Shaping place identity through cultural storytelling: strategic communication in a small mountain city

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City branding has become an important strategy for local governments, yet small and semi urban mountain regencies remain underexplored; this research examines how cultural storytelling functions as a form of strategic communication in shaping the city branding of Magetan Regency, East Java, Indonesia, using the City Brand Hexagon framework. The study employed a qualitative case study design, drawing on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with cross sector stakeholders and document analysis of regional planning documents, tourism programs, and promotional materials, with thematic analysis guided by the six dimensions of the City Brand Hexagon, namely Presence, Place, Potential, People, Pulse, and Prerequisites. The findings show that Magetan's brand identity is constructed through a balanced articulation of these dimensions, integrating cultural narratives, local history, and natural tourism potential, which are visually embodied in the "Magetan Ngangeni" tagline and a logo that features Mount Lawu, the Lawu Starling, the keris, and natural motifs such as lakes and waterfalls. Overall, cultural storytelling based city branding operates not only as a promotional mechanism but also as a participatory communication process that negotiates place identity, fosters stakeholder co creation, and supports sustainable regional competitiveness for small mountain cities.

KEYWORDS

city branding, cultural storytelling, mountain city, place identity, strategic communication, public relations, small cities

1 Introduction

City branding has become an essential strategy for local governments to enhance the attractiveness of their regions, whether for tourists, investors, or local communities (Ginesta and de San Eugenio, 2020; Soltani et al., 2018). In international literature, city branding is generally examined in the context of large metropolitan cities, focusing on modern marketing strategies and digital-based promotion. However, research on city branding at the regency level remains relatively limited, even though semi-urban areas with a rural–urban blend face unique challenges (Akbar et al., 2024; Carrilho et al., 2025; Urso, 2021). Magetan Regency, located on the border of East Java and Central Java, holds rich cultural, historical, and natural potential. However, cultural elements often remain underrepresented in regional and national branding discourse.

Magetan Regency is one of the areas in East Java with remarkable local potential. Based on its vision and mission, regional development emphasizes the creation of healthy, progressive, religious, friendly, and skilled human resources. Economic improvement through

community empowerment at the village level as the foundation of regional development, sustainable optimization and utilization of natural resources, and strengthening the adequacy of facilities and infrastructure for public services (Sekretariat Daerah Kabupaten Magetan, 2024).

The majority of Magetan's population works in the agricultural sector. Situated on the slopes of Mount Lawu, the regency enjoys a cool climate. Magetan is well known for its natural tourism icon, Telaga Sarangan, along with other popular destinations such as Mojosemi Forest Park and Genilangit Park. However, the regency's tourism potential has not been evenly explored, as seen from the disparity in visitor numbers across its attractions. For instance, Telaga Sarangan dominates with more than 1 million visitors between 2023 and early April 2024, while Mojosemi Forest Park and the Refugia Flower Garden attract tens of thousands of visitors. In contrast, destinations such as Randugede Hidden Paradise and Telaga Wahyu remain under-visited, recording fewer than 5,000 visitors during the same period. This indicates that tourism promotion and development in Magetan need to be expanded to ensure that the potential of all areas is equally recognized (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Magetan, 2024).

One approach that has gained increasing attention in strategic communication studies is the use of cultural storytelling (Block and Lovegrove, 2021; Júnior et al., 2023; Kristiawan et al., 2022). This approach emphasizes how local cultural values, history, and collective narratives are framed into a communicative and authentic identity that strengthens the sense of belonging (Bruni, 2021; Hay et al., 2021). Thus, storytelling functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a communication strategy that fosters public participation, cross-sector collaboration, and the construction of a sustainable city identity. This aligns with the trend of stakeholder-driven city branding, which highlights the importance of co-creation in building place identity (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2019; Leal et al., 2022).

This study is guided by the research question: how is cultural storytelling used as a strategic communication tool in shaping the city branding of Magetan? The study aims to analyze the formulation process of cultural narratives, the role of stakeholders in co-creating city identity, and the transformation of these narratives into visual communication forms such as taglines and logos. Theoretically, this research contributes to strengthening the study of strategic communication and city branding by providing perspectives from a rarely examined regency context. Practically, it offers a model of culture-based city branding that can be adapted by other semi-urban regions in developing their identity amid regional and national competition.

2 Literature review

2.1 Branding

A brand is defined as a name, term, symbol, design, or a combination of these elements, intended to identify the goods or services of an individual or group of producers and to distinguish them from competing products (Ghosh et al., 2022; Keller, 2021; Rua and Santos, 2022). Beyond its functional role, a brand can also be understood as the totality of consumer perceptions, encompassing what is known, thought, felt, and associated with a particular product or entity (Gustafsson et al., 2024; Jethwaney, 2024; Sehgal et al., 2023).

At present, a brand occupies a central position in shaping identity and generating deeper meaning (He and Zhang, 2022). A strong brand not only differentiates a product from its competitors but also provides a platform through which values, visions, and missions can be communicated to relevant audiences (Abdullah et al., 2022). The symbolic and imaginative dimensions embedded in consumers' perceptions highlight the necessity for brands to cultivate profound emotional experiences (Ahmed et al., 2024; Bruckberger et al., 2023).

Ultimately, a successful brand demonstrates adaptability to shifting consumer behaviors and expectations, while simultaneously preserving the essence and core values that constitute its uniqueness in the marketplace (Mandlik et al., 2025; Sahin and Soylemez, 2024). This indicates that branding should not be perceived as an outcome, but rather as a dynamic and evolving process that responds to ongoing social, cultural, and economic transformations.

2.2 Place branding as communication

Place branding is a multidimensional and interdisciplinary field that intersects marketing, public relations, geography, and communication studies (de San Eugenio-Vela et al., 2023; Robson, 2021). Its primary focus lies in the strategic process of constructing, managing, and disseminating a place's identity and image to attract residents, tourists, and investors, while also fostering a sense of belonging among local communities (Jernsand and Kraff, 2015). Thus, place branding is not merely promotional activity but also a form of strategic communication that mediates both internal and external interests of a locality.

From a communication perspective, place branding shares significant commonalities with public relations, particularly in managing relationships with stakeholders and reputation without directly "selling" a product (Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2020; Ripoll González and Lester, 2018). The identity of a city or region is constructed through symbolic interaction and representation, which are then communicated to internal and external audiences. Stakeholder involvement, therefore, is a crucial element in this process. The participation of local residents, business actors, and local government enables the construction of a collective narrative that reflects shared aspirations and strengthens the resilience of place identity.

Various communication strategies are employed in place branding. Physical communication through urban design, word-of-mouth communication, and digital communication via social media and online platforms all contribute to shaping public perceptions of a place (Braun et al., 2014). In the digital era, online communication plays a particularly important role in enhancing local attractiveness by ensuring content relevance, platform accessibility, and audience engagement (Beddaa and Bentalha, 2024). Design and visual tools are also integral, as logos, taglines, and cultural symbols articulate a cohesive narrative that resonates with audiences (Yoon and Chang, 2017).

Recent developments in place branding emphasize participatory and co-creation approaches. Involving local communities in the branding process not only enhances the authenticity of the narratives constructed but also fosters a stronger sense of ownership. Community

participation in cultural festivals or collaborative initiatives serves as a communicative platform that connects local identity with global recognition (Brokalaki and Comunian, 2019).

2.3 City Brand Hexagon

Research on city branding as an academic topic has not been widely conducted in Indonesia. However, in the international academic discourse, studies on city branding and place marketing have grown significantly in recent years. One notable work is How the World Sees the World's Cities by Anholt (2006). In this study, Anholt measures a city's brand through six indicators known as the City Brand Hexagon (Anholt, 2006): presence (the city's visibility, reputation, and global contribution); place (the physical environment, comfort, and aesthetic appeal); potential (economic and educational opportunities); pulse (cultural and entertainment attractiveness); people (friendliness and safety); and prerequisites (quality of infrastructure and urban facilities), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Anholt summarizes the City Brand Hexagon as the image of a city represented through six key dimensions, each measured by the following indicators (Anholt, 2006):

(1) Presence—the city's international status and reputation: level of familiarity, whether it has been visited, what the city is "famous for," and its contributions to culture, science, or governance over the past 30 years.
(2) Place—perceptions of the physical environment: whether it is pleasant to be outdoors and move around the city, aesthetic appeal, and climate.
(3) Potential—economic and educational opportunities: ease of finding employment, attractiveness for business, and whether the city is considered a good place to pursue higher education for oneself or one's family.
(4) Pulse—the vibrancy of lifestyle: how exciting the city is, and the ease of finding engaging activities—both for short-term visitors and long-term residents.
(5) People—the character of the population: whether residents are perceived as warm/welcoming or cold/prejudiced, ease of

socializing and networking with people from similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and, most importantly, the sense of safety.
(6) Prerequisites—quality-of-life fundamentals: affordability of housing, as well as the standard of public amenities such as schools, hospitals, public transportation, and sports facilities.

The City Brands Index (CBI) demonstrates that a city's image is shaped by six dimensions within the City Brand Hexagon, reflecting global recognition, environmental quality, economic and educational opportunities, lifestyle, the character of its people, and basic infrastructure (Anholt, 2005, 2006; Zedan and Al-Moqaram, 2024). This image evolves very slowly, such that cities with a positive reputation tend to be resilient in times of crisis, while emerging cities require considerable time before their progress is acknowledged (Eraydin and Özatağan, 2021; Pasquinelli et al., 2022). Mere promotion is insufficient, as a city's brand can only be strengthened when supported by consistent and tangible improvements (Eraydin and Özatağan, 2021).

A deep understanding of this reputation, therefore, becomes essential for strategic development and positioning in the global arena. Anholt's study concludes that the brand image of cities rises and falls gradually, and when a city's brand improves, it is not the result of advertising or marketing campaigns, but rather a reflection of fundamental changes in the place itself, its conditions, its people, its policies, and the opportunities it offers.

2.4 Cultural storytelling as strategic communication

Storytelling is a communication strategy that emphasizes the power of narrative to convey values, meanings, and identities (Humairoh, 2023; Key et al., 2023). In the context of branding, storytelling does not merely present information but also fosters emotional connections between the brand and its audience (Crespo et al., 2023; Kemp et al., 2021). When applied to city branding, storytelling highlights the uniqueness of a place in ways that are authentic, engaging, and memorable. The narratives constructed through storytelling are often rooted in history, culture, traditions, and collective community experiences, which are then shaped into a shared identity (Dutta et al., 2022; Osei-Tutu, 2022).

Cultural storytelling, in particular, focuses on utilizing cultural elements as the primary substance of a city's narrative (Pillai, 2022). Culture, expressed through oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, or local artifacts, provides symbolic resources that articulate urban identity. This is significant because cities are understood not only as physical spaces but also as symbolic spaces filled with meaning (Carmona, 2021; Sen and Silverman, 2021). Cultural narratives can foster emotional bonds with local communities while simultaneously strengthening a city's distinctiveness at both regional and global levels.

Furthermore, cultural storytelling functions as a medium for shaping place identity. The identity of a place does not arise naturally; it is a socially constructed process that is constantly negotiated (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2019). Cultural narratives reinforce this process by offering symbolic frameworks that are collectively understood, both by local communities and external audiences (Suddaby et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2025). In this way, cultural

FIGURE 1
City Brand Hexagon (Anholt, 2006).
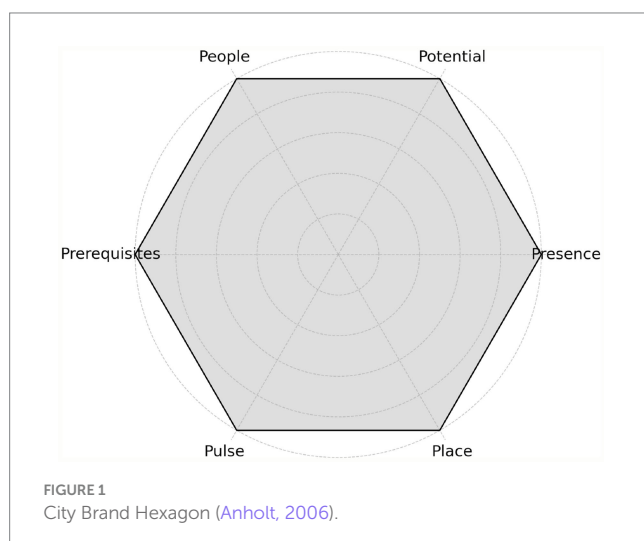
storytelling not only strengthens a city's external image but also cultivates an internal sense of belonging that is vital for sustainable branding.

In strategic communication practices, cultural storytelling extends beyond the creation of narratives to their transformation into diverse communicative forms, including logos, taglines, media campaigns, and cultural festivals (Basaraba, 2023; Dean et al., 2025; Warren et al., 2021). Thus, storytelling operates not merely as discourse but as a concrete and multidimensional communication strategy. Consequently, cultural storytelling serves as a bridge between place identity rooted in local values and the need to establish competitive appeal at national and international levels.

3 Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine how cultural storytelling is utilized as a strategic communication tool in shaping city branding in Magetan Regency, Indonesia. The case study approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018).

3.1 Data collection

Data were collected using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and qualitative document analysis. The FGDs were conducted between October and November 2024 to capture diverse perspectives on Magetan's city branding process. This method was chosen because it facilitates interactive dialogue and allows participants to co-construct meanings around cultural identity, tourism development, and communication strategies (Hennink, 2013). The discussions involved representatives from government institutions, creative and tourism industries, and cultural practitioners and stakeholders who directly influence Magetan's branding initiatives.

Each FGD session lasted approximately 2 h and followed a semi-structured guide derived from the six dimensions of the City Brand Hexagon (Anholt, 2006). Three rounds of discussions were organized: the first focused on cultural and historical narratives, the second on tourism and creative economy development, and the third on infrastructural and institutional coordination. All sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and validated through member-checking to ensure accuracy. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, who were briefed on the study's purpose and their voluntary participation.

To complement the primary data, secondary data were collected through the analysis of official documents and regional publications. These included the Regional Tourism Development Master Plan (RIPPDA), reports on cultural and creative economy programs, promotional materials, and local media coverage of branding activities. The document analysis followed a qualitative approach to identify cultural narratives, policy orientations, and the alignment between official communication and stakeholder perspectives (Altheide, 2000). The combination of FGD and documentary data provided methodological triangulation, reinforcing the credibility, contextual depth, and validity of the findings.

3.2 Research site and participants

The research site was Magetan Regency, East Java. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, considering their involvement and relevance in the regional branding process (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2025; Yin, 2018). The participants who took part in a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) included:

(1) Head of the Department of Culture and Tourism of Magetan Regency;
(2) Head of the Division of Tourism Marketing and Creative Economy Development, Department of Culture and Tourism of Magetan Regency;
(3) Head of the Department of Cooperatives and Micro Enterprises of Magetan Regency;
(4) Head of the Department of Industry and Trade of Magetan Regency;
(5) Head of the Department of Transportation of Magetan Regency;
(6) Magetan Regency Hotel Association or Hospitality Guild;
(7) Tour and Travel Association;
(8) Restaurant, Food Stall, and Souvenir Center Association;
(9) Art and Cultural Practitioners; and
(10) Tourism Site Managers.

3.3 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using an interactive model, which consists of three main stages (Miles et al., 2014):

(1) Data Reduction: Selecting, focusing, and simplifying data from FGDs and documents. The data were coded to identify patterns of cultural narratives, communication strategies, and forms of stakeholder collaboration.
(2) Data Display: Reduced data were presented in thematic matrices, tables, and descriptive narratives. This stage aimed to facilitate the identification of relationships among categories such as stages of co-creation (initiation, narrative development, implementation, evaluation).
(3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification: From the data display, initial conclusions were drawn and then repeatedly verified by comparing data sources (triangulation of FGDs and documents) and through participant confirmation (member checking).

3.4 Data validity

Data validity was ensured through several strategies (Morse et al., 2002; Yin, 2018). First, source and methodological triangulation were conducted by combining FGDs with document analysis to ensure consistency of findings. Second, member checking was carried out by providing summaries of interpretive results to several FGD participants to obtain confirmation and corrections when necessary. Third, the researchers employed an audit trail consisting of detailed records of data collection, coding, and analysis processes to guarantee transparency and accountability of the study.

4 Results and discussion

The results of this study are derived from stakeholder FGDs and analysis of documents conducted by the Magetan Regency government. Unlike most city branding studies that primarily focus on large metropolitan areas, this research is distinctive because it integrates the City Brand Hexagon framework with a cultural storytelling approach and applies it within a semi-urban regency context (Anholt, 2006). From a communication perspective, this study highlights how place identity is not merely "designed" but negotiated through multi-stakeholder dialogues, narrative construction, and symbolic representation. The city branding process thus becomes a strategic communication practice in which local history, cultural values, and development goals are articulated into shared narratives that resonate both internally and externally.

4.1 Presence

The presence dimension in the City Brand Hexagon emphasizes the extent to which a city is known, recognized, and positioned within national and international perception maps (Anholt, 2006). For Magetan, this dimension is closely tied to its history, cultural narratives, media visibility, and the symbolic influence embedded in its identity. Historically, Magetan's existence can be traced back to the seventeenth century, when the region was closely connected to the dynamics of the Mataram Kingdom. The establishment of Magetan Regency is inextricably linked to the figure of *Ki Ageng Mageti*, a respected spiritual leader whose wisdom and authority played a pivotal role in the clearing of forest lands (*babat alas*). The name *Magetan* itself is believed to derive from *Mageti* or *Kamagetan*, reflecting its historical legacy while forming the foundation of its identity. This historical narrative legitimizes Magetan as part of the Javanese cultural heritage, particularly within the *Mataraman* context that is strongly connected to the traditions of Surakarta and Yogyakarta (Lubinski, 2018). In this sense, Magetan is positioned not merely as an administrative regency but as an integral part of the broader Javanese historical and cultural network. According to a cultural practitioner, *"Magetan's history should continuously be highlighted so that people understand their identity as part of the Mataram civilization, not merely as a mountain tourism town"* (FGD–Cultural Practitioner). This perspective reflects a shared understanding that historical continuity strengthens symbolic legitimacy and differentiates Magetan from other regions.

At the national level, Magetan's popularity is primarily supported by Telaga Sarangan. For decades, this natural lake at the foothills of Mount Lawu has been the central icon associated with Magetan's image, both in national media and in regional tourism promotions. Its scenic beauty has made Magetan widely recognized as a prominent mountain tourism destination. However, the FGDs revealed concerns that Sarangan's dominance often overshadows other potentials, resulting in a perception of Magetan that is narrowly tied to a single destination. According to the Head of the Division of Tourism Marketing and Creative Economy Development, *"Magetan's brand has become too strongly associated with Sarangan, while other places such as Genilangit, Mojosemi, and several tourism villages also hold significant potential but receive limited exposure"* (FGD–Tourism Marketing

Division). Likewise, a representative from the Tour and Travel Association observed, *"If promotion continues to focus only on Sarangan, other areas will not grow and the brand will remain stagnant"* (FGD–Tour and Travel Association). These insights indicate that Magetan's external presence remains partial and requires diversification through stronger cultural narratives and wider promotion of alternative destinations (Chen et al., 2019; Lichrou et al., 2008).

Beyond natural attractions, Magetan's presence is reinforced by its historical and cultural legacies. As part of the *Mancanegara Timur* region after the Giyanti Agreement of 1755, Magetan held a strategic position within the Mataram political network. Maospati, for instance, once served as an important administrative center during the leadership of Raden Ronggo Prawirodirjo III. Historical narratives such as these highlight Magetan's important contribution to Javanese history, a symbolic asset that is underutilized in current branding strategies. According to the Head of the Department of Culture and Tourism, *"Magetan's historical and cultural role in the Mataraman context needs to be highlighted so that it is known not only for its natural attractions but also for its historical legacy"* (FGD–Department of Culture and Tourism).

Magetan's visibility is also strengthened by local narratives linked to Mount Lawu. The legend of King Brawijaya V, who retreated to the mountain's peak, and the story of the Lawu Starling (Jalak Lawu) as a spiritual guardian for climbers, add unique layers of mythology. These stories form part of the collective imagination of the Javanese people and symbolically position Magetan as both sacred and exotic. According to a tourism site manager, *"The legend of the Lawu Starling is unique to Magetan. It could become a core branding strength if properly developed, not merely as folklore but as a symbol of local identity"* (FGD–Tourism Site Manager). Such mythological narratives are essential, as city-branding theory argues that narrative uniqueness is a key element in building city-identity differentiation within competitive landscapes (Johansson, 2012; Kavaratzis, 2004).

The FGDs further revealed that Magetan's external recognition remains limited. According to the Head of the Department of Culture and Tourism, *"Branding must reach communities and small business actors so that they feel ownership and contribute to promoting the region's positive image"* (FGD–Department of Culture and Tourism). Similarly, a representative from the Pokdarwis (Tourism Awareness Group) remarked, *"Magetan's branding should expand by involving tourism villages, MSMEs, and the creative industry so that its presence is not overly dependent on Sarangan"* (FGD–Pokdarwis). These statements align with the view that visibility should also be cultivated internally through broad stakeholder participation, as authentic branding must be rooted in local acknowledgment before being promoted outward (Holt, 2004; Morgan et al., 2011).

From a media perspective, Magetan has begun to gain attention through various digital channels, primarily related to Sarangan and Mount Lawu. However, such media representation remains sporadic and has not yet consolidated into a consistent overarching narrative. According to a representative from the Creative Economy Development Division, *"Tourism-related content on social media is still fragmented; each government unit and community tends to promote separately without a unified concept"* (FGD–Tourism Marketing Division). This fragmentation has resulted in inconsistent visibility in the national public sphere (Keane, 2018). Strengthening digital storytelling that integrates history, tradition, and the Mataraman

identity could help establish a more coherent and competitive city presence (Nag and Mishra, 2024).

Tthe presence dimension of Magetan reflects a combination of historical strength, cultural narratives, and tourism popularity. However, the current image is still centered on one icon, namely Sarangan, which risks reducing the city's identity. To become more competitive, Magetan must expand its presence narrative by emphasizing history, culture, and other local potentials. Strengthening presence will not only enhance external attractiveness but also consolidate the internal sense of identity among its citizens.

4.2 Place

The place dimension in the City Brand Hexagon refers to the physical and symbolic qualities of a location, encompassing its natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and spatial comfort for both residents and visitors (Anholt, 2006). In the case of Magetan, the region possesses a diverse combination of natural, cultural, and spatial elements that together create a distinctive sense of place. Geographically, Magetan lies on the western slopes of Mount Lawu, an area celebrated for its cool climate, scenic mountain views, and spiritual significance in Javanese cosmology. The mountain not only provides the backdrop for tourism but also embodies local mythology and identity. According to a cultural practitioner, *"Mount Lawu is not just a tourist site; it represents the harmony between people and nature, shaping Magetan's collective character"* (FGD–Cultural Practitioner). This statement illustrates that the mountain functions simultaneously as a natural asset and a cultural symbol—an embodiment of the community's attachment to place.

At the center of Magetan's tourism landscape lies Telaga Sarangan, a natural lake that has long been the main icon of the regency. Its panoramic view and accessibility have made it one of the most visited destinations in East Java. However, FGD participants emphasized that the concentration of development in Sarangan has created spatial imbalance. According to the Head of the Hotel and Restaurant Association, *"Promotion should go hand in hand with infrastructure improvement; otherwise, tourism growth will remain centered only in Sarangan"* (FGD–Hotel Association). A representative from the Department of Transportation similarly observed, *"Access roads to secondary destinations such as Genilangit or Tirtosari Waterfall need serious upgrading if we want tourists to explore beyond Sarangan"* (FGD–Transportation Office). These comments highlight that Magetan's place value depends not only on its natural beauty but also on its functional accessibility and spatial equity.

Beyond natural attractions, Magetan's *place* dimension is reinforced by its cultural and historical sites. One of the most notable examples is Candi Sadon, a temple complex that continues to serve as a site for local rituals and thanksgiving ceremonies. According to an art and cultural practitioner, *"Candi Sadon is not merely a historical monument; it remains a living cultural space where our traditions are practiced"* (FGD–Cultural Practitioner). This view supports the argument that the vitality of place is sustained when cultural heritage is integrated into contemporary social life (Becken and Coghlan, 2024; Koens et al., 2021).

The discussions also revealed the importance of linking tourism spaces with community-based economic activities. According to the Head of the Department of Cooperatives and Micro Enterprises, *"Tourism development should empower local entrepreneurs so that every village can feel the impact of tourism income"* (FGD–Cooperatives and SMEs Office). Likewise, a representative from the Restaurant and Souvenir Association stated, *"Tourism must generate benefits beyond hotels and travel agents; small food stalls and craft shops are part of the same ecosystem"* (FGD–Restaurant & Souvenir Association). These insights resonate with sustainable tourism perspectives that view place as an inclusive living space rather than a mere commercial attraction (Intason et al., 2021).

To maintain long-term spatial quality, the FGDs underscored the need for an integrated roadmap and consistent event calendar connecting cultural sites, tourism villages, and creative industries. According to a representative from the Tourism Marketing Division, *"A clear yearly calendar will make Magetan's tourism more predictable and help synchronize infrastructure planning with promotional activities"* (FGD–Tourism Marketing Division). Such coordination ensures that the aesthetic and experiential qualities of Magetan's places are supported by tangible services and facilities.

The place dimension of Magetan reveals a strong interplay between nature, culture, and community. Yet its development remains uneven due to infrastructural gaps and concentration of activities in a single core area. Strengthening spatial connectivity, revitalizing heritage sites, and integrating community-based enterprises are essential to transforming Magetan from a transit-based destination into a holistic living landscape that offers authentic and sustainable experiences for both residents and visitors.

4.3 Potential

The potential dimension in the City Brand Hexagon refers to the future opportunities a city can offer in terms of economy, investment, education, and tourism (Anholt, 2006). For Magetan, this potential is rooted in the synergy between its natural landscapes, creative industries, and agricultural economy. However, the FGDs revealed that these strengths remain fragmented and require strategic integration to create sustainable growth. Tourism remains the most prominent sector of Magetan's potential. The regency's location on the slopes of Mount Lawu provides an advantage for developing eco-tourism and nature-based attractions. According to a tourism site manager, *"Magetan's cool climate and mountainous topography are our strongest assets; what we need is better coordination between destinations to form connected tourism routes"* (FGD–Tourism Site Manager). This aligns with the view that coordinated destination management strengthens a region's competitiveness (Gungor et al., 2024).

Beyond tourism, the FGDs highlighted the potential of the creative economy and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). According to the Head of the Department of Cooperatives and Micro Enterprises, *"Magetan is famous for its leather crafts such as bags, shoes, and jackets, but many craftsmen still lack digital marketing access to expand beyond the local market"* (FGD–Cooperatives and SMEs Office). Similarly, a representative from the Department of Industry and Trade added, *"The local leather industry can be Magetan's identity if we combine craftsmanship with branding and design innovation"* (FGD–Industry and Trade Office). These insights underscore that economic diversification should move toward creative value addition

rather than relying solely on traditional manufacturing (Agosin and Retamal, 2021; Saviotti et al., 2020).

Magetan's agricultural base also presents considerable potential for agro-tourism and food innovation. According to a representative from the Department of Agriculture, *"Farm-based tourism and local food processing can strengthen both Magetan's economy and its identity as a green and healthy region"* (FGD–Government Representative). This reflects the broader sustainable development perspective that links local economy with environmental stewardship (Becken and Coghlan, 2024).

Education and human resources were also identified as areas of latent potential. Magetan's proximity to educational hubs such as Surakarta and Yogyakarta creates opportunities for knowledge exchange and skill development. According to a representative from the Tourism Marketing Division, *"We can attract students and creative communities through internship and training programs that link tourism, culture, and entrepreneurship"* (FGD–Tourism Marketing Division). This approach would position Magetan as a learning-based destination that combines cultural experience with creative collaboration.

From a branding perspective, the FGD participants stressed that potential must be communicated as a collective narrative. According to the Head of the Department of Culture and Tourism, *"Our economic and tourism strengths should be presented as one integrated story, Magetan as a creative mountain regency that connects nature, craftsmanship, and culture"* (FGD–Department of Culture and Tourism). This statement illustrates the need for coherence in promotional messages, where each sector contributes to the overarching brand identity.

The potential dimension suggests that Magetan's future lies in integrating its diverse assets, such as tourism, creative industries, agriculture, and education, into an integrated framework of sustainable local development. Realizing this potential requires improved infrastructure, stronger digital promotion, and consistent policies that link community empowerment with regional branding strategies.

4.4 People

The people dimension in the City Brand Hexagon highlights the character, attitudes, and social roles of local communities as reflections of a city's identity (Anholt, 2006). In city branding, people are not merely recipients of development but central agents who embody and communicate the values of place. For Magetan, community participation and cultural character play a crucial role in shaping the authenticity of its brand. Culturally, Magetan's residents are part of the *Mataraman* sphere, which shares linguistic and behavioral similarities with Surakarta and Yogyakarta. According to a cultural practitioner, *"Mataraman characters such as politeness, harmony, and refinement should be reintroduced as part of Magetan's identity to distinguish it from other areas of East Java"* (FGD–Cultural Practitioner). This resonates with Arrini et al. (2023), who emphasize that cultural manners form the moral foundation of community-based identity (Arrini et al., 2023).

The people of Magetan are also known for their agrarian background and collective traditions such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and *slametan* (communal ritual meals). These practices

reflect the community's social solidarity and moral connectedness. According to a representative from the Tourism Site Managers, *"Our traditions, such as Ledug Suro, slametan, and other village ceremonies, express who we are as a community; these traditions should be promoted as symbols of togetherness, not simply annual events"* (FGD–Tourism Site Manager). Such cultural expressions strengthen local attachment while serving as communicative assets for branding (Barkun et al., 2021).

However, the FGDs revealed that participation levels among communities remain uneven. According to a representative from the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), *"Communities around Sarangan are more active because they see direct benefits from tourism, while other villages still feel excluded from the branding process"* (FGD–Pokdarwis). This highlights a spatial and participatory gap that limits the sense of collective ownership of Magetan's city brand. A representative from the Department of Culture and Tourism reinforced this by noting, *"City branding should involve community leaders and youth groups from all districts so that everyone feels included in the process"* (FGD–Department of Culture and Tourism).

Participants also emphasized the importance of strengthening human resource capacity to sustain tourism and creative industries. According to a representative from the Department of Industry and Trade, *"Local entrepreneurs and artisans need training on digital marketing and brand storytelling so they can connect their products to Magetan's overall image"* (FGD–Industry and Trade Office). Similarly, a representative from the Tourism Marketing Division stated, *"Empowering young people to become tourism ambassadors will make the branding message more authentic and closer to the community"* (FGD–Tourism Marketing Division). These insights affirm that effective branding depends on building human capital capable of articulating the city's values through creative and participatory means (Ripoll Gonzalez and Gale, 2022).

The people dimension of Magetan reveals strong social capital rooted in cooperation, cultural manners, and communal pride. Yet, inclusivity remains a challenge. Strengthening civic participation, providing capacity-building programs, and integrating community narratives into official branding efforts will help ensure that Magetan's identity reflects not only government initiatives but also the voices and values of its people.

4.5 Pulse

The pulse dimension of the City Brand Hexagon represents the extent to which a city radiates vitality, dynamism, and a sense of liveliness that makes it attractive to residents and visitors alike (Anholt, 2006). A city's pulse reflects not only its cultural and recreational activities but also the energy and creativity that characterize its daily social life. In Magetan, this vitality emerges through its cultural events, creative economy, and community-based tourism practices, though challenges remain regarding consistency and sustainability.

Cultural festivals form the most visible expression of Magetan's social rhythm. The annual Ledug Suro celebration, which combines traditional parades, performances, and community rituals, serves as a major cultural attraction. According to a representative from the Department of Culture and Tourism, *"Ledug Suro is not just entertainment; it is a cultural space that unites people and reminds them*

of their heritage" (FGD–Department of Culture and Tourism). This aligns with Agus et al. (2021), who argue that revitalizing traditional culture fosters both national identity and local pride (Agus et al., 2021).

Beyond large-scale events, everyday community practices also contribute to Magetan's liveliness. According to a tourism site manager, *"Villages have their own cultural rhythms such as small markets, performances, and culinary festivals but they are often poorly coordinated with district-level promotions"* (FGD–Tourism Site Manager). This indicates that Magetan's vibrancy is dispersed across multiple localities, which could be leveraged into a cohesive network of recurring community events to sustain year-round engagement.

The creative economy also adds to Magetan's pulse, driven by local entrepreneurs and youth collectives. According to a representative from the Creative Economy Development Division, *"Magetan's young creators are starting to produce digital content, crafts, and local fashion, but they need stronger links to tourism campaigns"* (FGD–Tourism Marketing Division). Similarly, a representative from the Department of Cooperatives and Micro Enterprises noted, *"Small businesses contribute to the city's vitality; weekend markets and festivals where MSMEs participate can make Magetan feel more alive"* (FGD–Cooperatives and SMEs Office). These comments highlight that economic and cultural energies are intertwined, where supporting creative industries simultaneously enriches the city's social rhythm (Wavhal, 2024).

Despite these positive developments, the FGDs revealed concerns regarding the continuity of cultural activities. According to a cultural practitioner, *"After the pandemic, some local traditions almost disappeared; cultural revitalization should not only be for tourism but for maintaining community spirit"* (FGD–Cultural Practitioner). This underscores that pulse is not merely about periodic excitement but the ongoing preservation of cultural vitality within daily life. Sustained programming and community participation are essential to prevent cultural fatigue and maintain long-term dynamism (Smith and Hetherington, 2013).

Participants also stressed the need for a structured cultural and tourism event calendar to ensure consistency and visibility. According to a representative from the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), *"If we have a clear calendar of events, both tourists and locals will know when to visit and participate, it will make Magetan more vibrant throughout the year"* (FGD–Pokdarwis). This insight points to the importance of institutional coordination, where branding is supported by predictable, community-driven activities rather than isolated events.

The pulse dimension of Magetan reflects a strong yet uneven vitality shaped by traditional culture, creative industries, and local initiatives. To sustain this rhythm, the city must integrate cultural events, empower creative communities, and establish continuous collaboration among stakeholders. In doing so, Magetan can project an enduring sense of liveliness that strengthens both its internal cohesion and external appeal.

4.6 Prerequisites

The prerequisites dimension of the City Brand Hexagon refers to the fundamental qualities that support both the sustainability of everyday life and the attractiveness of a city to visitors and investors

(Anholt, 2006). These include infrastructure, public services, safety, and supporting facilities that enable tourism and economic activities to function effectively. For Magetan, this dimension represents both its greatest challenge and its most urgent area for improvement.

Infrastructure emerged as the most frequently discussed issue in the FGDs. According to a representative from the Hotel and Restaurant Association, *"Promotion comes after infrastructure; without reliable roads, parking, and cleanliness, visitors' experiences will never meet expectations"* (FGD–Hotel Association). This statement reflects a widely held concern that Magetan's branding efforts risk being undermined if basic facilities remain inadequate. Similarly, a representative from the Department of Transportation stated, *"Access roads to secondary destinations are still narrow and poorly maintained; we must improve connectivity to distribute tourism traffic beyond Sarangan"* (FGD–Transportation Office). These views confirm that infrastructural consistency is a prerequisite for sustainable place branding (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001).

Public services and amenities also play a significant role in shaping visitor perceptions. According to a representative from the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), *"Tourist facilities like rest areas, signage, and waste management should be standardized; many destinations still lack basic amenities"* (FGD–Pokdarwis). This observation aligns with Almeida et al. (2022), who emphasize that service quality is a determinant of long-term satisfaction in tourism-oriented cities (Almeida et al., 2022). Moreover, a representative from the Department of Culture and Tourism added, *"Good public service means not only physical infrastructure but also coordination among agencies and responsiveness to tourist needs"* (FGD–Department of Culture and Tourism). This perspective underscores that soft infrastructure such as governance, coordination, and communication are as important as physical development (Agosin and Retamal, 2021).

Cleanliness, safety, and environmental management were also identified as priority areas. According to a representative from the Department of Industry and Trade, *"Markets and food centers must be clean and organized; this is part of how people judge a city's hospitality"* (FGD–Industry and Trade Office). In addition, a representative from the Department of Cooperatives and Micro Enterprises pointed out, *"Small business areas need better waste collection and lighting; it affects both comfort and security for tourists"* (FGD–Cooperatives and SMEs Office). These comments illustrate that everyday management of space contributes directly to the city's perceived quality of life and overall brand experience (Charles et al., 2022).

Participants further emphasized the importance of planning and consistency. According to a representative from the Tourism Marketing Division, *"A clear infrastructure roadmap and event calendar would help align facility readiness with tourism peaks"* (FGD–Tourism Marketing Division). This reflects the understanding that prerequisites are not static conditions but dynamic processes requiring institutional collaboration and long-term commitment.

The *prerequisites* dimension of Magetan demonstrates that a strong city brand cannot be sustained without robust foundations in infrastructure, public services, and governance. While the regency possesses abundant natural and cultural resources, the full realization of its branding potential depends on addressing these fundamental prerequisites. Ensuring consistent infrastructure quality, strengthening inter-agency coordination, and maintaining clean, safe, and accessible public spaces are essential for transforming Magetan's symbolic

identity into tangible, everyday experiences for residents and visitors alike.

4.7 Formulation of the tagline and logo of Magetan Regency

The formulation of the tagline and logo of Magetan Regency is grounded in the key findings of the City Brand Hexagon analysis, which comprises six core dimensions: presence, place, potential, pulse, people, and prerequisites. These dimensions are further integrated with a cultural storytelling approach, thereby producing an identity that is not only anchored in the region's tangible potential but also reflects its distinctive cultural and natural characteristics (Anholt, 2006). Collectively, these elements form the basis for articulating Magetan's unique values, which are subsequently translated into its visual identity in the form of a tagline and logo.

Drawing on this analysis, the city branding team of Magetan Regency identified Mount Lawu and the Lawu Starling as the principal visual elements to symbolize both the natural beauty and cultural uniqueness of the region. Mount Lawu is positioned as a representation of grandeur and resilience, while Telaga Sarangan and its waterfalls embody the refreshing natural environment of Magetan. The Lawu Starling, imbued with rich philosophical narratives, is incorporated as a symbol of guidance, loyalty, and adventurous spirit. The use of blue and green conveys freshness and serenity, while the orange accent of the starling's beak signifies joy and hospitality. Historical heritage, such as Candi Sadon, reflects harmony and peacefulness, whereas the exhibition of Tosan Aji, particularly the keris, reinforces the deep-rooted Javanese cultural identity that inspires the overall brand concept.

These findings provide the foundation for the formulation of the tagline and logo of Magetan Regency, demonstrating that branding is not merely an aesthetic consideration but is substantively grounded in a holistic exploration of the region's resources. The process involved the examination of documents, digital platforms, and social media, as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with local stakeholders. Insights gathered from these activities served as the basis for drafting the creative brief that guided the development of alternative taglines and logos. In addition, surveys were conducted to enrich perspectives and ensure that each element of the branding truly reflected the aspirations of the community.

The preference of participants for the tagline "Magetan Ngangeni" and the logo, which features visual elements such as mountains, the Lawu Starling, keris, and natural scenery of lakes and waterfalls, affirms that the public favors symbols evoking emotional closeness alongside the natural and cultural appeal of Magetan. This strong public endorsement provides a robust foundation for positioning Magetan as a region that is memorable, comfortable, and deeply meaningful for both residents and visitors. Following the stage of public testing, the finalization and refinement of the logo and tagline were carried out collaboratively by the Department of Culture and Tourism of Magetan Regency and the appointed consultants, resulting in the official visual identity of Magetan Regency as illustrated in Figure 2.

The logo represents the unique identity and character of Magetan Regency, located at the foothills of Mount Lawu, with its captivating natural richness and profound local wisdom. The design concept of the Magetan Regency logo is structured as follows:

(1) The visual elements of the logo are inspired by the natural landscape of Magetan, particularly its hilly terrain, the grandeur of Mount Lawu with its refreshing natural resources, and the Javanese cultural values that continue to be preserved by its people.

FIGURE 2
Results of the logo and tagline as place identity. Adapted with permission from the Government of Magetan Regency (Pemerintah Kabupaten Magetan).

(2) The logo features the Lawu Starling (Jalak Lawu), an endemic bird regarded as a guide on Mount Lawu. Local belief holds that the Lawu Starling is the reincarnation of Wongso Menggolo, who protects climbers from losing their way. The bird symbolizes wisdom, loyalty, and adventure, inviting everyone to experience the beauty and hospitality of Magetan.

(3) The keris is incorporated as a cultural and philosophical symbol of Javanese identity, resonating with the values upheld by the people of Magetan.

(4) The use of blue and green reflects the calm and serene natural environment of Magetan.

(5) Flowing lines within the design convey a message of freshness and harmony.

(6) The historical significance of Candi Sadon, which embodies the value of peace, is represented through the calming use of blue as a symbol of tranquility and hospitality among Magetan's residents.

(7) The use of orange complements this palette, symbolizing warmth and friendliness.

(8) Specifically, the orange beak of the Lawu Starling embodies the spirit, cheerfulness, and welcoming nature of Magetan's community.

Through the integration of these visual elements and cultural narratives, the study provides a comprehensive depiction of both the potential and the challenges faced by Magetan Regency across various dimensions, including strategic efforts to construct a strong visual identity through the newly developed logo. The collaborative process of aligning the visual design of the logo and tagline, undertaken jointly by the Department of Culture and Tourism of Magetan Regency and professional consultants, is expected to reflect the cultural wealth, historical depth, and unique characteristics of Magetan. The information presented in this chapter is intended to offer strategic insights for stakeholders in formulating sustainable policies and development programs. Altogether, these findings are expected to strengthen the identity and competitiveness of Magetan Regency at both national and international levels.

4.8 Integrative insights and strategic directions for Magetan's city branding

The analysis of Magetan's city branding was structured equally across the six dimensions of the City Brand Hexagon to ensure analytical balance and comparability. Each dimension, namely Presence, Place, Potential, People, Pulse, and Prerequisites, was discussed with equal emphasis during the FGD and examined using consistent thematic criteria (Anholt, 2006). This balanced analytical design allows for an integrative interpretation of how these dimensions interact in shaping Magetan's brand identity.

Collectively, the six dimensions reveal that Magetan's identity is shaped through an interplay of cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors. Rather than functioning as separate analytical units, these dimensions are interconnected through a shared narrative of cultural storytelling, which positions the regency as both a historical and living space. This integrative perspective confirms that city branding is not merely a promotional endeavor but a strategic communication process that articulates the community's values, historical memory, and aspirations (de San Eugenio-Vela et al., 2023; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2019). The findings demonstrate that branding functions simultaneously as symbolic representation and relational practice, where dialogue among stakeholders mediates the relationship between heritage and modernization (Braun et al., 2014; Ripoll González et al., 2024).

The results show that Presence provides Magetan with symbolic legitimacy through its historical and cultural narratives, while Place materializes those narratives into spatial and experiential realities. Potential links cultural and natural assets with economic and educational opportunities that enhance competitiveness, whereas People and Pulse sustain the living identity of the city through participation, cultural vibrancy, and creativity. Prerequisites, in turn, secure the infrastructure and governance necessary to support these symbolic and social processes. Viewed holistically, these dimensions illustrate that successful branding depends on alignment between narrative authenticity, participatory governance, and sustainable infrastructuree (Anholt, 2006; Leal et al., 2022).

Magetan's brand identity, centered on the slogan "Magetan Ngangeni," embodies this integration by combining emotional resonance with development goals. The city's story is both cultural and strategic, linking historical continuity with contemporary aspirations for inclusive growth. As noted by Wan and Li (2024), the effectiveness of city branding increasingly relies on how local governments transform cultural assets into participatory and digitally mediated experiences (Wan and Li, 2024). In this regard, Magetan's strategy offers three major implications.

First, institutional integration is essential. City branding should operate within a coordinated governance framework that connects tourism, culture, trade, and infrastructure sectors to ensure consistent messaging and synchronized program implementation. Such interdepartmental collaboration reflects the multilevel approach advocated by de San Eugenio-Vela et al. (2023), which emphasizes coherence between communication and policy. Second, community empowerment must remain at the core of the branding process. Inclusive participation of residents, MSMEs, creative youth, and local organizations not only strengthens authenticity but also enhances social ownership of the brand. This participatory model aligns with Ripoll González and Lester (2018), who highlight that co-creation between authorities and citizens transforms branding into a shared civic project rather than a top-down initiative. Finally, sustainability and digital transformation are critical for long-term competitiveness. Integrating green tourism principles, circular economy practices, and data-driven digital communication will help Magetan maintain both ecological and reputational resilience. As Beddaa and Bentalha (2024) argue, digital territorial communication enables localities to expand visibility while preserving narrative coherence and environmental responsibility.

Magetan's city branding demonstrates that the interaction among the six dimensions produces a coherent and sustainable identity. The synthesis of cultural storytelling, stakeholder participation, and infrastructural development illustrates how strategic communication can convert local distinctiveness into global competitiveness. Maintaining this equilibrium between heritage and innovation will allow Magetan to evolve as a model of culturally grounded yet future-oriented city branding.

5 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that city branding at the regency level, particularly in Magetan, can be strengthened through a cultural storytelling approach. The findings reveal that Magetan's identity is constructed through the integration of natural resources, local history, and cultural heritage, which materialized in the visual identity of the tagline "Magetan Ngangeni" and a logo representing Mount Lawu, the Lawu Starling, the keris, and other natural symbols. Branding in this context is not limited to visual representation but emerges as a relational process that connects stakeholders, narratives, and local values within a shared communicative space.

The analysis, which equally examined the six dimensions of the City Brand Hexagon: Presence, Place, Potential, People, Pulse, and Prerequisites shows that Magetan's brand identity is the outcome of a balanced interaction between symbolic narratives, participatory engagement, and infrastructural readiness. The Presence and Place dimensions provide historical depth and spatial distinctiveness; Potential highlights future-oriented opportunities in tourism, creative industries, and education; People and Pulse sustain vitality through social participation and cultural expression; and Prerequisites ensure that these symbolic and social energies are grounded in effective infrastructure and public service. Taken together, these findings confirm that successful city branding depends on the alignment between authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing discourse on culture-based city branding by demonstrating how storytelling operates as a strategic communication framework that connects identity formation, stakeholder co-creation, and governance coordination. Practically, it provides insights for city managers in semi-urban regions: that cultural narratives must be translated into participatory policies, continuous stakeholder collaboration, and infrastructural improvements to ensure long-term impact.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. Its focus on a single case study with selected stakeholder groups constrains the generalizability of the findings. Future research should explore comparative cases across regions with different socio-cultural contexts, integrate the role of digital and social media platforms in disseminating cultural narratives, and apply quantitative methods to measure residents' perceptions, satisfaction, and engagement with city branding. Incorporating sustainability and green branding perspectives would also strengthen future studies, ensuring that culture-based branding contributes not only to regional competitiveness but also to environmental and social well-being.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author(s) declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. The authors used a generative artificial intelligence tool (Google Gemini) to assist in translating parts of the manuscript into English and checking grammar. The authors reviewed and edited the content to ensure accuracy and take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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