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Heritage-Led City Branding: Indigenous Knowledge and Community Governance in Positioning Langgur as Southeast Maluku's Capital

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how heritage and indigenous knowledge function as communicative resources in constructing the city brand identity of Langgur as the capital of Southeast Maluku. Moving beyond instrumental place marketing, the research conceptualizes city branding as a discursive and symbolic process shaped by community governance and cultural legitimacy. Grounded in cultural communication theory, destination branding communication models, and participatory governance discourse, this study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with indigenous leaders, local government officials, tourism actors, and youth community representatives, complemented by document analysis and semiotic examination of rituals, spatial symbols, and promotional narratives. The findings reveal that branding in Langgur is not merely a promotional strategy but a negotiated communicative arena in which indigenous customary law, maritime heritage, and civic administration intersect. Three key communicative mechanisms emerge: (1) the translation of indigenous values into public narratives of capital legitimacy, (2) symbolic institutionalization through ritual performances and spatial representation, and (3) discursive alignment— and at times tension—between state-led modernization narratives and community-based cultural authority. The study proposes a model of Heritage-Led Participatory Branding, in which city identity is co-constructed through dialogic governance rather than imposed marketing frameworks. By situating city branding within indigenous communication systems and peripheral island governance contexts, this research contributes to communication scholarship on place identity, postcolonial branding, and participatory city-making. It expands existing destination branding theory by demonstrating how cultural legitimacy and community discourse function as foundational elements in capital city positioning within decentralized regions of Eastern Indonesia.

Keywords: *city branding; indigenous knowledge; heritage communication; community governance; participatory branding*

1. INTRODUCTION

Across decentralized regions of Indonesia, subnational cities increasingly compete for symbolic authority, administrative recognition, and developmental resources. In eastern Indonesia, peripheral island towns face a dual challenge: geographical marginality and narrative invisibility. Within this context, Langgur—located in Maluku Tenggara—occupies a strategic position as the administrative center of Southeast Maluku. This distinction, however, necessitates a deliberate strategic approach to city branding, one that transcends conventional urban development paradigms by integrating unique cultural assets and local governance structures into its core identity [1].

Yet beyond bureaucratic designation, the symbolic positioning of Langgur as the region's capital requires communicative legitimacy rooted in cultural authority and collective memory. This involves the meticulous crafting of a city brand image, utilizing local heritage as a foundational object, artifact, and infrastructure [2]. Such an approach necessitates a deep understanding of the city's authenticity, encompassing its historical heritage and cultural traditions, to shape a distinctive local community identity [3]. This conceptualization is critical for fostering socio-economic development and strengthening local identity, requiring an inclusive decision-making process that integrates diverse stakeholder perspectives [4].

This necessitates a strategic approach to city branding, one that moves beyond mere economic promotion to encompass the deeper layers of identity, memory, and cultural significance that resonate with both local inhabitants and external perceptions [1]. This paper posits that a heritage-led city branding strategy,

particularly one that integrates indigenous knowledge and community governance, can effectively elevate Langgur's profile, fostering a unique identity that transcends generic urban development narratives [2]. This innovative approach moves beyond conventional urban regeneration models by co-creating tools that integrate identity-based strategies with inclusive governance, offering solutions for underrepresented territories [4].

City branding scholarship has traditionally framed branding as a strategic marketing tool designed to enhance competitiveness, attract tourism, and stimulate investment. However, a more nuanced understanding recognizes city branding as a holistic process that cultivates a unique identity and fosters a sense of place among diverse stakeholders, including residents, visitors, investors, and businesses [5]. This expanded perspective on city branding frequently incorporates local identities and socio-economic specificities, while also emphasizing culture, creativity, and social capital as crucial elements for sustainable urban regeneration [4].

However, such approaches often privilege global metropolitan contexts and instrumental promotional logic. Peripheral island cities embedded in strong customary governance systems present a different communicative landscape. This landscape often requires a delicate balance between leveraging global branding strategies and respecting the integrity of local authenticity and cultural heritage [6].

In these contexts, heritage is not merely an asset but a normative structure regulating social order, spatial organization, and political authority. This necessitates an exploration into how the authenticity of urban heritage can shape citizen identity, fostering a connection between the city's historical evolution and its contemporary identity [3]. This involves examining how a three-dimensional measure of urban identity, encompassing cognitive, affective, and evaluative aspects, establishes a connection between urban identity and citizen participation in local initiatives through personal and social norms [3]. Building on this, the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and robust community governance models becomes crucial for authentic placemaking, ensuring that branding efforts resonate deeply with the local populace and reflect the unique socio-cultural fabric of Langgur [3].

This study argues that city branding in Langgur cannot be understood as a top-down promotional strategy. Rather, it constitutes a discursive process in which indigenous knowledge, customary governance (adat), and civic administration intersect to construct symbolic legitimacy. By examining how heritage narratives, ritual performances, and governance discourse co-produce Langgur's identity as the capital of Southeast Maluku, this research repositions branding as a communicative act of collective meaning-making. This approach highlights the symbiotic relationship between placemaking and the authenticity of traditional architecture, demonstrating how integrating these elements can amplify a city's brand identity and foster a distinct sense of place [7]. Such an endeavor delves into the theoretical underpinnings of "vernacular branding," wherein indigenous architectural forms and community-driven initiatives are recognized as pivotal in shaping a city's unique identity and fostering its cultural resilience [8]. The study addresses three research questions:

1. How is indigenous knowledge communicated in constructing Langgur's city brand identity?
2. How does community governance discourse shape narratives of capital legitimacy?
3. To what extent is branding co-created or administratively instrumentalized?

By situating city branding within indigenous communication systems and participatory governance discourse, this research contributes to communication theory, postcolonial branding studies, and island urbanism scholarship. It emphasizes the intricate interplay between authenticity and strategic positioning, highlighting how indigenous knowledge and community participation are vital for crafting a distinctive and resonant place identity that goes beyond mere economic attraction [1], [4], [6].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

City Branding as Communicative Construction

Contemporary city branding theory increasingly recognizes branding as a multidimensional communication process. This perspective moves beyond a purely promotional understanding, viewing city branding as a dynamic negotiation between planned place image, the authentic identity held by local inhabitants, and the perceptions constructed by visitors and external stakeholders [9]. This dynamic interplay underscores the importance of placemaking based on authentic local culture, with residents serving as integral ambassadors and narrators of their city's unique heritage [9].

Rather than reducing branding to slogans and logos, scholars conceptualize cities as communicative entities shaped by primary (physical environment), secondary (planned promotion), and tertiary (public discourse) communication flows [6]. Cities are symbolically constructed through architecture, narratives, policy discourse, and everyday interaction. This involves understanding how the formulation of cultural narratives, the collaborative role of stakeholders in shaping city identity, and the transformation of these narratives into visual communication elements like taglines and logos contribute to a city's branding efforts [10]. Furthermore, this communicative construction of city branding often leverages cultural storytelling as a strategic approach, integrating local values, historical narratives, and collective identities into a cohesive and engaging brand message [10].

However, much of this literature remains urban-centric and market-oriented [11], [12]. Peripheral island capitals challenge these assumptions. In Langgur, identity is not negotiated primarily through global competition but through cultural legitimacy embedded in customary law and maritime heritage. Therefore,

understanding city branding in such contexts necessitates an approach that considers the profound influence of indigenous knowledge systems and the intricate dynamics of local governance structures on identity formation [6]. This often involves a shift from top-down, government-led branding initiatives to more decentralized and participatory approaches that engage multiple local authors in co-creating the city's narrative [13]. Thus, this study adopts a communication-centered definition of city branding:

City branding is a discursive process through which collective identity is constructed, negotiated, and legitimized via symbolic, narrative, and governance practices. This perspective aligns with the understanding that successful city branding relies on a consensus of identity and core values among city authorities, policymakers, and diverse stakeholders, much like symbolic interactionism where reality is formed through interaction within an environment [14]. This conceptualization highlights the importance of shared meaning-making and social representation in brand formation, where public knowledge is procured through various brand transmitters like imagery, language, and circular information [2]. This collaborative process of meaning-making is crucial for developing a coherent city brand that resonates with both internal and external audiences, moving beyond superficial marketing to cultivate a deeper sense of place and identity [15].

Indigenous Knowledge as Communication System

In the Kei Islands, customary law—often referred to as Larvul Ngabal—constitutes a foundational social contract governing hierarchy, land rights, conflict resolution, and ritual order. Rather than treating adat as cultural artifact, this study frames indigenous knowledge as a communication system. This perspective emphasizes the active role of traditional practices and communal narratives in shaping and transmitting the collective identity of Langgur, thus positioning indigenous knowledge as a dynamic, living system of communication that informs and validates the city's brand [9]. This system actively constructs and legitimizes the city's identity through intergenerational knowledge transfer and symbolic practices [2].

Rituals function as performative communication; spatial organization reflects symbolic hierarchy; oral traditions transmit historical legitimacy. Drawing from ritual communication theory, culture is understood not as transmission of information but as the maintenance of shared belief systems. Thus, heritage becomes communicative capital. This capital, deeply embedded in the community, is then harnessed for "Community Branding," which fosters collective awareness and local self-organization by integrating physical and digital connectivity for synergistic outcomes [4]. This approach underscores the importance of an inclusive governance process, where collaborative decision-making among diverse stakeholders generates tangible benefits in social innovation, economic growth, and heritage conservation, thereby strengthening the authenticity and resilience of the place identity [4]. Indigenous knowledge systems, often termed local wisdom, are thus critical in preserving cultural heritage and influencing societal decision-making, ensuring that developmental approaches align with local values and community sensibilities [16].

Governance as Discursive Arena

Governance is not merely institutional administration; it is an arena of narrative production. State actors, adat leaders, and community groups engage in discursive practices that construct legitimacy. Capital positioning requires more than administrative decree—it demands recognition through symbolic consensus. This involves the co-creation of meaning through communication and collaboration, fostering a shared understanding of heritage and its role in civic identity. This dynamic interplay shapes the city's brand narrative, evolving it from a static governmental pronouncement into a living, community-driven identity [4]. Such processes necessitate a flexible and transdisciplinary reconfiguration of the economy–society–territory nexus, emphasizing integrated strategies and participatory mechanisms as alternatives to compartmentalized technical approaches [4].

This approach enables the integration of diverse perspectives and promotes collective ownership over heritage enhancement, thereby strengthening local identity and fostering socio-economic development [4]. These integrated approaches are vital for negotiating city identity through creative economy and ensuring that historical values, encompassing cultural, community, environmental, and economic aspects, are central to place branding [14]. This involves engaging local communities in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership, and celebrating their unique heritage to create authentic and resilient urban identities [3]. This is particularly pertinent in contexts like Langgur, where the formal administrative structures often intersect with customary governance, requiring a collaborative framework to reconcile diverse perspectives on urban development and cultural preservation [17]. Such a framework necessitates an adaptive governance model that can effectively integrate traditional knowledge systems, like those found in Indonesia, into contemporary policy-making, facilitating a harmonious balance between progress and heritage preservation [18], [19].

Participatory governance theory suggests legitimacy emerges through dialogic engagement. In contexts like Langgur, where customary authority coexists with formal government structures, branding becomes a negotiated terrain. This negotiation involves navigating diverse perceptions and emotional attachments to the city, which often differ between residents and official branding efforts [1]. Therefore, inclusive place branding approaches, emphasizing co-creation and stakeholder involvement, are essential for developing a brand that truly reflects the community's vision and values [20]. The interdisciplinary nature of urban heritage practice further necessitates a people-centered approach to address complex challenges like community displacement and identity formation, making inclusive decision-making paramount [21].

3. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative methodology, specifically a case study approach, to thoroughly examine the multifaceted interplay between indigenous knowledge, community governance, and city branding in Langgur. the data collected for this research obtained from Policy document analysis and Observation of rituals and civic ceremonies. Additionally, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including adat leaders, local government officials, and community representatives, were conducted to gather nuanced perspectives on these dynamics [22], [23]. This multi-modal data collection strategy allowed for triangulation of findings, enhancing the credibility and robustness of the qualitative analysis. The data triangulation is done by cross-verifying insights from policy document analysis, direct observations of rituals and civic ceremonies, and in-depth interviews with adat leaders, government officials, and community representatives, thereby yielding a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay among cultural practices, governance structures, and Langgur's evolving capital identity [24], [25], [26].

The interpretive framework employed was grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, seeking to uncover the lived experiences and subjective meanings attributed to heritage and identity by the community. This intensive approach facilitates a deep understanding of the socio-cultural fabric, allowing for the articulation of a comprehensive narrative that reflects the intricate relationship between traditional practices and modern urban development [8]. To gain a holistic understanding of the phenomena, actions, motivations, behaviors, and perceptions experienced by the research subjects, a descriptive qualitative method was employed [24].

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings through an integrated qualitative analysis, combining interview data, observations, and media artifacts. The analysis follows a three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective coding), through which recurring patterns were organized into three major themes: (1) indigenous knowledge as a communicative foundation, (2) governance discourse as a legitimacy mechanism, and (3) branding as a negotiated process between co-creation and instrumentalization.

Participants consistently framed Langgur's capital status as inseparable from customary legitimacy. Adat leaders emphasized historical continuity, positioning the city as cultural custodian rather than administrative invention as shown by figure 1 below.



Figure 1 Kei heritage being used as branding strategy

In regards to behind the story of this image, we capture perspectives from three point of views. The cultural authority sees this as a way for their culture to be understood as he stated "What you see in this moment is not a performance for publicity—it is the continuation of our ancestral law. The ritual, the clothing, the way we gather, all follow the values of our adat. When people witness this, they are not just seeing culture; they are recognizing legitimacy. For us, Langgur is not called a capital because of administration, but because it stands on the foundation of our customs. If this is shared in the news, it is good—but it must be understood correctly. Our culture is not for branding in the modern sense. Rather, if Langgur is to be known, it should be known because it respects and lives by adat. That is where its true identity comes from."

1. Indigenous Knowledge as Communicative Foundation of City Branding

The findings indicate that indigenous knowledge in Langgur is not positioned as a symbolic accessory to branding, but rather as its primary communicative infrastructure. Across interviews, adat leaders consistently framed rituals and customary practices as non-performative obligations, emphasizing their function as living law rather than staged representation. One adat authority noted that ritual practices "are not for show, but part of ancestral continuity," highlighting a rejection of purely promotional interpretations.

Open coding of these statements generated categories such as ritual as law, authenticity, and cultural continuity, which were later grouped into the broader theme of cultural authority (see Table 1). This suggests that indigenous knowledge operates as a source of symbolic legitimacy, aligning with ritual communication theory, where meaning is produced through participation and repetition rather than transmission.

Raw Data (Interview Excerpts)	Initial Codes	Categories	Theme	Theoretical Link
"This ritual is not for show, it is our ancestral law." (Adat Leader)	Ritual as law, authenticity, continuity	Cultural authority	Indigenous knowledge as legitimacy source	Ritual Communication (Carey)
"We use traditional symbols to show Langgur's identity." (Gov Official)	Symbol usage, representation	Strategic cultural framing	Heritage as branding resource	Destination Branding (Kavaratzis)
"We feel this is who we are, not just for visitors." (Community)	Identity, belonging, internal meaning	Lived cultural experience	Identity internalization	Symbolic Interactionism
Observation: ceremonial attire, spatial arrangement	Visual symbolism, performativity	Embodied communication	Symbolic communication system	Semiotics (Barthes)

Table 1. Indigenous Knowledge Communication in City Branding

At the same time, government actors selectively translate these cultural elements into representational narratives, reframing traditional symbols as markers of Langgur's identity. Codes such as symbol usage and strategic representation reveal a parallel process in which heritage is repositioned as a branding resource within institutional discourse. Meanwhile, community participants articulated these practices as expressions of lived identity, emphasizing belonging and internal recognition rather than external promotion.

Observational data further reinforces this multi-layered communication system. The use of ceremonial attire, spatial arrangements reflecting customary hierarchy, and ritual performances function as semiotic structures, encoding meaning within the physical and social environment. Together, these findings demonstrate that indigenous knowledge in Langgur operates simultaneously at three levels: as cultural authority (adat), strategic narrative (government), and embodied experience (community).

2. Governance Discourse and the Construction of Capital Legitimacy

The second major finding highlights how capital legitimacy is constructed through multi-actor governance discourse, rather than unilateral institutional declaration. Coding results (Table 2) reveal three distinct but interconnected sources of legitimacy: cultural, institutional, and participatory.

Raw Data (Interview Excerpts)	Initial Codes	Categories	Theme	Theoretical Link
"Langgur is central because it holds our traditions." (Adat Leader)	Tradition as legitimacy	Cultural legitimacy	Heritage-based authority	Indigenous Governance
"We align development with culture." (Gov Official)	Alignment, integration	Institutional legitimacy	Hybrid governance narrative	Participatory Governance
"People join, so it feels legitimate." (Community)	Participation, validation	Social legitimacy	Participatory legitimacy	Public Sphere (Habermas)
Media coverage amplifies event	Visibility, recognition	Discursive reinforcement	Mediated legitimacy	Media Framing

Table 2. Governance Discourse and the Construction of Capital Legitimacy

From the perspective of adat leaders, legitimacy is rooted in historical continuity and cultural stewardship. Statements emphasizing that Langgur's centrality derives from its role in preserving tradition were coded under tradition as legitimacy, forming the category of cultural legitimacy. This reflects an indigenous governance logic in which authority is derived from ancestral systems rather than administrative designation.

Government officials, by contrast, articulated legitimacy through alignment between development and heritage, producing codes such as integration and institutional alignment. These were grouped into the category of institutional legitimacy, indicating an effort to reconcile modern governance with customary authority. Rather than replacing indigenous systems, formal governance attempts to incorporate them into a unified narrative of capital status.

At the community level, legitimacy emerges through participation and recognition. Codes such as involvement, collective witnessing, and public affirmation indicate that legitimacy is socially validated through engagement in cultural events and their representation in media. The presence of online news coverage further amplifies this process by transforming local participation into mediated legitimacy, extending recognition beyond immediate participants.

These findings suggest that governance discourse in Langgur operates as a dialogic field, where legitimacy is co-articulated across actors. Rather than a fixed attribute, capital status is continuously negotiated through communicative practices that align cultural authority, institutional framing, and public participation.

Branding thus operates as a negotiated field rather than harmonious consensus. As said by the local government "This event reflects how Langgur integrates cultural heritage into its development vision. As the administrative center of Southeast Maluku, we are committed to ensuring that modernization does not erase identity, but instead strengthens it. When activities like this are covered in online media, they help communicate to a wider audience that Langgur is not just a government center—it is a cultural capital. This is important for tourism, investment, and regional recognition. We see heritage not only as tradition, but as a strategic asset in building our city's image. However, we also work closely with adat leaders to ensure that what we present remains authentic and respectful."

3. Branding Between Co-Creation and Instrumentalization

The third theme examines the extent to which branding in Langgur is co-created or administratively instrumentalized. Coding results (Table 3) reveal that branding exists along a continuum, shaped by differing actor orientations.

Raw Data (Interview Excerpts)	Initial Codes	Categories	Theme	Theoretical Link
"Culture should not be used for promotion." (Adat Leader)	Resistance, authenticity protection	Anti-commodification	Organic branding	Postcolonial Critique
"This helps promote Langgur as a capital." (Gov Official)	Promotion, strategy	Instrumental use	Strategic branding	Place Marketing
"We are part of it, not just audience." (Community)	Participation, inclusion	Co-creation	Participatory branding	Co-creation Theory
Media headline uses heritage framing	Framing, narrative construction	Selective representation	Mediated branding	Discourse Theory (Foucault)

Table 3. Branding Between Co-Creation and Instrumentalization

Evidence suggests branding is partially participatory but asymmetrical. While community voices shape symbolic narrative, strategic framing remains influenced by administrative priorities. From figure 1, we can agree that the news reflects the community as a symbol of heritage, which include government officials. They said "For us as a community, this is something we are proud of because it shows who we are. When we take part in these activities, we feel included—not just as spectators, but as part of the culture itself. When this appears in the news or online, it makes us feel that our traditions are recognized beyond our village. It also reminds younger generations that this is our identity. If Langgur is known as a capital, then it should reflect the people. And this is what you see here—people, culture, and togetherness. So in a way, this is not just branding for outsiders, but also for ourselves."

Adat leaders expressed concern over the potential commodification of culture, generating codes such as resistance and authenticity protection. These were categorized under anti-commodification, reflecting a perspective in which cultural practices should remain autonomous from promotional agendas. In this view, branding is not an intentional activity but an emergent outcome of authenticity.

Conversely, government officials demonstrated a more strategic orientation, producing codes such as promotion, visibility, and image-building. These fall within the category of instrumental use, indicating that heritage is consciously mobilized as a resource for enhancing Langgur's position as a regional capital. Media coverage plays a critical role here, as headlines and visual framing selectively highlight cultural elements to construct a coherent brand narrative. Community members occupy an intermediary position, contributing to both co-creation and validation. Codes such as participation, inclusion, and shared identity indicate that branding is experienced as a collective process, where individuals actively engage in producing and sustaining cultural meaning. At the same time, their involvement lends credibility to institutional narratives, reinforcing legitimacy.

Taken together, these findings suggest that branding in Langgur is partially co-created but asymmetrically structured. Cultural legitimacy originates from adat and community participation, while narrative framing and amplification are influenced by governmental and media actors. This dynamic supports the development of a hybrid model in which branding is neither fully organic nor entirely imposed.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The findings support reconceptualizing city branding as discursive governance. Heritage functions as communicative infrastructure, not decorative resource. This perspective highlights the dynamic interrelationship between historical temporalities and present-day stakeholder interactions in shaping brand identity, often leading to tensions between prioritizing past, present, and future orientations [25]. This necessitates a nuanced approach to heritage, viewing it not as a static artifact but as a dynamic "living entity" continually shaped by daily use, intergenerational transmission, and community participation [21]. This understanding aligns with the notion that successful branding campaigns, particularly those focused on cultural heritage, depend on community involvement and the valorization of local identity, moving beyond mere collaboration to encompass deeper participatory governance [4].

The HLPB model demonstrates that capital legitimacy in peripheral island contexts requires alignment between customary authority and civic administration. This alignment is crucial for fostering a cohesive and authentic place brand that resonates with both local communities and external stakeholders, thereby supporting sustainable development initiatives [23], [26]. This is particularly relevant for managing perceptions of a destination, as social media actively shapes its identity and multicultural appeal [27]. Furthermore, strategic use of technology and digital platforms can amplify a city's global presence, attracting a broader audience while simultaneously nurturing a sense of local pride and ownership [28].

The careful integration of digital strategies with traditional practices can therefore enhance the authenticity and reach of Langgur's brand, positioning it effectively as Southeast Maluku's capital. This approach emphasizes the imperative of infusing authenticity and ethical communication into engagement strategies, leveraging value-based content, interactivity, and creativity to foster genuine connections [29]. This holistic strategy acknowledges that digitalization is not merely a tool for promotion but an integral component for sustainable branding in tourism destinations [30]. However, balancing the need for digital visibility with the preservation of cultural authenticity presents a significant challenge, as over-reliance on digital media can sometimes prioritize superficial visual appeal over deep cultural engagement and authentic experiences [31], [32].

Extending Branding Theory

The integration of findings across all themes leads to the identification of a core category through selective coding: **Heritage-Led Participatory Branding**

(HLPB). This model conceptualizes city branding as a communicative process characterized by:

- **Indigenous knowledge as symbolic authority**
- **Governance discourse as narrative mediator**
- **Community participation as legitimacy validator**
- **Media as amplification mechanism**

Rather than treating branding as a linear communication strategy, HLPB positions it as a **relational and negotiated system**, where meaning is co-produced across cultural, institutional, and social domains. Importantly, this model emerges from a peripheral, postcolonial context, demonstrating that alternative branding paradigms can be generated outside dominant global frameworks.

Indigenous epistemology as branding foundation, underscoring the importance of understanding local knowledge systems and cultural narratives in crafting authentic and resonant brand identities [33]. This approach emphasizes that effective place branding must transcend superficial marketing tactics, instead rooting itself deeply in the socio-cultural fabric and historical consciousness of a place [34]. It also highlights how such an approach can foster a sense of collective identity and belonging, moving beyond mere economic objectives to encompass broader social and cultural aspirations [20]. Moreover, this expanded theoretical framework for heritage-led branding acknowledges that destination branding, when rooted in deep cultural understanding, can transform a locale into a distinctive and appealing destination by attracting tourists seeking authentic experiences [31], [35]. This suggests that place brands, particularly in contexts rich with indigenous heritage, can serve as powerful mechanisms for sustainable development, promoting both economic prosperity and cultural preservation by leveraging the unique assets of the community [35], [36]. Furthermore, integrating local communities into the design and implementation of brand strategies ensures that economic benefits are equitably distributed and that cultural integrity is maintained, moving beyond superficial engagement to genuine co-creation [32].

Indigenous knowledge in Langgur is communicated not through formal promotional channels alone, but through embodied cultural practices, ritual performances, and symbolic representation. From the perspective of adat leaders, indigenous knowledge is transmitted as a living system of meaning, where rituals, attire, and ceremonial acts function as communicative codes that express continuity, authority, and identity. This aligns with a ritual communication model, where meaning is sustained through participation rather than dissemination.

Local government actors reinterpret these cultural expressions into a broader narrative framework, positioning them as representational assets that define Langgur as a culturally grounded capital. Meanwhile, community members experience and reproduce these practices as part of their everyday identity, reinforcing indigenous knowledge as both internalized meaning and externalized representation. Thus, indigenous knowledge operates simultaneously at three levels: as cultural authority (adat), strategic narrative (government), and lived experience (community), collectively constructing the city's brand identity.

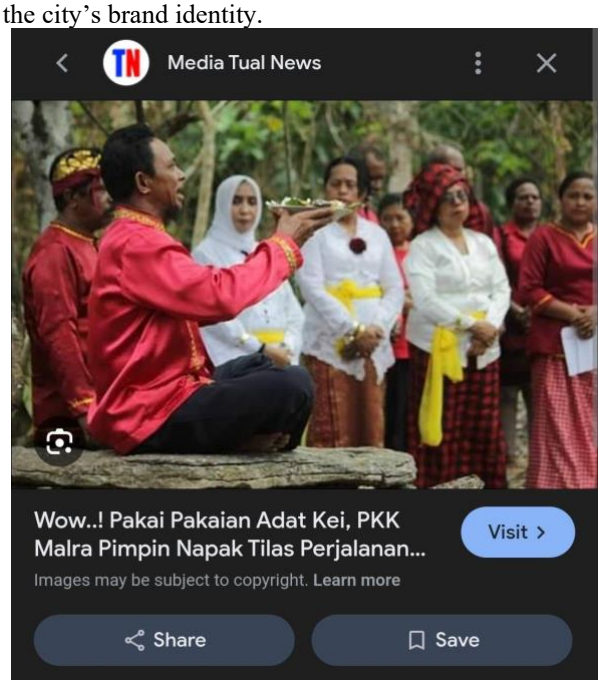


Figure 2 online news capturing heritage as branding strategy.

As seen on figure 2, the integration of visual rhetoric through imagery serves to underscore the practical application of these theoretical tenets, demonstrating how indigenous motifs and community engagement translate into tangible brand elements. Published by Media Tual News—illustrates how online news functions as a form of public relations and branding communication through the strategic use of heritage narratives. The visual centers on a ritual scene in which a man dressed in Kei traditional attire performs what appears to be a ceremonial act, surrounded by community members also wearing culturally significant clothing. This staging is not incidental; it communicates authenticity, continuity, and cultural authority. The headline, emphasizing the use of pakaian adat Kei and a symbolic "napak tilas" (heritage retracing), transforms a local event into a public narrative of identity, aligning cultural performance with institutional actors such as PKK. In communication terms, this represents tertiary city branding, where media coverage amplifies symbolic meaning beyond the event itself. The image and headline together construct Langgur (and broader Southeast Maluku) as a space where governance and culture are intertwined, reinforcing legitimacy through heritage visibility. Importantly, the media framing does not merely report an event—it actively produces a brand narrative: that leadership is culturally rooted, community participation is tradition-based, and local identity is preserved through collective ritual. This demonstrates how digital news platforms operate as discursive agents in heritage-led branding, translating indigenous practices into consumable public imagery that supports broader

positioning of the region as culturally authentic and socially cohesive.

The image operates as more than documentation; it is a discursive artifact that reveals how branding in a peripheral, postcolonial context is produced through participation and negotiated legitimacy. The ritual scene—where a cultural figure performs a ceremonial act in front of a mixed audience of community members and institutional actors—visually encodes what can be theorized as participatory legitimacy as a branding outcome. Legitimacy here does not originate from formal authority alone (e.g., state or administrative designation), but from the visible alignment between adat practitioners, civic representatives, and the community as witnesses. The act of gathering, observing, and symbolically endorsing the ritual becomes a communicative process through which the brand of the place—Langgur as a culturally grounded capital—is validated. In other words, the brand is not simply projected outward; it is ratified internally through collective participation. This shifts branding theory away from a transmission model (sender → audience) toward a ritual and co-creation model, where legitimacy is continuously reproduced through embodied cultural practices.

Participatory legitimacy as branding outcome, emphasizing that a brand's success is not merely measured by economic indicators but by its acceptance and endorsement from local communities and stakeholders [37]. This perspective highlights the significance of involving diverse groups in the branding process, from initial conceptualization to ongoing management, to cultivate a shared sense of ownership and enhance the brand's credibility [37]. This bottom-up approach to brand building acknowledges that local knowledge and multi-actor networks are valuable assets, contributing to both the legitimacy of the brand and the entities possessing these resources [37]. It is crucial to recognize that the authentic representation of a territorial brand, especially one steeped in rich cultural heritage, necessitates the active involvement of its inhabitants to ensure genuine reflection and community identification [20]. This collaborative model, therefore, moves beyond conventional top-down strategies to foster a sense of shared purpose and collective identity, thereby strengthening the brand's long-term viability and impact [38].

Community governance discourse in Langgur shapes capital legitimacy through a process of dialogic negotiation between customary authority and formal administration. Adat leaders assert legitimacy based on ancestral continuity and cultural stewardship, framing Langgur's status as emerging from its role as a guardian of tradition rather than a purely administrative center.

Government officials, on the other hand, articulate legitimacy through institutional alignment, emphasizing the integration of heritage into development and positioning Langgur as both administratively and culturally central. This creates a hybrid narrative in which legitimacy is not imposed but co-articulated across governance domains.

From the community perspective, legitimacy is validated through participation and recognition. Public involvement in rituals and their representation in media serve as mechanisms through which legitimacy is socially confirmed. Consequently, governance discourse in Langgur does not function as a singular authoritative voice but as a multi-actor communicative field, where legitimacy emerges through alignment, negotiation, and public affirmation.

Moreover, this participatory model aids in establishing brand values that are authentic and reflective of the territory's identity and culture, fostering a deeper sense of belonging among local communities and enriching the tourist experience [39], [40]. This co-creative approach to branding acknowledges that enthusiasm from a community is a considerable advantage in implementing a joint strategy, especially for cultural routes, leading to more sustainable development practices [34]. This approach further suggests that by uniting diverse interests involved in local development, a participatory branding process fosters a higher acceptance of the brand among citizens, aligning with sustainable, long-term development objectives [41].

At the same time, the image exemplifies the postcolonial periphery as a site of theoretical innovation. Conventional city branding theory has been largely derived from global, post-industrial cities where branding is driven by competitiveness, investment attraction, and tourism marketing. In contrast, this scene from Southeast Maluku demonstrates that in peripheral contexts, branding emerges from historically rooted systems of meaning that predate the modern state. The use of traditional attire, ritual performance, and communal witnessing challenges the dominance of Western-centric branding frameworks by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies as primary branding resources. Rather than adapting local culture into a global branding template, the process here inverts the logic: modern governance and media (e.g., online news coverage) adapt themselves to indigenous communicative structures.

Postcolonial periphery as site of theoretical innovation, demonstrating how non-Western contexts offer unique insights into inclusive tourism and place branding, often overlooked by frameworks developed in developed nations [42]. This challenges conventional understandings of place branding by advocating for more responsible, socially oriented approaches that emphasize multi-level stakeholder engagement and acknowledge collective ownership of place identity [20]. This inclusive approach also recognizes that all actors, including future generations, play a critical role in creating and managing the territorial brand, and their actions can significantly influence its perception [20]. This implies that place branding, especially in postcolonial settings, should embrace a dynamic, multi-vocal approach that acknowledges and integrates indigenous knowledge systems as foundational elements for sustainable and culturally authentic identity formation [43]. This approach moves beyond conventional branding

paradigms by emphasizing the crucial role of co-creation and community governance in shaping a heritage-led identity, thereby ensuring both authenticity and sustained engagement [35].

This has significant implications for extending branding theory. First, it introduces legitimacy as a culturally contingent outcome, not a universally standardized metric. In postcolonial peripheral settings, legitimacy must be performed, recognized, and negotiated within existing cultural systems. Second, it positions the periphery not as a passive recipient of global branding practices, but as an active generator of alternative theoretical models, such as Heritage-Led Participatory Branding (HLPB). The image, therefore, is not just illustrative—it is evidentiary. It shows that branding can be grounded in ritual communication, communal validation, and indigenous authority, offering a corrective to dominant paradigms that prioritize visual identity, slogans, and external perception. In doing so, it expands branding theory into a more plural, context-sensitive framework where participation and postcolonial context are not variables, but foundational conditions of meaning-making.

The findings indicate that branding in Langgur exists along a continuum between co-creation and administrative instrumentalization. On one end, adat leaders emphasize that cultural practices are not designed for branding purposes, but are intrinsic expressions of identity, suggesting that branding emerges organically as a byproduct of authenticity. This reflects a bottom-up dimension of branding rooted in cultural continuity.

Conversely, government actors demonstrate a more strategic orientation, recognizing heritage as a valuable communicative resource for promoting Langgur's image and enhancing its visibility. This introduces elements of top-down instrumentalization, where cultural symbols are selectively framed within development and promotional agendas. Community members occupy an intermediary position, actively participating in cultural practices while simultaneously interpreting their representation in media as a form of recognition and identity reinforcement. This indicates that branding is not fully controlled by institutional actors, but is co-produced through everyday participation and shared meaning-making.

Overall, the branding process in Langgur can be conceptualized as partially co-created but asymmetrically structured, where cultural legitimacy originates from the community and adat systems, while narrative amplification and strategic framing are influenced by governmental institutions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Importantly, this study demonstrates that postcolonial peripheral contexts such as Langgur are not passive recipients of dominant branding models, but active sites of theoretical innovation. By foregrounding indigenous communication systems and participatory legitimacy, the case challenges the global city bias in branding literature and expands the field toward more plural, context-sensitive, and culturally grounded frameworks.

In conclusion, branding Langgur as the capital of Southeast Maluku is not achieved through slogans or visual identity alone, but through the continuous negotiation of meaning across cultural, institutional, and social domains. It is within this intersection that legitimacy is constructed, identity is sustained, and branding becomes not a tool of representation, but a process of collective recognition and cultural affirmation.

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