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Destination Branding through USP and Stakeholder Participation in Cirebon

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ABSTRACT

Destination branding has become an important strategy for cities seeking to enhance their competitiveness in the tourism sector. However, many cities in Indonesia still face challenges in identifying distinctive characteristics that can function as clear Unique Selling Points (USPs), while stakeholder participation in the branding process often remains limited. This study aims to identify the key USPs of Cirebon City and examine how stakeholder involvement can contribute to the development of an effective destination branding strategy. A qualitative research approach was employed through literature review and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The participants consisted of government representatives, cultural practitioners, tourism business owners, visitors, local community members, and a local historian. The collected data were analyzed to explore cultural, historical, and tourism attributes that could strengthen Cirebon's destination identity and serve as strategic branding assets. The findings indicate that Cirebon possesses several potential USPs rooted in its rich royal heritage, distinctive batik tradition particularly the iconic Mega Mendung motif its historical role in the spread of Islamic culture in Java, and its well-known culinary traditions such as empal gentong and nasi jamblang. These cultural and historical assets provide a strong foundation for developing a distinctive destination brand when supported by coordinated stakeholder engagement. This study highlights the importance of integrating local cultural identity with participatory stakeholder involvement in shaping destination branding strategies. The results provide practical insights for local governments and tourism stakeholders in Cirebon to strengthen branding initiatives, enhance destination differentiation, and support sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: *destination branding, unique selling points, stakeholder participation, cultural heritage tourism, Cirebon City*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a significant sector in global economic development, driven by increasing mobility, accessibility, and the rapid advancement of information technology. As destinations compete to attract visitors, the ability to create a strong and distinctive identity becomes essential. In this context, destination branding plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, differentiating destinations, and enhancing tourism competitiveness.

Destination branding refers to the process of building a unique identity and image of a place through strategic communication and positioning. A strong destination brand not only attracts tourists but also contributes to local economic development and strengthens the overall competitiveness of a region. However, many cities in Indonesia still face challenges in developing effective destination branding strategies.

One of the main challenges is the difficulty in identifying clear and distinctive Unique Selling Points (USPs) that represent the authentic identity of a destination. In addition, stakeholder participation in the branding process is often limited and fragmented. As a result, destination branding initiatives tend to be top-down and lack integration among key actors such as government, local communities, and tourism businesses. This condition reduces the effectiveness of branding strategies and limits the potential for sustainable tourism development.

Cirebon City, located on the northern coast of West Java and bordering Central Java, has a strategic position as a transit hub for travelers along the northern Java route. The city also possesses significant tourism potential, including cultural heritage, Islamic historical sites, traditional batik, and distinctive culinary traditions. Despite these advantages, Cirebon has not yet established a strong destination brand that effectively communicates its unique identity. Previous studies have highlighted the tourism potential of Cirebon; however, they have not

sufficiently examined how these local assets can be systematically formulated as Unique Selling Points through stakeholder participation in destination branding.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the key Unique Selling Points (USPs) of Cirebon City and examine how stakeholder participation contributes to the development of an effective destination branding strategy. By integrating local identity and stakeholder collaboration, this research is expected to provide practical insights for strengthening destination branding and supporting sustainable tourism development in Cirebon City.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Destination Branding

Destination branding is a strategic process aimed at creating a distinctive identity and image for a place in order to differentiate it from competing destinations. It involves not only visual elements such as logos, slogans, and symbols, but also the development of emotional associations and experiences that influence tourists' perceptions. According to Ritchie and Ritchie [1], destination branding is defined as a name, symbol, logo, or design that identifies and differentiates a destination while promising a memorable travel experience.

Furthermore, destination branding plays an important role in enhancing the competitiveness of a tourism destination by positioning it clearly in the minds of target markets. Ndlovu et al. [2] emphasize that destination branding integrates various attributes of a place into a unified concept that communicates its unique identity and value. Therefore, an effective destination branding strategy requires a clear understanding of the destination's distinctive characteristics and how they can be communicated consistently.

2.2. Unique Selling Points (USP) in Tourism

Unique Selling Points (USPs) refer to the distinctive attributes or advantages that differentiate a product or destination from its competitors. In the context of tourism, USPs are critical elements that form the basis of a destination's identity and attractiveness. According to Wijaya [3], USP represents a strategic approach in marketing that highlights the uniqueness of a product in order to create a strong differentiation and influence consumer decisions.

In tourism destinations, USPs can be derived from various aspects such as cultural heritage, historical significance, natural attractions, local traditions, and culinary uniqueness. These elements must be authentic, distinctive, and difficult to replicate by other destinations. The identification of strong USPs is essential in developing an effective destination branding strategy, as it enables destinations to communicate their unique value to potential visitors.

2.3. Stakeholder Participation in Tourism Development

Tourism development is a complex process that involves multiple stakeholders with different roles and interests. Stakeholders in tourism include government institutions, local communities, tourism businesses, media, and academic institutions. Mihardja and Rudianto [4] define stakeholders as individuals or groups that have an interest in or are affected by tourism development activities.

The involvement of stakeholders is crucial in ensuring that tourism development is inclusive, sustainable, and aligned with local needs. Collaboration among stakeholders allows for the integration of diverse perspectives, resources, and knowledge, which can enhance the effectiveness of tourism strategies. In the context of destination branding, stakeholder participation plays an important role in shaping the identity and image of a destination, as it reflects the collective values and aspirations of the community.

2.4. Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study adopts a conceptual framework that links tourism assets, Unique Selling Point identification, and stakeholder participation in the development of destination branding. Tourism assets such as cultural heritage, culinary traditions, historical landmarks, and local identity serve as the foundation for identifying potential USPs. Through stakeholder participation, these unique attributes can be collectively recognized, validated, and communicated as part of a destination branding strategy.

The framework assumes that effective destination branding is achieved through the integration of authentic local identity and collaborative stakeholder involvement. This approach not only strengthens destination differentiation but also contributes to sustainable tourism development.

3. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the development of destination branding in Cirebon City through the identification of Unique Selling Points (USPs) and stakeholder participation. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, experiences, and insights of stakeholders related to tourism development and branding

Data collection was conducted using three main methods: field observation, literature review, and semi-structured interviews.

First, field observations were carried out at several tourism destinations in Cirebon City, particularly cultural and heritage-based attractions. These observations aimed to identify existing tourism assets, assess branding elements, and understand how destination identity is presented to visitors.

Second, a literature review was conducted to examine relevant theories and previous studies related to destination branding, Unique Selling Points, and stakeholder participation in tourism development. The literature sources included academic journals, books, conference proceedings, and official documents, which provided a theoretical foundation for the study.

Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to obtain in-depth insights regarding tourism potential and branding strategies in Cirebon City. The study involved nine informants consisting of government representatives (2 participants), cultural practitioners (1 participant), tourism business owners (1 participant), visitors (2 participants), local community members (2 participants), and a local historian (1 participant). The informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their knowledge and involvement in tourism-related activities.

The stakeholders involved in this study were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance, experience, and active involvement in tourism-related activities in Cirebon City. The selection aimed to represent diverse perspectives from key tourism actors, including government institutions, cultural practitioners, tourism businesses, local communities, visitors, and historians. Each stakeholder group was treated as an important source of qualitative insight rather than being quantitatively weighted, as the study focused on understanding perceptions, experiences, and interpretations related to destination branding development.

The data collected from these methods were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. The analysis focused on identifying key tourism assets, formulating potential Unique Selling Points, and examining the role of stakeholders in shaping destination branding strategies.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Tourism Context of Cirebon City

Cirebon City demonstrates significant tourism potential supported by its strategic location along the northern coastal route of Java. The city functions not only as a transit hub but also as a destination with diverse cultural, historical, and culinary attractions. However, tourism data indicate that visitor numbers are still dominated by domestic tourists, while international tourist arrivals remain relatively low. This condition suggests that Cirebon has not yet established a strong global destination image.

The city branding initiative “The Gate of Secret” reflects an attempt by the local government to highlight hidden cultural and historical values. However, the branding has not been fully supported by a clear articulation of Unique Selling Points (USPs) and integrated stakeholder participation. As a result, the branding strategy remains less effective in positioning Cirebon as a distinctive tourism destination.

4.2. Identification of Unique Selling Points (USPs)

Based on field observations, literature analysis, and stakeholder interviews, this study identifies several key elements that can be formulated as Unique Selling Points of Cirebon City. These USPs are not only based on physical attractions but also on cultural identity and historical narratives.

First, Cirebon’s royal and cultural heritage represents a strong foundation for destination identity. The presence of historical palaces and cultural landscapes reflects the legacy of the Cirebon Sultanate, which differentiates the city from other destinations in West Java.

Second, religious tourism plays a significant role, particularly through the Sang Cipta Rasa Grand Mosque, which is closely associated with the spread of Islam in Java. This historical and spiritual dimension strengthens Cirebon’s positioning as a destination with Islamic cultural heritage.

Third, culinary tourism emerges as one of the most prominent USPs. Traditional dishes such as Empal Gentong and Nasi Jamblang represent authentic local experiences that are widely recognized and difficult to replicate by other regions.

Fourth, the batik tradition, especially the Mega Mendung motif, reflects a distinctive artistic identity that has both cultural and economic value. This element contributes to the creative economy while reinforcing the visual identity of the city.

Fifth, Cirebon’s identity as the “City of Shrimp” highlights its maritime heritage and coastal culture, which further enriches its uniqueness. Additionally, the city’s historical role in the spread of Islam has led to its recognition as the “City of Guardians,” reinforcing its religious and historical significance.

These findings indicate that Cirebon’s USPs are multidimensional, combining cultural, historical, culinary, and symbolic elements. According to the concept of USP in tourism [3], such uniqueness must be authentic, distinctive, and communicable. In this case, Cirebon already possesses strong intrinsic assets, but they have not yet been fully integrated into a coherent branding strategy.

4.3. Stakeholder Participation in Destination Branding

The findings also reveal that stakeholder participation in Cirebon’s tourism development remains limited and fragmented. Although various stakeholders including government, local communities, tourism businesses, media, and academia are involved in tourism activities, their roles are not yet fully integrated into a unified branding strategy.

The government plays a dominant role in initiating branding efforts, such as the development of the city branding tagline. However, the involvement of local communities and tourism businesses is still relatively limited, particularly in the co-creation of destination identity and storytelling. This condition reflects a top-down approach in destination branding, which may reduce the effectiveness and sustainability of tourism development.

From a theoretical perspective, stakeholder participation is essential in creating inclusive and sustainable tourism development [4]. Active collaboration among stakeholders enables the integration of diverse perspectives and strengthens the authenticity of the destination brand. In the case of Cirebon, stronger

stakeholder engagement is needed to transform existing tourism assets into a shared narrative that reflects collective identity.

4.4. Integrating USP and Stakeholder Participation in Destination Branding

The integration of Unique Selling Points and stakeholder participation is a critical factor in developing an effective destination branding strategy. This study proposes that tourism assets must first be identified and formulated as USPs, which are then strengthened through stakeholder collaboration.

In Cirebon, the identified USPs such as cultural heritage, culinary traditions, and Islamic history provide a strong foundation for branding. However, without active stakeholder involvement, these elements remain fragmented and underutilized. Therefore, stakeholder participation is necessary not only in the implementation stage but also in the process of identifying, interpreting, and communicating these unique attributes.

This finding aligns with the concept of destination branding, which emphasizes the importance of collective identity and shared meaning in shaping a destination's image [1], [2]. A collaborative approach allows stakeholders to co-create branding narratives that are authentic and relevant to both local communities and visitors.

Ultimately, the integration of USP identification and stakeholder participation can enhance destination differentiation, strengthen brand positioning, and support sustainable tourism development. In the context of Cirebon City, this approach can transform existing tourism potential into a cohesive and competitive destination brand.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that Cirebon City possesses strong potential to develop a distinctive destination brand through the identification of its Unique Selling Points (USPs), which are rooted in its cultural heritage, Islamic historical significance, culinary traditions, and maritime identity. These elements represent authentic and distinctive attributes that can differentiate Cirebon from other tourism destinations. However, the findings indicate that these potentials have not yet been fully integrated into a coherent and strategic destination branding framework.

The study also reveals that stakeholder participation in Cirebon's tourism development remains limited and fragmented. Although various stakeholders are involved in tourism-related activities, their roles are not yet effectively coordinated in shaping and communicating the city's branding identity. This condition reflects a predominantly top-down approach, which reduces the effectiveness of branding efforts and limits the development of a strong and sustainable destination image.

Therefore, an integrated approach that combines the identification of Unique Selling Points with active stakeholder participation is essential in developing an effective destination branding strategy. Collaboration among government, local communities, tourism businesses, media, and academia is necessary to create a shared narrative that reflects the authentic identity of Cirebon City.

The findings of this study provide practical insights for local governments and tourism stakeholders to strengthen destination branding by focusing on authentic local identity and collaborative engagement. This approach is expected to enhance tourism competitiveness and support sustainable tourism development in Cirebon City.

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