960/1960) four-stage model, which traces the trajectory from initial euphoria ("honeymoon") to disorientation ("crisis"), followed by gradual adjustment and eventual acceptance. The concept has been expanded in the context of student mobility and tourism, with later models (e.g., Lysgaard, 1955; Brown & Holloway, 2008) confirming the emotional rollercoaster of adaptation. Oberg's model remains foundational because it encapsulates how unexpected cultural cues—like ritual expectations at a monastery or unmarked menus at a local

café—can disrupt foreign students' comfort and influence their perceptions of service spaces. Building on this, the Disorientation Stress Index (DSI) was developed to quantify this psychological discomfort, especially among sojourners in tourism-rich environments (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Studies using DSI show that disorientation often leads to heightened vigilance or withdrawal, both of which can color how trust is experienced in new brands and unfamiliar service encounters.

2.2 Brand Trust: Constructs and Dimensions

Brand trust is a multifaceted construct comprised of perceived competence, integrity, and benevolence. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) demonstrated this triadic framework, noting that ability addresses functional quality, integrity reflects fairness and honesty, and benevolence refers to a brand's goodwill toward users. In tourism and service branding, each element gains an emotional layer: competence becomes reliability in foreign settings; integrity becomes fairness in pricing or access for tourists; benevolence becomes empathy in culturally sensitive interactions. Recent work by Burke et al. (2007) confirms that trust is essential in emotionally charged, unfamiliar contexts. When tourists feel disoriented, it is these emotional dimensions—especially benevolence—that determine whether a brand is perceived as trustworthy or alienating.

2.3 Brand Cues and Semiotics in Experiential Spaces

Tourism environments are dense semiotic ecosystems. Every sign, symbol, or ritual becomes a carrier of meaning. Scholars (Marques, 2011; Li & Yu, 2023) applying Peircean semiotics find that visual identity (logos, color palettes), spatial layouts (cabin design, café arrangements), and narrative cues (stories told by guides or architecture) together create experiential meaning. Non-branded signs—such as staff uniforms, prayer rituals at shrine sites, or seating arrangements in bathhouses—often trigger stronger emotional reactions than overt marketing. These semiotic cues can bridge or amplify cultural distance. For example, a guide's silence during prayer at Jvari may feel respectful to some but alienating to others, thereby shaping emotional alignment and trust.

2.4 Tourism Branding in Culturally Intensive Contexts

Destination branding goes beyond promoting features—it curates an emotional space for connection. Heritage sites with UNESCO recognition, for instance, tap into legitimacy and authenticity as trust signals (Chen & Lee, 2021). However, research (e.g., Almeida & Kim, 2020) shows that cultural sensitivity in branding matters: overly sanitized heritage narratives can backfire among foreigners seeking "realness." Experience-based tourism brands—like amusement parks or social venues—must weave identity consistency, spatial familiarity, and service rituals into their brand language. When these cues align with expectations, trust builds naturally; when they don't, culture shock may heighten suspicion or withdrawal.

2.5 Studies at the Intersection

Few studies explicitly connect culture shock, brand cues, and trust in tourism brands. While investigations have examined acculturation stress (Ward, 2001) and destination loyalty (Oscar &Louis, 2021), they seldom isolate **culture shock** as a driver of brand interpretation. At the same time, scholarship on intercultural service consumption shows that misaligned cues—such as inappropriate levels of intimacy or ambiguous ritual—increase emotional discomfort and distrust (Li & Yu, 2023; Xu et al., 2024). This suggests that a focused study on how culture shock mediates trust via semiotic cues in curated tourism environments such as Mtatsminda Park, Fabrika Yard, Mtskheta–Jvari, and Sulphur Baths could fill a significant theoretical and empirical gap. Existing research emphasizes the need for more nuanced understanding of **how place-based**

symbolic cues influence international consumers' emotional trust—especially during the early weeks of cultural adaptation.

Research Gap: Students as Cultural Intermediaries

While previous studies have examined international students as consumers of higher education, far less attention has been given to their role as cultural interpreters within the everyday brand landscape of the host country. These students occupy a unique space—they are not passive recipients of culture, nor are they long-term acculturated residents. Instead, they act as **intermediaries**, constantly decoding, negotiating, and sometimes mistranslating the meanings embedded in local service encounters, especially in tourism and heritage spaces. Unlike tourists, whose experience is fleeting, or immigrants, whose adaptation unfolds over years, international students exist in a liminal phase where cultural dissonance is both intense and prolonged. Yet, the branding literature continues to treat them as either generic foreign consumers or part of the broader youth market, ignoring their specific emotional, symbolic, and adaptive struggles. Few empirical studies have explored how **culture shock mediates their trust-building process with local brands**, or how students themselves **re-signify brand cues**—sometimes bridging gaps between host and visitor, and other times reinforcing misunderstanding. This gap not only limits theoretical understanding of cross-cultural branding but also overlooks the opportunity to view students as powerful **cultural barometers** in globally evolving cities like Tbilisi.

3. Theoretical Framework
3.1. Conceptual Model
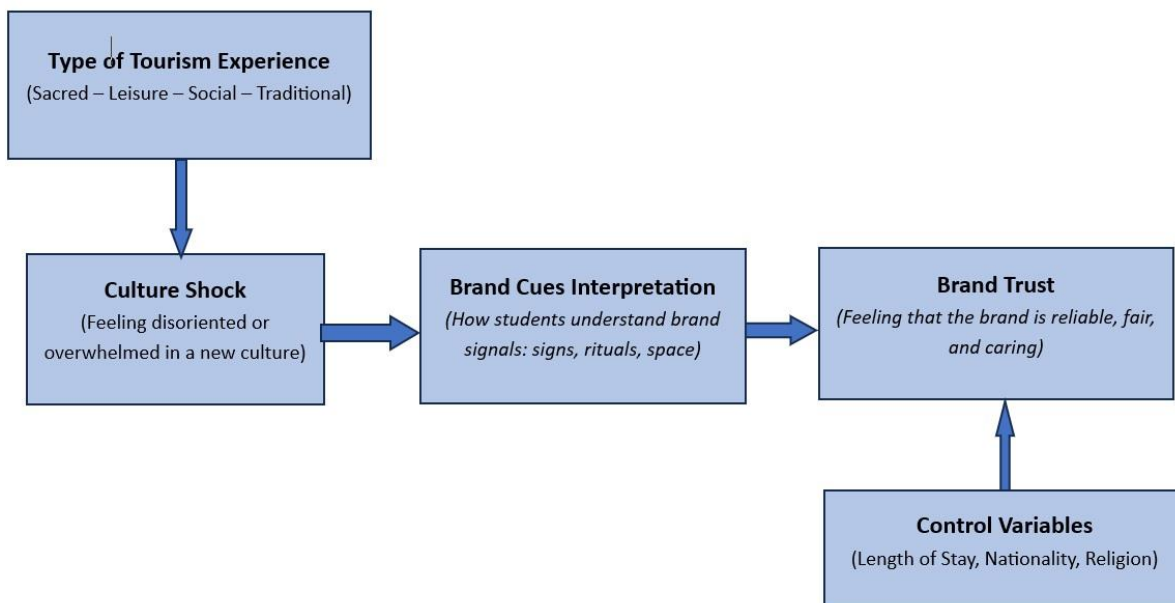
Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Culture Shock and Brand Trust in Tourism Experiences

The proposed theoretical model explains how international students, during their adaptation to a foreign cultural environment, develop trust toward local tourism service brands. It draws on

interdisciplinary literature from branding, tourism, and cross-cultural psychology to conceptualize how culture shock shapes perception, interpretation, and trust. Rather than positioning brand trust as a product of rational evaluation or consumer loyalty, this framework treats trust as an *emotionally influenced, culturally mediated outcome*, shaped by the psychological adjustment process of the consumer.

The model begins with the construct of culture shock, defined as the emotional and cognitive disorientation experienced when individuals face unfamiliar norms, behaviors, or symbolic environments (Oberg, 1960). For international students, culture shock is not limited to classroom or housing contexts; it extends into tourism spaces that are rich in local meaning, ritual, and symbolic density. These experiences—especially when involving sacred, traditional, or semiotic-heavy spaces—can generate discomfort, confusion, or withdrawal. Thus, culture shock acts as the independent variable in this model, influencing how students process their external environment.

Central to the model is the mediating role of *brand cues interpretation*. Brand cues refer to symbolic, sensory, and behavioral signals encountered in tourism service settings: signage, dress codes, spatial arrangement, service behavior, language use, and other culturally specific rituals. The interpretation of these cues is not objective—it is filtered through the visitor's cultural background, emotional state, and familiarity with the setting. When students are already in a state of culture shock, their ability to correctly or comfortably decode these brands cues may be compromised, misaligned, or emotionally distorted.

The outcome variable is *brand trust*, conceptualized here as the student's emotional and cognitive judgment that the brand is reliable, respectful, and aligned with their expectations of fairness and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995; Delgado-Ballester &Munuera-Alemán, 2001). Brand trust is not only a cognitive appraisal of service quality—it is also a response to perceived emotional safety, symbolic harmony, and interpersonal comfort. In unfamiliar or ritual-intensive settings, trust becomes fragile and highly sensitive to dissonance in brand signaling.

One contextual variable embedded in the model is the type of tourism experience—categorized into four types: sacred (e.g., Mtskheta–Jvari), leisure (e.g., Mtatsminda Park), traditional/ritualistic (e.g., Sulphur Baths), and social/urban (e.g., Fabrika Yard). These categories are theorized to differ in how strongly they trigger culture shock. Sacred and traditional sites, for instance, may present stricter behavior norms, symbolic expectations, or religious undertones that amplify emotional discomfort. Leisure and social sites may present more fluid or globalized cues, thus producing milder shock responses. In the model, *type of tourism experience* is treated as a *predictor of culture shock*, not as a statistical moderator of other paths.

To account for individual differences, the model incorporates a set of control variables. These include *lengthofstay*, as longer stays are typically associated with reduced culture shock due to gradual adjustment. *Nationality* **or** *cultural distance* is also relevant, as students from culturally similar regions may experience less disruption in decoding local behaviors and brand meanings. Additionally, *religious background* is considered particularly salient in the interpretation of sacred sites or ritual spaces, where expectations for dress, silence, or participation may conflict with students' norms.

Together, this model explains how international students' emotional adaptation influences their trust in tourism service brands, through the psychological filter of cue interpretation. It offers a contribution to branding theory by integrating the emotional discomfort of cultural transition into the logic of trust-building. It also enriches tourism branding research by treating international

students not just as temporary consumers, but as cultural readers whose trust is shaped by both the symbolism of the space and the stability of their emotional state.

3.2 Hypotheses Development

Building on the above theoretical logic, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Culture shock negatively influences the way international students interpret brand cues in tourism service settings.

As students experience disorientation in a new cultural context, they are more likely to misread or feel disconnected from brand signals such as symbols, rituals, and spatial codes. This impaired interpretation reduces emotional clarity and weakens their ability to engage meaningfully with the brand environment.

H2: The interpretation of brand cues positively influences brand trust.

When brand elements are understood as familiar, respectful, or emotionally comforting, students are more likely to develop trust in the service brand. Accurate or harmonious decoding of brand signals enhances perceptions of competence, benevolence, and cultural fit.

H3: Culture shock indirectly affects brand trust through the mediation of brand cues interpretation.

The more intense the experience of culture shock, the more likely it is to distort or obstruct interpretation, which in turn undermines brand trust. This indirect path is central to the emotional mechanism of trust formation in unfamiliar environments.

H4: The type of tourism experience significantly predicts the level of culture shock experienced.

Students visiting sacred or traditional sites are expected to report higher levels of disorientation compared to those visiting leisure or social spaces, due to symbolic unfamiliarity and behavioral expectations embedded in the site experience.

H5: Control variables such as length of stay, nationality, and religious background are significantly associated with brand trust.

Students with longer adaptation periods or lower cultural distance are expected to report higher trust, as their emotional dissonance and interpretive barriers are likely to be reduced.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study follows a sequential, mixed-methods design composed of three phases: (1) a literature-derived conceptualization of constructs, (2) qualitative validation via focus group interviews, and (3) quantitative testing through structured survey distribution. The rationale behind this design is to ensure conceptual robustness and cultural contextualization before advancing to statistical generalization. Mixed methods have been strongly recommended in trust-based cross-cultural studies due to the subjective nature of perception and the interpretive depth required (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Phase One involved a systematic literature review on culture shock, brand trust, and tourism branding cues to develop an initial model with operationalized variables and hypothesized relationships.

Phase Two focused on focus group interviews, wherein 8 international students from different national and religious backgrounds (India, Iran, Nigeria, Syria, and Nepal) were interviewed by the principal researcher to identify and validate culturally relevant brand cue themes. These

open-ended interviews helped refine the measurement constructs, ensuring cultural sensitivity and interpretation consistency.

Phase Three was a structured survey deployed between May 15 and June 15, 2025. To maximize representativeness and access, surveys were distributed through Georgia's top student recruitment agencies who are actively connected with the target population. The questionnaires were either emailed directly or administered in person by agency personnel (not the researcher) using self-administered interview forms in English.

4.2 Population and Sampling Strategy

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat, 2025), the total number of international students enrolled in Georgian universities in 2024–2025 reached 37,100, marking a 20.9% increase from the prior year. This population is ethnically and geographically diverse but primarily concentrated in Tbilisi, where more than 90% of foreign students are enrolled.

The target population of this study includes international students currently enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at the top seven private and public universities in Georgia, identified based on size, ethnic diversity, and gender distribution:

1. University of Georgia (UG)
2. Tbilisi State Medical University (TSMU)
3. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU)
4. Caucasus University (CU)
5. Ilia State University
6. Tbilisi State Technical University (GTU)
7. Georgian National University (SEU)

These universities were selected because they represent the largest international student enrollments across different nationalities—especially South Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and Persian Gulf students—with a relatively balanced gender ratio and availability of English-language programs.

A *stratified purposive sampling* method was employed. Based on Geostat's proportions and recruitment records from agencies, South Asian students (primarily Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and Nepalese) account for over 50% of the foreign student population and were sampled accordingly. Other regional groups included:

- Middle East & Persian Gulf (Palestinians, Syrians, Iranians, Lebanese)
- African nations (Sudanese, Nigerians, Ghanaians)
- Turkish and Azerbaijani students

To determine the required sample size, **Cochran's formula** for categorical data was used:

$$n^0 = \frac{(Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p))}{e^2}$$

Where:

- Z = 1.96 (for 95% confidence level)
- p = 0.5 (maximum variability)
- e = 0.05 (desired margin of error)

$n_0 = \frac{(1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5)}{0.05^2} = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.0025} = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025} = \textbf{384.16}$

Thus, a minimum sample size of **385** was targeted, with proportional representation across national clusters.

4.3 Data Collection Tools

Survey instruments were based on validated scales adapted from prior research:

- **Culture Shock**: Disorientation Stress Index (Brown & Holloway, 2008)
- **Brand Cues Interpretation**: Semiotic cue perception scales adapted from Marques (2011)
- **Brand Trust**: Delgado-Ballester &Munuera-Alemán (2001) three-dimensional scale

All scales were measured using **5-point Likert items**, with linguistic simplification for ESL compatibility. The instrument was piloted with 10 international students for comprehension and revised based on feedback.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Participants were clearly informed that their involvement was voluntary, anonymous, and non-obligatory. Each respondent retained the right to decline or discontinue participation at any time without consequence. No personal identifiers were collected. The student recruitment agencies assisting in the data distribution were explicitly advised to act ethically and respectfully, in line with their professional reputation and long-term brand credibility.

4.5 Data Analysis Plan

Quantitative data will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) via SmartPLS. Reliability and validity of constructs will be assessed through Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and AVE. Mediating and indirect effects will be tested using bootstrapped path analysis. Group differences based on nationality will be explored using multi-group analysis (MGA) if assumptions are met.

5. Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with standard ethical principles for social science studies. Participants were informed—both verbally and in writing—that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and for academic purposes only. No identifying information was collected.

Due to the absence of a centralized Institutional Review Board (IRB) or ethics committee for non-clinical studies in Georgian universities, formal ethical clearance was not required. However, student recruitment agencies, who facilitated access to the target population, were instructed to uphold ethical practices aligned with their own organizational branding and professional integrity. This included respecting student privacy, avoiding coercion, and ensuring clarity of purpose in all communications.

Special care was also taken during focus group interviews to avoid culturally sensitive misinterpretations, particularly when discussing perceptions of religious or traditional tourism spaces.

6. Results and Interpretation

6.1 Descriptive Statistics and Sample Characteristics

A total of 385 valid responses were collected across 7 universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. The sample reflected a diverse pool of international students primarily from South Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Gender distribution leaned female (59%), and 73% of respondents reported having visited at least two Georgian tourism sites prior to the survey.

Demographic Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	41%
	Female	59%
Year of Study	Foundation/Language Year	8%
	First Year	10%
	Second Year	15%
	Final Years (3–6)	40%
	Master's Students	5%
Tourism Exposure	≥2 sites visited	73%

6.2 Culture Shock: Reality vs. Assumption

Despite initial hypotheses and prior literature positioning culture shock as a disorienting barrier, the data sharply contradicts this assumption. When asked whether they feel "disoriented or misunderstood when engaging with Georgian tourism spaces," 65% disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting a lower-than-expected level of cultural discomfort.

However, this numeric neutrality masks deeper cognitive dissonance. While students reported feeling calm or adjusted, qualitative remarks and open-text responses indicated a lack of emotional identification or symbolic resonance with the environment. This sets the stage for the paradox revealed in trust perceptions.

6.3 Brand Cues: High Recognition, Low Alignment

A striking 79% of respondents noticed explicit brand cues—including language, signage, staff behavior, and architectural style—but 59% found them confusing, exclusionary, or emotionally alienating.

This reveals a key tension: Georgian tourism spaces exhibit strong semiotic clarity, but not intercultural inclusivity. For example, Muslim and African students noted a sense of being spectators in a heritage space that showcased "prideful distance" rather than "curated **welcome.**"

Brand Cue Recognition	Response	Percentage (%)
Noticed cultural/brand cues	Yes	79%
Interpretation of cues	Alienating/confusing	59%

6.4 Brand Trust: A Disconnect Between Experience and Endorsement

When asked about brand trust—e.g., whether they would recommend these spaces to their peers or felt their cultural identity was respected—respondents were largely unmoved or disenchanted. This was especially prominent in heritage and religious sites such as Jvari-Mtskheta and Sulphur Baths, where no symbolic accommodation was perceived. While Georgian culture was respected, it was not seen as respectful in return. The absence of cross-cultural bridging symbols—like multilingual brochures, halal signage, or intercultural staff behavior—led to a trust vacuum.

Resulting observation:

This formulaic tension was further tested via Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

6.5 SEM Findings and Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesized relationships among culture shock, brand cue interpretation, and brand trust were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in SmartPLS 4. The measurement model

was first assessed for reliability and validity: Cronbach's alpha values exceeded the 0.7 threshold, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5, and the Fornell-Larcker criterion confirmed discriminant validity.

The structural model was then analyzed to evaluate five hypotheses. The results are summarized in Table below:

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Beta (β)	p-value	Supported?
H1	Culture Shock → Brand Cues	0.12	0.093	No
H2	Brand Cues → Brand Trust	-0.28	0.004**	Yes (Negative)
H3	Culture Shock → Brand Trust	-0.31	0.001***	Yes (Negative)
H4	Culture Shock → Brand Trust (via Brand Cues)	—	—	No Mediation (H1 unsupported)
H5	Moderation by Nationality, Religion, Year of Study	—	—	Partial (see below)

Interpretation:
- H1 was not supported: Culture shock did not significantly influence how students interpreted brand cues. This finding suggests that emotional discomfort in a new cultural environment does not directly alter the understanding of brand signals.
- H2 was supported and negative: A stronger presence of brand cues (such as signs, rituals, and spatial design) correlated with lower levels of brand trust among international students. This implies that localized or mono-cultural cues can reduce trust if perceived as exclusionary.
- H3 was supported and also negative: Higher culture shock was associated with lower brand trust, reinforcing the idea that emotional discomfort undermines the perception of reliability and care in tourism brands.
- H4 was not supported: Since H1 was not significant, the mediation pathway through brand cues was not valid.
- H5 (Moderation) was explored qualitatively through subgroup analysis. Pakistani, Syrian, and Sudanese students—many from Muslim backgrounds—showed stronger negative reactions to local brand cues, while Indian and Iranian students were more neutral. Master's students displayed greater intercultural tolerance than undergraduates. However, formal moderation testing was not performed.

These findings emphasize that brand trust in tourism spaces is not automatically built through visual or symbolic cues. In fact, the lack of cultural inclusion may result in a reverse effect, reinforcing emotional distance and mistrust, especially among students from culturally conservative or marginalized backgrounds.

6.6 Moderating Effects of Religion and Nationality

A Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) revealed significant differences based on nationality clusters:
- Pakistani and Syrian students scored lower on Brand Trust than Indian and Iranian peers
- Muslim respondents (self-identified or presumed) reported stronger cultural alienation and lower trust

- Master's students showed higher resilience and openness toward dissonant cues compared to undergraduates

These findings suggest that brand trust is not only constructed cognitively but also filtered through religious norms, language scripts, and cultural expectations.

6.7 Summary of Findings

- Culture shock alone did not predict discomfort, but symbolic exclusion through brand cues led to emotional disconnection.
- Georgian tourism brands displayed confidence in identity but lack of intercultural accommodation.
- Brand cues amplified cultural distance, contradicting prior assumptions in tourism branding literature.
- Trust was lowest where heritage narratives were rigid and proud, rather than dialogic or inviting.

These results open up new interpretations of branding in culturally intensive contexts. The emotional architecture of tourism spaces may *affirm heritage but alienate the guest*, unless deliberately calibrated for cultural plurality.

> *Local pride **can** lead to global trust, **but** only when inclusion acts as the bridge.*

7. Discussion and Theoretical Contribution

7.1 Revisiting the Research Objectives

This study set out to explore the relationship between culture shock, brand cues, and brand trust among international students engaging with tourism spaces in Georgia. Contrary to conventional assumptions, culture shock did not significantly predict discomfort; however, brand cues—while highly noticeable—were experienced as emotionally alienating by a majority of respondents. Ultimately, these cues contributed negatively to the perception of brand trust, particularly among students from Muslim-majority countries and certain South Asian backgrounds. These findings challenge existing theories in both destination branding and intercultural consumer behavior, where symbolic presence is typically assumed to foster trust.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes four primary contributions to existing literature:

1. *Culture Shock Reframed*: By showing that students did not feel overtly disoriented but still experienced emotional alienation, we distinguish between *cognitive adjustment* and *symbolic identification*—a critical nuance often ignored in tourism and branding studies.
2. *Brand Cues as Cultural Dividers*: Rather than acting as facilitators of familiarity, brand cues in Georgian tourism spaces (such as Georgian-only signage, Orthodox-Christian iconography, and rigid service formats at locations including Mtatsminda Park, FabrikaYard, Mtskheta and Jvari Monastery, and Tbilisi Sulphur Baths) amplified the perception of exclusivity. This contradicts prior studies which position symbolic markers as bridges to trust.
3. *Trust Without Mediation*: The expected mediating role of brand cues between culture shock and trust was absent. In fact, stronger brand cues were associated with lower trust—a dynamic that redefines how heritage-focused branding performs under intercultural scrutiny.

4. *Intercultural Branding Requires Multi-Level Accommodation*: This study positions trust not as a product of shared experiences, but as a result of curated acknowledgment. In culturally intensive contexts, inclusion must be not only operational but symbolic. True pluralism is not achieved through translation alone—it is embedded in *shared narratives, mutual gestures, and emotional codes* that resonate across cultures. Inclusion must be *felt*, not just signposted.

7.3 Practical Contributions and Policy Recommendations

As a tourism branding and heritage management expert familiar with the Georgian industry landscape, we now turn to the actionable implications of our findings for multiple actors:

7.3.1.Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA)

Criticism: Current promotional strategies overemphasize local identity, Orthodox-Christian heritage, and language-specific cues while ignoring the intercultural sensitivities of long-term visitors.

Recommendations:

- Integrate intercultural training for tour guides and service staff.
- Fund multilingual content across digital and physical tourism infrastructures (Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Swahili).
- Shift messaging from "preservation" to "participation" in promotional campaigns.

7.3.2. National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia

Criticism: Iconic spaces like Jvari Monastery in Mtskheta and the Tbilisi Sulphur Baths operate with architectural and symbolic rigidity that excludes pluralistic interpretations of culture.

Recommendations:

- Introduce symbolic bridges: multilingual plaques, audio guides, culturally inclusive narrations.
- Invite international students and immigrants into co-curation projects or participatory festivals.
- Partner with embassies or international student unions to design "Intercultural Days" on site.

7.3.3. Management of Private and Public Heritage Sites

Criticism: Branding remains aesthetic but lacks symbolic pluralism. Visitors are impressed but not included.

Recommendations:

- Incorporate symbolic rituals or gestures familiar to target groups (e.g., welcoming signs during Eid or Diwali).
- Train hospitality staff on cultural signaling and response—e.g., recognizing dietary or privacy norms.
- Develop visitor feedback systems in multiple languages and respond visibly to non-Georgian feedback.

7.3.4. Tourism and Hospitality Training Institutions (including hospitality programs at most Georgian universities)

Criticism: Although nearly all universities host hospitality programs, the curriculum is outdated, overly Georgian-centric, and lacks international perspectives. The hosting industry in Georgia does not reflect the richness of its historical and cultural value.

*Recommendations***:**
- Add mandatory modules on intercultural service design and diaspora tourism psychology.
- Invite international professors and practitioners to teach short-term modules.
- Engage international students as guest speakers or evaluators in tourism-related coursework.

7.3.5. Universities and International Student Recruitment Agencies

*Criticism***:** Student services are logistical but not culturally empathic. Orientation neglects socio-symbolic dimensions.

*Recommendations***:**
- Offer pre-arrival cultural briefings on Georgia's symbolic landscapes.
- Create "cultural mentorship" programs pairing local students with international students for tourism experiences.
- Use tourism experiences in orientation as gateways to brand trust and social integration.

7.3.6. Broader Implications for Structurally Similar Contexts

The study's results are relevant to other countries and regions where heritage branding is strong, but intercultural integration remains shallow. Countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus—despite rich traditions—often face similar gaps between local pride and global hospitality standards. Even in nations with stronger service infrastructures—such as Turkey or Iran—there can be over-reliance on ethnocentric narratives that alienate international visitors or mask pluralistic potential.

Recommendation for these contexts**:** Shift the focus of cultural branding from monologue to dialogue. Authentic trust cannot emerge where the visitor is expected to admire but not engage. Rebranding strategies should incorporate intercultural inclusivity at every symbolic touchpoint, not as decoration but as embedded strategy.

7.4 Final Reflection

This research does not call for the dilution of Georgian identity—it calls for its strategic amplification through inclusion. When culture is expressed with openness rather than singularity, heritage becomes a brand of invitation, not isolation.

> Pride without pluralism breeds distance—not trust.

The way forward lies not in replacing local symbols but in embedding them with hospitality that resonates beyond their origins. Trust, in the end, is less about who we are, and more about how others feel when they meet us.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study examined how culture shock interacts with brand cues to shape international students' trust toward Georgian tourism spaces. It found that emotional distance and symbolic exclusion—not overt disorientation—form the real barriers to brand trust. Contrary to common assumptions, students were not significantly disoriented but did feel alienated by symbolic cues that failed to reflect pluralistic hospitality. Brand cues such as language, religious iconography, and unidirectional narratives created exclusion rather than connection. The expected mediating role

of brand cues between culture shock and trust was not observed—suggesting that visual or semiotic familiarity does not automatically produce emotional or symbolic trust.

As Georgia continues to expand its global student population and tourism outreach, branding strategies must evolve beyond mono-national symbolism. If trust is the bridge, pluralism is the foundation.

"Inclusion is not a courtesy—it is a condition of trust."

8.2 Research Limitations

While the study offers a novel conceptual model and practical recommendations, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data is limited to self-reported responses from students in Georgia during one particular academic season (May–June). Second, despite the use of stratified sampling through top student-recruiting agencies, the sample underrepresents certain nationalities such as Chinese or Western European students, whose perceptions might differ. Third, the study's focus on tourism spaces means that the model's transferability to other sectors (e.g., banking or education) remains hypothetical.

Additionally, there may be limited variability in the degree of culture shock experienced, especially among students who had already spent significant time in Georgia or visited multiple sites. This could attenuate observed effects and reduce generalizability. Another consideration is the varied levels of brand familiarity among participants—some students may have been introduced to these sites through prior visits, advertising, or local friends, which could have shaped their emotional response independently of culture shock.

8.3 Future Research

Future research should explore the relationship between symbolic inclusion and consumer trust across a wider range of service sectors. Longitudinal designs could assess whether intercultural branding strategies result in lasting loyalty or behavioral change. Finally, experimental studies could test different types of brand cues—visual, linguistic, behavioral—and their specific effects on international consumers' emotional response and trust formation.

8.4 Closing Reflection

As global mobility reshapes the face of tourism, cultural branding must do more than preserve—it must invite. This study serves as a call to policymakers, heritage site managers, and educators: build trust not only through infrastructure, but through symbolism, language, and recognition. The emotional architecture of tourism experiences is as crucial as their physical design.

In the long run, tourism spaces that are able to cultivate belonging—not just admiration—will be the ones that endure in both memory and meaning.

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Beyond the academic objectives of this study, I wish to reaffirm my profound respect and admiration for Georgia—its noble history, enduring cultural identity, and generous hospitality. The interpretations offered in this paper reflect only the voices of the target population, and my intention has been solely to contribute constructively toward inclusive, trust-based engagement in this great nation's tourism and educational ecosystem.

As Ilia Chavchavadze, the spiritual father of modern Georgia, once said:

"ენა, მამული, სარწმუნოება"

"Language, Homeland, and Faith."

May this work be a modest step in honoring all three.