



Exploration Of Sustainability Models In City Branding: Integration Of Local Culture, Digital Media, And Multisector Collaboration

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Abstract

This study aims to develop a substantive theory of sustainable city branding in small cities, with a focus on Berau. Using a qualitative approach grounded in Grounded Theory, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, then analyzed iteratively to identify key processes and relationships. The findings reveal that successful city branding relies not only on natural potential and leadership support but also on complex interactions among multisector collaboration, active community participation, and strategic digital media use. The theory emphasizes that sustainability in this context involves holistic integration of local culture, environmental concerns, and economic development through concrete, collaborative steps. This model highlights the importance of active stakeholder engagement and innovative digital strategies in building an authentic and sustainable city image. The study contributes to understanding how small cities can effectively implement sustainable branding practices through a process of collective effort and strategic management

INTRODUCTION

City branding (CB) is a creative and innovative process aimed at shaping a positive image of a city to attract investment, tourists, and future residents, while also enhancing the quality of life for local inhabitants (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2024). CB plays a crucial role in increasing competitiveness and the tourism sector (Sigwele, Prinsloo, & Pelsler, 2018). The main elements of CB include the city's visual identity, stakeholder engagement, and infrastructure, while social media also plays a significant role in constructing the city's narrative (Mohamad, Adetunji, Alarifi, Ismail, & Akanmu, 2022).

Effective CB requires consideration of both driving and hindering factors and the involvement of local stakeholders to create an authentic identity and improve residents' quality of life, as exemplified by Berau (Green, Grace, & Perkins, 2018; Insch & Stuart, 2015). Ecological

and cultural aspects are also vital in developing sustainable and authentic CB strategies (Chan & Marafa, 2014).

Key drivers of CB as a sustainable tourism destination include digital technology, natural diversity, stakeholder engagement, and a focus on SDGs (Lestari, Yuliani, & Cahyono, 2025). However, challenges such as digital competition and dependence on the mining sector persist. The destination's image and the use of augmented reality influence digital Word of Mouth, which in turn strengthens tourists' intentions (Nurhidayati, Brahmasari, Aju, & Ratih, 2024). Additionally, CB helps create a positive image that reflects the social and cultural identity of the city (Ward, 2005). Brand authenticity is crucial in building a strong CB, as an authentic image enhances emotional connections with visitors and residents alike (Hanna & Rowley, 2008; Pike, 2009).

Furthermore, citizen participation in shaping the city's identity significantly impacts the success of CB (Zenker & Braun, 2010). Effective communication through social media plays a vital role in establishing relationships with a global audience (Baker & Cameron, 2008; Hanna & Rowley, 2011).

The integration of corporate branding and place branding is essential to creating a cohesive city image (Dinnie, 2022). CB considers four dimensions: city identity, quality of life, investment appeal, and the image held by the international community (Anholt, 2010). Other findings highlight the important role of local government in the success of city branding, supporting local economic development (LED), attracting investment, and enhancing the city's image (Zulu & Phiri, 2021).

Despite extensive research on CB, gaps remain, particularly in small cities like Berau. Studies on the collaboration between government, business sectors, and communities in successful CB implementation are still limited (Warren, 2024). Moreover, the influence of social media in shaping city images in resource-rich areas like Berau remains underexplored.

This research aims to address these gaps by examining the application of CB in Berau, which faces resource limitations. Previous studies have mainly focused on large cities, while the roles of social media, multisector collaboration, and resource management based on blue and green economies in small cities have received less attention. Additionally, local stakeholder involvement in creating authentic and sustainable identities remains under-investigated. Using Grounded Theory, this study seeks to deepen understanding of how social media and multisector collaboration can build a sustainable and authentic CB, supporting the development of a sustainable economy in Berau.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of sustainable city branding (CB) has rapidly advanced within academic research. Studies on Berau's CB as a sustainable tourism destination have identified key drivers and barriers; however, the role of local stakeholders in creating an authentic and inclusive narrative still requires further attention (Lestari et al., 2025). The importance of internal stakeholders and social interactions in shaping city identity is emphasized by Golestaneh, Guerreiro, Pinto, & Mosaddad (2022).

Digital transformation, as reviewed by Asdourian, Chariatte, & Ingenhoff (2023) and Wan & Li (2024), highlights the significance of digital communication in CB, especially concerning climate change and globalization, although many cities have yet to fully leverage these opportunities.

The focus of CB often tends to prioritize economic growth, sometimes at the expense of environmental sustainability, thereby opening space for the integration of social and ecological aspects into city branding (Ripoll Gonzalez & Gale, 2023). For example, CB strategies in Jakarta emphasize eco-friendly development and international events; however, these studies do not address the specific challenges faced by small cities (Luerdi, 2023).

Sustainable strategies based on cultural tourism have been reinforced, yet research into the roles of social media and local stakeholders remains limited (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2024).

Further, studies by Moreira, Pereira, Lopes, Calisto, & Vale (2023) underscore the importance of green resources and improving urban quality of life, while Rinaldi, Giovanardi, & Lucarelli (2021) highlight stakeholder engagement in sustainable CB. Nonetheless, gaps still exist in implementing blue and green economy-based strategies, particularly in small cities.

Research by Zhang (2019), Joss (2011), Kolotouchkina & Blay Arráez (2015), Aydın & Alvarez (2020), and Yang, Ye, Pei, Shi, & Pan (2019) offer valuable insights into best practices for sustainable CB across various contexts. The existing gap lies in how small cities like Berau can effectively integrate sustainability into CB, harness social media, and manage natural resources based on blue and green economies. Therefore, further research is necessary to understand how multisector collaboration and social media utilization can strengthen CB, especially when tourism and natural resources are central to the city's identity. This approach is considered meaningful not only to fill the research gap but also to provide an innovative framework relevant to the current challenges of globalization and sustainability.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing Grounded Theory methodology to explore a sustainable city branding (CB) model that integrates local culture, digital media, and multisector collaboration in Berau, East Kalimantan. Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Martin & Woodside, 2008) was selected because this approach allows for the development of theory directly grounded in field data, facilitating an in-depth and flexible understanding of the phenomenon, and producing theories relevant to the local context.

The primary objectives of this research are: (1) to develop a sustainable city branding model relevant to Berau's local context by integrating cultural, digital media, and multisector collaboration aspects; (2) to identify factors influencing the success of city branding in Berau and the challenges faced during implementation; and (3) to formulate policy recommendations for local government and stakeholders involved in implementing sustainable city branding.

The research will be conducted in Berau Regency, East Kalimantan, chosen for its rich local cultural potential and natural resources that can serve as vital components of sustainable city branding, alongside the challenges in managing tourism and economic sectors.

Key informants include stakeholders involved in the city branding process, such as local government officials, business sector representatives, community leaders, tourism and branding experts, digital media managers, and local influencers. The selected informants include: the Head of the Tourism and Culture Office of Berau, representatives from local businesses, community leaders and local residents, academics or practitioners with expertise in city branding and sustainability, and digital media managers/influencers.

Data collection techniques involve: (1) In-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants to explore their perspectives and experiences regarding city branding in Berau, focusing on cultural integration, digital media use, and multisector collaboration; (2) Participatory observation to directly observe social interactions, collaboration processes, and digital media utilization in city branding activities; and (3) Document analysis of related materials such as government reports, tourism promotion content, and digital media content.

Participants will be purposively sampled to ensure diverse perspectives from key stakeholders, with a total of 10 participants (P1-P10), representing sectors such as government (20%), civil servants (20%), community figures (30%), journalists (20%), and private sector (10%). This sampling aims to produce rich qualitative data through interviews, observations, and document analysis, supporting triangulation and bias reduction. For example, P1 from the Communication and Informatics Department will provide insights into digital promotion and social media challenges (aligned with Mohamad et al., 2022), P2 from the Culture and Tourism Department will highlight cultural integration with sustainable tourism (Chan & Marafa, 2014), while P3 and P10, as civil servants, will discuss policy commitments and budget limitations (Zulu

& Phiri, 2021). Community leaders (P4, P5, P8) will emphasize the role of local communities in authenticity and environmental preservation (Zenker & Braun, 2010), journalists (P6, P7) will analyze media’s role in shaping public narratives and digital Word of Mouth (Nurhidayati et al., 2024), and P9, a private sector employee, will contribute perspectives on multisector collaboration and the creative economy (Dinnie, 2022). Ethical considerations include informed consent, anonymity, and flexible interview modes (face-to-face or virtual), adapted to local context, thereby strengthening the holistic sustainability analysis aligned with blue, green, and creative economy themes.

Data analysis will follow the Grounded Theory stages: (1) Open Coding to identify and label emerging data fragments; (2) Axial Coding to relate categories and identify patterns; and (3) Selective Coding to develop core concepts that describe the main dynamics of city branding in Berau, ultimately constructing a broader theory on sustainable city branding based on local culture, digital media, and multisector collaboration.

To ensure data validity and reliability, several key concepts will be applied: credibility through member checking and qualitative triangulation (Wang, Hu, & Duan, 2024; Carcary, 2009); transferability regarding applicability to other contexts; dependability via an audit trail; and confirmability to ensure findings originate from respondents’ responses rather than researcher bias, supported by triangulation (Carcary, 2009). The methodology also incorporates qualitative simulation checks, Multisource Evidence Fusion (MEF-GT), Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR), and Inter-Rater Agreement (IRA) to enhance transparency (Díaz, Pérez, Gallardo, & González-Prieto, 2023). The Constant Comparative Method (CCM) will be employed for theory development, with practical validation through member checks and triangulation. Addressing challenges such as ambiguity and cultural sensitivity requires a reflective and inclusive approach to maintain cross-cultural validity.

RESULTS

The findings for RQ1 identify the driving and inhibiting factors for the success of city branding (CB) in Berau, as well as the challenges faced, particularly related to the blue, green, and creative sectors, the interaction between environmental sustainability and economic growth, multisector collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and the role of social media in shaping the city’s image.

Table 1

Open Code	Axial Code	Selective Code
"Support from the Regent, Vice Regent, and OPD is crucial" (P1).	Main Leadership.	1. Driving Factors
Marine tourism potential such as Derawan Islands becomes the main driver.	Main Potential.	
"Marine tourism destinations such as Derawan Islands" (P2).	Main Destination.	
The BRO logo represents maritime, plantation, and MSME sectors. (P1).	Sector Identity.	
Collaboration between government, private sector, and academia. (P1).	Collaboration.	
Youth as promoters through cultural events. (P2).	Community Engagement.	
"Use of social media like Instagram" (P1).	Digital Promotion.	
"Program sustainability depends on budget" (P1).	Budget Constraints.	2. Inhibiting Factors
Only 10% of the population is involved in socialization. "Only about 10% of the total	Limited Socialization.	

population" (P1).			
"Website content is still monotonous" (P1).	Limited Outreach.		
"No concrete steps related to environmental protection" (P1).	Digital Management Lacking.		
"Sea and air transportation are still limited" (P5).	Sustainability Risks.		
Promotion of blue/green/creative economy sectors is still minimal (P1).	Low Promotion.	3.Challenges	
Integration of blue/green/creative sectors as the central challenge.	Sector Integration.		
The interaction between sustainability and economic growth as the main tension.	Sustainability vs. Growth Tension.		
Slow multisector collaboration as an intervention condition.	Slow Collaboration.		
Low stakeholder involvement as a strategy barrier.	Low Participation.		
Social media role has not been maximized as an interaction opportunity.	Social Media Management.		
No concrete steps for eco-friendly development (P1).	Lack of Concrete Actions.		
The process of obtaining logo approval delays collaboration (P1).	Logo Approval Delay.		
Community awareness about branding is still low (P1).	Low Branding Awareness.		4. Holistic Sustainability Integration
Social media management needs to be strengthened for engagement (P1).	Need for Social Media Strengthening.		
The integration of environmental sustainability and economic growth still needs to be developed more concretely (P1).	Holistic Sustainability Integration.		
No concrete strategies to protect the environment while developing tourism (P2).	Lack of Environmental Strategies.		
Diversification of destinations to avoid over-tourism (P5).	Destination Diversification.		
Building a dedicated team for sustainable promotion.	Sustainable Promotion Team.		
Building a dedicated team for promotion (P7).	General Promotion Team.		

Results for Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do local stakeholders view their role and contribution in the city branding (CB) process in Berau, and how their role supports the integration of environmental sustainability with the creative economy?

Table 2

Open Code	Axial Code	Selective Code
Local government as the main facilitator, program driver, and strategic policy maker. "Acting as a facilitator, main driver, and strategic policy maker. They initiate and implement branding programs through socialization, logo launches, as well as	Role of Government as Facilitator	1. Main Roles and Contributions

infrastructure development and digital promotion." (P1)		
Business sector and MSMEs strengthen regional identity through local products. "Introducing local products such as handicrafts, batik, and culinary, which are promoted through events and social media." (P2)	MSMEs and community as cultural preservers	
Community and community as main actors in cultural preservation. "Becoming the main actors in cultural preservation and tourism destination development." (P4)	Community and community as actors in cultural preservation.	
Academics and influencers support cultural and sustainability narratives. "Supporting cultural and sustainability narratives through training, education, and digital promotion." (P5)	Support from academics and influencers.	
Environmental sustainability is seen as the main foundation in the city branding process." (P6)	Sustainable Foundation	2. Support for Sustainability
Supporting the development of ecotourism and promotion of environmentally friendly destinations." (P6)	Sustainable tourism for environmental preservation.	
"Concrete steps include waste management, conservation, and supervision of tourism activities." (P4)	Environmental preservation through sustainable tourism.	
Local products such as handicrafts, batik, and culinary. "Local products such as handicrafts, batik, and culinary become part of the creative economy strategy." (P8)	Local products support sustainable creative economy.	3. Development of Creative Economy
Cultural festivals, competitions, and digital promotion to expand markets and increase competitiveness of local products. "Cultural festivals, competitions, and digital promotion are used to strengthen cultural identity and increase community income." (P5)	Creative promotion for local product competitiveness.	

DISCUSSION

The data collected from participants has been analyzed and presented with the following interpretation and discussion: (1) Discussion for RQ1, namely what are the driving factors and obstacles to the success of city branding (CB) in Berau, as well as the challenges faced, especially those related to the blue, green, and creative economy sectors, interactions between environmental sustainability and economic growth, multisector collaboration, involvement of local stakeholders, and the role of social media in shaping the city's image?.

Based on the data and literature review, the driving factors, obstacles, and challenges in the success of city branding (CB) in Berau can be outlined as follows. The main driving factors include commitment from regional leaders and local natural and cultural potential. The data shows that support from the regent and OPD, as well as maritime tourism potential such as the Derawan Islands, are key factors (e.g., *"Support from the Regent is very crucial"* - P1; *"Maritime tourism destinations like the Derawan Islands"* - P2). This aligns with Sigwele, Prinsloo, and Pelsler (2018) who emphasize the importance of CB to enhance tourism competitiveness, as well as Lestari, Yuliani, and Cahyono (2025) who identify natural diversity as a major factor for sustainable destinations. The Berau City Branding (BCB) logo, representing the maritime sector

(blue), plantations (green), and creative MSMEs, strengthens the city's visual identity, in line with the main elements in CB (AlShalan and Durugbo, 2024).

Furthermore, other driving factors for success include multisector collaboration and community involvement, especially among young people. Their participation in promoting cultural events and cooperation between government, private sector, and academics is an important factor (e.g., *"Collaboration between government, private sector"* - P1; *"Young people as promotion agents"* - P2). This supports the views of Chan and Marafa (2014) as well as Zenker and Braun (2010) who emphasize the importance of citizen participation in CB success. The use of social media such as Instagram and TikTok for engagement is also a driving factor, as expressed by participants (*"Use of social media like Instagram"* - P1), which aligns with studies by Mohamad et al. (2022) and Nurhidayati et al. (2024) on the influence of digital Word of Mouth and augmented reality on tourist intentions.

However, there are several obstacles hindering CB success in Berau. Among them are budget limitations, infrastructure, and low socialization. Dependence on APBD, limited sea and air transportation, and low community participation around 10% are significant challenges (e.g., *"Program sustainability depends on budget"* - P1; *"Sea and air transportation is still limited"* - P5; *"Only about 10% of residents are involved"* - P1). This reflects the challenges faced by small cities like Berau, as identified by Warren (2024) and Lestari, Yuliani, and Cahyono (2025). Additionally, the lack of concrete steps in environmental protection is a major obstacle because there is no clear strategy to maintain ecosystem sustainability (*"No concrete steps related to environmental protection yet"* - P1), which aligns with the criticism of Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale (2023).

Other major challenges relate to the interaction between sustainability and economic growth. Risks of over-tourism and exploitation of natural resources are major concerns, especially in the blue, green, and creative sectors. Without proper strategies, efforts to maintain a balance between development and environmental preservation will be difficult to achieve (*"Interaction of sustainability vs. economic growth"* - P1; *"No concrete strategy to protect the environment yet"* - P2). This is supported by studies by Moreira et al. (2023) and Rinaldi, Giovanardi, and Lucarelli (2021). Additionally, slow multisector collaboration processes and monotonous social media content are obstacles, due to complicated licensing processes and lack of innovation in digital marketing (*"The process of obtaining logo permits slows down"* - P1; *"Content on the website is still monotonous"* - P1). Involvement of local stakeholders is also low, because community awareness of the importance of city branding needs to be increased (*"Community awareness of branding is still low"* - P1), in line with findings by Golestaneh et al. (2022).

Overall, these challenges indicate a gap in small cities like Berau, where multisector collaboration and social media use have not been fully optimized. Unlike big cities like Jakarta, which have advanced further in these aspects (Luerdi, 2023; Warren, 2024).

(2). Discussion for Research Question 2, namely how do local stakeholders view their role and contribution in the city branding (CB) process in Berau, and how their role supports the integration of environmental sustainability with the creative economy?.

The Role of Government, Business Sector, Community, and Academics in Berau City Branding. The Berau regional government acts as the main facilitator driving programs and strategic policy makers, as stated by one participant, *"The regional government as the main facilitator, program driver, and strategic policy maker"* (P1). In addition, the government actively introduces local products such as handicrafts, batik, and culinary through various events and social media, supporting promotion strategies and city image building (P2). This role aligns with the findings of AlShalan and Durugbo (2024), who emphasize the importance of the government's active role in building a city image capable of attracting investment and tourists. The business sector and MSMEs also strengthen local identity through the development of local products and active promotion, while communities act as cultural preservers and tourism destination developers, strengthening authentic narratives for CB success (Green et al., 2018).

Academics and influencers support this strategy through training and education that strengthen cultural and sustainability images, in line with findings by Mohamad et al. (2022).

Support for Environmental Sustainability and Ecotourism. Environmental sustainability is viewed as the main foundation in Berau's city branding strategy. One participant stated, *"Environmental sustainability is viewed as the main foundation in the city branding process"* (P6), and *supports the development of ecotourism and promotion of environmentally friendly destinations* (P6). *Concrete steps taken include waste management, natural resource conservation, and supervision of tourism activities to ensure the ecosystem remains intact and a positive destination image can be maintained sustainably* (P4). This view aligns with Chan and Marafa (2014), who emphasize the importance of conservation-based ecotourism development to strengthen environmentally friendly destination images. These efforts are crucial so that the ecosystem remains protected and the positive image of the destination can be maintained sustainably, supporting branding strategies oriented towards environmental preservation.

Development of Creative Economy and Local Products. Local products such as handicrafts, batik, and culinary become an integral part of Berau's creative economy strategy. As stated by one participant, *"Local products such as handicrafts, batik, and culinary are part of the creative economy strategy"* (P8). *The development of these products is supported by cultural festivals, competitions, and digital promotions used to expand markets and increase the competitiveness of local products* (P5). This approach not only strengthens cultural identity and authentic regional image but also contributes to the social and economic sustainability of the community. Through cultural festivals and digital promotions, local products can reach wider markets, while increasing community income sustainably and strengthening authentic cultural images, as supported by Sigwele et al. (2018) and Mohr et al. (2023).

The Grounded Theory (GTA) process began with field data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation related to city branding practices in small cities like Berau. The collected data was then analyzed inductively through an iterative process, namely by conducting open, axial, and selective coding to identify patterns, relationships, and processes occurring in the field.

During the analysis process, it was found that CB success not only depends on individual factors such as natural potential and leader support, but more on the complex interaction between multisector collaboration, active community participation, and strategic use of digital media. From there, the concept emerged that sustainability in this context involves the holistic integration of local culture, environment, and economy, which must be carried out through concrete and collaborative steps.

The result of this process is the formation of a substantive theory called the "Sustainable Branding Theory". This theory asserts that the success of city branding in small cities like Berau depends on multisector collaboration, community participation, and strategic use of digital media. The sustainability referred to includes the holistic integration of local culture, environment, and economy through concrete and collaborative steps. This theory emphasizes that success in building the image of a small city like Berau depends on the active synergy of various stakeholders and innovative digital strategies, as well as authentic and holistic processes in managing sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The success of city branding in Berau is greatly influenced by strong support from regional leaders, local natural and cultural potential, and multisector collaboration involving government, community, private sector, and academics, with the use of social media as an important digital promotion tool. However, significant obstacles such as budget limitations, infrastructure, low community participation, and lack of concrete steps in environmental protection become major challenges, especially in balancing environmental sustainability and economic growth that could

potentially cause over-tourism and exploitation of natural resources. The role of stakeholders is very vital, where the government functions as the main facilitator and driver, the business sector and MSMEs strengthen identity through local products, and communities participate in cultural preservation and tourism destinations, supported by academics and influencers who strengthen sustainability and cultural narratives. Environmental sustainability becomes the main foundation in this strategy, with concrete steps such as waste management and natural resource conservation, while the development of the creative economy through cultural festivals and digital promotions helps strengthen authentic identity and socio-economic sustainability of the community. Therefore, there is a need to increase multisector collaboration and optimize social media to strengthen the city image more effectively, as well as holistically integrate cultural and environmental aspects so that sustainable economic development can be achieved in reality, thus the success of city branding in Berau depends on effective cooperation, sustainable resource management, and active participation of all stakeholders.

LIMITATION

This research has several limitations that need to be noted. First, the study focus is limited only to the local context in Berau, so the results and findings may not be fully generalizable to other small cities with different characteristics. Second, the methods used are qualitative and based on in-depth interviews and observations, so the data obtained is highly dependent on the perceptions and experiences of informants, which can cause subjective bias. Third, the limitation of the number of participants (ten people) and the coverage of involved sectors may not yet be able to capture the entire dynamics and perspectives of stakeholders comprehensively. In addition, the aspects of sustainability and natural resource management based on green and blue economy still require deeper and long-term studies to assess their real implementation effectiveness. Finally, external factors such as national and global political and economic conditions that also influence the city branding process have not specifically been the focus in this research, so the results need to be re-examined in the context of those dynamics in the future.

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