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Strengthening tourism village identity through participatory branding and storytelling: a case study of Watu Gedhek Village, Batu City

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ABSTRACT

Community-based tourism (CBT) supports rural development and preserves local culture, yet many tourism villages face challenges in showcasing their distinctive characteristics. This study aimed to develop participatory branding strategies for Watu Gedhek Village, Batu City, by integrating local narratives and sustainability goals. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with village officials, tourism managers, small business owners, and youth representatives. The process included identifying local potentials and problems, exploring branding and storytelling opportunities, and formulating strategic recommendations. The results highlight three key strategies: (1) positioning eco-printing shoes as cultural-environmental narratives, (2) promoting organic farming and aquaponics as educational tourism for families and students, and (3) developing therapeutic healing and experiential tourism to align with wellness tourism trends. These findings suggest that participatory branding and storytelling can strengthen the identity of a place, empower communities, and engage visitors in an immersive experience through environmental participation. This approach provides a framework for sustainable tourism development that can be replicated in other rural destinations.

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Introduction

Watu Gedhek Village in Batu City has considerable potential to be developed as a nature- and culture-based tourism destination. However, its primary challenge is the absence of a strong brand identity and compelling storytelling strategy that can differentiate it from other tourism

destinations in Batu City. Current tourism trends indicate a growing preference for destinations that emphasize sustainability, authenticity, and educational value (OECD, 2020). Sustainable tourism emerged as an essential approach to destination development, aiming to preserve natural and cultural resources while providing meaningful visitor experiences.

Located in Junrejo District, Watu Gedhek Village (Address: Dusun Watu Gedhek, Desa Mojorejo, Kecamatan Junrejo, Kota Batu, Jawa Timur, Indonesia, 65322) serves as the locus of this community service and research initiative. The village is known for its unique bamboo-based crafts, cultural traditions, and scenic landscapes, making it a potential model for participatory branding and storytelling-based tourism development. Its geographical proximity to popular attractions in Batu City, yet relatively underdeveloped branding, highlights the urgency of strengthening its identity to compete in the broader tourism ecosystem. Branding a sustainable tourism village requires a nuanced understanding of the interplay between local identity, community participation, and eco-conscious marketing. As Bowen and Sotomayor (2021) emphasize, sustainable branding is integral to positioning a destination effectively within a competitive tourism landscape, while highlighting its social and environmental responsibility.

Community involvement plays a critical role in this process. Bowen and Sotomayor (2021) advocate for actively engaging residents in the rebranding process, as their participation helps achieve sustainable development goals and strengthens their emotional ties to the destination. Engaging local stakeholders also facilitates the creation of brand identity elements that reflect the community's values, fostering a sense of ownership and loyalty. Similarly, Yuan et al. (2019) argue that strengthening place attachment through community participation can positively influence residents' attitudes toward tourism initiatives, thereby reinforcing the village's sustainable brand identity.

The activities carried out in Watu Gedhek Village are designed to strengthen its identity through participatory branding and storytelling. This includes capacity-building workshops for local communities on tourism branding, collaborative sessions to develop authentic narratives rooted in local culture and bamboo heritage, and practical training on digital storytelling and social media promotion. These activities aim not only to create a stronger brand image but also to ensure that residents become active agents in shaping and promoting their village's tourism identity. By doing so, the program fosters community pride, strengthens place attachment, and creates a foundation for sustainable tourism practices. Experiential marketing is another key factor in attracting visitors to sustainable tourism villages. By focusing on unique, memorable experiences, it appeals to modern travelers' preferences. Hanna et al. (2018) found that sustainability features significantly enhance tourists' experiential satisfaction, turning sustainability into a source of memorable tourism experiences rather than a mere marketing slogan. Creating immersive opportunities allows visitors to deeply engage with local culture and traditions, shaping their understanding of sustainability.

Cultural branding through local festivals and events can further strengthen the village's identity. Nugraha et al. (2024) highlight that showcasing local customs through festivals contributes to the branding narrative and enhances visitor engagement. These events not only attract tourists but also serve as platforms to educate them about sustainable practices. Finally, establishing brand trust is essential for long-term competitiveness. Wang (2022) notes that building trust fosters lasting relationships with visitors, encouraging repeat visitation and loyalty. By committing to transparency and sustainability, Watu Gedhek Village can solidify its brand identity and position itself as a leading sustainable tourism destination in Batu City. Moreover, the role of digital tools and social media cannot be overlooked. Buhalis and Sinarta (2019) emphasize that real-time engagement enabled by digital technologies is crucial for maintaining

competitiveness and connecting with increasingly informed consumers. By leveraging these platforms, tourism villages can effectively communicate their sustainability narratives, shape consumer perceptions and influence visitor behavior. Branding sustainable tourism villages requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates community engagement, experiential marketing, and strategic branding initiatives. As the tourism landscape shifts toward sustainability, stakeholders must actively involve residents and highlight authentic experiences that resonate with eco-conscious travelers. Prioritizing sustainability within branding strategies not only attracts visitors but also contributes to community well-being and environmental conservation. This comprehensive approach illustrates how combining community participation, experiential marketing, and strategic branding can foster meaningful connections with environmentally aware travelers while supporting long-term sustainability goals.

Community-based tourism (CBT) plays a central role in achieving these objectives. CBT is widely recognized for its ability to improve community welfare while preserving local culture and the natural environment (Risfandini, 2024). In rural contexts, tourism development must also consider local wisdom and community participation to ensure that initiatives remain culturally relevant (Vitasurya, 2016). As Lane and Kastenholz (2015) observe, rural tourism continues to evolve by emphasizing sustainability and differentiation in the delivery of visitor experiences. CBT empowers communities by generating economic benefits while simultaneously safeguarding cultural and natural resources (Sugiyarto & Amaruli, 2018). This is consistent with Komariah et al. (2018), who argue that successful tourism development depends on recognizing local wisdom and encouraging community participation, thereby aligning tourism efforts with the community's cultural values and practices. Differentiation, as noted by Lane and Kastenholz (2015) and Ardoin et al. (2015), enables communities to leverage their unique identities to provide authentic experiences that foster pride and ownership among residents. Such efforts strengthen the sustainability of tourism models and enhance the overall visitor experience.

Method

This international community service program adopted a participatory and experiential approach to support the sustainable branding of Watu Gedhek Village. The core method utilized was a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving village officials, tourism managers, small business owners, and youth representatives. FGD is an effective participatory tool for exploring aspirations, local narratives, and collective ideas in tourism village development (Vitasurya, 2016).

The program was carried out in several stages:

1. Identification of Potentials and Problems

The first stage focused on mapping the village's strengths, flagship products, and challenges faced by tourism managers. This step was essential for understanding the village's unique cultural and environmental assets and aligning them with sustainability-oriented development goals (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015).

2. Branding and Storytelling Discussion

In the second stage, participants collaborated to identify local stories, cultural values, and environmental narratives that could strengthen the village's identity. These discussions aimed to build a coherent brand narrative that reflects community values and fosters differentiation from other destinations, consistent with recommendations on sustainability branding (Bowen & Sotomayor, 2021; OECD, 2020).

3. Formulation of Strategic Recommendations

The final stage involved preparing strategic recommendations for branding, including key messaging, market segmentation, and experiential marketing approaches tailored to target audiences. This process integrated digital strategies, enabling the village to share sustainability narratives on social media platforms and enhance visitor engagement (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

Complementing the FGD process, future activities are planned to include capacity-building workshops for residents, focusing on sustainable tourism practices, digital storytelling, and content creation. These workshops aim to equip local youth with the skills to manage social media accounts and develop digital campaigns that highlight the village's eco-friendly initiatives and cultural heritage, reinforcing the importance of sustainability-driven experiences (Hanna et al., 2018). Additionally, participants collaborated with local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to design eco-friendly product packaging and promotional materials, further amplifying the village's brand. Cultural activities and small-scale festivals were co-created to showcase local traditions, aligning with Nugraha et al. (2024) on the role of cultural events in strengthening tourism branding. For the present stage, the program outcomes were reflected through two main indicators: (1) the level of community participation and empowerment achieved during the FGD process, and (2) the relevance of proposed digital outreach strategies in communicating sustainability narratives. These indicators were chosen based on prior research emphasizing the importance of community participation and place attachment in reinforcing destination branding and sustainability (Yuan et al., 2019; Sugiyarto & Amaruli, 2018). Visitor feedback regarding authenticity and satisfaction is planned to be incorporated in future stages once capacity-building activities and tourism product implementation are underway. By integrating FGD-based participatory planning, experiential learning, and digital branding initiatives, this method ensures that the branding of Watu Gedhek Village reflects community aspirations while promoting long-term environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability.

Results and Discussion

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) generated several strategic recommendations that directly support the development of a distinctive and sustainability-oriented brand for Watu Gedhek Village.

Eco-Printing Shoes as a Cultural and Environmental Narrative

Eco-Printing is a process of patternmaking by imprinting natural elements such as flowers, leaves, and branches. The process includes scouring the fabric by soaking in a TRO (Turkey Red Oil) solution and mordanting the fabric by immersing the cloth in a solution of alum and soda ash over boiling water. The process of transferring the print varies from compounding, which includes the plant elements being directly on the fabric then beaten with a mallet or iron blanketing, when the fabric and print is fixed by steaming (Susilawati et al., 2022).

Participants emphasized that eco-printing shoes should be positioned not merely as handicrafts but as visual stories reflecting farmers' deep connection to the land and the environment. The process is ethical and respectful to the environment by utilizing readily available materials instead of artificial dyes. The practice aligns with the branding and storytelling approach discussed in the introduction, where emphasizing local identity and community values is key to differentiation (Bowen & Sotomayor, 2021). By framing eco-printing products as cultural narratives, the village can enhance the perceived authenticity of its offerings

and strengthen visitor engagement, supporting the notion that sustainability branding must go beyond functional benefits and appeal to emotions and shared values (OECD, 2020).

Organic Farming and Aquaponics as Educational Tourism Attractions

The FGD highlighted organic farming and aquaponics as potential tourism education experiences, particularly targeting families and school groups. This approach is consistent with global trends in rural educational tourism that promote food sustainability and environmental literacy (OECD, 2020). Integrating these activities into the village's tourism portfolio provides experiential learning opportunities that not only attract eco-conscious visitors but also create awareness of sustainable agriculture practices to every people of any social and educational status. Such activities contribute to the village's long-term branding strategy by linking tourism experiences with sustainability education, reinforcing the environmental stewardship narrative.

Therapeutic Healing and Experiential Tourism

Another key recommendation was to position therapeutic healing experiences—such as herbal wellness activities, nature walks, food culture, and mindfulness programs—as part of the village's tourism offerings. This strategy aligns with research on rural health tourism, which demonstrates that such activities benefit both visitors' well-being and the preservation of natural environments (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). By integrating health-oriented experiential tourism, Watu Gedhek Village can appeal to growing wellness tourism markets while further embedding sustainability into its tourism narrative.

Strategic Role of Storytelling

Although the activities were limited to FGDs, the results indicate that storytelling offers a powerful framework for strengthening the village's identity as a community-based tourism destination. As Vitasurya (2016) notes, local narratives and community participation are vital for developing tourism initiatives that are both culturally relevant and sustainable. Storytelling also provides a foundation for digital engagement strategies, as recommended in the methodology, allowing the village to disseminate its narratives via social media and connect with wider audiences (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). While a story defines a city, change is still inevitable especially in natural landscapes. Gerona-Daga & Salmo (2022) suggests that threat of Climate Change, economic shift, and altered land use are the factors that change the meanings and vulnerability of places. Therefore, storytelling must be process-oriented and locally led.

Discussion

These results collectively demonstrate how participatory approaches can generate branding strategies that are practical and culturally grounded for tourism villages. The engagement of FDGs in the local community led to the exchange of values, customs and knowledge. Collectively, FDGs first handedly experienced wellness-oriented activities that the tourism offered through sight-seeing, learning how the local products were made and distributed, and even engaging in food practices. Watu Gedhek Village can differentiate itself in a competitive tourism landscape. The findings reinforce the argument that sustainable branding is most effective when it combines community engagement, experiential marketing, and digital storytelling to create a coherent and authentic destination image (Yuan et al., 2019; Hanna et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the recommendations have important implications for future development. Implementing these strategies could foster stronger place attachment among residents,

encourage local economic participation, and build visitor trust in the village's commitment to sustainability (Sugiyarto & Amaruli, 2018; Wang, 2022). The FGD outcomes thus serve as a preliminary roadmap for positioning Watu Gedhek Village as a leading example of community-based sustainable tourism in Batu City.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of participatory approaches in shaping the sustainable branding of Watu Gedhek Village. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) revealed three strategic directions: positioning eco-printing shoes as cultural-environmental narratives, promoting organic farming and aquaponics as educational tourism experiences, and developing therapeutic healing activities to tap into wellness tourism trends. Together, these initiatives strengthen the village's identity and create a compelling value proposition for eco-conscious visitors.

The findings confirm that storytelling is a powerful tool for differentiating tourism villages, as it captures local culture, community values, placemaking, and sustainability commitments in ways that resonate with travelers. Moreover, integrating digital engagement and experiential marketing can amplify these narratives, enabling wider reach and deeper visitor connection. Ultimately, the results demonstrate that community participation, environmental stewardship, and strategic branding must work in synergy to create an authentic and competitive tourism destination. By implementing the recommendations from this study, Watu Gedhek Village can enhance resident empowerment, attract environmentally aware visitors, and contribute to long-term sustainable tourism development in Batu City.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the branding and sustainable tourism potential of Watu Gedhek Village, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the findings are based primarily on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), which capture perceptions and ideas but may not fully represent all community members' perspectives. Additional methods such as household surveys or key informant interviews could offer a more comprehensive understanding of resident attitudes and priorities. Second, the study did not include implementation or longitudinal monitoring of the recommended branding strategies. Future research could pilot the proposed initiatives—such as eco-print product promotion, educational tourism programs, and therapeutic tourism activities—and measure their impacts on visitor satisfaction, resident participation, and economic outcomes over time. Third, while digital storytelling and social media strategies were proposed, their effectiveness has not yet been empirically tested. Further studies could evaluate engagement metrics, visitor conversion rates, and the role of online branding in shaping tourists' decision-making. Finally, this research focused on a single village in Batu City, which may limit generalizability. Comparative studies involving multiple tourism villages could help identify best practices and scalable strategies for community-based sustainable tourism branding. By addressing these limitations, future research can build on the current findings, offering deeper insights into how participatory branding, digital engagement, and sustainability initiatives interact to create resilient rural tourism destinations.

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