

Evaluation of the Smart Branding Strategy of Pahlawan Street Center in Strengthening the Identity of Madiun City

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The development of the smart city concept has encouraged local governments to build city branding through smart branding strategies as an effort to enhance competitiveness, increase regional attractiveness, and strengthen local identity. One implementation of this strategy is manifested through the development of Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) as a flagship destination of Madiun City. Nevertheless, the existence of PSC has also generated various dynamics regarding its appropriateness in representing the distinctive identity of the region. This study aims to evaluate the strategic fit of the smart branding strategy of Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) in strengthening the identity of Madiun City, analyze the supporting and inhibiting factors, and formulate strategic recommendations. This study employed a descriptive qualitative method. Data were collected through interviews, direct observation, and documentation studies involving various informants. The strategy evaluation in this study was analyzed using John M. Bryson's strategic management concept, which encompasses five dimensions: strategic fit, public value creation, feasibility, stakeholder support, and sustainability. The findings indicate that the smart branding strategy through PSC has been integrated with planning documents and has created tangible public value in the form of enhanced visual attractiveness of the area. However, this strategy is considered not yet optimal in strengthening the authentic local identity, as the area's appearance is more dominated by miniature global icons that obscure the authentic local character. Supporting factors for the successful implementation of the strategy include alignment with planning documents, community economic improvement, private sector participation (CSR), digital infrastructure support, and innovative activities. Meanwhile, the inhibiting factors include city image issues, inconsistency in digital promotion, low budget realization, and infrastructure capacity constraints. This study proposes strategic recommendations to optimize the smart branding of Madiun City through the alignment of branding strategies with planning documents, the strengthening of local identity as a source of public value, the optimization of budget planning and utilization, the enhancement of collaboration among stakeholders, and the implementation of sustainable performance monitoring and program evaluation.

Keywords: Strategy Evaluation, Smart Branding, Pahlawan Street Center, City Identity, Smart City.

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1. Introduction

Based on data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS) for 2025, East Java Province was the leading destination for domestic tourists in Indonesia, recording more than 218 million domestic trips, surpassing West Java with 167 million trips and Central Java with 146 million trips. The largest contributors to domestic tourist arrivals in East Java are nature-based tourism, urban centers, and regions supported by well-developed transportation infrastructure, including Surabaya City with 27.2 million trips as the province's primary center of activity and mobility, Sidoarjo Regency with 14.9 million trips as a culinary and handicraft MSME hub, and Malang Regency with 14.6 million trips as a destination for natural and man-made attractions. Compared with other regencies and municipalities in East Java, the research location examined in this study records a relatively lower number of domestic tourist visits. In 2025, Madiun City received 2,522,349 domestic tourist visits, placing it in competition with Blitar City and Probolinggo City. However, the number of domestic tourists visiting Madiun City remained below that of neighboring regencies within the same

residency area, including Madiun Regency, Magetan Regency, Ngawi Regency, Ponorogo Regency, and Pacitan Regency.

Although Madiun City's domestic tourist arrivals appear less competitive when compared with other regencies and municipalities in East Java, a different perspective emerges from the domestic tourism statistics published by the Madiun City Statistics Office (BPS Kota Madiun), which are derived from Mobile Positioning Data (MPD), a modern statistical method officially implemented by Statistics Indonesia through the *Madiun City Tourism Statistics 2025*. The data indicate that domestic tourist visits to Madiun City exhibited a positive long-term trend from 2019 to 2025. Tourist trips declined from 1.305 million in 2019 to 1.164 million in 2021, most likely due to mobility restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly limited tourism activities nationwide. Beginning in 2022, however, the tourism sector experienced substantial recovery, with domestic tourist trips increasing to 1.633 million, indicating the revival of tourism activities in Madiun City. This positive trend continued through 2024, when tourist arrivals rose sharply to 2.503 million, followed by a further increase to 2.522 million trips in 2025.

In today's digital era, domestic tourists increasingly rely on social media platforms and search engines to identify popular tourist destinations through keyword searches. Tourist attractions that receive extensive online attention and reach broader audiences across regions are more likely to attract additional visitors. As visitor numbers increase, these destinations also become more attractive to investors seeking investment opportunities. One widely used tool for assessing the popularity of search keywords is Google Trends, which provides insights into public search interest over time.

Urban infrastructure development does not always generate new employment opportunities. This phenomenon is evident in the development of Pahlawan Street Center (PSC), which was expected to create new jobs but has not significantly improved the Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in Madiun City. According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS) of East Java Province, Madiun City's LFPR remains relatively low compared with other regions in East Java. The city ranks 31st out of 38 regencies and municipalities in terms of labor force participation. This low participation rate indicates that a considerable proportion of the working-age population does not actively participate in the labor market, either because they choose not to work, are not seeking employment, or face structural barriers such as skill mismatches, limited formal employment opportunities, or low interest in working within particular sectors.

The phenomena described above raise important questions regarding the effectiveness of urban infrastructure development, particularly the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC), in increasing labor force participation. According to Todaro and Smith (2012:372), economic development through regional development and increased investment expands production activities, thereby increasing employment opportunities. However, empirical conditions indicate a gap between job creation and the actual participation of the working-age population in the labor market.

Furthermore, the Human Development Index (HDI) serves as a comprehensive indicator of people's quality of life by measuring achievements in education, health, and purchasing power. Improvements in the HDI are generally expected to contribute positively to the Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) because higher human capital quality should encourage greater workforce participation. According to BPS data, Madiun City recorded a very high HDI of 84.51 in 2024, ranking fifth among all regencies and municipalities in East Java. In 2025, the city's HDI further increased to 85.12, placing it third in the province. Despite these improvements, the city's LFPR increased only marginally, rising by approximately 0.63 percentage points, from 70.60% in 2024 to 71.23% in 2025 (BPS, 2025). Moreover, the LFPR remained stagnant at 66.8% during the 2021–2022 period.

The coexistence of a high Human Development Index and a relatively low Labor Force Participation Rate in Madiun City suggests that improvements in human development alone are insufficient to increase labor force participation without adequate economic structures and employment opportunities. Therefore, public policies should be integrated with initiatives aimed at creating quality jobs, developing creative industries, and strengthening workforce empowerment programs. Such efforts are essential to reduce the gap between the quality of human resources and their participation in the labor market.

The Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy has been formally regulated under Mayor Regulation No. 45 of 2022. Nevertheless, its implementation has not yet fully achieved its intended objectives. This study is motivated by the importance of local government efforts to build the city's image and identity through the concept of smart branding, one of the key dimensions of the smart city framework. Through the PSC strategy, the local government seeks not only to enhance the city's attractiveness to residents and visitors but also to strengthen its distinctive characteristics as part of its regional identity. Accordingly, this study aims to evaluate the extent to which the smart branding strategy implemented through Pahlawan Street Center contributes to strengthening the identity of Madiun City while identifying the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting its implementation. The findings are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategies that have been implemented and to serve as recommendations for optimizing future city branding initiatives.

The purpose of this study is to collect data and information related to the smart branding strategy of Pahlawan Street Center (PSC), identify the factors influencing its implementation, and examine local government programs that are aligned with the Madiun Smart City Master Plan. In addition, this study seeks to formulate recommendations for strengthening the smart branding strategy of Pahlawan Street Center. Specifically, the objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To evaluate the alignment between the Pahlawan Street Center Smart Branding Strategy and the Madiun Smart City Master Plan 2019–2024 as an effort to strengthen the city's identity.
2. To analyze the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting the implementation of the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy.
3. To formulate strategic recommendations for strengthening smart branding through Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) in Madiun City.

2. Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research approach because the researcher sought to describe the observed phenomena in the field in a more specific, transparent, and in-depth manner. As stated by Irawan (2000:60), descriptive research is intended to describe or explain phenomena as they naturally occur. Data were collected from multiple sources through interviews and direct observations at the research site (place), as well as through the review of official documents, regulations, and government publications (paper). These data served as the basis for describing and analyzing the benefits of the development of Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) as a smart branding initiative and its social and economic implications for the local community.

The data obtained from the three primary sources persons, papers, and places were compiled and classified into primary and secondary data. In selecting research participants, the researcher identified informants who possessed relevant expertise and knowledge related to the subject under investigation. Accordingly, the selected informants were expected to provide accurate, comprehensive, and in-depth information, thereby ensuring the credibility and richness of the research data.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and literature review. In line with the qualitative research approach, the collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The qualitative analysis focused on interpreting textual data rather than numerical information, encompassing legislative documents, regional government policies, and technical policy measures related to the implementation of the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy. The analyzed findings were then systematically organized and presented in an integrated narrative to facilitate a clear understanding of the research objectives. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the verified findings. If the available data were considered insufficient to adequately address the research questions, additional data were collected and subjected to further reduction and analysis until credible and trustworthy conclusions could be established.

3. Results and Discussion

Alignment of the Pahlawan Street Center Smart Branding Strategy with the Madiun Smart City Master Plan 2019–2024 as an Effort to Strengthen the City's Identity

1. Strategic Fit

Strategic fit refers to the harmonious alignment among an organization's vision, mission, objectives, programs, and available resources. From this perspective, every planned program should support the established policy direction. When strategic initiatives are not aligned with policy objectives, their implementation is unlikely to achieve optimal results.

In this study, the strategic fit dimension is examined through three indicators: (a) alignment with planning documents, (b) relevance to local potential, and (c) responsiveness to tourism trends and digitalization.

a. Alignment with Planning Documents

The implementation of the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy in Madiun City demonstrates a well-planned policy direction, as it has been formally incorporated into regional development planning documents. This indicates that the development of PSC is not merely an incidental program but forms part of a systematically designed regional development strategy. The inclusion of PSC smart branding in official planning documents reflects the local government's commitment to strengthening the city's identity through the utilization of public spaces, technological innovation, and regional image enhancement.

This commitment is explicitly stated in the Appendix to Mayor Regulation of Madiun No. 45 of 2022, amending Mayor Regulation No. 32 of 2020 concerning the Madiun Smart City Master Plan 2019–2024. The regulation identifies three core identities that underpin the city's branding strategy: Pecel culinary heritage, Pencak Silat culture and martial arts, and the national railway industry and education center.

The findings indicate that the implementation of smart branding is not an isolated initiative but rather a derivative of formally established regional development priorities. This finding supports the strategic management concept proposed by Bryson (2018), which emphasizes that an effective strategy requires alignment among organizational objectives, programs, and implementation in order to achieve strategic goals.

These findings also reinforce the study conducted by Suhartono Winoto et al. (2023), which concluded that the success of smart branding largely depends on its integration with regional development planning documents. However, previous research conducted in Malang City identified weak inter-agency coordination and the absence of a clear branding roadmap. In contrast, the present study demonstrates that

Madiun City has established a relatively integrated development framework through its Smart City Master Plan, enabling a more structured implementation of the PSC program.

b. Relevance to Local Potential

The findings reveal a discrepancy between the city's intended identity and tourists' actual preferences. Although PSC does not yet fully represent Madiun City's identity as the City of Warriors (Kota Pendekar), it has made a meaningful contribution to increasing tourist arrivals and strengthening the city's image as an attractive destination.

The regional branding strategy implemented through Pahlawan Street Center demonstrates the local government's success in creating a modern and visually appealing tourism icon capable of attracting visitors. Nevertheless, the development of PSC should be complemented by stronger integration with the city's cultural identity and local potential to preserve its distinctive character. This is particularly important because Madiun City possesses a well-established identity as the City of Warriors, supported by its rich cultural heritage and traditional culinary assets. Without incorporating these local values, modern developments such as PSC risk becoming attractive public spaces with limited cultural significance.

c. Responsiveness to Tourism Trends and Digitalization

The research findings indicate that promotional activities related to PSC have utilized various digital platforms. According to one informant, every event organized at PSC is consistently promoted through the local government's official social media accounts with additional support from community organizations. Furthermore, event documentation is uploaded to YouTube, enabling broader and more sustainable dissemination of information. These findings suggest that the local government recognizes the strategic role of digital media in tourism communication and destination marketing.

The development strategy for PSC has also accommodated contemporary tourism trends that emphasize visual appeal and visitor experience. This is reflected in the design of the area, which incorporates numerous attractive photo spots that encourage visitors to document and share their experiences through social media platforms. Consequently, destination promotion is carried out not only through official government channels but also indirectly through user-generated content produced by tourists.

Despite these positive developments, the study also reveals that the current strategy has not yet been fully optimized. Interview findings indicate that digital promotional activities remain inconsistent and are primarily concentrated around specific events. Promotional content generally increases before and during events but declines significantly once the events conclude. As a result, PSC's digital visibility lacks continuity and sustained public engagement.

From the perspective of local businesses, not all micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) operating within the PSC area possess adequate digital marketing capabilities. Consequently, the benefits of digitalization have not been distributed evenly among business actors. Although the policy direction aligns with current digitalization trends, the implementation has yet to fully capitalize on the opportunities provided by the digital environment. An effective strategy should not only respond to environmental changes but also integrate all available resources and stakeholders to maximize overall impact.

Overall, the PSC development strategy demonstrates a positive response to contemporary tourism trends and digital transformation, particularly through infrastructure development and the utilization of digital media for destination promotion. However, further improvements are required in terms of maintaining consistent promotional activities, enhancing human resource capacity, and strengthening stakeholder participation to ensure that the smart branding strategy becomes more adaptive, effective, and sustainable in reinforcing the identity of Madiun City.

2. Public Value Creation

Public value creation is an important dimension in evaluating public sector strategies, referring to the extent to which government policies and programs generate tangible benefits for society. In this study, public value creation is assessed through three indicators: (a) city identity and image, (b) enhancement of economic activities, and (c) public satisfaction.

a. City Identity and Image

Based on search trend data collected over the past five years, the keywords "Kota Pecel" (City of Pecel) and "Kota Pendekar" (City of Warriors) appeared more frequently in searches related to Madiun City than "PSC Kota Madiun" or "Pahlawan Street Center." Although the overall search volume remains relatively modest, this pattern indicates that Madiun City's public image continues to be more strongly associated with its traditional and cultural identity than with the newly developed urban landmark.

These findings suggest that historically rooted and culturally based branding has become deeply embedded in public perception, resulting in stronger brand recognition than more recent branding initiatives such as Pahlawan Street Center. In other words, although PSC has been developed as a new city icon and has contributed to increasing tourist arrivals, its digital presence has not yet been able to replace or match the popularity of the city's long-established identity.

b. Enhancement of Economic Activities

The findings indicate that the existence of the PSC area has made a significant contribution to improving local economic activities, particularly for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). However, visitor numbers tend to decline after holiday periods, indicating that tourist arrivals remain highly seasonal and fluctuate according to holiday momentum.

These findings suggest the need for sustainable management strategies and continuous innovation to ensure that Pahlawan Street Center remains attractive not only during holiday seasons but also throughout regular weekdays. Consequently, more consistent management and promotional strategies are required to maintain stable and sustainable economic activities within the PSC area.

c. Public Satisfaction

One of the most frequently expressed suggestions concerns the need to emphasize local culture rather than architectural concepts inspired by foreign landmarks. This finding indicates that Madiun City's distinctive identity has not yet been fully reflected in the PSC area. Within regional branding initiatives, local cultural elements play a crucial role because they differentiate one city from another. Therefore, the local government could strengthen the area's identity by incorporating elements that represent the city's unique characteristics, including traditional arts and culture, local history, the city's Pencak Silat heritage, and Madiun's distinctive culinary traditions. Such initiatives would enable PSC to function not only as a recreational destination but also as a medium for introducing Madiun City's identity to a broader audience.

In addition, several reviews highlighted that the culinary area tends to be relatively quiet on weekdays and outside weekends. This situation indicates that economic activities within PSC have not yet become consistently active throughout the week and remain heavily dependent on weekend visitor traffic. A vibrant public space that maintains continuous activity contributes positively to the city's overall image and development. To address this issue, innovations such as regular cultural events, culinary promotions, artistic performances, and collaboration with local communities should be implemented to sustain visitor interest throughout the year.

Another recurring concern relates to the accessibility of facilities for persons with disabilities. Several visitors indicated that accessibility within the PSC area requires further improvement to ensure equal access for all members of society. This finding suggests that inclusivity remains an area requiring greater attention. As a modern public space, PSC should provide equitable access through facilities such as wheelchair-accessible pathways, tactile guiding blocks, accessible toilets, designated parking spaces, and safe pedestrian infrastructure. These improvements are essential for enhancing the quality of public services within the area.

Cleanliness was also identified as a concern by several visitors. Environmental cleanliness plays a crucial role in determining visitor comfort while simultaneously influencing the overall image of the destination. Poor sanitation and inadequate maintenance may negatively affect public perceptions of PSC. Consequently, cleanliness management should be strengthened through the provision of additional waste disposal facilities, more frequent cleaning activities, closer supervision by maintenance personnel, and public education initiatives encouraging visitors to maintain a clean environment.

Overall, these public reviews demonstrate that PSC has evolved into one of Madiun City's prominent landmarks but still requires improvements in several areas. Strengthening local cultural identity, increasing economic activities during weekdays, enhancing inclusive public facilities, and improving environmental cleanliness should become key priorities for the local government. Continuous improvements in these aspects will further reinforce PSC as an attractive, distinctive, and socially beneficial symbol of Madiun City.

The findings further reveal that PSC has generated significant public value by stimulating MSME economic activities, creating spaces for social interaction, increasing tourist arrivals, strengthening community pride in Madiun City, and contributing to a more modern urban image. These findings demonstrate that the smart branding strategy extends beyond enhancing the city's image by generating tangible economic, social, and symbolic benefits, consistent with Bryson's concept of public value.

3. Feasibility

The feasibility dimension represents one of the key aspects in evaluating the successful implementation of a strategy. It refers to the extent to which a planned strategy can be realistically executed based on the availability of organizational resources. A strategy should not be assessed solely on the quality of its conceptual design but also on the ability of the government or organization to provide adequate support for its effective implementation. In other words, a successful strategy requires an internal environment that is both prepared and capable of supporting its execution.

According to Bryson (2018), the feasibility dimension consists of three primary indicators: human resource competency, budget availability, and technological infrastructure. The success of a strategy is largely determined by the organization's internal readiness. When competent human resources, sufficient financial support, and adequate technological infrastructure are available, the likelihood of successful implementation increases significantly. Conversely, weaknesses in any of these components may create substantial barriers to achieving strategic objectives.

a. Human Resource Competency

Based on organizational structure and educational qualification data from the Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth, and Sports of Madiun City, the competency of human resources supporting the implementation of the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy can be considered relatively adequate. This is reflected in the educational qualifications of structural officials and team coordinators, the majority of whom possess higher education credentials ranging from Diploma III to Bachelor's (S1) and Master's (S2) degrees. These findings indicate that the implementing agency possesses sufficient human

capital to carry out planning, management, promotion, and tourism and cultural development activities effectively.

b. Budget

Within the context of the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy, low budget realization may directly delay the achievement of strategic objectives. Smart branding requires sustained investment in physical infrastructure, promotional activities, event organization, creative economy development, and the maintenance of public facilities. When allocated budgets are not fully utilized, opportunities to improve destination quality, expand promotional activities, and introduce program innovations become limited. Consequently, the success of city branding depends not only on the size of the allocated budget but also on the government's ability to translate financial resources into measurable outputs and outcomes.

The Madiun City Government should therefore strengthen the integration of development planning, budget formulation, and program implementation to ensure that allocated financial resources are utilized effectively and efficiently. Such integration is essential to ensure that policies formulated within development planning documents are translated into concrete activities that generate tangible benefits for the community. Strong alignment among planning, budgeting, and implementation processes will minimize program inconsistencies, implementation delays, and low budget absorption rates.

c. Technological Infrastructure

The contribution of technological infrastructure to strengthening city identity should not be evaluated solely based on the quantity of available facilities but also on their symbolic and strategic functions. Technology is considered effective when it reflects local identity, creates distinctive visitor experiences, and reinforces Madiun City's image as a modern and innovative city. Conversely, if technological facilities merely serve general utility purposes without integration into local cultural values and regional branding strategies, their contribution to city identity remains limited. Therefore, the effectiveness of technology in supporting PSC's smart branding depends on the extent to which it showcases Madiun City's unique characteristics within public spaces.

An assessment of the technological infrastructure available in the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) indicates that the Madiun City Government has made substantial efforts to implement the smart branding concept through the provision of digital facilities and urban technologies. The installation of integrated CCTV systems, free Wi-Fi, digital billboards (videotrons), smart street lighting, and pelican crossings demonstrates that city branding is being developed not only through promotional narratives but also through the real experiences of citizens and visitors while utilizing public spaces. This approach is particularly important because, in the contemporary urban context, a strong city identity is increasingly shaped by service quality, public space comfort, and the perception of technological innovation experienced directly by visitors. Consequently, PSC functions as a showcase that presents Madiun as a city capable of adapting to technological advancements.

The findings further indicate that Madiun City's smart branding strategy through PSC has placed considerable emphasis on physical and visual dimensions, particularly through the development of highly visible public infrastructure. While this approach is effective in creating an initial impression of modernity and attracting public attention, sustainable smart branding requires strengthening non-physical dimensions, including service quality, data integration, community participation, consistent digital promotion, and continuous program innovation. Without these supporting elements, technological facilities risk becoming merely decorative urban features that contribute little to the city's long-term reputation.

These findings are consistent with the study by Shinta Permana Putri (2023), which concluded that successful city branding depends heavily on the readiness of smart governance and digital infrastructure. Madiun City demonstrates similar characteristics through the development of pedestrian facilities, tourism landmarks, digital networks, and modern public amenities. However, this study also finds that implementation feasibility depends not only on government support but equally on the preparedness of local communities and micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which are the primary stakeholders utilizing the PSC area. Nevertheless, several limitations remain, including limited parking capacity, reduced Wi-Fi performance during peak visitor periods, and the need to improve the quality and competitiveness of locally produced MSME products.

4. Stakeholder Support

Stakeholder support is one of the key determinants of the successful implementation of the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy as an iconic landmark of Madiun City. Regional branding strategies cannot be implemented solely by the government; rather, they require the active involvement of multiple stakeholders who possess relevant interests, resources, and influence over the area's development. The stronger the collaboration among stakeholders, the greater the likelihood that the strategy will be implemented effectively, sustainably, and with meaningful benefits for the community.

Stakeholder support can be observed through collaboration among the local government, the private sector, the community, and the media in fostering a positive image of the area. As a modern public space, community activity center, and urban tourism destination, PSC requires collective support to ensure that its development extends beyond physical infrastructure and contributes to sustainable social and economic vitality. To evaluate stakeholder support, this study employs three primary indicators: private sector support, support from regional government agencies (OPDs), and support from the community and the media.

a. Private Sector Support

The involvement of the private sector demonstrates that the PSC area possesses considerable economic value and business potential. Private participation may take various forms, including business investment, event sponsorship, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and the digitalization of economic transactions. Greater private sector involvement strengthens PSC's position as a vibrant and productive urban area while reducing its dependence on government funding.

The findings indicate that private sector participation through CSR programs reflects increasing confidence and commitment from businesses in supporting the development of PSC's smart branding strategy. Nevertheless, certain CSR contributions, such as replicas of the Eiffel Tower and the National Monument (Monas), present a dual perspective. On one hand, these installations function as attractive photo spots that enhance the area's visual appeal and encourage visitors to share their experiences on social media. In the digital era, such iconic attractions effectively capture public attention and increase online visibility.

On the other hand, the adoption of symbols originating from outside the region or even from other countries may weaken the authenticity of Madiun City's local identity. Ideally, a smart branding strategy should emphasize the city's distinctive characteristics, including the heritage of the City of Warriors (Kota Pendekar), local cultural traditions, pecel culinary heritage, Pencak Silat, and other icons that genuinely represent Madiun's identity. Excessive reliance on external symbols may create an artificial city image that is less reflective of the region's authentic cultural character.

b. Support from Regional Government Agencies (OPDs)

The support of regional government agencies (Organisasi Perangkat Daerah OPDs) is essential because a city's image is not shaped by a single program but by the collective contribution of multiple government

institutions. A city that is clean, well-organized, secure, vibrant, easily accessible, and actively promoted will naturally foster positive public perceptions. These conditions can only be achieved through effective coordination among government agencies.

The PSC smart branding strategy therefore represents a collaborative policy requiring sustained inter-agency cooperation. The stronger the coordination and commitment among OPDs, the greater the opportunity for PSC to develop into a modern and attractive city landmark capable of strengthening Madiun City's identity. According to Mayor Regulation No. 45 of 2022, which amended Mayor Regulation No. 32 of 2020 concerning the Madiun Smart City Master Plan 2019–2024, multiple government agencies have been assigned specific programs and activities supporting the implementation of the PSC smart branding strategy.

The findings demonstrate that the participation of various OPDs through coordinated programs and activities reflects a cross-sectoral collaborative approach to implementing Madiun City's smart branding strategy. The success of city branding is therefore not the responsibility of a single institution but is achieved through synergy among government agencies, each contributing according to its respective roles and responsibilities. This collaborative framework indicates that strengthening the city's image requires the integration of infrastructure development, technological innovation, environmental cleanliness, public safety, cultural preservation, economic development, and public service delivery.

c. Community and Media Support

Observations of the Madiun City Government's Instagram account indicate that public engagement with the branding of Pahlawan Street Center, measured through indicators such as likes, comments, shares, and content reach, has not yet demonstrated consistently high levels of participation. Although many social media users have expressed positive responses, the overall intensity of public engagement remains relatively limited.

These findings suggest that community support through social media should be further strengthened through more intensive promotional strategies. The Madiun City Government should expand its promotional efforts by producing more creative and well-planned digital content, maximizing the use of Instagram features, implementing digital marketing campaigns, and collaborating with influencers and content creators to broaden audience reach and encourage greater public participation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the implementation of PSC's smart branding strategy has received support from a wide range of stakeholders, including the local government, regional government agencies, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), local communities, the media, and the private sector through CSR initiatives. This collaboration indicates that the city's branding strategy has increasingly adopted a collaborative governance approach.

These findings support the study conducted by Rini Rachmawati et al. (2024), which concluded that the success of smart branding is strongly influenced by community participation, government support, social media engagement, and local economic empowerment. Similarly, this study demonstrates that PSC has fostered such collaboration through MSME development, event organization, and CSR support.

In contrast, the findings differ from those of Hilarion Hamjen et al. (2023), who reported relatively low levels of community participation due to a predominantly top-down implementation approach. The present study shows that stakeholder support in Madiun City is comparatively stronger, although collaboration with the private sector remains largely concentrated on physical CSR contributions and has not yet evolved into a more strategic model of collaborative governance.

5. Sustainability

According to Bryson's (2018) framework for strategic evaluation, a strategy cannot be considered sustainable merely because it continues to be implemented over time. Sustainability requires not only the continuation of programs but also the capacity to monitor, evaluate, improve, and adapt them to changing circumstances and emerging needs.

a. Program Consistency

The findings indicate that Madiun City has demonstrated an initial commitment to establishing Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) as a key element of the city's identity. However, the consistency of evaluation mechanisms still requires further strengthening. The local government should institutionalize periodic evaluations as part of its annual strategic agenda rather than relying primarily on assessments conducted at the national level. Regular evaluations are essential to ensure that PSC continues to develop sustainably, responds effectively to challenges encountered during implementation, and maintains its position as a flagship branding initiative that represents the identity of Madiun City.

b. Innovation

The findings suggest that innovation within the PSC smart branding strategy has progressed relatively well, particularly in the organization of events and public activities. Nevertheless, greater emphasis is needed on developing more creative, adaptive, and sustainable digital promotional strategies. Moving forward, the Madiun City Government should increase the frequency of planned collaborations with influencers, public figures, and digital content creators to expand PSC's visibility and further enhance Madiun City's image at both regional and national levels.

c. Facility Maintenance

The results indicate that the PSC smart branding strategy possesses promising prospects for long-term sustainability because it is supported by government policies, continuous event development, routine maintenance of public spaces, MSME empowerment initiatives, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. Despite these strengths, several challenges remain. These include the absence of a long-term smart branding master plan, insufficient integration of local cultural identity into branding initiatives, and a continued reliance on physical infrastructure development as the primary branding approach.

These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Marinda Noor Fajrina Noviana Putri et al. (2025), which emphasized that a city's visual identity should be integrated with sustainable urban development to ensure that branding extends beyond symbolic visual representation.

The findings also reinforce the research of Reynold Patabuga et al. (2020), which concluded that culture-based city branding requires strong community support to remain sustainable over time. Unlike the case of Tomohon, which prominently emphasizes its local cultural identity, Madiun City continues to highlight several global-inspired icons. Consequently, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening authentic local narratives, including the City of Warriors (Kota Pendekar) identity, Pencak Silat cultural heritage, the historical significance of INKA (Industri Kereta Api Indonesia), and the city's distinctive pecel culinary tradition, thereby creating a more authentic and distinctive city brand.

Overall, the findings suggest that the sustainability of smart branding cannot be achieved solely by maintaining physical infrastructure. Rather, long-term sustainability should be built through the reinforcement of local cultural identity, institutional capacity, stakeholder collaboration, digital innovation, and the continuous organization of public events. In this regard, the present study extends Bryson's sustainability framework by proposing that the sustainability of city identity should be regarded as equally important as the sustainability of programs themselves.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of the Smart Branding Strategy through Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) in Madiun City

A comprehensive understanding of both the supporting and inhibiting factors is essential for evaluating the implementation of the smart branding strategy. Such an analysis provides a more holistic perspective on the effectiveness of the strategy and serves as a foundation for formulating improvements that are more adaptive, effective, and sustainable in strengthening the position of Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) as an iconic landmark of Madiun City at the local, national, and international levels. The following sections summarize the supporting and inhibiting factors identified in this study.

1. Supporting Factors

a. Alignment with Planning Documents

The PSC development strategy is closely aligned with the policy directions outlined in the Madiun City Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) 2025–2029 and the Madiun Smart City Master Plan 2019–2024. The development of PSC is therefore not an isolated initiative but rather a strategic program that was designed from the outset to support the city's long-term vision of becoming a globally recognized city.

b. Visual Appeal and Urban Modernization

The PSC area has been designed using a modern, aesthetically appealing, and highly Instagrammable concept that corresponds well with contemporary tourism trends. The inclusion of miniature replicas of internationally recognized landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower, the Kaaba, and the Merlion, has proven effective as a *quick-win* strategy for attracting tourists, particularly younger visitors.

c. Enhancement of Economic Activities

The establishment of PSC has generated significant multiplier effects on the local economy. Evidence of these impacts includes increased revenues for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) during holiday seasons, the creation of employment opportunities in supporting services such as parking management, and the entry of several national franchise businesses, including HokBen, KFC, and Yoshinoya, into the surrounding area.

d. Private Sector Support

The implementation of PSC has received substantial support from the private sector through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. These initiatives have contributed various public facilities, including public drinking water stations, MSME container kiosks, and decorative park lighting, thereby enhancing both public services and the attractiveness of the area.

e. Digital Technology Infrastructure

The PSC area has been equipped with various smart city technologies, including free public Wi-Fi, AI-enabled CCTV systems, digital videotron displays, smart street lighting, and Pelican Crossing facilities. These technological features support the implementation of smart branding while improving visitor convenience and urban service quality.

f. Diverse and Innovative Public Events

The local government has actively maintained the vitality of the PSC area through a variety of public events, including the Madiun Night Carnival, live music performances, Barongsai cultural performances, evening parades, and the integration of tourism bus routes and cycling paths. These activities contribute to sustaining visitor interest and strengthening the area's attractiveness as an urban tourism destination.

2. Inhibiting Factors

a. Inconsistency in City Identity and Image

The predominance of international landmark replicas within the PSC area has received criticism from academics, who argue that these elements tend to obscure Madiun City's authentic identity as the "City of Warriors (Kota Pendekar)." Rather than showcasing the city's local cultural heritage to the global community, PSC is often perceived as presenting "the world in Madiun," thereby reducing the visibility of the city's unique identity.

b. Inconsistent Digital Promotion

Social media promotion remains highly dependent on specific events and declines substantially after events conclude. As a result, audience engagement cannot be maintained consistently over time. In addition, collaboration with public figures, influencers, and digital content creators remains relatively limited, reducing the effectiveness of long-term digital marketing efforts.

c. Low Budget Realization

Although the smart branding program receives one of the largest budget allocations within the city's development agenda, budget absorption for several strategic programs particularly those related to cultural heritage preservation and MSME development remains relatively low. This situation is primarily attributed to administrative constraints, delays in technical assessments, and coordination challenges during program implementation.

d. Discontinuation of Program Evaluation

Formal evaluation of the PSC smart branding strategy has not been conducted since 2024. The absence of systematic evaluations throughout 2025 and 2026 increases the risk that the program will become stagnant, less responsive to changing circumstances, and less capable of generating new innovations for sustainable development.

e. Limitations in Public Infrastructure

Public infrastructure continues to present several challenges. Parking capacity remains insufficient, resulting in traffic congestion during weekends and major public events. Furthermore, visitors have expressed concerns regarding the limited accessibility of facilities for wheelchair users and families with strollers, as well as cleanliness issues during peak visitation periods.

From a strategic perspective, the Madiun City Government has successfully addressed the city's limited natural tourism resources by developing a visually attractive artificial tourism destination. PSC has functioned effectively as a *quick-win* initiative that has revitalized the city's urban image, transformed Madiun from a transit city into a tourism destination, stimulated local economic growth, and attracted private sector investment.

Nevertheless, the evaluation of feasibility and public value creation reveals a cultural identity paradox. While the physical development of PSC has been successful, its strategic alignment with Madiun City's local cultural heritage remains insufficient. Effective city branding should not merely replicate globally recognized symbols but should instead transform local assets such as Pencak Silat, pecel culinary traditions, and the city's historical heritage into authentic tourism experiences. Without stronger integration of these local values, PSC risks becoming a visually appealing public space that lacks meaningful cultural significance.

From a managerial perspective, the principal weaknesses lie in implementation and long-term sustainability. The low realization of budgets allocated to cultural preservation and historical conservation programs suggests a gap between strategic planning documents and the administrative capacity required for effective implementation. This situation has been further exacerbated by the suspension of routine evaluations since 2024, eliminating the government's continuous feedback mechanism for monitoring and improving program performance. Unless improvements are made in the consistency of digital promotion, the provision of inclusive public facilities, and the institutionalization of periodic evaluations, PSC's

attractiveness may gradually decline as public enthusiasm for the concept of international landmark replicas diminishes over time.

Strategic Recommendations for Optimizing the Pahlawan Street Center Smart Branding Strategy as an Effort to Strengthen Madiun City's Identity

Strategic recommendations are essential for bridging the gap between academic findings and practical implementation. These recommendations are intended to provide practical solutions, enhance competitive and adaptive advantages, and serve as a guide for policy formulation and decision-making. Well-formulated strategic recommendations enable policymakers to develop targeted policies capable of addressing existing challenges effectively. Based on Bryson's strategic evaluation framework, the theoretical review, empirical findings, and field observations, this study proposes the following policy recommendations for the Madiun City Government to optimize the Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy in strengthening the city's identity.

1. Strategic Fit

Each regional government agency (OPD) should revise its strategic plan to incorporate programs and activities that explicitly strengthen Madiun City's identity. In accordance with the city's medium-term development planning documents, PSC should reinforce Madiun's image as both the "City of Warriors (Kota Pendekar)" and a "Historic City." Since the public continues to associate Madiun primarily with these identities, future branding strategies should combine modern visual approaches with physical attractions and thematic events that create memorable visitor experiences while preserving the city's historical and cultural character.

2. Public Value Creation

Although PSC has successfully established a modern, well-organized, and visually attractive public space, further efforts are required to strengthen its identity by expanding events that celebrate Madiun City's unique cultural heritage, particularly its identities as the City of Warriors and the City of Pecel. The Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth, and Sports could develop thematic zones featuring digital Pencak Silat installations, a Madiun history gallery, and a Pecel Museum. Such initiatives would provide a more authentic city branding strategy, as sustainable branding should emerge from distinctive local characteristics rather than the imitation of globally recognized symbols.

3. Feasibility

The commitment of the Madiun City Government to developing smart branding through PSC is reflected in its budgetary support. Nevertheless, evaluation results indicate that budget realization, particularly for smart branding initiatives, has not yet reached the expected level. Therefore, the Regional Development Planning, Research, and Innovation Agency (Bapperida) should strengthen the quality of budget planning and implementation. Priority programs must be closely monitored to ensure that allocated financial resources are utilized effectively, particularly for initiatives promoting local culture as an integral component of Madiun City's identity.

4. Stakeholder Support

The implementation of PSC's smart branding strategy has received positive support from both the private sector and government institutions, representing a valuable opportunity for broader collaboration. The Madiun City Government, under the coordination of Bapperida, should establish formal Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with private sector partners to strengthen long-term collaboration in reinforcing the city's identity. Potential areas of cooperation include annual cultural and arts festivals as promotional platforms for regional identity, partnerships to empower local artisans in producing official city souvenirs, and agreements concerning visual branding standards and the development of a unified visual identity for public spaces throughout Madiun City.

5. Sustainability

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the PSC smart branding strategy, systematic evaluations should be conducted on a semi-annual, annual, and five-year basis through an integrated program performance monitoring framework involving Bapperida, the Department of Culture, Tourism, Youth, and Sports, the Department of Communication and Information Technology, and the Department of Public Works. Regular evaluations will help ensure that programs designed to strengthen Madiun City's identity remain strategically focused, follow clear implementation timelines, and continuously adapt to changing societal needs and technological developments. Furthermore, periodic evaluations will provide a foundation for generating innovative improvements while ensuring that public facilities and supporting infrastructure are maintained effectively.

Overall, the future development of Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) should no longer rely primarily on physical infrastructure development. Instead, it should evolve toward a more comprehensive and sustainable approach that integrates the strengthening of local identity as the foundation for urban differentiation, improves public service quality in response to community needs, optimizes the use of technology in supporting the smart city concept, and reinforces governance that is effective, collaborative, and oriented toward long-term development. Through this integrated approach, PSC can function not only as a public space and urban tourism destination but also as a meaningful representation of Madiun City's values, identity, and regional competitiveness.

4. Conclusions

Based on the findings obtained through systematic data collection, data reduction, qualitative analysis, and discussion presented in the preceding chapters, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The Pahlawan Street Center (PSC) smart branding strategy has not yet been fully aligned with the Madiun Smart City Master Plan 2019–2024. Although PSC has served as a successful *quick-win* initiative that revitalized the city's physical appearance and stimulated local economic growth, it has not yet fully strengthened Madiun City's authentic identity at the global level because its smart branding strategy has not been sufficiently grounded in local cultural values.
2. The implementation of the PSC smart branding strategy is supported by several factors, including its alignment with regional planning documents, strong visual appeal and urban modernization, increased local economic activities, private sector participation, digital technology infrastructure, and diverse public events. Conversely, the strategy continues to face several constraints, including inconsistencies in city identity and branding, inconsistent digital promotion, low budget realization, the absence of continuous program evaluation, and limitations in public infrastructure.
3. Based on Bryson's strategic evaluation framework, several strategic recommendations can be proposed to optimize Madiun City's smart branding strategy through PSC. These include aligning the strategic plans of all regional government agencies with programs that reinforce the city's identity; strengthening public value creation through cultural events that promote Madiun as the City of Warriors and the City of Pecel; improving budget planning and implementation to maximize support for identity-based development programs; establishing stronger partnerships between the local government and the private sector through formal collaboration agreements; and institutionalizing regular program monitoring and evaluation involving relevant government agencies to ensure the long-term sustainability of the smart branding strategy.

Research Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that this qualitative study has several limitations, particularly regarding the research instrument, in which the researcher served as the primary instrument supported by interview

guidelines. Consequently, the findings are influenced by the researcher's interpretative judgment as well as the honesty and openness of the informants during the interview process. In addition, the qualitative approach was limited in its ability to generate precise quantitative data regarding macro-level fluctuations in the community's actual income.

Considering these limitations, future studies are encouraged to adopt a mixed-methods or quantitative research approach. Future researchers are recommended to develop structured questionnaires incorporating more comprehensive macroeconomic indicators to measure the financial impact of the PSC smart branding strategy on the local economy of Madiun City with greater precision.

Despite these limitations, this study is expected to make a meaningful academic contribution and provide an important foundation for future research on the smart branding strategy of Pahlawan Street Center (PSC). The methodological limitations identified in this study do not diminish the significance of its findings; rather, they provide opportunities for future researchers to refine the research methodology and generate more comprehensive and robust evidence.

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