



Collaborative Governance in Smart Branding of Tourism Sector in Banjarmasin City

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the implementation of collaborative governance in the development of smart branding in the tourism sector of Banjarmasin City. The main focus of this study is to identify the patterns of collaboration between the actors involved, as well as to analyze the strategies and innovations applied in an effort to form a city identity based on local potential and digital technology. The research method used is a qualitative approach with data collection through in-depth interviews and observations of various stakeholders such as the Culture Office, Youth Sports and Tourism, the private sector, local communities, and academics. The results show that while there is significant potential to create a strong branding ecosystem, collaboration between government and non-government actors has not been fully optimal. In addition, the application of digital technology in the tourism branding strategy of Banjarmasin City is still limited, while the contribution of the local community in the co-creation branding process has not been properly facilitated. This study also found that low coordination between government agencies and a lack of data-based evaluation are obstacles to the effectiveness and sustainability of city branding strategies. Based on the findings, this study recommends the establishment of a more inclusive cross-sectoral collaboration forum, digital capacity building in tourism promotion, and policy updates that support the integration of data-based branding strategies and technology

Keywords: Collaborative governance, smart branding, community, stakeholder, tourism

1. Introduction

Digital transformation in the tourism sector has encouraged the birth of the concept of smart tourism, which emphasizes the optimization of technology to improve the tourist experience and the efficiency of destination management (Sustacha et al., 2023). In the midst of competition between destinations, smart branding strategies are important in shaping the image of a city that is not only digitally informative, but also authentic in represent local characters (Koo et al., 2016). Effective branding requires not only visual aspects and digital promotion, but also strong and sustainable collaboration between stakeholders (Purnamawati & Hatane, 2024).

However, the implementation of collaborative governance cannot be achieved without solid collaboration between various stakeholders (Emerson et al., 2012). Collaboration in the context of tourism destination management refers to effective cooperation between local governments, local communities, tourism industry players, and other private sectors to achieve common goals in destination development. In this regard, collaboration is not just cooperation but also involves coordination, active participation, and transparent exchange of information among all parties involved (Sørensen & Torfing, 2017).

Nevertheless, collaborative governance cannot be realized without solid cooperation among diverse actors (Emerson et al., 2012). In tourism destination management,

collaboration involves coordinated efforts among local governments, communities, tourism industry players, and other private sector actors to achieve shared development goals. Such collaboration encompasses more than cooperation it requires deliberate coordination, active participation, and transparent information exchange among all parties involved (Sørensen & Torfing, 2017).

The city of Banjarmasin, with its river-based tourism potential and Banjar culture, has a great opportunity to develop a distinctive smart city identity facing structural challenges, such as institutional fragmentation, suboptimal digital integration, and lack of cross-sector coordination. In this context, a collaborative governance approach is crucial to unite the vision, resources, and role of actors in creating a consistent and adaptive city branding narrative digitally.

Banjarmasin, known for its river-based tourism and strong Banjar cultural heritage, holds significant potential for developing a distinctive smart city identity. However, the city faces structural barriers such as institutional fragmentation, limited digital integration, and weak inter-sectoral coordination. In this regard, a collaborative governance approach is crucial for aligning visions, mobilizing resources, and strengthening the roles of diverse actors in shaping a cohesive and adaptive digital city branding narrative.

The concept of collaborative governance refers to the decision-making and policy implementation process involving various cross-sectoral actors from government, the private sector, and civil society (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In tourism, this kind of collaboration is important because destination management often involves diverse and interrelated interests (Bichler & Lösch, 2019). A study by Sentanu et al. shows that the success of tourism development is greatly influenced by the effectiveness of coordination between local actors, including in the preparation of destination branding narratives (Sentanu et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, smart branding is part of the place branding approach developed to adjust destination promotion strategies with digital technology. Smart branding is not only concerned with the digitization of promotions but also involves the creation of interactive experiences based on data and technology such as AI, big data, and digital storytelling (Cihan Yavuz et al., 2017). Technology-based urban branding must still maintain an authentic narrative in order to attract tourists looking for a unique local experience (Andres Coca-Stefaniak, 2019).

Smart branding, as part of the broader place branding paradigm, aims to align destination promotion strategies with technological advancements. This concept goes beyond digital promotion, encompassing the design of interactive, data-driven experiences through tools such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and digital storytelling. However, branding efforts based on technology must still preserve authenticity to appeal to tourists seeking unique local experiences (Andres Coca-Stefaniak, 2019).

The integration between collaborative governance and smart branding poses challenges in terms of digital capacity differences between stakeholders, institutional conflicts of interest, and weak regulations that support cross-sector collaboration (Tian & Wang, 2025). Therefore, collaborative strategies must be adapted to the local socio-political context as well as the cultural characteristics of the local community (Purnamawati & Hatane, 2024).

The integration of collaborative governance and smart branding poses significant challenges, including disparities in digital capacities among stakeholders, conflicting institutional interests, and the absence of robust regulatory frameworks to facilitate cross-sector collaboration (Tian & Wang, 2025). Therefore, collaboration strategies must be sensitive

to the local socio-political context and cultural characteristics of the community (Purnamawati & Hatane, 2024).

Studies on collaborative governance in the tourism sector have been widely conducted in various global contexts, but research that explicitly integrates this approach with smart branding in the context of a middle town in Indonesia is still very limited (Fithriyyah & Widodo, 2021). Most studies only highlight aspects of tourism digitalization or branding strategies separately, without examining the relationship between the synergy of actors and the simultaneous creation of a city's digital identity.

In addition, although there is a lot of literature that emphasizes the importance of digital innovation in city branding, there has not been much research that explores how local identity is constructed and communicated through collaborative mechanisms, especially in areas with growing digital capacity such as Banjarmasin.

In the global context, the development of smart branding in Banjarmasin's tourism sector not only contributes to enhancing the competitiveness of the destination but is also closely aligned with the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, this initiative supports SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth by creating employment opportunities and fostering local economic growth in the tourism sector; SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities by strengthening the city's identity rooted in sustainable river-based culture; and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals through the practice of cross-sector collaborative governance. Thus, smart branding strategies not only construct the city's image but also serve as a crucial instrument in advancing inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

This research focuses on collaborative governance and smart branding to examine how local actors collaborate in building city identity digitally. The focus on the city of Banjarmasin as a case study also provides important contextual value because it raises local dynamics outside the metropolitan city, which has been dominant in the literature.

In addition, this research offers a new perspective on the development of urban branding that rests not only on technology but also on the social and institutional mechanisms that support the creation of a unique local identity-based destination narrative based on rivers and collaboration between actors. Until this study, it aimed to fill the gap by analyzing how collaboration between the government, the private sector, and the community can support the development of smart branding in the tourism sector in the city of Banjarmasin. The results are expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of sustainable and inclusive tourism in Indonesia.

2. Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study strategy to explore the dynamics of collaborative governance in smart branding of the tourism sector in the city of Banjarmasin. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in depth the social realities, collaborative practices between actors, as well as the cultural and institutional contexts that influence the digital branding process of cities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This research was carried out in the city of Banjarmasin by involving key actors in the tourism ecosystem such as the Culture, Youth Sports, and Tourism Office, the private sector, local communities, and academics. The informant selection technique was carried out by purposive sampling with the criteria of active participation in policy-making or the

implementation of technology-based tourism promotion programs and those who have relevant knowledge and experience.

The data were collected through three main methods, namely interviews that aimed to explore perceptions, roles, and dynamics of relationships between actors in the development of city branding. The interview guide was developed based on the collaborative governance framework of Ansell & Gash (2008). Furthermore, observations were made on local tourism promotion activities, and finally a documentation study that included analysis of tourism strategic plans, city branding documents, websites, and official social media.

To analyze the data collected, the researcher adopted the qualitative analysis framework as articulated by (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach comprises five key stages: (1) organising and preparing the data, (2) thoroughly reading all the data, (3) coding the data, (4) generating themes or categories, and (5) interpreting the meaning of the data.

The initial stage of analysis began with organising and preparing the data derived from in-depth interviews, participant observations, and official policy documentation. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in Banjarmasin's tourism sector, including officials from the Tourism Office, tourism-oriented small and medium enterprises actors, local creative communities, and academics. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes from destination branding activities were compiled systematically to support data triangulation. This stage was essential in maintaining the validity and integrity of the data. Furthermore, the researcher classified the data according to actor categories and their respective forms of participation in the branding process. This aims to ensure that the next process can be carried out efficiently and in a focused manner.

In the second stage, the researcher undertook an exhaustive reading of all interview transcripts, field notes, and relevant policy documents. Through this process, indications emerged that inter-agency collaboration especially among the municipal government, local communities, and tourism entrepreneurs, played a significant role in Banjarmasin's tourism branding. However, the analysis also uncovered challenges, notably disparities in participation, whereby some actors felt inadequately included in strategic branding planning.

In the third stage, the researcher conducted open coding on important segments of data. Coding was performed by assigning labels to units of data that reflected specific phenomena, such as forms of inter-actor interaction, branding strategies, and field-level technical challenges. Coding served not only to categorise the data, but also as a reflective process to connect field experiences with the conceptual framework. Thus, the researcher ensured that each code was strongly justified by the narrative context and corroborative information.

Following the compilation of codes, the fourth stage involved grouping these into broader categories and primary themes. The researcher identified three major themes that encapsulated the dynamics of collaboration and smart branding strategies in Banjarmasin:

1. Patterns and forms of inter-actor collaboration
2. Strategies and branding innovations implemented
3. Institutional and cultural barriers encountered in the implementation of collaborative branding policies

The final stage consisted of interpreting the findings. This interpretation connected the empirical results with relevant theories and literature, particularly the theory of collaborative governance by Ansell & Gash (2008) and the concept of smart branding within the context of digitally driven tourism development.

3. Results and Discussion

This study reveals the dynamics of collaborative governance in the smart branding process of the tourism sector in Banjarmasin City through three main dimensions: (1) the patterns and forms of collaboration between actors, (2) the branding strategies and innovations implemented, and (3) the institutional and cultural obstacles faced in the implementation of collaboration-based branding policies.

3.1. Patterns of Collaboration Between Actors

The pattern of collaboration in the development of tourism smart branding in Banjarmasin City shows complex dynamics and tends to be not optimal in the involvement of all stakeholders. In the context of collaborative governance, as explained by Ansell & Gash (2008), there are four main prerequisites that are the foundation for successful collaboration, namely the existence of fair starting conditions, inclusive institutional design, facilitative leadership, and a sustainable collaborative process. However, from the results of this study, the implementation of these principles is still running partially and sporadically.

Local governments, especially the Culture, Youth, Sports, and Tourism Office, are central actors in the development of city branding. The government acts as the initiator of various tourism promotion activities such as the Floating Market Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, and destination promotion through social media. The role of the government is very dominant in determining the direction and content of branding, which is centered on the narrative of "Banjarmasin, City of a Thousand Rivers". This slogan does have strong historical and cultural roots, but in practice it has not been balanced with a space for participation that is open to other actors.

The results of interviews with various informants show that the involvement of non-government actors is still top-down. One of the river tourism actors said that:

"We know there is city branding, but we are rarely involved in planning discussions. We are only notified when there is an activity, not when the concept is formulated" (Interview with river tourism actors).

This quote shows that the collaboration process that occurs is still instrumental, not dialogical. The government still seems to view tourism actors as implementers of activities, not as strategic partners in decision-making. In fact, the main principle of collaborative governance is the existence of an equal and participatory deliberative process, not just administrative involvement.

On the other hand, local communities and informal tourism actors actually show a high spirit of initiative. Several communities, such as kelotok activists, local photographers, and homestay managers, are active in promoting Banjarmasin through their social media. One of the content creators conveyed:

"We often make content about Banjarmasin, especially the cultural and culinary side, but unfortunately, there has never been an official invitation from the office to work together, only personal initiatives" (Interview with local content creator).

These initiatives form a form of emergent collaboration, which is collaboration that grows from the bottom up and does not depend on the formal structure of government. grassroots that have not been accommodated in the branding governance system. If managed strategically, this potential can be a major force in building an authentic and relevant city identity.

Inequality in relations between actors is also seen in the involvement of the private sector and tourism business actors. Some hotel owners and travel agents state that they are only involved in promotional activities if there is sponsorship or direct involvement in the event. This statement underscores the importance of having a collaborative platform that allows for the exchange of information and the formation of a shared vision. According to Emerson & Nabatchi (2015), the success of collaborative governance is highly dependent on collaborative capacity, which is the ability of the system to manage cross-sector communication, build trust, and create a shared decision-making mechanism.

Furthermore, actors from academia and universities have also not received enough space to contribute. Many academics have research on tourism, but they are not involved in making studies and strategic planning about it. In fact, the role of knowledge institutions in the branding ecosystem is very important, especially in providing data, analysis, and research-based recommendations. This contribution is crucial in building a city branding that is not only impressive but also rational and adaptive to the dynamics of the tourist market.

In addition, the institutional structure that supports collaboration has also not been built strongly. Until now, there is no official forum or cross-sector team that functions as the manager of the city's branding strategy. As a result, branding initiatives run sectorally and fragmentarily. This leads to inconsistencies in program implementation, duplication of activities, and difficulties in monitoring and evaluating overall branding success.

From an institutional design perspective, the absence of a collaboration forum causes the branding process to be exclusive and non-inclusive. Governments have a tendency to take a central role without building a space for dialogue, which can ultimately lower the legitimacy of the branding narrative in the eyes of the public. In fact, according to Sørensen & Torfing (2017) innovation in public governance is greatly influenced by how broad and deep community involvement is in the policy design process.

One of the impacts of the lack of effective collaboration is the lack of integration of branding narratives that reflect the diversity of local identities. In fact, the current global tourism trend highly appreciates destinations that have strong cultural characteristics. Furthermore, cross-sector collaboration that combines government, the private sector, communities, and academia will enable cities to build strong shared narratives. Place branding, in the view of (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), is not only about how the city is promoted but also how the city is told by its citizens. Therefore, cities need to provide a space for their citizens to become active narrators of their city identity, not just spectators.

Overall, the collaboration pattern formed in the development of tourism branding in Banjarmasin City is currently still in the early stages of collaboration; the collaboration that takes place is partial, not yet systemic, and tends not to form an inclusive governance structure. Furthermore, concrete steps are needed to strengthen the institutionalization of collaboration, including the establishment of collaborative forums across actors, community involvement in strategy design, strengthening the capacity of local actors, and the use of technology as a medium for coordination and communication. By strengthening this pattern of collaboration, cities will not only be able to build a more authentic and representative branding narrative but also strengthen trust and belonging from all stakeholders, emphasizing the importance of the process of building the city's identity.

3.2. Branding Strategy and Innovation

The branding strategy of the City of Banjarmasin, which is based on the image of the “City of a Thousand Rivers”, is the government’s effort to build a strong and distinctive city identity. This narrative was born from the geographical and historical reality of the city, which is divided by the flow of large rivers such as the Martapura and Barito Rivers, as well as the existence of the iconic floating market. This branding is a tool to differentiate Banjarmasin from other cities in Indonesia, especially in the cultural and nature-based tourism sector.



Figure 1. The Nickname of Banjarmasin City as “A Thousand River City”

Source: Disbudporapar, 2024

However, to make this branding truly “smart” a more strategic and innovative approach is needed. In this context, smart branding refers to the blending of local identity with the use of technology, data, and multi-actor collaboration to create engaging and meaningful city experiences (Koo et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the current branding strategy still tends to be conventional and has not fully adopted the principles of integrated smart city marketing.

Banjarmasin's current branding strategy places river heritage as the central theme. This is reflected in various annual cultural events such as the Dragon Boat Festival, the Floating Market Festival, and the River Parade. In their implementation, these festivals are packaged as the main attractions, not only for local and national tourists, but also to build citizens’ pride in their cultural heritage staff by the Tourism Office stated.

“We make the river the main stage of branding because that's where Banjarmasin's identity is built. The narrative of the City of a Thousand Rivers is not just a symbol but a foundation that can explain who we are in the eyes of tourists” (Interview with Banjarmasin City Disbudporapar Staff).



Figure 2. Annual event of The Tanglong Ornamental
Source: Disbudporapar, 2024

However, in practice, this branding has not been structured in a coherent communication strategy. There is no brand guideline or derivative thematic narrative that connects digital content, offline promotions, and travel experiences in a structured way. For example, iconography, colors, visual language, and slogans in promotional media often vary between events. The success of place branding is highly dependent on the consistency of the message and visuals conveyed to the audience (Sustacha et al., 2024).

In the digital era, city branding does not only depend on billboards and events but also on how the city appears and interacts in the online realm. The Banjarmasin City Government has utilized social media, such as the website, Instagram, and YouTube, to promote tourism. However, the use of this platform is still one-way broadcasting, with standard visual content and minimal user-generated content.

This is in contrast to best practices in other cities such as Semarang, which have developed the Explore Semarang application, containing interactive tourist maps, event calendars, and feature reviews of places by users. Meanwhile, in Banjarmasin, there is no official application or website that integrates tourism information, event schedules, service bookings, or local historical stories in one user-friendly platform. In the perspective of smart tourism, digitalization is not only a promotional tool, but also a tool for empowering cities that develop smart destination branding. They need to build data-based and technology-based systems to connect visitors with attractions and business actors, as well as local communities. this has not been seen in real terms in the city of Banjarmasin (Qian, 2024).

Apart from the government's limitations in digital innovation, there are creative initiatives from local actors that should be appreciated. For example, some river tour operators make sunrise breakfast tour packages in Kelotok, with typical menus such as Soto Banjar, ketupat kandangan, and traditional cakes. The experience is narratively packaged, touching on the emotional side of tourists. In addition, the local photography community and content creators are actively promoting hidden corners of the city such as mural alleys, morning markets, and street food spots. They not only create visual content but also build the city's

story from the perspective of the citizens. This is a form of co-created branding, which, according to (Sarasvuo et al., 2022) is able to strengthen the legitimacy of the city's identity because it involves a bottom-up narrative. Unfortunately, there has been no official incentive or collaboration between the government and these creative communities; in fact, the involvement of citizens in the branding process not only increases the accuracy of representation but also builds a sense of belonging to the city's identity.

A good branding strategy requires a cross-sector coordination system so that messages and promotional activities do not run separately. However, in Banjarmasin, agencies related to tourism, culture, small and medium enterprises, and the creative economy are still working separately. This causes overlapping programs, a lack of continuity of messages, and inefficient budget allocation, as well as the lack of a special brand management team under the city government, causing Banjarmasin's branding strategy to have no long-term direction.

3.3. Barriers to Collaborative Implementation

The implementation of collaboration in tourism branding governance in Banjarmasin City faces a number of interrelated structural, cultural, and technological obstacles. These obstacles are the main obstacles in creating participatory, adaptive, and sustainable governance. Based on the results of observations and interviews, there are at least five main types of obstacles: (1) sectoral egos between agencies, (2) limited institutional capacity, (3) lack of meaningful participation from the community, (4) weak use of digital technology, and (5) lack of institutional collaboration mechanisms.

First, one of the most dominant obstacles is the high sectoral ego among local government agencies. Agencies involved in the tourism sector, such as the Culture, Youth, Sports, and Tourism Office, Communication and Information Service, and Cooperatives Offices, often run their programs individually. This creates a condition of policy fragmentation where each agency has its own agenda, targets, and success indicators that are not always aligned.

The second obstacle is the limitation of institutional capacity, both in terms of human resources, budget, and supporting devices. Many actors involved do not have a deep understanding of the concept of collaborative governance and smart branding. As a result, the involvement of non-government actors such as the creative community, small and medium enterprises actors, and academics is still ad hoc and informal.

According to Emerson et al. (2012) the success of collaboration is highly determined by collaborative capacity, namely the capacity of the organization to build trust, communication, and coordination across sectors. This lack of capacity makes collaborative processes unsustainable and vulnerable to conflicts of interest between actors.

Third, although the community and local actors are recognized as important parties in supporting the branding of the city, their participation so far has been more “involved” than “involved”. The government often invites the community only for operational activities such as being an event performer or social media promoter, without giving space to contribute to the planning or evaluation stage. In the context of collaborative governance, meaningful participation is participation that allows the community to play a role in the process of design, implementation, and evaluation of policies (Bichler & Lösch, 2019).

The fourth obstacle relates to the low adoption of digital technology in the tourism branding and promotion system. The city of Banjarmasin does not yet have a technological infrastructure that supports data integration, digital destination mapping, and connectivity

between tourism actors. The absence of an application-based tourism information system or dashboard makes the promotion process still conventional and sporadic in terms of business actors and communities; digital literacy is also a challenge. Many tourism actors do not understand how to build a digital branding narrative, utilize search engine optimization (SEO), or produce promotional content based on tourist data. In fact, in the literature on smart destinations, technology is the main enabler that can connect city actors in a responsive and collaborative digital ecosystem (Sustacha et al., 2023).

The final obstacle is the absence of a formal mechanism for ongoing collaboration. There is no dedicated agency, permanent forum, or cross-agency work unit structurally responsible for the management of the city's branding. Existing collaborative activities are more short-term projects, relying on personal will or informal networks between individuals. A study by Klijn & Koppenjan (2015) confirms that effective network governance requires institutional structures, rules of common play, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Without it, collaborations will tend to be prone to deadlock, dominance of certain actors, or evaporation halfway through.

The presence of the above obstacles to the implementation of collaborative governance in the context of smart branding is not automatic. It requires transformation in the governance structure, bureaucratic culture, and capacity of human resources, as well as institutional tools so that collaboration can really run as a system. Collaboration is not just about "working together" but about building shared value, shared power, and shared learning (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

In the context of Banjarmasin, the opportunity for collaboration is actually very large considering the high potential of creative communities, the diversity of river-based destinations, and the enthusiasm of tourism actors. However, this opportunity will continue to be hampered if it is not balanced by structural improvements and cross-sector work culture. Therefore, it needs serious efforts from the government to not only invite collaboration but also create its ecosystem institutionally. Results show that the implementation of collaborative governance in the tourism smart branding strategy of Banjarmasin City is in a promising early stage but still faces structural, technical, and cultural challenges.

Collaboration between local governments and tourism actors, creative communities, academics, and the private sector in Banjarmasin tends to be instrumental, where non-governmental actors are more mobilized to support government programs rather than as strategic partners in the planning and decision-making process. This shows that the collaboration that occurs has not yet reached an equal and sustainable stage of collaborative engagement. Collaboration that is only an "invitation to attend" in a formal forum has not created a meaningful participation space in determining the direction and strategic value of city branding.

Although the city of Banjarmasin has a strong branding narrative through the "City of a Thousand Rivers" the use of digital technology in branding strategies is still not optimal. Social media channels are managed passively, do not yet utilize user engagement analytics, do not have interactive tourism applications, and there is no integrated data-driven system to monitor public perception of city brands.

In fact, according to research by Zheng & Chou (2024) smart branding requires the use of digital technology to connect the city's narrative with the user experience in real-time and personally. Cities that are able to provide easy access to information, integrated digital

experiences, and digital feedback systems will have an edge in building a competitive destination image.

In addition, Kaluarachchi (2022) states that data-driven branding is the future direction of tourism city development. By using data from social media, online reviews, and visitor behavior, city governments can adjust their promotion and destination development strategies more adaptively. The use of data in Banjarmasin branding shows the need to invest in digital infrastructure and increase human resource capacity.

This research reveals that local communities, river tourism actors, and content creators have become important actors in building the city's image through authentic experiences. For example, breakfast tour packages in kelotok and visual documentation from the river photography community have created a bottom-up branding narrative. However, this contribution has not been institutionally facilitated.

Research Sarasvuo et al. (2022) emphasizes that in the era of participatory branding, cities that are able to encourage citizens as brand co-creators will have a stronger and more inclusive narrative. The city of Banjarmasin has great potential in this regard, but has not yet established a digital and physical space that allows citizens to systematically contribute their ideas, content, and experiences. In this regard, a study by Mensah et al. (2025) reveals that user-generated content (UGC) has a significant impact in increasing positive perceptions of tourist destinations, especially on visual-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The branding strategy of the City of Banjarmasin needs to shift from an institutional approach to an ecosystem approach, where community content becomes an integral part of the city's tourism promotion.

One of the main challenges identified is the lack of strong cross-sector coordination in branding management. The Tourism Office, Communication and Informatics, and small and medium enterprises have their programs that are not connected systemically to each other. This reflects the low level of integration of branding policies between agencies. These findings are also in line with the perspective of Bisani et al. (2024), which emphasizes the importance of place brand governance, namely the ability of the city government to design an institutional architecture that supports the participation of actors and the implementation of branding strategies collaboratively and sustainably. Departing from the findings and literature that have been explained, the direction of tourism branding development in Banjarmasin City in the future needs to shift from a conventional approach to a smart collaborative approach Branding. This means that branding is not only a promotional tool, but also a platform for social interaction, digital innovation, and citizen participation with this kind of direction, Banjarmasin City branding can go beyond symbolic functions and truly become a medium for the city's transformation towards a sustainable, inclusive, and experience-oriented tourism ecosystem.

Conclusions

This study confirms that the implementation of collaborative governance in the tourism smart branding strategy of Banjarmasin City is in the early phase, which is still facing structural, technological, and institutional challenges. Collaboration between the government, business actors, local communities, academics, and the private sector has not been fully equal and sustainable. Non-governmental actors are still largely positioned as program implementers, rather than strategic partners in the formulation of the city's branding vision.

On the other hand, tourism branding efforts that raise the narrative of “City of a Thousand Rivers” have the strength of a distinctive local identity but have not been supported by an optimal digitization and content management system. The branding approach that is still conventional and less participatory causes the weak competitiveness of the city’s image in the digital realm. The absence of technology-based data utilization and the lack of integration of cross-sector communication strategies are significant obstacles to strengthening destination brands.

This study also found that the potential for collaboration through co-creation branding is actually very strong, especially from river communities, local tourism actors, and content creators. Unfortunately, this potential has not received adequate policy support or collaboration infrastructure. Thus, it can be concluded that the success of tourism branding in the digital era does not only depend on symbolic or visual aesthetic power but also on the ability of city governments to facilitate space for cross-actor participation, build digital capacity, and create a data- and innovation-oriented collaboration system. The city of Banjarmasin has a strong foundation of identity, but to achieve a true smart tourism city, a more adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable governance transformation is needed.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently, and no external party had any influence on the study design, data collection, analysis, manuscript preparation, or the decision to publish the findings

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