

Yacuvíña as Cultural Heritage: A Transdisciplinary Approach to Tourism and Archaeological Heritage Enhancement through Visual Communication and Advertising

Yacuvíña como patrimonio cultural: una aproximación transdisciplinaria desde la Comunicación Visual y la Publicidad en la puesta en valor turístico-arqueológica

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Abstract

The Yacuvíña Archaeological Complex (CAY), located in El Oro Province, Ecuador, is a cultural heritage site of substantial historical and symbolic value, yet its public visibility and tourism use remain limited. This study analyzed the current state of visual and advertising communication at CAY and formulated transdisciplinary strategies to enhance its tourism and archaeological value, strengthen its cultural identity, and generate positive socioeconomic benefits for the

Resumen

El Complejo Arqueológico Yacuvíña (CAY), ubicado en la provincia de El Oro, Ecuador, representa un patrimonio cultural de gran valor histórico y simbólico, aunque su difusión y aprovechamiento turístico han sido limitados. De ahí que esta investigación tuviera como objetivo el análisis del estado actual de la comunicación visual y publicitaria del Complejo Arqueológico Yacuvíña (CAY) para formular estrategias transdisciplinarias que potencien su puesta en valor turístico-ar-

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community of Atahualpa. The study adopted a transdisciplinary approach integrating visual communication and advertising. It combined an extensive review of 35 sources (archaeological reports from the National Institute of Cultural Heritage [INPC], academic studies, and municipal management documents) with six months of ethnographic fieldwork involving participant observation, in-depth interviews, and semiotic analysis of 142 photographs. Strategic frameworks for visual storytelling, place branding, and immersive cultural experiences were examined. The results show that 78% of visitors consider the available information insufficient and that 62% cannot distinguish among the cultural periods represented, reflecting what we term the «static display case syndrome.» The name «Yacuvíña» («eternal water») is a powerful but underused marker of identity. The synergistic use of visual communication and advertising could substantially increase CAY's visibility, reinforce its cultural identity, and catalyze positive socioeconomic outcomes for the local community of Atahualpa while promoting responsible heritage stewardship.

Keywords: archaeological heritage; visual communication; place branding; cultural tourism; Yacuvíña; Ecuador.

queológico, fortalezcan su identidad cultural y generen impactos socioeconómicos positivos en la comunidad de Atahualpa. En cuanto a la metodología, este artículo propone un enfoque transdisciplinario que integra la comunicación visual y la publicidad para su puesta en valor integral. A partir de un análisis documental exhaustivo de 35 fuentes (informes arqueológicos del INPC, estudios académicos y documentos de gestión municipal) y un trabajo de campo etnográfico de seis meses que incluyó observación participante, entrevistas en profundidad y análisis semiótico de 142 fotografías, se examinan marcos estratégicos para la narrativa visual, el branding territorial y el diseño de experiencias culturales inmersivas. Los resultados indican que el 78% de los visitantes considera insuficiente la información actual y el 62% no logra diferenciar los periodos culturales representados, evidenciando lo que se denomina “síndrome de vitrina estática”. El nombre “Yacuvíña” (agua eterna) constituye un potente signo identitario desaprovechado. Esto nos lleva a la conclusión de que la aplicación sinérgica de la comunicación visual y la publicidad puede elevar significativamente la visibilidad del CAY, fortalecer su identidad cultural y catalizar impactos socioeconómicos positivos para la comunidad local de Atahualpa, promoviendo al mismo tiempo una apropiación responsable del patrimonio.

Palabras clave: Patrimonio arqueológico; comunicación visual; branding territorial; turismo cultural; Yacuvíña; Ecuador.

Introduction

The Yacuvíña Archaeological Complex (CAY), located in El Oro Province, Ecuador, provides material evidence of the Palta, Cañari, and Inca cultures. Despite its historical and scenic value, the site has received limited public exposure and tourism use. This article proposes an interdisciplinary approach that integrates visual communication and advertising as strategic pillars for enhancing the site's value. It begins from the premise that perceptions of heritage depend not only on its intrinsic value but also on the narratives and visual representations constructed around it (Smith, 2006).

Within Ecuadorian archaeology, particularly in El Oro Province, some areas have yet to be systematically explored, studied, and disseminated through scientific publications. CAY, located near the urban parish of Paccha in Atahualpa Canton, is one such area. The few available studies provide only limited insight into the past because they are based on scarce archaeological data or have not been published systematically in the scientific literature.

For residents of Atahualpa Canton, especially those in Paccha, the ruins of Yacuvíña embody the identity of the territory, together with legends of ancient civilizations and its cultural, archaeological, and artisanal wealth. Research into the site's origins has been conducted since the early twentieth century. It is thought that the first occupants were hunter-gatherer groups who used nearby caves as shelters. The territory was subsequently occupied by different civilizations from the northern and southern

regions of the continent. The Cañari are believed to have established temporary settlements there, and excavations have uncovered several types of pottery, suggesting that the site served as a meeting place and center of intercultural exchange (Lumbreras, 1982).

CAY is a cultural heritage site of exceptional historical and symbolic value, yet it has virtually no established communication or advertising presence. This article examines the site from the perspectives of visual communication and advertising, identifying opportunities, shortcomings, and potential strategies for heritage enhancement on the basis of theoretical frameworks developed by specialists in these fields.

The general objective of this study is to characterize the Yacuvíña Archaeological Complex and propose visual communication and advertising strategies that contribute to restoring the area's sociocultural identity and strengthening its local economy. Such strategies could help address the agricultural crisis in the upper areas of the province, where a lack of employment opportunities drives young people to migrate to urban centers or abroad. CAY offers opportunities for adventure, cultural, and ecotourism that, through national and international dissemination, could create new jobs for the surrounding community.

Theoretical Framework

Visual Communication and Cultural Heritage

Visual communication plays a central role in constructing cultural meaning. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1972) argues that what and how

we see are shaped by what we know (p. 8). At CAY, visual narratives must move beyond simple archaeological description and connect with local identities and emotions. Photography, documentary video, and infographics can communicate the site's historical and ecological complexity.

According to Munari's (1971) theory of visual communication, design should mediate between an object and its user. In a heritage context, this means that signage, interpretive materials, and digital interfaces should guide visitors and enrich their experience. Well-planned design facilitates understanding of the site and encourages an emotional connection with its heritage.

In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) propose that images construct meaning through three metafunctions: representational, interactive, and compositional. Applied to CAY, the site's current photographs and visual materials lack a coherent narrative structure, making it difficult to convey its cultural complexity.

Advertising and Place Branding

Heritage advertising seeks to position places as brands with distinctive identities and symbolic value. In *Marketing Places*, Kotler and Gertner (1993) argue that place promotion should be based on a territory's unique attributes and the creation of memorable experiences. For CAY, this entails developing a brand identity that integrates elements such as eternal water (Yacuvíña), hybrid architecture, and Andean biodiversity.

In *The Tourist*, MacCannell (1976) examines

how tourists seek authentic experiences in a world perceived as artificial. Promotion of CAY should avoid folklorization and instead emphasize the site's genuine authenticity. Campaigns such as «Yacuvíña: Eternal Water, Living History» could be implemented through social media, partnerships with cultural influencers, and participation in international archaeological tourism fairs.

Nikulina et al. (2024) demonstrate that an image must narrate, act, and resonate (NAR) to transport viewers into its story. This model could underpin a visual storytelling campaign for CAY in which water - the element that names and structures the site - becomes the protagonist of a cultural narrative.

Design and the Visitor Experience

Graphic design serves not only an aesthetic function but also functional and communicative purposes. Frascara (2006) notes that heritage signage should fulfill three functions: orientation, information, and education. Current signage at CAY provides only basic information and fails to realize its educational and narrative potential.

In *Uses of Heritage*, Smith (2006) argues that heritage is not something people simply «have» but something they actively «do» through communicative processes. From this perspective, CAY is not heritage solely because of its physical existence; it becomes heritage through the discourses and representations that construct it as such. The absence of visual communication and advertising has prevented CAY from being actively established as heritage in the collective imagination.

Theories of the Earliest Migrations to the Americas and El Oro Province

The peopling of the Americas remains the subject of academic debate, with three principal migration routes commonly discussed: a coastal migration from Oceania through Polynesia, an Atlantic route from Europe across the glaciers of the Arctic Circle, and migration from Asia across the Bering land bridge. The last of these is the predominant theory and holds that Asian hunter-gatherer groups entered the continent over a land bridge formed during glacial periods, when sea levels fell by approximately 120 meters and connected Siberia with Alaska (Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino, 2021).

In addition, the «Coastal Migration Hypothesis» proposed by Espiro (2024) suggests that the earliest peoples of the Americas moved southward along the Pacific coast from Beringia, which would explain their rapid dispersal into South America; this hypothesis is supported by archaeological evidence of early coastal occupations. Migration into the upper areas of El Oro Province is thought to have originated in northern Ecuador and to have occurred between 10,000 and 4000 BC, during the so-called Preceramic Period. Nomadic hunter-gatherer groups initially arrived in the region and, owing to its abundant flora and fauna and favorable climate, became sedentary by the Late Formative Period. This process involved the construction of dwellings and the development of agriculture, supplemented by pottery trade with other regional settlements. The presence of the

Late Valdivia culture is particularly noteworthy because it is considered the earliest sedentary culture recorded in the area (Staller, 2015).

Researchers hypothesize that the ancient inhabitants of Yacuvíña crossed the Andes along a route connecting the settlements of Saraguro, Selva Alegre, Manú, Cequer, and Fátima before reaching Guanazán. From there, they followed the Tío Loma ridge and connected with Huertas through Cerro Corredores. The continued use of this route by residents of these communities lends considerable plausibility to the hypothesis.

Characteristics of the Yacuvíña Archaeological Complex

Location and Discovery

Located west of Paccha Parish, the complex was discovered by chance in 1994 by Aparicio Balarezo, the owner of the land, while clearing vegetation for cattle. It was subsequently added to the region's list of tourism and archaeological attractions. With sponsorship and funding from the Provincial Council of El Oro and logistical support from the Municipality of Atahualpa, archaeological restoration of CAY began in October 1999 under the direction of the INKA Foundation. Five months of work, conducted from October to December 1999 and in January and February 2000, uncovered an important group of structures dating to the Inca period in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Apolo, 2001).

Figure 1. Panoramic View of the Yacuvíña Archaeological Complex



Note. Photograph by the authors.

Architectural Structures

The principal structures include two temples, residential complexes of different status levels, plazas, a walled lake, stairways, and two springs supplied directly from the ground through natural water outlets and underground currents. These sources provide water even when the rest of the mountain range is dry, especially during the summer. Baths were constructed beside the springs, which supply crystal-clear water of excellent quality and provide the key to understanding the name Yacuvíña, translated from Kichwa as «eternal waters» or «permanent waters» (Apolo, 2001).

The extensive archaeological complex also contains an unusual feature: a deep cave in the highest part of the ruins. According to local beliefs, it contains human remains and objects made of clay and metal, although archaeologists have not yet conducted detailed excavations there.

Figure 2. Partial View of CAY



Note. Photograph by the authors.

For analytical purposes, CAY is divided into five main sectors: El Mirador, the cruciform structures, the residential area, the Uzhnu (a Quechua term meaning «sacred place» or «place of libations»), and the Temple of Catequilla. Additional subsectors include a 90-meter-diameter lagoon on the right side of the complex (now drained), two groups of terraces, one large plaza, and five smaller plazas. According to Hidrovo (2000), the large residential compounds were used by chiefs and officials, whereas the smaller structures served as recreational spaces for commoners during the Inca period.

Another distinctive feature is the presence of two baths fed by natural springs: a small bath for public use and a larger one, measuring approximately two meters in length, one meter in diameter, and three meters in height, reserved for the Inca elite. The most representative pottery recovered from the site is attributed to the Moche people of Peru (500 BC-AD 500), providing evidence of exchange among distant communities (Hidrovo, 2000).

With regard to the internal organization of dwellings, no evidence of spatial division has been found for either the Cañari or Inca periods. Both Cañari and Inca houses consisted of a single room and were architecturally simple; elaborate decoration was reserved for administrative and religious buildings (Pesántez & González, 2011, p. 44).

Cultural Affiliations of the Inhabitants

The similarity of the remains suggests that the inhabitants of the upper areas of El Oro Province

were connected with the Cañari, Palta, and Chimú cultures. The Cañari connection is supported by evidence from dwellings, pottery, and terraces. The Palta connection is associated with the Garrochamba ethnic group, which is believed to have inhabited part of Zaruma Canton. Chimú influence is indicated by imperial Chimú-style pottery found at several locations in the province.

The site's extensive architecture and agricultural terraces, characteristic of the Inca tradition, are also noteworthy. Archaeologists who have studied CAY's origins offer a scientific interpretation that differs from the stories told by local residents. Hidrovo (2000) argues that the complex shows evidence of an Inca presence between 1470 and 1530, the period in which the empire collapsed. CAY served not only as an Inca camp but also as a strategic point of communication with Indigenous cultures, particularly the Cañari at the Pucará lookout complex and the Saraguro in Loja.

Available evidence suggests that the Palta migrated to present-day Loja Province approximately 2,000 years ago. This interpretation is supported by finds along the ancient road that connected Piñas and Yacuvina with other areas of Zaruma, Atahualpa, and Portovelo. Along a four-hour walking route in the area, researchers identified a 50-centimeter-thick layer of Palta pottery. Its relatively coarse workmanship distinguishes it from the more highly finished Inca pottery. Archaeologist Bryan Granda considers this find evidence of dense and long-term Palta occupation at Yacuvina.

Figure 3. Bichrome Inca pottery similar to that found in Chinchero, Peru



Figure 4. Folded rims of Palta pottery.



Figure 5. Handles from a Palta vessel found alongside the folded rims.



Figure 6. Bases of Palta pottery bowls or plates.



Figure 7. Palta pottery decorated with incised lines.



Figure 8. Folded rims of Palta pottery.



In his research at CAY, Granda has examined three dimensions: urban layout, pottery, and lithic artifacts. These elements reveal differences between Inca and Palta material culture. Palta pottery is generally coarse, minimally finished, and fired at low temperatures (Figures 4-8), whereas Inca pottery is highly refined (Figure 3), well burnished, and durable because it was fired at temperatures of approximately 700°C. According

to Granda, the pottery found at CAY may have been influenced by pottery from Chinchero, Peru, given similarities in texture, clay composition, temper, and firing methods (Rivera, 1977).

Unlike Inca pottery, Palta pottery is characterized by a coarse orange fabric fired in open hearths, prominent modeled decoration such as clay bands bearing impressions from fingers, fingernails, or plants, and varied but

weakly standardized forms, including jars and cooking pots, often with ring bases and corrugated necks. These utilitarian household objects reflect the culture of the Palta people, who occupied southern Ecuador before the Incas and maintained close relationships with natural resources and life across different ecological zones. Their pottery expresses this emphasis through its simplicity and functionality.

The urban layout also reveals important differences. Palta culture left little clearly defined stone architecture, whereas the Incas remodeled the complex under orders from Huayna Cápac. Palta pottery did not acquire the level of refinement achieved by the Incas in slightly more than half a century; according to the author, this difference resulted not from the passage of time but from economic conditions, cultural organization, and ideological factors. Granda argues that the Inca arrived at Yacuvíña with an established cultural background and that CAY was a citadel inhabited primarily by the Palta. The site therefore served different functions for the two groups. For the Incas, it became a means of subordinating the Palta and exerting political and sociocultural pressure through cultural exchange, marriage alliances, treaties, or force.

Regarding the age of the artifacts, Granda notes that archaeologists rely on relative dating when absolute methods - such as radiocarbon, thermoluminescence, or uranium-series dating - cannot be used. This has been the case for objects recovered from the complex because of the high cost of absolute dating.

Architecture of the Yacuvíña Archaeological Complex

Yacuvíña is one of the most compelling archaeological sites in El Oro Province. Its distinctive features include a privileged natural setting, connections with different ecological zones and cultural regions, and an internal organization and architecture that distinguish it from other pre-Inca sites later reorganized under Cuzco rule. Many of these elements center on water, which gave the site its name and played a major role in ritual practices and spaces of worship, including the lake, baths, protective huanacas (monoliths typical of the Andean cultural area), canals, and at least two temples - one of earlier origin and another built by the Incas - arranged around the great plaza.

This location in the northern Andes, at the headwaters of an important river network extending toward the northern coast of Peru, is thought to have been known and incorporated into long-distance interregional exchange networks as early as the Moche period. This would explain the presence of Moche pottery at Yacuvíña and the Incas' later use of the site as a point of control over the highlands of Ecuador's far south. They retained earlier religious structures, including the temple of Apu Catequil, an aquatic deity in Inca cosmology. Its strategic position along the Tumbes-Tomebamba road placed Yacuvíña on an ancient route of contact and trade that the Incas subsequently revitalized (De Betanzos, 2010).

The ruins at CAY exhibit a hybrid architectural style that combines rectangular Inca plans with

the strong influence of Cañari architecture, which used circular forms in its urban layout. Most of the complex was built by the Incas using finely fitted, pillow-faced stone masonry without mortar. The site contains a total of 22 structures used for housing, storage, and other purposes (Meyers, 1998).

Figure 9. Residential Complex at Yacuvíña



Note. Photograph by the authors.

No evidence of internal spatial divisions has been found in either Cañari- or Inca-period dwellings. Houses consisted of a single room and were architecturally simple, whereas elaborate decoration was reserved for administrative and religious buildings (Pesántez & González, 2011). Within CAY, El Mirador is the most important architectural group because it occupies the highest point and offers expansive views across a landscape rich in both natural and historical significance.

Kancha 1 is the most prominent structure because of its position, size, and quadrangular form. A four-step stairway at the center of its eastern wall provides access to the building. Kancha 2 contains a series of internal walls and a small enclosure extending from north to south.

Kancha 3, located at the edge of the native forest, consists of a group of buildings that have lost much of their original structure. It may have been a large building with an internal corridor that functioned as a «reception hall.» Kanchas 4 and 5 form a single unit separated only by a smaller structure. All entrances face Kancha 4, and the group is notable for being embedded within preserved native forest (Vázquez, 2011).

Yacuvíña in the Archaeology of the El Oro Highlands

Evidence of textile production has been identified at the site through the discovery of a spindle whorl or spinning weight made from a fragment of Cañari or Palta pottery. This suggests that the group responsible for this activity was local rather than Inca. Other recovered objects include a bolas stone, a fragmented grinding stone, a taptana, a hammer, and three ritual wankas, the last of which are now missing (Vázquez, 2011).

Throughout its history, Yacuvíña has been an essential reference point for understanding the regional development of the El Oro highlands and coast-highland relations between northern Peru and southern Ecuador. This strategic importance led the Incas to establish a settlement there with religious characteristics of the highest rank in the northern Andes. Its significance lies less in the scale and monumentality associated with the major cities of the central Andes than in its location at the boundary of diverse but complementary ecological zones. Intense short-, medium-, and long-distance trade gave the site considerable economic and ideological power (Meyers, 1998).

Yacuvíña: Cultural Identity

The highlands of El Oro have historically been marginalized in specialized scholarship, which has focused primarily on Zaruma as the region's urban and economic center. During the colonial and republican periods, the predominantly Indigenous communities of the region were treated as marginal groups burdened with obligations but afforded few rights, including little recognition in the historical record. Nevertheless, the area has a dynamic past and played an essential role in relations among diverse ecological and cultural zones, making it highly significant within the northern Andes.

From a linguistic perspective, the territory referred to as Western Peripheral Cañari (CPO, from the Spanish) may have been Cañari-speaking, as indicated by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents. Yunga-language elements associated with the northern Peruvian and southern Ecuadorian coasts also converged there. This interpretation is supported by the survival of numerous regional place names containing Kichwa and Cañari words, including Buza, a settlement near Portovelo, and Dumarí, which recalls Chief Duma, a renowned Cañari kuraka. Traditional surnames in Paccha Parish include Buele, Malaver, and Nivicela, all associated with the Cañari people (Mendoza, 1970).

Yacuvíña's Relationship with Other Archaeological Sites in the Region

Surveys conducted in previous years uncovered several archaeological complexes

within Yacuvíña's area of contact and influence during the Inca period. These findings indicate the presence of a population culturally associated with the Integration Period (AD 500-1500), provisionally designated CPO, whose material culture included the production and use of distinctive pottery similar to that found at Guayquichuma.

The most prominent sites in this Cañari category contain pottery closely related to that found at Yacuvíña. However, none of these complexes contains architecture identified as Inca. This suggests that, although the sites belonged to the same cultural and temporal landscape, they may have maintained relationships with one another or been subordinated to Inca control through Yacuvíña (Vázquez, 2011).

The sites with the closest cultural relationship to Yacuvíña include two pairs of opposing hills in the immediate region with extensive earthworks and architectural structures: Las Huacas and Shurquillo, and, four kilometers to the northeast, Las Antenas and Loma de las Ruilovas. From the road leaving Yacuvíña toward Pueblo Viejo, El Gulumpio and several smaller sites can be seen. Their earthworks extend nearly to Pueblo Viejo, where remnants of colonial-period streets and drainage channels are visible alongside Indigenous CPO pottery.

Similarities with Other Inca Complexes

Yacuvíña shares many features with other Inca complexes in the Ecuadorian highlands, although differences reflect each site's particular economic, political, or religious specialization.

The major centers of power in this region, such as Tomebamba and Hatun Cañar or Ingapirca, are defined as capitals and high-ranking urban centers because they contain features absent from Yacuvíña, including a Qorikancha or sun temple, a kallanka (a distinctive Inca architectural structure), and an acllahuasi («House of the Chosen Women») adjacent to the sun temples.

By contrast, Yacuvíña contains an Uzhnu, which was used for esoteric ceremonies, public exhortations, and trials. Tomebamba and Ingapirca lack temples dedicated to Catequilla, although one is located near Tomebamba at the Pachamama Archaeological Complex. Springs and baths are also present at these sites and at numerous Cañari complexes that were later redesigned by the Incas.

What is particularly notable is that, despite its much smaller area compared with Tomebamba and Ingapirca, Yacuvíña contains a concentration of religious components expressing the sacred character and ideological importance of water cults. Its privileged position connected an entire region spanning northern Peru, coastal southern Ecuador, and Ecuador's southern inter-Andean zone (Meyers, 1998).

Yacuvíña as an Inca Urban Center

Researchers have described Yacuvíña as an Inca urban center that once formed part of Tahuantinsuyu. Its social organization included temporary curacas, yana curacas, priests, healers, diviners, merchants, Chinchá traders, northern traders, commoner artisans, hatun runa, fishers,

mitmaq, yana, mamaconas, pina, a system of dual rule, and the authority of the Inca (Rostworowski, 1988).

Although Yacuvíña's significance within Tahuantinsuyu exceeded its physical size, the following elements identify it as an Inca settlement: a lake and terraced land used for specialized agriculture and ritual purposes; residential compounds for high-status individuals with political and administrative functions; storehouses and structures for specialized activities, including craft production at El Mirador; a large plaza for mass gatherings and smaller plazas for specific uses; and a road network connecting the Yacuvíña «neighborhoods» of El Gulumpio, Las Antenas, and Loma de las Ruilovas. This network extended into CPO territory and established Yacuvíña as the regional center of a cultural area that became a political capital under Inca rule.

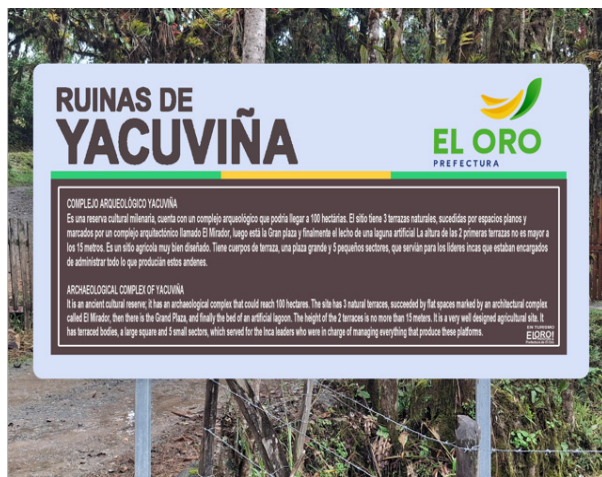
Tourism Potential of CAY

The complex represents both tangible and intangible tourism potential for Ecuador. It encompasses legends, archaeological objects, cruciform structures, and designs associated with the skills of the Cañari, Palta, and Inca peoples. Local residents associate the ruins with mysteries such as nocturnal lamentations, burials, and gold objects. The archaeological complex therefore offers opportunities for adventure, cultural, and ecological tourism. National and international dissemination, combined with protection and restoration of the local environment, could create new employment opportunities for the surrounding community.

Restoration work covered an area extending approximately four kilometers around the site. The landscape includes fields cultivated on cut terraces, stone walls, large enclosures, stepped pyramids, and canals. The walls consist of stone bonded with a mixture of soil, water, and local plant material and rest on shallow foundations, suggesting that the buildings may have been adapted for religious purposes (Vázquez, 2011).

According to data provided by the Atahualpa municipal council, CAY receives approximately 15,000 visitors each year, especially during the summer. Ninety percent of these visitors come from El Oro Province, highlighting the need for stronger promotion of the site nationally and internationally.

Figure 10. Information Sign at the Entrance to CAY



Note. Photograph by the authors.

Archaeological tourism is a form of tourism in which archaeology is the central component of cultural and tourism products. Archaeological sites, however, are unique and highly fragile resources whose destruction causes an irreversible loss of information; in some cases, limiting access may therefore be preferable. Both sites already identified as having tourism potential and those being evaluated for future tourism use should meet minimum heritage-enhancement standards that safeguard their conservation, given the nonrenewable nature of archaeological remains.

Methodology

This study was based on a documentary analysis of archaeological reports, photographs, and existing promotional materials concerning the Yacuvina Archaeological Complex. It also included a theoretical review of key authors in visual communication and advertising and developed a conceptual proposal for integrating these disciplines into the enhancement of CAY. A mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted.

Phase 1: Comprehensive Diagnostic Analysis

A comprehensive and systematic documentary review was conducted of 35 key sources: 15 archaeological reports from the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC), eight academic studies of cultural tourism in Ecuador, and 12 municipal and provincial management documents. Documents produced between 1999 and 2024 were eligible for inclusion.

An audit of existing visual communication was also conducted. It included a semiotic analysis of 142 photographs of CAY (both original and archival), an assessment of current signage against ISO 7001:2007, and content analysis of the site's digital presence, including its website and social media accounts.

Phase 2: Ethnographic Field Research

Ethnographic field research was conducted over four months and included 120 hours of observation at CAY and in neighboring communities, as well as visitor-flow mapping using physical tracking. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 20 participants, including an archaeologist and heritage specialist, tourism managers, local guides, and site visitors.

Results and Discussion

The findings reveal that CAY experiences what we term the «static display case syndrome»: heritage is presented as an object for passive contemplation, without narrative context or emotional connection. This phenomenon is consistent with Smith's (2006) critique of the «authorized heritage discourse,» in which expert voices exclude local narratives. Our data show that 78% of visitors consider the available information insufficient and that 62% cannot distinguish among the cultural periods represented.

Visual communication plays a central role in constructing cultural meaning. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1972) argues that what and how we see are shaped by what we know. At CAY, visual narratives

must move beyond simple archaeological description and connect with local identities and emotions. Photography, documentary video, and infographics can communicate the site's historical and ecological complexity.

The complex's name is its first and most powerful element of both visual and verbal communication. "Yacuvíña," derived from the Kichwa yacu (water, river, or spring) and víña (forever), is translated as "Eternal Water" or "Permanent Waters." From a semiotic perspective, the name functions as an iconic-indexical sign that refers directly to the site's most distinctive feature: permanent groundwater that continues to flow even when the rest of the mountain range is dry. This quality gives the name exceptional communicative power because two words encapsulate the site's defining attribute, a fundamental element of any heritage communication strategy.

Within Munari's (1971) theory of visual communication, the name functions as a "verbalized visual message" that evokes mental images of purity, permanence, and life. The study nevertheless shows that this powerful signifier has not been used strategically in communication and appears only on the entrance sign and in academic publications.

This study includes numerous photographic references that constitute CAY's existing visual corpus and currently serve a primarily documentary function. From Berger's (1972) perspective, these photographs do more than record reality: they construct a particular way of seeing heritage and remind us that every visual representation involves selection and, therefore, interpretation. Decisions about what to

photograph, how to frame it, and which features to emphasize are exercises of power that determine which aspects of CAY become visible and which remain hidden. Community participation in these decisions is essential to prevent external representations from being imposed. Kotler and

Gertner (1993) similarly emphasize that place marketing should involve the local community. Paccha’s living relationship with CAY - expressed through legends, traditional surnames, and historical participation - is an invaluable asset for authentic place branding.

Table 1. Analysis of Images of the Yacuvíña Archaeological Complex

Image Type	Current Function	Communication Potential
Panoramic view	Geographic contextualization	Postcards, promotional materials, and website headers.
Entrance sign	Basic identification	Redesign as a branding element.
Architectural structures	Archaeological documentation	Visual narratives about construction techniques.
Wankas and objects	Scientific record	Storytelling about rituals and worldviews.
Comparative pottery	Academic evidence	Visual identity and graphic patterns.

Note. Prepared by the authors.

Current photographs of CAY exhibit what Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) describe as a “lack of narrative structure”: they are isolated images that do not construct a coherent visual story. The absence of a unified visual grammar makes it difficult to communicate the site’s cultural complexity.

In their article “Narrate, Act, and Resonate to Tell a Visual Story,” Nikulina et al. (2024) note that marketing professionals increasingly use storytelling to connect with audiences. They demonstrate that an image must narrate, act, and resonate (NAR) to stimulate viewers and

transport them into its narrative. This model could be implemented through a visual storytelling campaign for CAY:

- Narrate: A photograph of a spring emerging among ancient ruins is not merely a record; it narrates a promise of continuity and enduring life.
- Act: Water is not static; it moves and flows. A short-form video or reel showing the water’s reflections and sound would engage viewers’ senses.
- Resonate: The message “Eternal Water”

resonates in a world that longs for permanence and authenticity, establishing a deep emotional connection with the audience.

This approach transforms water from a simple geographic feature into the protagonist of a cultural story capable of captivating potential visitors.

A study by Zhao et al. (2024) shows that visuals containing human elements are more effective when paired with subjective reviews, whereas images without people perform better when accompanying reviews of cultural attributes. CAY's strategy should therefore encourage user-generated content from guides and tourists for subjective reviews, while promoting people-free imagery - such as architectural details, landscapes, and pottery - for discussions of cultural attributes, including Inca construction techniques. This strategy should be complemented by training community guides to create authentic human-centered content, including photographs, videos, and short-form clips, thereby expanding the site's reach and credibility.

In relation to heritage-based visual identity, Lu et al. (2025) analyzed 34 logos from Chinese destinations and showed that the skillful integration of pictorial and written elements creates a positive brand identity. Applied to CAY, this finding suggests the need for a systematic visual identity in which the logo combines a stylized flow of water with a Palta pottery pattern, such as incised lines or clay bands. The color palette should draw on Palta pottery (earthy orange), Inca material culture (golden ochres),

water (deep blue), and native forest (Andean green). Signage pictograms should be based on documented archaeological motifs rather than generic international symbols.

From the perspective of information design, the information sign at the entrance to CAY is visitors' first visual contact with the site and therefore a critical touchpoint in the communication experience. The following problems were identified:

1. Lack of visual hierarchy: The information is presented without a structure that guides the viewer's attention.
2. Absence of a graphic identity: The sign contains no design elements that are consistent with the cultures represented at the site.
3. Absence of pictograms: International standards for public information symbols (ISO 7001:2007) recommend the use of universal symbols, but none are included.

According to Frascara (2006), heritage signage should fulfill three functions: orientation, information, and education. Current signage at CAY provides only basic information and fails to realize its educational and narrative potential.

The visual elements presented in this study derive from the Palta, Cañari, and Inca cultures and can be used as graphic resources for a visual identity, as detailed below:

- Pottery motifs: Palta pottery features clay bands on rims and necks, often smooth and commonly found on vessel necks and bowl walls. Because some bands are more

than one centimeter high, these decorative patterns could provide the basis for a culturally authentic graphic identity.

- Color palette: Palta pottery is described as having a “coarse orange fabric,” whereas Inca pottery is characterized by “good burnishing” and high firing temperatures. This chromatic distinction - earthy orange versus more refined tones - could be translated into a palette that visually communicates the site’s cultural stratification.
- Architectural forms: The combination of rectangular Inca plans and circular forms in Cañari urban design provides a distinctive formal repertoire that could inspire logos, pictograms, and decorative elements.
- Ritual symbols: The wankas (protective monoliths), the uzhnu (ceremonial platform), and the temple of Catequil (an aquatic deity) are cultural icons with substantial symbolic potential for visual communication.

From the perspective of Aaker’s (2004) theory of cultural branding, these authentic elements make it possible to construct a genuinely differentiated brand identity while avoiding the generic stereotypes that affect many tourism destinations. Water should also serve as the central visual axis because it structures Yacuvina’s identity through

both the site’s name and its physical presence: a “walled lake,” “springs supplied directly from the ground,” “natural water outlets,” and “baths fed by natural springs.” This centrality offers a powerful visual narrative framework:

- Photographic imagery: reflections, transparency, and fluidity.
- Visual metaphor: cultural continuity, eternal life, and purity.
- Video resource: the sound of water as an immersive element.

Arnheim (1986) notes that water in visual communication evokes fundamental emotions of serenity, life, and mystery, all of which are relevant to the experience CAY can offer. Visual communication should move beyond illustration and become a tool for education and community empowerment. Projects such as Museum without Walls (García Canclini, 2007) demonstrate how heritage can be mediated through participatory digital platforms. For CAY, a short documentary series could combine local testimony, aerial footage, and three-dimensional animations reconstructing the site’s architecture.

From an advertising perspective, the current lack of promotion and limited dissemination of the Yacuvina Archaeological Complex constitute both a problem and an opportunity.

Table 2. Advertising SWOT Analysis of CAY

Strengths	Opportunities
Powerful and meaningful name	Growing interest in post-pandemic cultural tourism
Unique water feature (eternal water)	Digital tourism-promotion platforms
Distinctive hybrid architecture	Collaboration with travel and culture influencers
Evidence of multiple cultures	Funding for heritage promotion
Outstanding landscape	Partnerships with universities and research centers
Proximity to urban centers	Development of a provincial archaeological route
Weaknesses	Threats
Absence of a unified visual identity	Competition from established destinations (Ingapirca)
Lack of promotional materials	Deterioration caused by unplanned tourism
Limited digital presence	Budget constraints
Basic tourism infrastructure	Loss of interest owing to limited dissemination
Inadequate signage	Looting and destruction of heritage objects (including the wankas)

Note. Prepared by the authors.

Heritage advertising seeks to position places as brands with distinctive identities and symbolic value. In *Marketing Places*, Kotler (1993) argues that place promotion should be based on a territory’s unique attributes and the creation of memorable experiences. For CAY, this entails developing a brand identity that integrates eternal water (Yacuvíña), hybrid architecture, and Andean biodiversity. Storytelling strategies and digital campaigns could increase the site’s visibility nationally and internationally.

Promotion of CAY should avoid folklorization and instead emphasize authenticity. Following MacCannell (1976), cultural tourists seek what is “authentic” rather than stereotyped. Campaigns such as “Yacuvíña: Eternal Water, Living

History” could be implemented through social media, partnerships with cultural influencers, and participation in international archaeological tourism fairs.

In *Uses of Heritage*, Smith (2006) argues that heritage is not something people simply “have” but something they actively “do” through communicative processes. From this perspective, CAY is not heritage solely because of its physical existence; it becomes heritage through the discourses and representations that construct it as such. The absence of visual communication and advertising has prevented CAY from being actively established as heritage in the collective imagination.

In “Cultural Heritage as an Advertising

Factor in Tourism Marketing in Cartagena,” Rodríguez et al. (2019) conclude that advertising and education, when integrated into media strategies that incorporate new technologies, are essential for promoting cultural heritage. Applied to CAY, this would involve campaigns that not only display the site but also briefly teach visitors how to distinguish Palta pottery from Inca pottery or explain the function of an *uzhnu*, thereby positioning CAY as a learning destination. Technological measures could include QR codes linking to concise educational content rather than dense webpages, as well as Instagram filters incorporating archaeological motifs. Partnerships with schools and universities could support visit programs with pre- and post-visit teaching guides, transforming CAY into a living laboratory for students of history, archaeology, and tourism.

Lyu (2025) demonstrates that color in the visual communication of archaeological sites guides viewers’ attention, conveys historical and cultural information, and contributes to brand formation. At CAY, a consistent palette of terracotta, ochre, deep blue, and Andean green could be used across signage, the website, printed materials, and social media to construct a visual narrative of cultural development.

Sang et al. (2024) focus on World Heritage sites and propose analyzing user-generated content through geographic information systems (GIS) and machine learning to reveal how tourists perceive, feel about, and behave toward heritage sites. This methodology could be applied to CAY in the medium term. For example, sentiment-analysis tools could be used to examine existing reviews on TripAdvisor, Google Maps, and

Facebook and identify current strengths and weaknesses. Geotagged photographs on Instagram and Flickr could also reveal which aspects of CAY are most frequently photographed and which are overlooked. Visitor-flow mapping could then identify congestion points, areas of greatest interest, and opportunities to distribute visitors more evenly across the site.

De Man’s (2016) stakeholder-based study of digital communication examines how institutions such as museums and heritage sites perceive their current and future roles in digital communication, emphasizing the need for proactive management and individualized visitor experiences. Alamäki et al. (2022) likewise show that, in promotional videos, images of people are more effective at generating emotion and engagement than images of landscapes alone.

Conclusions

CAY contains material remains of past human activities that archaeologists study to reconstruct the ways ancient societies lived, including their culture, technology, and relationships with nature. It thus preserves a tangible record of human history. Yacuvina was first occupied by the Palta and later became an Inca settlement. The site connects contemporary communities with their own history and that of their ancestors, providing evidence for understanding human development and the history of El Oro Province and establishing CAY as tangible cultural heritage.

The Yacuvina Archaeological Complex currently suffers from limited public visibility, characterized by the absence of a unified visual

identity, inadequate and insufficient signage, no structured digital presence, a lack of promotional materials, and the underuse of symbolic elements such as water, pottery, and architecture.

Enhancing the Yacuvíña Archaeological Complex requires a holistic approach that integrates archaeological knowledge with contemporary communication, advertising, and design strategies. Coordinating these disciplines could increase the site's visibility and tourism appeal, strengthen local cultural identity, generate sustainable economic opportunities, and promote active heritage conservation.

An interdisciplinary team of archaeologists, communication specialists, designers, and advertising professionals should develop a comprehensive heritage-enhancement plan with the active participation of the communities of Paccha and Atahualpa.

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