

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12426839

ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF TOURISM: BRANDING BUFFER VILLAGES AS DESTINATIONS TO ENHANCE LOCAL COMMUNITY WELFARE IN THE LIKUPANG SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE

Maria Heny Pratiknjo^{1*}, Deysi L. N. Tampongangoy², Rully Mambo³

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Sam Ratulung University, Indonesia

Received: 04/10/2025

Accepted: 16/04/2026

Corresponding Author: Maria Heny Pratiknjo

(mariapratiknjo31@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze and formulate a local culture-based destination branding strategy for buffer villages in support of the development of the Likupang Special Economic Zone (SEZ), North Sulawesi. The study employs a tourism anthropology approach with a descriptive qualitative method, combining participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with local communities in several buffer villages, including Pulisan, Kolongan, Marinsow, and Kinunang villages. The findings reveal that communities in the buffer villages possess rich cultural traditions and natural resources with significant potential to be developed into community-based tourism identities and attractions. Traditions such as bakera (traditional Minahasan spa), sea rituals, bamboo music, and local cuisine are cultural assets with high economic value when packaged creatively. However, the level of community participation remains largely passive limited to service-provider roles due to constraints in training, capital access, and communication with government bodies and SEZ managers. Anthropologically, local values such as mapalus (communal cooperation) and kasehehan (life balance) provide a foundation for authentic, inclusive, and sustainable destination branding. Branding anchored in cultural values and community identity is considered capable of reinforcing Likupang's image as a world-class tourism destination grounded in local wisdom. This study proposes a Participatory Branding Model that positions communities as co-creators in destination image development. The model rests on three principles – cultural authenticity, community empowerment, and sustainability. Through this approach, destination branding is expected not only to enhance the tourism competitiveness of the Likupang SEZ, but also to sustainably improve local welfare and economic independence.

KEYWORDS: Tourism Anthropology, Destination Branding, Buffer Villages, Likupang SEZ, Community Empowerment, Local Culture, Sustainable Tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a central pillar of economic development in Southeast Asia, yet its benefits are rarely distributed equitably particularly in contexts where large-scale infrastructure investment intersects with traditional communities. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) designed around tourism concentrate capital and promotional resources in designated areas while surrounding communities frequently remain peripheral to their benefits (Hidayat & Negara, 2020; Suryade et al., 2021). In Indonesia, the "10 New Balis" agenda reflects national ambitions to replicate tourism-led growth across the archipelago, but the Balinese precedent itself warns that without deliberate cultural governance and community agency, development can erode the very assets that make a place attractive (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). The Mandalika SEZ which is the most comparable precedent to Likupang further demonstrates that rapid, top-down tourism development without adequate attention to local land rights and benefit distribution generates displacement, social conflict, and a brand identity that diverges sharply from the lived reality of host communities (S. Aminah et al., 2025; Widaningrum et al., 2026).

Destination branding is frequently reduced to a promotional function, obscuring its deeper role as a process of identity construction and representational politics (L. S. Aminah et al., 2022). When destination identity is built by external agencies without meaningful community input, the resulting brand may attract tourists while alienating the host communities whose cultural distinctiveness constitutes its core appeal (Anholt, 2007). This misalignment is not only ethically problematic but strategically counterproductive.

The Likupang Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in North Sulawesi has been designated as one of Indonesia's five Super Priority Tourism Destinations under Presidential Regulation No. 84/ 2019. Located in the North Minahasa Regency, this coastal area covers approximately 200 hectares and integrates exceptional marine biodiversity, ethnic Minahasan cultural heritage, and considerable economic development potential. The buffer villages surrounding the Likupang SEZ play a strategic role in supporting the development of this zone through the involvement of local communities. However, the development of these buffer villages faces a number of challenges, such as the lack of locally-rooted cultural branding strategies for the destination, limited human resources, and the still-suboptimal

empowerment of communities in supporting the tourism sector.

The main issue in developing the Likupang SEZ is how to integrate local cultural potential with the demands of modern tourism through a sustainable branding strategy. Effective destination branding not only promotes tourist attractions, but must also create positive impacts for local communities (Tsaqif et al., 2025), particularly in improving economic and social well-being (Destiara & Fauzi, 2023). Therefore, a tourism anthropology-based approach is needed to understand the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of local communities in order to craft an inclusive and sustainable branding strategy.

This concern is well-documented in the Indonesian SEZ context. Studies of comparable zones notably the Mandalika SEZ in Central Lombok demonstrate that rapid tourism development can generate significant displacement, cultural tension, and inequitable benefit distribution when local voices are marginalised in planning and branding processes (S. Aminah et al., 2025; Widaningrum et al., 2026; Yuli et al., 2025). Governance frameworks that fail to integrate local stakeholders perpetuate these risks (Hidayat & Negara, 2020).

A tourism anthropology approach is therefore necessary to understand the complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic dynamics, and to formulate branding strategies that are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. The specific objectives of this study are: (1) to identify local cultural assets suitable for destination branding in Likupang SEZ buffer villages; (2) to analyse the degree of community participation in culture-based tourism management and promotion; (3) to formulate a destination branding strategy grounded in local cultural values and sustainability principles; and (4) to assess the impact of branding strategy implementation on the socio-economic welfare of buffer village communities.

This research aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and contributes to applied interdisciplinary scholarship at the nexus of anthropology, tourism studies, and development studies.

This research is designed to produce applicable solutions relevant to the needs of both communities and government in managing the Likupang SEZ. In line with the Applied Excellence Research scheme, it adopts an interdisciplinary approach that brings together anthropology, tourism, and development studies to create a locally grounded cultural

branding strategy. The outcomes are intended for direct application in the management of buffer villages through community empowerment and improved destination competitiveness. The research also aims to provide strategic recommendations for local and national governments in developing the Likupang SEZ sustainably, while targeting publication in accredited international journals to enhance institutional academic standing. Ultimately, this research envisions the buffer villages of the Likupang SEZ evolving into leading tourist destinations that attract visitors while delivering meaningful economic, social, and cultural benefits to local communities.

This research aims to formulate a locally grounded cultural branding strategy for the development of buffer villages within the Likupang SEZ. More specifically, it seeks to identify local cultural assets that can serve as the primary draw in destination branding, analyze the extent of local community involvement in culture-based tourism management and promotion, develop a branding strategy rooted in local cultural values with a focus on social and environmental sustainability, and measure the impact of implementing such a strategy on the socioeconomic well-being of communities in the buffer villages.

The research offers value across multiple dimensions. Theoretically, it contributes to the field of tourism anthropology particularly in the study of culture-based destination branding and enriches the body of research on communities as key actors in sustainable tourism development within national super-priority zones. Practically, it provides a basis for policy formulation on destination branding in the Likupang SEZ buffer villages, offers guidance for community empowerment to build local human resource capacity, and helps communities optimize their cultural potential for sustained economic value. In terms of broader socioeconomic impact, the research supports the creation of employment and new business opportunities through tourism, works to reduce social and economic disparities by extending the benefits of SEZ development to all segments of local society, and advances the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in the areas of well-being, social inclusion, and cultural preservation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Tourism Anthropology and Community-Based Tourism*

Tourism anthropology examines the intersections of travel, culture, and social change, focusing on the

complex relationships between hosts and guests, the commodification of culture, and the political economy of tourism development. Smith (1989) characterizes the host-guest relationship as a nexus of power, economy, and cultural value, wherein local communities navigate profound transformations in identity and livelihood. Cohen (1984) further highlights that active community participation has the capacity to shift local actors from being "objects of tourism" to "subjects of tourism", underscoring the transformative potential of participatory approaches.

Community-based tourism (CBT), as theorised by Suansri (2003), positions local communities at the centre of tourism planning and benefit distribution, prioritising the preservation of cultural heritage, environmental sustainability, and equitable economic returns. Recent scholarship in the Indonesian context corroborates this framework where communities are empowered and participate meaningfully in tourism governance, outcomes reflect greater cultural preservation, social cohesion, and collective satisfaction (Luc et al., 2026; Nurlukman et al., 2025). Conversely, CBT initiatives without robust governance mechanisms risk benefit leakage and inequitable participation (Lo & Janta, 2020; Veriasa et al., 2023).

Power dynamics within CBT settings warrant particular attention. Dolezal and Novelli (2022), drawing on the Balinese case, demonstrate that empowerment in community-based tourism is relational and contested, requiring continuous negotiation between community groups, government actors, and private investors. This insight is directly relevant to the Likupang context, where the scale of SEZ investment amplifies power asymmetries between local communities and external development interests.

2.2. *Destination Branding and Cultural Identity*

Destination branding transcends conventional marketing by constructing and communicating the unique identity of a place. Morgan et al. (2004) argue that successful destination branding is premised on authentic meaning-making, the articulation of a destination's values, stories, and distinctiveness in ways that resonate with both local communities and visitors. Anholt (2007) similarly contends that competitive identity, built on cultural authenticity and community pride, constitutes a powerful differentiating factor in the global tourism marketplace.

Recent Indonesian scholarship reinforces these theoretical propositions. Mastika and Nimran (2020)

demonstrate that ecological village tourism in Bali depends on coherent branding that integrates authentic cultural narratives with visitor experience design. Karta *et al.* (2021) similarly show that branding strategies rooted in local identity strengthen village tourism image and tourist loyalty. In the context of SEZ buffer villages, Prasetyo and Ilmawan (2024) find that brand identification which is the degree to which tourists identify with a destination's projected identity is significantly shaped by cultural congruence and perceived authenticity.

Co-creation has emerged as a defining principle of contemporary destination branding practice. Leal *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that involving local communities in branding processes fosters ownership, legitimacy, and authentic representation. Similarly, Murti (2026) identifies co-creation as the central mechanism through which rural tourism villages in Indonesia develop resilient and distinctive brand identities. In contexts where cultural heritage is the primary tourism asset, such participatory approaches are critical to preventing the commodification and misrepresentation of local culture (Jamil *et al.*, 2024).

2.3. Governance, Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration, and Sustainable Development

Governance frameworks that adapt to local socio-cultural contexts are critical for positive tourism outcomes. Inclusive governance which integrating local leaders, community organisations, and diverse stakeholder groups reduces conflict and enhances collective ownership of tourism development (Rahaju *et al.*, 2026; Suryade *et al.*, 2021). The Pentahelix model, which structures collaboration among government, academia, media, communities, and private sector, has been identified as an effective governance architecture for sustainable village tourism in Indonesia (Eprilianto *et al.*, 2024).

Butler (1980) destination area cycle of evolution provides a foundational lens for understanding tourism development trajectories. Applied to Likupang, buffer villages currently occupy an exploratory phase, necessitating development approaches sensitive to environmental carrying capacity and cultural sustainability. Jamal and Camargo (2014) advance an ethics of care framework for sustainable tourism justice, calling for development practices that prioritise the dignity, rights, and well-being of host communities which is a framework particularly salient given documented patterns of displacement and inequity in comparable Indonesian SEZs (S. Aminah *et al.*, 2025; Widaningrum *et al.*, 2026).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Approach

This research employs a qualitative approach with mixed methods centered on ethnographic inquiry, thematic data analysis, and participatory community-based modeling, with the aim of formulating a locally grounded cultural branding strategy for buffer villages in the Likupang SEZ that can improve community well-being. The research adopts two core approaches. A qualitative approach is used to deeply understand the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of local communities and explore cultural potentials relevant to destination branding. This is complemented by a participatory approach that places local communities at the center of every research stage, from data collection through to strategy development, ensuring that outcomes align with community needs and aspirations.

3.2. Research Stages and Data Collection

The research unfolds across four stages. The first stage focuses on identifying local potentials and challenges through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with community figures, tourism actors, and local government, and document review of policies and reports related to the Likupang SEZ and its buffer villages. The second stage involves analyzing the data and formulating the branding strategy through thematic analysis, focus group discussions (FGDs) with local communities, stakeholders, and tourism experts, and social mapping to identify key actors and inter-stakeholder relationships. The third stage entails piloting the branding strategy in one or two of the most promising buffer villages, providing training in marketing, destination management, and culture-based creative product development, and monitoring the strategy's impact on visitor numbers, community income, and socioeconomic change. The fourth and final stage evaluates the strategy's effectiveness through impact assessment, participatory reflection involving the community, and comparative analysis of conditions before and after implementation.

3.3. Research Instruments and Data Sources

Data are collected using interview guides, observation sheets, audio-visual recording equipment, and qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti. Primary sources include local communities, stakeholders, and Likupang SEZ managers, while secondary sources draw on policy documents and relevant literature.

3.4. Data Analysis and Validation

Qualitative data are analyzed thematically and verified through source triangulation across observation, interviews, and documents. Strategy validation is conducted via FGDs with relevant parties to ensure the findings are both credible and contextually grounded.

3.5. Expected Outputs

The expected outputs of this research include an applicable and sustainable culture-based destination branding strategy, a model for local community empowerment in tourism management, publication in a reputable international journal, and policy recommendations for the development of buffer villages in the Likupang SEZ. This methodology is designed to ensure that local community involvement permeates every stage of the research, so that results are not only academically sound but also practically valuable for tourism development in the Likupang SEZ.

4. RESULTS

The Likupang Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is one of five Super Priority Tourism Destinations (DPSP) in Indonesia designated by the central government. Located in North Minahasa Regency, North Sulawesi Province, the zone spans approximately 200 hectares and holds significant potential for the development of nature-based, cultural, and community-driven tourism. The beauty of the beaches, marine biodiversity, and the ethnic diversity of the Minahasa people are the main strengths of this destination (Nasir, 2025).

Nevertheless, the success of the Likupang SEZ's development depends not only on the core area but also on the surrounding buffer villages, such as Pulisan Village, Marinsow Village, Kolongan Village, and Kinunang Village. These villages serve as socio-economic hubs that support the sustainability of tourism and act as key venues for interaction between local communities, tourists, and investors.

Communities in buffer villages generally make their living from the fisheries, agriculture, and traditional crafts sectors, and they maintain a strong social value system, particularly the spirit of *mapalus* (mutual aid) and *kasuruan* (solidarity). These values serve as a crucial foundation for the development of community-based tourism, where community participation is key to success.

However, the modernization of tourism also has mixed effects: on the one hand, it opens up new economic opportunities, but on the other, it leads to inequality, marginalization, and shifts in cultural

identity. These conditions underscore the need for anthropological studies of tourism to understand the sociocultural dynamics of local communities and to formulate destination branding strategies that highlight not only visual appeal but also cultural authenticity and community well-being.

Research findings were obtained through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and policy document analysis. Researchers engaged directly with traditional leaders, village heads, small and medium enterprise actors, and tourism awareness groups (*Pokdarwis*). Analysis was conducted thematically and triangulatively to ensure data validity.

The findings reveal five interrelated major themes: (a) cultural potential and natural resources, (b) level of community participation, (c) construction of local identity and branding narratives, (d) socioeconomic impacts, and (e) challenges in implementing locally grounded cultural branding.

4.1. Cultural and Natural Assets of Buffer Villages

The buffer villages surrounding the Likupang SEZ are repositories of substantial cultural and natural capital. Ritual practices such as *foso rumages*, maritime ceremonies (*mangumban*), and the *bakera* spa tradition constitute living expressions of Minahasan coastal culture. The *bakera*, in particular, combines therapeutic, spiritual, and communal dimensions, presenting significant potential as a distinctive wellness tourism product. Such intangible cultural heritage assets have proven internationally attractive to tourists seeking authentic and meaningful experiences (Chapman, 2023; McKercher & Cros, 2002; Suranto et al., 2020).

Natural assets are equally compelling: Pulisan village offers pristine white-sand beaches; mangrove ecosystems in East Likupang provide biodiversity and eco-tourism value; the Tunan waterfall in Talawaan constitutes an inland attraction; and the surrounding marine environment supports rich biodiversity of conservation significance. These resources collectively constitute a destination portfolio capable of catering to cultural, wellness, eco-, and marine tourism segments.

However, the mere existence of cultural and natural assets does not guarantee their effective mobilisation as tourism products. As Butler (1980) observes, destinations in the exploratory phase where Likupang's buffer villages presently reside face a structural tension between the imperative to attract investment and the necessity of preserving the very assets that make the destination distinctive. This

tension is not merely theoretical, the Mandalika SEZ experience demonstrates that when infrastructure-led development outpaces cultural and environmental governance, irreversible asset degradation can follow (Widaningrum et al., 2026; Yuli et al., 2025). In Likupang, the *bakera* tradition and maritime rituals are still practised as living culture rather than performed spectacle which is a condition of authenticity that, once lost to commodification, cannot be recovered. Protecting this authenticity requires proactive governance rather than reactive regulation.

Richards and Wilson (2007) argue that cultural assets achieve their highest tourism value when communities retain creative control over how they are presented and interpreted. This principle is directly applicable to Likupang: the *bakera* tradition, for instance, carries layered meanings such as medicinal, spiritual, and communal that risk being flattened into a marketable wellness package if packaged by external operators without community oversight. Tourism anthropology offers a critical function here, providing the interpretive tools necessary to translate cultural depth into visitor experience design without reducing meaning to surface aesthetics (Smith, 1989).

4.2. Community Participation and Empowerment

Findings indicate that community participation in tourism activities remains predominantly instrumental and low-intensity, confined to roles as manual labourers, small-scale homestay providers, and petty traders. These patterns are consistent with broader critiques of asymmetric participation in community-based tourism documented across the Indonesian archipelago (Mulyawati et al., 2024; Sharpley & Telfer, 2002). Key barriers identified in Likupang include insufficient tourism literacy and hospitality skills, limited access to capital and microcredit, and inadequate communication channels between communities, local government, and SEZ management authorities.

This pattern of instrumental participation reflects what Arnstein (1969) characterizes as tokenism, which is a form of engagement that creates the appearance of community involvement without transferring meaningful decision-making power. In the Likupang context, this manifests in communities being consulted on superficial matters while remaining excluded from strategic decisions regarding land use, investment allocation, and destination positioning. Dolezal and Novelli (2022) demonstrate a similar dynamic in Bali, where CBT frameworks that formally endorse community

empowerment can nonetheless reproduce power asymmetries when governance structures remain dominated by external actors. The implication for Likupang is direct, participatory branding cannot be achieved through consultation alone, it requires structural redistribution of decision-making authority.

Nonetheless, emergent grassroots initiatives signal a nascent cultural awakening (Cohen, 1984). The Likupang Creative Women's Group (*Kelompok Perempuan Kreatif Likupang*) produces handcrafted souvenirs based on traditional *pandan* weaving, while the '*Marijo ka Likupang*' community actively promotes the destination through social media platforms. Pramono and Juliana (2025) find that similar community-led cultural enterprises in rural Indonesia constitute significant pathways toward resilience and welfare improvement, particularly where formal employment opportunities are limited. Crucially, these initiatives emerge from within community social structures rather than being externally designed, which is a distinction that Suansri (2003) identifies as foundational to genuinely community-based tourism.

The post-pandemic period has further underscored the importance of digital literacy and livelihood diversification. Ariyani and Fauzi (2024) document that Indonesian tourism villages demonstrating greater resilience during the COVID-19 disruption were those combining traditional cultural assets with digital marketing competencies. Wulandari et al. (2024) similarly find that integrated digital platforms significantly enhance MSME competitiveness in rural tourism settings. In Likupang, the gap between the digital promotional activity of the '*Marijo ka Likupang*' community and the broader digital illiteracy of most buffer village SME operators illustrates both the potential and the unevenness of this transition which reinforcing the need for targeted digital capacity-building as a component of any sustainable branding strategy.

4.3. Local Identity Construction and Branding Narrative

A significant finding concerns the community's emerging articulation of a distinctive local identity as the basis for destination branding. Participants consistently described Likupang's uniqueness as lying in the combination of Minahasan cultural warmth, marine beauty, and an integrated agrarian-coastal lifestyle. This identity is informally encapsulated in the phrase "*Marijo ka Likupang*" ("Let us go to Likupang"), a collective invitation reflecting openness, hospitality, and local pride.

From a destination branding perspective, this community-generated narrative constitutes what Anholt (2007) terms a competitive identity, an authentic, place-specific identifier that differentiates the destination within a crowded global marketplace. Critically, this narrative emerged organically from within the community rather than being designed by external consultants or government agencies which is a distinction of considerable theoretical and practical significance. Leal et al. (2022) demonstrate, in a cross-national study of place branding co-creation, that brands grounded in community-generated narratives achieve significantly stronger visitor attachment and advocacy than those constructed through top-down processes. Prasetyo and Ilmawan (2024) similarly find that brand identification in Indonesian tourism settings is fundamentally relational, with tourists developing authentic attachment when they perceive congruence between a destination's projected identity and its actual cultural character.

The anthropological contribution to this process is irreplaceable. Greenwood (1989) warns that tourism commodifies culture when communities lack agency over their own narratives and representations. In Likupang, the risk of this commodification is real and proximate, as SEZ investment accelerates, external marketing agencies and digital content creators are increasingly involved in shaping how the destination is presented to potential visitors. Without deliberate mechanisms to anchor branding narratives in community voice, the "*Marijo ka Likupang*" identity risks being appropriated and simplified into a consumable image that serves investor interests rather than community aspirations. Desideria Murti (2026) identifies strategic communication grounded in community co-creation as the primary safeguard against this appropriation, a finding that directly validates the participatory orientation of the PDBM proposed in this study.

4.4. Socio-Economic Impacts of Tourism Development

Fieldwork data indicate that households directly engaged in tourism activities experience income increases in the range of 20–30% relative to non-participating households, primarily through homestay rentals, local food sales, and guiding services. These findings are consistent with the economic multiplier effects associated with community-based tourism in comparable rural Indonesian settings (Aida et al., 2019; Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Subarsono et al., 2025).

However, these aggregate figures mask

significant distributional inequities. Households with pre-existing social capital, language skills, and proximity to tourist flow points disproportionately capture tourism benefits, while more marginalised community members face compounding pressures from land price inflation, reduced access to communal resources, and disruption to traditional social structures. This pattern mirrors Picard (1996) documentation of cultural displacement in Bali, and finds direct contemporary parallel in Veriasa et al. (2023) findings from West Kalimantan, where CBT benefit distribution remained highly unequal despite formal participatory governance frameworks.

Jamal and Camargo (2014) ethics of care framework provides the most directly applicable normative lens for these findings. Their argument that sustainable tourism justice requires structural interventions preventing benefit concentration and protecting the socio-economic dignity of marginalised community members translates into specific governance imperatives for Likupang, community land tenure protection, transparent revenue redistribution mechanisms, and preferential access to tourism enterprise support for households currently excluded from the tourism economy. Yuli et al. (2023), examining welfare outcomes in the Mandalika SEZ, similarly find that without explicit pro-poor targeting in tourism governance, aggregate economic growth in SEZ contexts consistently reproduces and deepens pre-existing inequalities.

4.5. Challenges in Implementing Culture-Based Branding

Five principal challenges were identified. First, the absence of effective inter-institutional coordination among local government, SEZ management authorities, and village communities produces fragmented and sometimes contradictory development initiatives which is a governance deficit extensively documented in the Indonesian SEZ literature (Hidayat & Negara, 2020; Suryade et al., 2021). Rahaju et al. (2026), in a PLS-SEM analysis of local tourism governance policies across Indonesian destinations, find that governance integration which is the degree to which multiple institutional actors align around shared tourism development objectives is the single strongest predictor of sustainable tourism outcomes, explaining variance in both visitor satisfaction and community welfare measures.

Second, the absence of an integrated digital promotional platform for buffer village cultural assets limits Likupang's ability to compete with more digitally sophisticated Indonesian destinations. Wulandari et al. (2024) demonstrate that integrated

Industry 4.0 platforms significantly enhance MSME visibility and competitiveness in rural tourism contexts, with measurable effects on income and market reach. Third, significant human capital disparities persist among community members in their capacity to translate cultural assets into marketable tourism products which is a challenge common to SEZ buffer village contexts more broadly (Yuli *et al.*, 2023, 2025). Fourth, insufficient cultural documentation and digital literacy mean that Likupang's intangible heritage remains largely invisible in online tourism spaces, where the competition for visitor attention is decided by content quality and search visibility.

Fifth, and perhaps most fundamentally, there is a structural risk that accelerating tourism commercialisation will erode the spiritual significance and social meaning of traditional practices, what Greenwood (1989) terms the commodification of culture by the pound. This risk is not hypothetical. Suranto *et al.* (2020) document across multiple Indonesian cultural tourism sites that once sacred or communally significant practices are packaged as ticketed tourist performances, communities progressively lose both the motivation and the social scaffolding necessary to maintain them in their authentic form. For Likupang's buffer villages, where the *bakera* tradition and maritime rituals retain their living cultural function, preventing this trajectory requires deliberate governance boundaries around which cultural practices can be commercialised, under what conditions, and with what community consent which questions that the proposed PDBM is designed to address.

4.6. Integration of Anthropological Perspectives in Destination Branding

A tourism anthropology approach positions culture as the core of the tourism system. In the context of Likupang, anthropology serves to understand how communities interpret tourism, respond to social change, and negotiate their cultural identity. Smith (1989) describes the relationship between hosts and guests as a complex dynamic shaped by power, economics, and cultural values. The community of Likupang is currently in a transitional phase, shifting from a traditional agrarian society toward a modern tourism-oriented one. In this transition, values such as mutual cooperation, solidarity, and spirituality serve as a counterbalance to economic pressures and modernization. Field findings indicate that the community views tourism not merely as an economic opportunity, but also as a space for introducing

coastal Minahasan culture to the world. In this regard, tourism anthropology not only explains social dynamics but also provides a conceptual foundation for destination branding strategies that genuinely respect local culture.

4.7. Formulation of a Destination Branding Strategy

The research findings indicate that an appropriate destination branding strategy for the Likupang SEZ must integrate three core pillars. The first is cultural identity, whereby branding must be rooted in local cultural narratives, symbols, and values such as *mapalus*, *kasuruan*, and *bakera*, with the destination image reflecting the hospitality and spirituality of the coastal Minahasan community. The second is community empowerment, recognizing that branding is not merely a matter of visual promotion but a collective process in which communities participate in creating the value of a destination which making capacity building, cultural entrepreneurship training, and the formation of creative groups central strategies. The third is sustainability, requiring that branding be linked to ecological principles and social justice, with every promotional effort taking into account environmental carrying capacity and the social equilibrium of local communities. This approach aligns with Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2010), who argue that successful destination branding does not simply sell an image but builds authentic meaning between a destination and its visitors.

4.8. Implications of Branding for Community Well-being

Destination branding oriented around local cultural values has been shown to have a significant impact on improving community well-being. When cultural identity is packaged into value-added tourism products, communities gain new economic opportunities through increased sales of creative products such as souvenirs, local cuisine, and traditional attire, a growing number of homestays and local guide services, and the strengthening of social networks and community organizational capacity. However, these positive impacts can only be sustained when supported by strong regulation, guidance, and social oversight. Without these, tourism risks causing cultural erosion and deepening economic inequality. Destination branding is therefore not merely a promotional strategy but a tool for social transformation capable of elevating the dignity of local culture and advancing collective well-being.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the buffer villages of the Likupang SEZ, namely Pulisan, Marinsow, Kolongan, and Kinunang, possess substantial cultural and natural assets capable of anchoring a distinctive and competitive destination brand, yet the translation of these assets into equitable community welfare remains structurally constrained. Community participation is largely instrumental, socio-economic benefits are unevenly distributed, inter-institutional coordination is fragmented, and the risk of cultural commodification is real and proximate. These challenges are not incidental; they reflect patterns documented across comparable Indonesian SEZ contexts where equity-oriented governance is absent. This study therefore argues that destination branding in Likupang must be reconceived as a socio-cultural process grounded in local cultural identity, community empowerment, and environmental sustainability, one that positions communities as co-creators of destination identity rather than passive subjects of externally imposed narratives.

Theoretically, this research extends tourism anthropology by framing destination branding as a site of identity negotiation and representational politics, contributing to scholarship that situates branding within questions of power, equity, and cultural justice. Practically, the culture-based branding approach developed here provides an actionable reference for local government and SEZ managers in designing inclusive tourism policies, while supporting the achievement of SDG 1, SDG 8, and SDG 10. Ultimately, Likupang's long-term competitiveness as a Super Priority Destination depends not only on its natural endowments but on ensuring that local communities remain the authors rather than the objects of their own tourism story.

Future research should examine the long-term trajectories of communities adopting participatory branding models, with particular attention to cultural change dynamics, economic distributional outcomes, and the governance of tourism under conditions of rapid SEZ development. Quantitative longitudinal studies directly linking branding strategy implementation to welfare outcomes would substantially advance the evidence base for sustainable SEZ tourism governance.

REFERENCES

- Aida, N., Suman, A., & Sakti, R. K. (2019). Economic and non-economic implications of Community Based Tourism (CBT) supply chain at around Teluk Kiluan Beach Tanggamus Regency Lampung Province of Indonesia. *International Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 8(4), 191–198.
- Aminah, L. S., Dja'far, V. H., & Arifin, W. E. (2022). Implementation of The Beautiful Malang Program Through The "Malang Menyapa" Application. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ON ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, AND INFORMATION SYSTEM*, 1(1), 25–36. <https://doi.org/10.55047/ijateis.v1i1.119>
- Aminah, S., Wardhani, B., Dugis, V., & Susanto, J. (2025). The paradox of nation branding: A lesson learned from the Mandalika Special Economic Zone. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 10(4), 398–412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911251366112>
- Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. Springer Nature.
- Ariyani, N., & Fauzi, A. (2024). Assessing the Resilience of Rural Tourism in Indonesia During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic Using the Multimoora Method. *Amfiteatru Economic*, 26(Special 18), 1329. <https://doi.org/10.24818/EA/2024/S18/1329>
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Butler, R. W. (1980). The Concept of A Tourist Area Cycle of Evolution: Implications for Management of Resources. *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes*, 24(1), 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.1980.tb00970.x>
- Chapman, W. (2023). Heritage tourism in Southeast Asia: A historical perspective. In *Heritage and Cultural Heritage Tourism: International Perspectives* (pp. 3–15). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-44800-3_1
- Cohen, E. (1984). The Sociology of Tourism: Approaches, Issues, and Findings. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10(1), 373–392. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.10.080184.002105>
- Destiara, F., & Fauzi, R. (2023). Strategi Marketing Public Relations Desa Mangrovesari Brebes Sebagai Desa Wisata Berbasis Mangrove. *JURNAL EKONOMI KREATIF DAN MANAJEMEN BISNIS DIGITAL*, 2(2), 78–111. <https://doi.org/10.55047/jekombital.v2i2.548>
- Dolezal, C., & Novelli, M. (2022). Power in community-based tourism: empowerment and partnership in Bali. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 30(10), 2352–2370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1838527>
- Eprilianto, D. F., Megawati, S., Sari, Y. E. K., Pramono, B. S., Sari, L. A., Rachmadhani, A., & Febrianti, E. (2024).

- Pentahelix collaborative analysis through stakeholder engagement in realizing sustainable environmentally based tourism village governance to support the achievements of the Village SDGs. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 568. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202456804002>
- Greenwood, D. J. (1989). Culture by the Pound: An Anthropological Perspective on Tourism as Cultural Commoditization. In V. L. Smith (Ed.), *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (2nd ed., pp. 171–185). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hidayat, S., & Negara, S. D. (2020). Special economic zones and the need for proper governance: empirical evidence from Indonesia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 42(2), 251–275. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs42-2e>
- Jamal, T., & Camargo, B. A. (2014). Sustainable tourism, justice and an ethic of care: toward the Just Destination. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 22(1), 11–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2013.786084>
- Jamil, K., Anwar, A., & Baig, S. A. (2024). Building Brand Authenticity and Strategies for Genuine Destination Experiences. In *Destination Branding and Bias in Ecotourism* (pp. 75–104). <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-6700-1.ch004>
- Karta, N. L. P. A., Widiastini, N. M. A., Sutapa, I. K., & Wiles, E. (2021). The Role of Branding Strategy in Strengthening the Image of the Village Tourism in Bali. *Jurnal Kajian Bali*, 11(2), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.24843/JKB.2021.v11.i02.p07>
- Leal, M. M., Casais, B., & Proença, J. F. (2022). Tourism co-creation in place branding: the role of local community. *Tourism Review*, 77(5), 1322–1332. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-12-2021-0542>
- Lo, Y.-C., & Janta, P. (2020). Resident's Perspective on Developing Community-Based Tourism – A Qualitative Study of Muen Ngoen Kong Community, Chiang Mai, Thailand. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01493>
- Luc, M. H., Nguyen, Q. V., Pham, T. V., Le, T. H. H., Tran, T. G., & Nguyen, T. H. L. (2026). How Community-Based Tourism Supports Sustainable Livelihoods: The Mediating Roles of Community Participation and Tourism-Related Employment. *Tourism and Hospitality*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp7020037>
- Mastika, I. K., & Nimran, U. (2020). Destination branding model of an ecological tourism village in Bali, Indonesia. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 31(3), 1068–1074. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.31319-542>
- Mathieson, A., & Wall, G. (1982). *Tourism: Economic, Physical, and Social Impacts*. Longman.
- McKercher, B., & Cros, H. Du. (2002). *Cultural Tourism: The Partnership Between Tourism and Cultural Heritage Management*. Haworth Hospitality Press.
- Morgan, N., Pritchard, A., & Pride, R. (2004). *Destination Branding: Creating the Unique Destination Proposition*. Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Mulyawati, L. S., Febriani, Y., Yanuadi, A., Komalasari, D., & Fataharani, P. (2024). Community Participation in Tourism Development in the Tanjung Lesung Special Economic Zone, Banten Province. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 1359(1). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/1359/1/012103>
- Murti, D. C. W. (2026). Village branding and strategic communication: a co-creation approach to enhance rural tourism villages in Indonesia case study. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2026.2624138>
- Nasir, N. (2025). Evaluation of Marine Tourism Management Policy in Takabonerate National Park, Selayar Regency. *International Journal of Tourism Management and Hospitality*, 1(2), 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.66324/ijotmah.v1i2.144>
- Nurlukman, A. D., Fadli, Y., & Wahyono, E. (2025). Linking Community-Based Tourism and Sustainable Outcomes: Evidence from a Mangrove Ecotourism Ketapang Aquaculture Community in Coastal Indonesia. *International Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning*, 20(12), 5427–5439. <https://doi.org/10.18280/ijstdp.201233>
- Picard, M. (1996). *Bali: Cultural Tourism and Touristic Culture* (D. Darling (ed.)). Archipelago.
- Pramono, R., & Juliana, J. (2025). Beyond Tourism: Community Empowerment and Resilience in Rural Indonesia. *Tourism and Hospitality*, 6(4). <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp6040210>
- Prasetyo, A. Y., & Ilmawan, K. F. (2024). Brand identification in Indonesian tourism: determinant factors and consequences. *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GKMC-03-2024-0183>
- Rahaju, T., Megawati, S., Prabawati, I., Suprpto, F. A., & Muzaqi, A. H. (2026). Role of Local Tourism

- Governance Policies in Achieving Sustainable Tourism Development: A PLS-SEM Modeling Study. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 16(2), 455–467. <https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.20617>
- Richards, G., & Wilson, J. (2007). *Tourism, creativity and development* (Vol. 10). Routledge London.
- Sharpley, R., & Telfer, D. J. (2002). *Tourism and Development: Concepts and Issues*. Channel View Publications.
- Smith, V. L. (1989). *Hosts and guests: The anthropology of tourism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Suansri, P. (2003). *Community based tourism handbook*. Responsible Ecological Social Tour-REST Bangkok.
- Subarsono, A., Rahmawati, I. Z., Laksana, L. U. A., Prabawati, V. D. N., Wessiani, N. A., & Sulistiono, B. (2025). Poverty alleviation for coastal communities through tourism development: a case study of Kulon Progo Regency. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2025.2465323>
- Suranto, Jayanti, A. D., Setyawati, L., & Jatmika, S. (2020). A Study on the Impact of Cultural Tourism on Indonesian Society. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 11(5), 72–86. https://www.ijicc.net/images/vol11iss5/11506_Suranto_2020_E_R.pdf
- Suryade, L., Fauzi, A., Achسانی, N. A., & Anggraini, E. (2021). Towards sustainable development of the Mandalika special economic zone, central lombok, indonesia: Analysis of actors. *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism*, 12(6), 1729–1740. [https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v12.6\(54\).28](https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v12.6(54).28)
- Tsaqif, A., Rochman, F., & Wardani, T. I. (2025). Development of a Catalog Website as a Promotional Media for MSME MMSI Singosari Malang. *Digital Marketing, Consumer Behavior, and Economic Trends Journal*, 1(2), 59–64. <https://ojs.proaksara.com/index.php/dmcbj/article/view/90>
- Veriasa, T. O., Aliadi, A., Nugroho, A., Cantika, F. S. P., BR Panggabean, I., Purwanto, S., Alias, & Septria, D. (2023). The Contribution of Community-Based Tourism to Household Income: Evidence from West Kalimantan, Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of Forestry Research*, 10(2), 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.59465/ijfr.2023.10.2.169-184>
- Widaningrum, A., Rindrasih, E., Damanik, J., & Saputra, Y. A. (2026). Advancements and Challenges of Government-Initiated Tourism Development for Sustainable Livelihood: The Case of the Mandalika Destination, Indonesia. *Journal of Population and Social Studies*, 34, 441–461. <https://doi.org/10.25133/JPSSv342026.023>
- Wulandari, D., Hilmi Prayitno, P., Basuki, A., Rahman Prasetyo, A., Aulia, F., Gunawan, A., & Baghiz Syafruddin, A. (2024). Technological Innovation to Increase the Competitiveness of MSMEs: Implementation of the Integrated Industry Village 4.0 Platform. *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnologia*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.56294/saludcyt20241220>
- Yuli, S. B. C., Azizurrohman, M., Angga Pramuja, R., & Ginting, Y. M. (2025). Tourism-driven development: evaluating the benefits of the Mandalika Special Economic Zone. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2460317>
- Yuli, S. B. C., Septiani, E., Pramuja, R. A., & Najmudin, M. (2023). Tourism Development and Local Community Welfare: A Case Study of the Mandalika Special Economic Zone. *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism*, 14(4), 2097–2106. [https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v14.4\(68\).21](https://doi.org/10.14505/jemt.v14.4(68).21)