



Colorful Medan City Branding Strategy to Attract Tourists to Medan

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to strengthen the city's identity and increase tourism competitiveness, the Medan City Government initiated city branding titled Colorful Medan since 2017. This branding reflects the ethnic, cultural, culinary, and historical diversity of Medan City as a multicultural city. However, even though the city has enormous tourism potential, the number of tourist visits is still fluctuating. This study aims to analyze the city branding strategy of the Medan City Tourism Office in attracting tourist visits, as well as identifying supporting and inhibiting factors for its implementation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with data collection techniques in the form of in-depth interviews with four key informants from the Tourism Office, this study was analyzed using the theory of integrated marketing communication (IMC) and city branding theory. The results of the study indicate that Colorful Medan has been implemented through four main strategies: image marketing, attractions, infrastructure, and residents. This strategy generally reflects an integrated and participatory effort in forming a positive perception of the city, both through visual symbols, strengthening cultural and culinary attractions, developing tourism-supporting infrastructure, and actively involving the community. However, this strategy still faces various challenges, such as budget constraints, lack of synergy between agencies, less than optimal branding education for the community, and inconsistent branding implementation due to changes in leadership.

INTRODUCTION

A city branding strategy can be considered a strategic measure that must be managed by the government to promote a place or country internationally. The success of implementing a city branding strategy in these cities is inseparable from the role of the government, investors, tourism industry players, and the local community itself (Adhiimsyah Luthfi, 2018). A city needs to create an identity that attracts various parties to face competition between cities to attract resources, investment, and tourists.

Medan is one of Indonesia's metropolitan cities due to its rich history and diverse ethnic groups. Medan's residents come from diverse cultural backgrounds, but its earliest inhabitants were Malay, dominated by Javanese, Batak, Mandailing, and Minang, followed by Chinese, Indian, Arab, and others, making Medan a multicultural city.

Medan's numerous tourist attractions enrich its history and art scene. However, many of these attractions remain unknown to domestic and international tourists. With its rich culture, culinary delights, and history, Medan strives to highlight its uniqueness through city branding strategies (Fathimah, 2024).

Medan, with its long history, boasts numerous historical sites such as the Tjong a Fie Mansion, the Rahmat Gallery Museum, and the Plantation Museum. Maimun Palace and the Al-Mahsun Grand Mosque reflect the city's rich Malay and Islamic culture. Furthermore, Medan is surrounded by natural beauty, including the Medan Zoo, the Mangrove Ecotourism Park, Avros Park, and Lake Siombak. There are also attractions such as the Graha Annai Velangkani, the Shri Mariamman Temple, and more.

Medan needs to utilize creative marketing communications to increase tourist arrivals. One effective approach is to develop a unique city branding strategy, including the "Colorful Medan" concept, which reflects the city's diverse culture, cuisine, and tourist destinations. This strategy aims to create a positive image and strong appeal to tourists, as stated by Fathinnah (2022), who emphasized the importance of creating a unique and compelling city identity to enhance the city's image and support tourism growth. The "Colorful Medan" city branding is expected to enhance Medan's image among tourists and investors, as well as stimulate local economic growth.

Research by Adona (2017) explains that city branding must be clearly defined to avoid ambiguity that could undermine the launched city branding concept and to avoid unclear perceptions among tourists regarding the city's character, especially if the slogan is changed or requires further socialization and clarification. Although Medan already has the "Colorful Medan" city branding, its implementation is still not optimal. More intensive outreach to the public and stakeholders regarding the branding established by the government is needed. It is hoped that with the numerous infrastructure developments in Medan, the city government will use a tagline that is consistent and integrated with the existing city branding, to avoid confusion or uncertainty in the future. Currently, the tagline "Medan Berkah Collaboration" is used in every infrastructure development project. This tagline was part of the Medan Mayor's campaign

during his time. However, each change in city leadership is usually accompanied by a change in the tagline, which creates uncertainty regarding the city's future identity, especially for ongoing infrastructure projects. It is best not to change the city's established identity. This is crucial for maintaining the continuity and clarity of Medan's sustainable image.

Furthermore, Diella's (2020) research on the Communication Strategy for City Branding in Magelang City states that with the branding slogan "City of a Million Flowers," the Magelang City Government faces a unique challenge in presenting Magelang City to the wider public. How can the brand be built to gain a place and attention in the hearts and minds of the wider community, both the residents of Magelang City itself and those from other regions? From this research, it is clear that consistent branding in a city is crucial for increasing the city's appeal and increasing tourist visits.

Research by Muktiyo (2023) shows that city branding significantly influences the increase in tourist arrivals. Therefore, it can serve as a reference for Medan to better implement branding to increase tourist arrivals. Good city branding can enhance the city's image and support tourism growth. Furthermore, research by Syafitri (2023) found a significant influence between city branding and destination image. These findings underscore the importance of managing image and tourism experiences to attract more visitors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In an organization, everyone will communicate with others. Mistakes in communication will impact conflicts between individuals and work teams within an organization. Judging from the high time spent by individuals in the form of communication through writing, reading, speaking, and listening, where communication within an organization does not run effectively, it will hinder the success of the organization (Triapnita, 2021). Public communication shows a communication process where messages are delivered by speakers in face-to-face situations in front of a larger audience (Changra, 2014).

Based on this opinion, it can be seen that public communication is communication that occurs between a communicator and a number of audiences. Usually, the number of audiences is quite large, so it is said to be public. In the process, public communication can be direct or indirect (media). Thus, the face-to-face situation in public communication, with current technological advances. Another opinion put forward by Ruben and Stewart (2014) states that in contrast to more personal and individual forms of communication, public communication and mass communication refer to situations where messages are created and disseminated to a relatively large number of recipients and in relatively impersonal circumstances.

Knowledge of etiquette is a form of nonverbal communication, and competence can also be derived from this. Based on the behavior of the opinion section, communication competence is related to our ability to build effective communication. Effective communication is achieving our communication goals, namely receiving and even responding to our messages (Mucharam, 2022).

In Indonesia, tourism is the third largest foreign exchange earner after oil and textiles. This proves that the tourism service industry has significant potential to become the backbone of the economy in the future (Rezzaq, 2019). The tourism communication implemented by each tourism manager will also vary depending on the conditions and circumstances of the tourist destination. Some emphasize the use of social media as part of their tourism communication. Others emphasize the use of advertisements in the media. Still others emphasize the use of brochures or posters, and so on (Pradana, 2023). Meanwhile, tourism contributes to the field of marketing studies. Tourism communication is a human activity that conveys information about travel to an area or destination that tourists will visit, while enjoying the journey from one destination to another, thereby attracting tourists and leading them to take action (Sihombing, 2022).

All activities related to conveying product or service information, from producers to consumers, can be defined as a form of marketing. Communication, especially in marketing, can be created meaningfully when combined with effective and efficient communication. This is about how efforts to attract consumers or the public to become aware, aware, familiar with, and willing to purchase a product or service through communication channels is not easy (Rabbani, 2022). Marketing, according to Pragnoyo (2024), is a social process in which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want by creating, offering, and freely exchanging products of value with others. IMC integrates various communication elements, such as advertising, sales promotions, public relations, direct marketing, and other elements, to create a consistent and coordinated experience for consumers (Firmansyah M.A., 2019).

By delivering the same and consistent message across channels, companies can build strong brand awareness in the minds of consumers. When consumers are continuously exposed to a uniform message, the brand becomes more easily recognized and remembered (Pranogyo, 2024). Zahra (2023) stated that cities and other large cities are currently competing to build city branding. Constructing city branding is not easy because the idea is that each region must choose the most unique or new potential to be developed. Many regions have not yet realized their superior potential. Some regions choose superior potential to be developed as branding icons, but because of similarities with the potential of other regions, it is not strong enough to become a brand.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a descriptive method with a qualitative approach. Qualitative research can be simply understood as a type of research whose findings are not obtained through statistical procedures but rather focus on how the researcher understands and interprets the meaning of events, interactions, and behavior of subjects in specific situations from the researcher's perspective. This study employed purposive sampling, a technique for selecting research subjects based on characteristics relevant to the research and specifically determined by the researcher. Subjects in this study were not selected irregularly or randomly, but were determined by the researcher based on specific characteristics. Therefore, these research subjects must have backgrounds,

experience, insight, and in-depth knowledge relevant to the research topic to maximize the research objectives (Kumara, 2018)

Informant selection using purposive sampling was carried out until data saturation was reached, whereby new informants no longer provided significant or new information. The informants in this study were as follows:

1. The Head of the Medan City Tourism Office, who has the ultimate responsibility for policymaking and strategic direction for tourism promotion.
2. The Head of Tourism Marketing was selected because he is directly responsible for implementing marketing programs and strengthening the city's identity through branding.
3. The Tourism Marketing and Brand Strategy Working Team, which technically develops the branding strategy, including selecting concepts, visualizations, and communicating the "Colorful Medan" message.
4. The Head of the Tourism Promotion Working Team was involved because of his role in implementing promotional strategies, establishing collaborations with external parties, and distributing promotional content to various media outlets.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

City Branding Strategy of the Medan City Tourism Office in Attracting Tourists to Visit Medan City

The city branding strategy promoted by the Medan City Government through the "Colorful Medan" concept represents a comprehensive approach to building the city's image as a tourist destination that emphasizes not only its visual beauty but also its cultural and historical values, as well as the active participation of its residents. This strategy does not stand alone but is designed by considering all aspects of city communication, from symbolic imagery, attractions, infrastructure, and even resident engagement. "Colorful Medan" becomes a kind of collective identity that binds the city's elements together in a unified and consistent narrative. Within the framework of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory, this strategy appears to integrate various communication channels and messages into a strong, consistent, and participatory strategic framework.

At the image marketing level, "Colorful Medan" demonstrates a deep understanding of the importance of symbols and narratives in shaping city perceptions. Medan's image as a culturally rich and multicultural city is visually embodied through its "M"-shaped logo made of colorful songket cloth, which is not only aesthetically pleasing but also imbued with historical and philosophical significance. Songket, as a representation of Deli Malay culture, is rooted in local identity, while the symbolic colors reflect the city's ethnic diversity and social dynamics. Furthermore, the branding narrative is reinforced by the slogan "Colorful Medan Ahoy!", a distinctive greeting that fosters emotional connection with the community and tourists. These visuals and narratives are not only promotional tools but also a means of building social meaning and collective pride in the city.

The Medan City Government implements this image marketing in a multi-layered manner through the revitalization of historical spaces, the development of Strategic Tourism Areas (KSP), including KSP 1, namely the Kesawan area, Medeka field, Perintis, HM Yamin, Petisah, and Kebun Bunga areas. The installation of digital barcodes on heritage buildings and cross-media promotions, including the broadcast of branding videos in international areas such as Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur.

This context aligns with the results of a study by Alike Fathinnah (2022) in the *Journal of Spatial Studies*, which emphasized that an effective city branding strategy must integrate narrative, visual, and spatial elements to enable tourists to fully experience the city's uniqueness. Fathinnah stated that successful branding lies not solely in logo design, but in its ability to create a lasting spatial experience that reflects the city's identity emotionally and functionally. However, there are challenges in building a collective public understanding of this branding. Many residents still don't distinguish between "Colorful Medan" and tourism branding. This indicates that the communication strategy developed has not yet fully reached the educational realm. Branding has not been truly internalized as a shared awareness. This demonstrates the importance of two-way, educational, and sustainable communication in every city branding campaign (Purba et al., 2025).

From an attraction marketing perspective, "Colorful Medan" presents an approach that grounded the city's experience as a culture-based tourist destination. The city of Medan recognizes its natural limitations, lacking seas or mountains, and therefore chooses to highlight the strengths of culture, cuisine, and historical heritage as its main attractions. Events such as the Colorful Medan Carnival and Gelar Melayu Serumpun serve as a medium for multi-ethnic cultural expression (Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

The revitalization of historical areas such as Kesawan Heritage and the Warenhuis Building is also a crucial part of strengthening the city's collective memory-based attractions. These areas are not only restored to their original function but also revived as public spaces for events and historical tourism. From a city marketing perspective, Kotler (2002), this demonstrates that the city's marketed product is not only physical, but also narrative and atmosphere. The Medan City Government also targets MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Convention, and Exhibition) tourists by providing modern facilities, seminars, and conventions that position Medan on the map of professional urban destinations. All of these attractions are packaged within a consistent "Colorful Medan" narrative across various channels, reflecting the IMC principle of building a solid and memorable city image. This strategy is also supported by Syafitri's (2023) research in the *Journal of Trends in Economics and Accounting Research*, which shows that city branding based on cultural events, such as the Bengkulu Tabut Festival, can significantly increase tourist interest. Syafitri emphasized the importance of community involvement and the strength of cultural values as the heart of destination promotion, which aligns with the participatory concept implemented in the "Colorful Medan" cultural attraction strategy.

The next strategy is infrastructure marketing, which is a crucial foundation for supporting city branding. The Medan City Government is not only improving infrastructure for public service purposes but also packaging it as part of the city's symbolic communication. The revitalization of the KSP area, the installation of zebra crossings and pedestrian lights, and the planned construction of an aesthetic pedestrian bridge are concrete forms of creating comfort and safety for tourists. Furthermore, the commitment to a crime-free tourist area (Zero Crime Area) demonstrates that social infrastructure is also part of the branding narrative. This is relevant to theories of environmental communication and security communication, where spatial perceptions contribute to image perception Dalimunthe et al., 2025; Ritonga et al., 2025).

However, infrastructure challenges remain significant. The Tourism Office, which is not the primary manager of infrastructure, often acts only as a facilitator, while coordination between agencies remains weak. The city branding vision has not been fully integrated into cross-sectoral city development planning. Leadership imbalances and budget constraints also make infrastructure strategies more reactive than strategic. The fact that Medan Airport is located outside the Medan administrative area weakens the city's appeal as a major gateway to North Sumatra. Therefore, the city branding strategy is aimed at creating attractions within the city to maintain tourist interest.

Other weaknesses include the lack of integration with public transportation, the suboptimal digitalization of tourism (apps, internet networks), and a weak tourist visit monitoring system. Yet, within the IMC framework, infrastructure development should be part of the ongoing and coordinated delivery of branding messages. Visual branding, such as the acrylic "Colorful Medan" logo, does provide identity, but infrastructure, as an experience, must concretely reflect that message. Without synergy between symbolism and substance, city branding will lose its credibility.

The most crucial strategy in the "Colorful Medan" city branding is people marketing. Residents are no longer passive objects but active subjects in shaping the city's image. The Medan City Government strives to directly involve residents in cultural events, MSMEs, and visual promotions. Residents become performers, ethnic fashion designers, culinary entrepreneurs, and even informal ambassadors on social media. The signature greeting "Ahoy!", which has gone viral among young people, has become a symbol of authentic participation. This aligns with the concept of horizontal communication, where the messaging process is no longer top-down, but originates from and for the community. This people marketing strategy also represents an internal branding practice, where residents are involved from the initial branding formulation process through a national competition run by the Ministry of Tourism. Thus, "Colorful Medan" is not an elitist brand, but rather the result of public aspirations. However, sustainability challenges remain significant. Resident participation is still temporary, occurring only at specific events. There is no established branding education system, let alone a curriculum or branding learning media in schools.

Without a sustainable internal communication strategy, brand awareness will remain illusory.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of the Medan City Tourism Office in Attracting Tourists to Medan City

The initial success of Colorful Medan's city branding implementation is inseparable from a number of supporting factors that strengthened the foundation of city branding policies and implementation. One crucial structural support is the formal regulation in the form of the Mayor's Regulation (Perwal) concerning Strategic Tourism Areas (KSP). This regulation demonstrates the government's commitment to providing a strong legal basis for the systematic and integrated development and management of tourism areas. This Perwal serves not only as a symbol of political support but also as a policy instrument that enables cross-sector coordination in destination development. The revitalization of historic areas such as Kesawan is one concrete example of the regulation's implementation, where public infrastructure is reorganized to create a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing city that supports the branding narrative.

The destination packaging strategy is also a key strength in the marketing approach taken by the Tourism Office. The KSP area, comprising various historical, culinary, and entertainment elements, is packaged under one integrated theme, creating a comprehensive experience for tourists. This concept broadens the focus of city branding from a single object to a thematic area that simultaneously presents visual, cultural, and emotional narratives. The success of this strategy is reinforced by the involvement of the creative economy community through organizations like KOEKRAF and events like Beranda Kreatif, which actively involve artists, MSMEs, and the younger generation in promotional activities. This creates a participatory climate that strengthens the city's identity from within, in line with the principles of participatory communication in city branding.

This approach aligns with the findings of Rr. Almira Diella M. (2020) in her research on the city branding communication strategy of "Magelang, City of a Million Flowers." The study explained that the effectiveness of city branding is determined by the use of primary (infrastructure and regulations), secondary (visual identity), and tertiary (public experience and perception) communication strategies. The same trend is evident in the Medan context, particularly through the Mayor's Regulation (Perwal), the strengthening of visual imagery, and the cultural narrative built through thematic destination experiences and community participation. This demonstrates that Colorful Medan has implemented a comprehensive and theoretically sound city branding communication strategy.

The legality of the Colorful Medan brand, as the result of an official competition conducted by the Ministry of Tourism, also provides important national legitimacy. This brand was not born from a unilateral initiative of the local government, but rather was the result of a selection process involving the public and received recognition from the ministry. This gives the brand its resilience and symbolic power, making it more than just a regional project but part of a national strategy. The consistent use of the logo and visual branding

identity in various promotional materials, from flyers and backdrops to social media posts, demonstrates that this city branding has begun to be internalized as a collective narrative within the Medan City government bureaucracy. In fact, annual events like the Colorful Medan Carnival strengthen the brand's sustainability and serve as a platform for actualizing branding values in the public sphere.

Furthermore, Medan's ethnic pluralism serves as a narrative force underlying the birth of the Colorful Medan brand. With its diversity of 14 local and immigrant ethnicities, the city boasts rich and authentic cultural resources. This concept translates into various cultural events, such as the Gelar Melayu Serumpun, which is consistently held annually. This event serves not only as a promotional strategy for attractions but also as an effort to preserve and maintain cultural diversity as a tourist attraction. Beyond its visual appeal, Medan's culture is developed as a vibrant social experience through various performances, culinary exhibitions, and folk festivals.

Research by Lilik Sumarni et al. (2024) on Tangerang's city branding communication strategy through the promotion of Kali Pasir cultural tourism demonstrates the importance of cultural events as a means of communication that strengthens the city's image and attracts tourists. Like Tangerang, Medan also relies on cultural events as a symbolic communication channel to build a multicultural image. The title "Melayu Serumpun," in this context, functions not only as a promotional attraction but also as a manifestation of local values that strengthen the city's unique identity.

The government's internal commitment is also a crucial supporting factor. For example, the policy of wearing traditional attire every Friday for civil servants (ASN) and freelancers (PHL), demonstrates that branding is not only aimed at foreign tourists but also internalized within the bureaucratic social fabric. This is a crucial form of internal branding, ensuring that every city actor is part of the dissemination of the constructed identity. This practice also reinforces the narrative of diversity that is at the core of the Colorful Medan brand.

The Medan City Government also actively participates in various promotional activities outside the region, such as participation in national events in Yogyakarta and visual promotions in international locations such as Bukit Bintang, Malaysia. This demonstrates an effort to build external awareness so that the Colorful Medan brand is widely recognized, not just locally. These promotional activities are adaptive, with promotional steps being implemented in stages while awaiting the destination's full readiness. This approach reflects the principles of integrated marketing communication (IMC), which prioritize message consistency while remaining responsive to product readiness. In this context, communication messages are delivered through various channels and strategies, while maintaining a unified voice: the narrative of Medan's diversity and attractiveness.

These findings align with research by Alika Fathinnah, Agus Rochani, and Tingginehe (2019), which states that successful city branding is determined by consistent multi-channel communication and integration between sectors.

Medan's use of social media, the implementation of major events, and collaboration across technical agencies demonstrates a concrete practice of an integrated communications strategy that unites all elements of the city to strengthen the branding narrative.

Cross-sector synergy is also further strengthened in the implementation of city branding. Although the Tourism Office is not directly responsible for infrastructure, its collaboration with technical agencies such as the Transportation Office, Public Works and Housing Office, and the Housing and Settlement Office in supporting event implementation demonstrates a pattern of cooperation between regional government organizations. For example, during the Gelar Melayu Serumpun event, the Transportation Office provided technical support, including lighting and traffic management. This collaboration reflects the pentahelix approach in city branding theory, where the government, public, media, and the private sector play active roles in creating and strengthening the city's identity. This approach also reinforces the collaborative communication aspect, which is a crucial part of contemporary city branding strategies.

In terms of visual and digital communication, social media as a primary promotional channel provides an advantage in reaching a wide and fast audience. Colorful Medan's branding is consistently present in official social media content, strengthening a digital presence that is highly relevant in the modern marketing era. Within the framework of integrated marketing communications, the use of digital and social media is part of an integrated multichannel strategy, where messaging is delivered through various media to amplify promotional effects. Furthermore, the greeting "Ahoy," derived from Delhi Malay culture, serves as a linguistic symbol that strengthens the emotional connection between the brand and the community. The "Colorful Medan - Ahoy" chant used at events demonstrates a down-to-earth and memorable symbolic communication strategy.

Overall, the initial success of Colorful Medan's city branding strategy is strongly supported by symbolic, regulatory, participatory power, and internal and external synergy. The approach employed reflects the principles of integrated marketing communications, ranging from strengthening visual identity, message consistency, community engagement, and cross-sector collaboration. Furthermore, this strategy also aligns with city branding theory, which emphasizes the importance of building a city's image through the integration of cultural, social, and physical elements within a cohesive identity. With further strengthening of continuity, branding education, and more sophisticated digitalization, the Colorful Medan brand has great potential to grow as a city identity that is not only known, but also felt and owned by all its citizens.

In its implementation, Colorful Medan's city branding strategy faced a number of complex structural, cultural, technical, and resource challenges. One major obstacle was the Medan City Tourism Office's limited budget. This limited funding hampered the implementation of various strategic programs, from the construction of supporting infrastructure such as zebra crossings, pedestrian lighting, and aesthetically pleasing bridges to more extensive and innovative

promotions. This situation prevented several aspects of city branding from being fully implemented. Furthermore, the promotional strategy also depended on regional budget (APBD) funding, which was influenced by regional fiscal capacity and community tax contributions. In this context, city branding depended not only on planning but also on the strength of the local economy as a key driver.

In integrated marketing communications (IMC) theory, budget constraints were a major obstacle to creating consistent and sustainable communications. IMC requires the strategic integration of all communication messages and channels to create a strong and cohesive city image. Without adequate funding, communication strategies could not be implemented simultaneously across multiple channels, and as a result, the effectiveness of city branding campaigns was weakened. This was also reflected in the study by Caisar Pieter Vega Arwanto et al. (2020) regarding the city branding of Sparkling Surabaya, where budget constraints pose a major obstacle to optimally reaching target audiences and reducing Surabaya's competitiveness as a tourist city. Similarly, in Medan, limited funding prevents branding messages from being communicated widely and intensively.

The Tourism Office aspires to make Medan a Zero Crime City, so security is another systemic challenge that requires long-term attention. Security concerns not only crime but also public order, comfort, and public perception of the city's atmosphere. While branding can create positive perceptions through symbols and narratives, if security is not consistently maintained, these perceptions can easily collapse. In practice, Medan still faces challenges such as chaotic traffic, low public discipline, and a high level of negative opinions regarding tourist comfort. All of this creates a less-than-ideal tourist experience and reduces the overall effectiveness of branding.

This aligns with city branding theory, which states that tourists' direct experiences with a city are key to creating an authentic image. When actual experiences do not align with promotional messages, communication dissonance occurs, damaging long-term reputation. In Rr.'s research, Almira Diella M (2020) on Magelang, the City of a Million Flowers, explained that tourist perceptions are strongly influenced by concrete experiences during their visit. Magelang, in this case, was able to maintain a positive image by simultaneously integrating aspects of promotion, comfort, and city order. This remains a major challenge for Medan.

Inter-agency coordination is also a serious obstacle. Although branding is the primary responsibility of the Tourism Office, the success of this strategy depends heavily on synergy with other agencies such as the Public Works Office, the Transportation Office, and law enforcement agencies. Unfortunately, this cross-sectoral collaboration remains suboptimal. Much of the tourism-supporting infrastructure does not fall under the authority of the Tourism Office, so the implementation process is often hampered by differing priorities and a lack of policy integration. This prevents city branding from developing as an integrated, cross-sectoral strategy, but remains fragmented and sectoral.

From an IMC perspective, this weakness demonstrates a lack of vertical and horizontal integration in government communications. IMC emphasizes not

only message consistency but also coordination across stakeholders to ensure messages, actions, and policies are aligned. The lack of inter-agency synergy deprives Colorful Medan of its collaborative strength. This is also evident in the Sparkling Surabaya study, where the success of city promotion is largely determined by the cohesiveness of regional government agencies (OPDs) in supporting the city's core branding message.

On the other hand, Medan, as a commercial city, also lacks prominent natural tourism strengths, such as beaches, mountains, or captivating landscapes. Its reliance on urban attractions like heritage, culinary delights, and cultural events forces the city to compete more fiercely in developing unique and memorable attractions. The lack of natural resources necessitates more creative tourism promotion, but in practice, this limitation becomes an additional burden in shaping the city's differentiation.

In city branding theory, the power of differentiation is a crucial factor in building a strong positioning. Without a unique and competitive character, a city brand will be lost in the clutter of global information. This demands creative and innovative strategies that combine the uniqueness of local culture with modern tourism experiences. In the study of Magelang, the city of a Million Flowers, the visual power of flowers served as a strong differentiating element because neighboring cities lacked them. Medan still needs to find a strong, distinctive symbol that can be brought to the global stage as its primary identity.

Another challenge arises from the ownership of tourist attractions. Many destinations that are prime branding targets, such as Maimun Palace and several historic buildings, are managed by foundations or private parties. This leaves the Medan City Government with limited control over the governance, aesthetics, and service standards of these destinations. When service quality falls short of tourism standards, the impact can tarnish the city's overall image, even with carefully crafted branding. Furthermore, technical issues at destinations like Lake Siombak, which is prone to flooding and has suboptimal road access, exacerbate physical barriers to attracting tourists.

Community involvement in branding also remains a significant challenge. Although the Colorful Medan branding was conceived as a representation of multi-ethnic culture, active community participation remains minimal. Citizen involvement is often ceremonial, such as during certain events or festivals, but is not structured into long-term programs. The absence of educational campaigns or training on branding at the community level means that the public lacks an adequate understanding of the importance of city branding. Branding is still considered a government-owned activity, not part of the collective identity of residents. In fact, many residents are more familiar with government taglines like "Kolaborasi Medan Berkah" (Blessed Medan Collaboration) than with "Colorful Medan" as the city's identity.

City branding theory emphasizes the importance of community participation in shaping a city's identity. Without citizen involvement as co-creators of the city's image, branding will become a largely elitist, unrooted activity. Research on Magelang, the city of a Million Flowers, shows that the success of city branding is not solely due to the visual concept, but also to

residents' sense of ownership and participation in disseminating branding values. Medan still faces a gap between the branding narrative and public awareness.

Furthermore, branding sustainability is a strategic issue that cannot be ignored. City branding that relies on a regional leader risks long-term inconsistency. Changes in leadership can lead to changes in taglines, promotional direction, and even program cancellations. This causes branding to lose its power, continuity, and public trust. Furthermore, the lack of an in-depth evaluation of Colorful Medan's effectiveness as a city branding strategy has made development efforts less data-driven and critically reflective. Accurate information on tourist arrivals has also been lacking due to the lack of a valid counting system, particularly for domestic tourists not registered with the immigration system.

Another obstacle is the lack of comprehensive and sustainable promotion. Branding promotion remains limited to specific occasions such as events or social media posts, without an integrated campaign that encompasses all levels of society. The lack of branding education through school curricula, community media, or training for tourism stakeholders has made this strategy less grounded. Strong branding is, in fact, one that lives within the public consciousness.

Based on all of the above obstacles, it is clear that the implementation of Colorful Medan has not been fully systemic and sustainable. A more collaborative and participatory communication strategy is needed, encompassing institutional aspects, funding, and cultural approaches. Without strengthening internal foundations such as cross-agency synergy, community participation, and infrastructure improvements, branding will remain merely a powerful symbol on the surface, but weak in substance. The ideal city branding is one that lives within the actions, services, and collective perceptions of all elements of the city. Therefore, improving these inhibiting factors is the key to success in the long journey of building Medan's image as a truly colorful city.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The "Colorful Medan" city branding strategy has been comprehensively designed and reflects an integrated marketing communications (IMC) approach. This branding integrates elements of visual imagery, cultural attractions, supporting infrastructure, and community participation into a consistent and sustainable narrative. The use of a colorful songket-based logo and the slogan "Ahoy!" serve as powerful symbols representing the city's multicultural identity. In terms of image marketing, Medan City emphasizes visual symbols and cultural narratives to shape city perceptions. The revitalization of heritage areas, social media campaigns, and the use of visual elements in public spaces demonstrate that branding is implemented not merely as a promotional tool but as a process of internalizing the city's cultural meaning into social spaces and behaviors. The attraction marketing strategy focuses on cultural, culinary, and historical richness, given the city's limited natural attractions. Events such as the Colorful Medan Carnival and Gelar Melayu Serumpun provide participatory spaces for the community while reinforcing authentic tourism experiences. Medan also develops gastronomy as an attraction through the brand The Kitchen

of Asia. In the infrastructure marketing strategy, the government has strived to create infrastructure that supports tourist comfort, although challenges in inter-agency coordination and limited budgets remain significant obstacles. The Tourism Office's role as a facilitator has resulted in many development plans not being optimally representative of the city's physical and functional branding. People marketing has become a key pillar in strengthening the city's identity. The public has begun to be involved in organizing events and visual campaigns, as well as internalizing branding values within the bureaucracy, such as the use of traditional attire. However, this participation remains ceremonial and is not supported by a long-term branding education system. Although the "Colorful Medan" branding has demonstrated narrative and visual consistency, its impact on increasing tourist numbers has not been significant and continues to fluctuate. Year-to-year tourist visit data has been unstable and does not show a consistent upward trend. This indicates that city branding has not fully succeeded in driving long-term changes in tourist behavior, likely influenced by weak inter-agency synergy, promotional constraints, and suboptimal internal communication with the public.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of city branding initiatives like "Colorful Medan" on tourists' decision-making patterns, especially by integrating data analytics and sentiment analysis from social media platforms. While this study has identified the role of IMC and participatory strategies in shaping city identity, further investigation is needed to evaluate how digital narratives, traveler-generated content, and community-based branding influence tourist loyalty and revisit intention. Additionally, comparative studies between cities with similar cultural positioning such as Yogyakarta, Padang, or Makassar could yield deeper insights into the effectiveness of symbolic branding versus experiential infrastructure in driving sustainable tourism growth. Understanding these dynamics will not only help improve the "Colorful Medan" strategy but also offer a replicable model for other culturally diverse urban centers in Southeast Asia.

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