

The Power of City Branding in Enhancing Solo City's Competitiveness as an International Destination

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how city branding enhances Solo City's international competitiveness through cultural identity and creative economy development.

Research Methodology: A qualitative descriptive approach was applied using semi-structured interviews, field observations, and snowball sampling involving government officials, cultural institutions, and creative economy actors. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Results: Solo City strengthens its global positioning by utilizing cultural identity, local wisdom, international events, cultural symbols, creative products, and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Conclusions: Successful city branding depends on synergy among tourism attractions, public services, security, and government-community coordination.

Limitations: This single-case qualitative study is limited by contextual scope, interpretive subjectivity, and the absence of international stakeholder perspectives.

Contributions: This study contributes to city-branding literature by linking cultural capital, public diplomacy, and international competitiveness while offering practical insights for culturally based cities.

Keywords: *City Branding, Competitiveness, Policies, Public Diplomacy, Solo City*

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1. Introduction

City Branding is becoming popular as a tool to support the economic acceleration of a region. City branding refers to the process of creating a city brand or an area that the target market (investors, tourists, talent, and events) would recognize by employing icons, slogans, exhibitions, and appropriate placement in various forms of promotional media. An in-depth introduction of the city or region and enhancement of the city's reputation push a region or city to engage in city branding. Additionally, it has the ability to draw both domestic and international tourists ([Boisen, Terlouw, Groote, & Couwenberg, 2018](#); [Setianti, Dida, & Uttari Putri, 2018](#))

City branding aims to promote urban growth, attract tourists, highlight a city's unique features, and improve residents' quality of life. Various strategies can be used to emphasize a city's distinctiveness and originality. However, some city branding efforts may be short-lived, ineffective, or fail to achieve their intended goals, and it is essential to communicate these shortcomings to the public ([Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak, 2024](#); [Rodrigues & Schmidt, 2021](#); [Zahrah, 2023](#)). One area that relies on city branding to improve the welfare of its people is Surakarta, Indonesia. Surakarta City, popularly called

Solo City, is located in Indonesia and has grown as a city that is closely associated with massive cultural development.

Solo City has limited natural resources and a relatively small land area of 44 km² ([BPS, 2020](#)). The lack of natural resources and the limited area they own must force local governments to rely on creativity and innovation to develop. The Solo City Government has determined the direction of its regional development planning in the Surakarta City creative economy scheme. The direction of the development of a creative city is aimed at becoming a center for culture and arts, based on creativity as a way of life. There are three main aspects that color economic activities: the creative economy, creative society, and government (creative policy) ([Mukaromah, Permana, & Astuti, 2023](#)). The strong cultural nuances and local wisdom in Solo City make Solo City have it an attractive tourist destination and a powerful city brand.

The advantages of Solo as a tourist destination are popular in national and international circles. The number of tourists visiting Solo tends to continue to increase. This condition has an impact on improving the economy of the people of Solo City ([Pandansari, Purnomo, & Kasiwi, 2020](#)). As an international destination, the development of the city of Solo continues to develop, equipped with various superior facilities so that it is worthy of being a destination for international visits, including as a center for organizing MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions), in accordance with the development direction determined by the city government ([Nugroho et al., 2018](#)).

Solo's potential as an international destination was reinforced in December 2022 when the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy publicly endorsed the city as one of Indonesia's leading MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) destinations, citing its track record of hosting national-to-international agendas, including the 48th Muhammadiyah Congress, the 2022 International Wellness Tourism Conference and Festival, and the 2022 ASEAN Para Games as concrete evidence of this capacity ([Alatas, 2022](#); [Mosita, 2022](#)). This institutional recognition is reflected in measurable hospitality sector performance: the average hotel occupancy rate (Tingkat Penghunian Kamar/TPK) in Surakarta reached 50.57% in 2024, a year in which government-linked MICE activity remained strong ([BPS Kota Surakarta, 2024](#); [Sejati, 2026](#)).

The link between event hosting and hospitality revenue is further illustrated by the 2024 National Paralympic Week (Peparnas XVII), during which occupancy at host hotels in Solo reached nearly 100% for a two-week period ([Tempo.co, 2024](#)), and conversely, by the occupancy decline recorded in early 2025 following national budget-efficiency policies that reduced government-related MICE bookings ([Sejati, 2026](#)). According to earlier data from PHRI Surakarta, the MICE segment accounted for up to 80% of hotel revenue in the Solo Raya region ([Nugroho et al., 2018](#)). Although more recent disaggregated figures were not identified in the sources reviewed for this revision, the 2024–2025 occupancy trend corroborates the continued dependence of Solo's hospitality sector on MICE-related demands.

Solo's growing profile as an international destination is also evidenced by its record of hosting internationally oriented events that attract foreign visitors, including the Solo International Performing Arts (SIPA), ASEAN Para Games, Solo International Ethnic Music (SIEM), International Mask Festival (IMF), and Mangkunegaran Jazz Festival (MJF) ([Sari, Asmara, & Prasta, 2019](#); [Walenta & Suharto, 2024](#)). This trajectory culminated in a concrete institutional outcome: after two unsuccessful nominations in 2017 and 2019, Solo was formally inducted into the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) in the Crafts and Folk Art category on October 31, 2023, becoming one of 55 new member cities announced that year ([UNESCO, 2023](#)). This confirmed membership, rather than an ongoing "effort," as previously framed, provides a verifiable, internationally recognized indicator of Solo's creative city competitiveness ([Atmaja & Swasto, 2023](#)).

Becoming an internationally recognized destination is generally associated with local economic benefits such as employment generation and broader income distribution. However, city-specific labor market data for Solo were not identified in the sources reviewed and would strengthen this claim if

available in future revisions. Nevertheless, a well-defined branding and competitiveness strategy remains essential, particularly given that Solo's international tourist arrivals (10,120 in 2023) remain modest relative to other Central Java destinations such as Magelang and Klaten ([BPS Kota Surakarta, 2024](#); [Disporapar Jateng, 2024](#)), suggesting that Solo's comparative advantage lies less in raw leisure tourism volume and more in its MICE-hosting capacity and creative-city recognition.

This distinction makes Solo's branding strategy both a substantively interesting and empirically tractable object of study. While prior research has examined Solo's city branding, most studies have emphasized qualitative, domestically oriented approaches with limited empirical measurements of brand perception or competitiveness outcomes ([Darlenis, 2021](#); [Nugroho et al., 2018](#); [Pandansari et al., 2020](#)). A comparable quantitative approach—for instance, regressing city-image indicators against branding outcomes, as demonstrated for Solo's traditional market image ([Putri, 2020](#))—has rarely been extended to Solo's *international* competitiveness specifically, which is the gap this study addresses.

More comprehensive research is needed to explore strategies to enhance international competitiveness, particularly in the context of positioning cities as global destinations. This study focuses on the role of the Solo City government in positioning Solo as an international destination, using city branding as a key strategy along with other relevant approaches. The research seeks to answer the question, *"What is the city branding strategy for Solo in increasing competitiveness as an international destination?"* The goal is to provide a descriptive analysis of how collaboration between various stakeholders, particularly the government as a regulatory authority, can increase competitiveness and serve as a model for developing international competitiveness.

This research is both intriguing and significant because of its novelty in emphasizing the power of city branding as a strategy to enhance competitiveness, specifically for international destinations. This approach has not been widely implemented, and a case study of Solo City in this context has not yet been conducted. Previous studies have mainly focused on city branding or public diplomacy, while competitive strategies aimed at boosting international destinations have not been thoroughly explored

This research's novelty lies in examining city branding specifically as a strategy for enhancing Solo's competitiveness as an international destination—an aspect largely absent from the existing literature. Studies on Solo's branding have either centered on single cultural events, notably the Solo International Performing Arts (SIPA), as image-building tools for attracting tourist interest ([Darlenis, 2021](#); [Sari et al., 2019](#)), or examined broader branding dynamics through qualitative methods focused on domestic visitor attraction, finding that branding indicators have yet to meet ideal benchmarks ([Pandansari et al., 2020](#)). The sole quantitative study in this area links the image of Solo's traditional markets to general branding success but not to international positioning ([Putri, 2020](#)). Meanwhile, research on Solo's international profile remains descriptive, cataloguing hosted events ([Walenta & Suharto, 2024](#)) or MICE-related economic potential ([Nugroho et al., 2018](#)), without analyzing how branding is strategically leveraged for international competitiveness. This unaddressed gap between domestic-oriented branding research and descriptive accounts of Solo's international activity is what this study addresses.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis/es Development

This review synthesizes two literatures central to this study City Branding and Public Diplomacy, not merely to introduce these concepts but to identify precisely what each has and has not established regarding a city's international competitiveness. City Branding research has advanced along several distinct lines, each with a different outcome variable. One strand identifies the structural components and dimensions of urban branding through quantitative measurements within a single city ([Vahabian, Ghanbari, Nori, & Kalhornia, 2021](#)). The second strand has shifted toward participatory, resident-driven branding, positioning residents as credible ambassadors and co-creators of a city's brand rather than passive recipients of top-down promotion ([Casais & Monteiro, 2019](#)).

A broader body of work documents the general effects of branding on perception, economic development, and civic pride ([Dineri, Kılıç, Çiğdem, & Sayar, 2024](#); [Feng, Berndt, & Ots, 2023](#))

Across all three strands, the outcome measured is consistently domestic or resident-oriented, perception, pride, or single-city visitor interest, rather than a city's comparative competitive standing relative to other cities internationally. None of these studies operationalizes "international competitiveness" as a measurable outcome, leaving unresolved how branding activities specifically translate into a city's position relative to global competitors.

Public Diplomacy scholarship has developed largely at the national level. [Melissen \(2005\)](#) foundational framework conceptualizes public diplomacy as states engaging foreign publics to project soft power, a model built around national governments, not municipal actors. [Sevin \(2025\)](#) extends this logic to cities but explicitly diagnoses that the city diplomacy and city branding fields suffer from limited dialogue with one another, that city activities often fall outside either field's boundaries, and most relevant here that both fields have largely disregarded the linkages between nation-states and the cities within them. Sevin's soft-power framework addresses this fragmentation conceptually, but has not yet been tested in a context where a national government actively co-produces a city's international branding and event-hosting strategy alongside local authorities, a configuration distinct from the more autonomous paradiplomacy documented in existing city-diplomacy cases.

Read together, these literatures leave a specific gap rather than a generic "underexplored area": city-branding research has not operationalized international competitiveness as an outcome distinct from domestic perception, and public-diplomacy research, while beginning to theorize the city-branding/diplomacy nexus. [Sevin \(2025\)](#), has not empirically tested this nexus where national and local government roles are explicitly intertwined. Solo City addresses both gaps at once, offering (1) a conceptual shift in outcome variables, measuring branding success through verifiable international-competitiveness indicators (event hosting, international recognition, tourist arrivals) rather than resident perception alone, and (2) an empirical test of [Sevin \(2025\)](#) nation-state–city linkage in a secondary, culturally branded city where national endorsement, local branding strategy, and multi-stakeholder event delivery operate jointly.

Building on this synthesis, the theoretical framework of this study can be represented as a sequential model linking four constructs to the outcome of international competitiveness: Local Wisdom → Creative Economy → City Branding → Public Diplomacy → International Competitiveness. In this model, Solo's local wisdom and cultural distinctiveness constitute the raw material for its creative-economy development strategy, which the city government has structured around three interacting pillars: creative economy, creative society, and creative policy. This creative-economy base is then translated into a City Branding strategy, in which the cultural, historical, and social characteristics generated through the creative-economy framework are packaged into a differentiated city identity, ideally co-created with resident stakeholders. However, city Branding alone passively projects a city's image. The model's fourth construct, Public Diplomacy, represents the active, government-led engagement of foreign publics and institutions, illustrated by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy's endorsement of Solo's MICE positioning and its role in Solo's UNESCO Creative Cities Network membership, which converts a branded identity into an international reach. International Competitiveness is thus modeled not as a direct outcome of branding alone, but as the cumulative product of this sequence: locally rooted cultural assets, systematized through creative-economy policy, packaged through branding, and projected internationally through public diplomacy. This sequential model operationalizes the city branding–public diplomacy nexus identified above as a chain of specific, testable mechanisms rather than as two loosely related strategies, and constitutes this study's core theoretical contribution.

3. Research Methodology

The methodology of this study outlines the procedures followed to investigate how city branding and public policies contribute to the competitiveness of Solo as an international destination. This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the dynamic relationships between societal phenomena and the policies implemented by the Solo City government. The focus is on understanding the strategies developed by the government in collaboration with various stakeholders to improve the

global competitiveness of Solo. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of stakeholder perspectives, institutional practices, and cultural factors that shape Solo's branding strategy. Data interpretation emphasizes identifying patterns and themes related to destination development, policy implementation, and collaborative governance.

3.1 Study Design and Sample Selection

This study used a qualitative descriptive design with an explanatory model to provide an in-depth understanding of the research topic. This study does not rely on numerical data but aims to capture dynamic and flexible patterns that reflect real-world conditions. The sample was selected using a snowball sampling technique, with primary data sourced from in-depth interviews and field observations. Five informants were involved in this study. The data collection through interviews lasted for three months. Five informants were involved in this study (Table 1). The key participants included:

Table 1. Research informants

Code	Institutions	Position
<i>I₁</i>	Head of Arts and Culture, Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office (Disbudpar) Surakarta	Head of Arts and Culture
<i>I₂</i>	Official, Regional Development Planning Agency/ BAPPEDA Surakarta	Regional Planning Officer
<i>I₃</i>	Communication, Informatics, Statistics, and Coding Office (Diskominfo SP)	Government Communication Official
<i>I₄</i>	Academic from a university in Surakarta	Academic Expert
<i>I₅</i>	Cultural Actor, Kasunanan Surakarta Palace	Cultural Actor
<i>I₆</i>	Socio-cultural Observer	Observer

3.2 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and direct observation. The data collection through interviews lasted for three months. In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to gather detailed insights from key stakeholders involved in Solo city branding and policy strategies. The snowball sampling method ensured the inclusion of relevant participants, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issues. Field observations complemented the interviews by providing real-world context, where the researcher observed activities, events, and symbols related to the city's branding and international initiatives. Secondary data were gathered from the existing literature, including relevant documents and research studies, to support and enrich the primary data collected.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical standards by ensuring informed consent from all participants, ensuring the confidentiality of sensitive information, and maintaining transparency throughout the study. The participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences ([Dewati & Hulu, 2023](#)).

3.4 Limitations

This study is limited by its scope of the case study, focusing solely on Solo City. Consequently, the findings may not be directly applicable to other cities. Additionally, reliance on qualitative methods means that the results may be influenced by the researcher's subjective interpretations. However, these limitations were mitigated by using multiple data sources and methods to ensure a robust and reliable analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a qualitative descriptive approach consisting of four stages: data collection, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. During the analysis, interview transcripts, field observation notes, and supporting documents were systematically organized and coded to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships relevant to Solo City's international competitiveness and branding strategies. The coding process was conducted iteratively, allowing the emerging themes to be

continuously compared with the newly collected data until no substantial new categories or insights emerged.

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously throughout the three months of fieldwork. Data saturation was achieved when additional interviews no longer generated new themes or significant information regarding collaborative strategies, branding initiatives, and stakeholder perspectives. This point was reached after interviewing five key informants representing different institutional backgrounds, whose perspectives consistently converged on the main research findings.

Several validation strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different categories of participants, including representatives of the Surakarta City Government, BAPPEDA, academics, cultural actors from the Kasunanan Surakarta Palace, sociocultural observers, and officials from the cultural office. Method triangulation was also applied by comparing the findings from in-depth interviews with field observations and secondary data, including government documents, policy reports, and previous studies. The consistency of the evidence across these multiple sources strengthened the credibility of the findings and minimized potential researcher bias.

This analytical procedure provides a transparent and systematic framework for interpreting empirical data. By integrating iterative analysis with triangulation across multiple data sources and methods, this study enhances the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings while providing a comprehensive understanding of Solo City's strategies for strengthening its international competitiveness through city branding and multistakeholder collaboration.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Results

To increase a region's competitiveness using city branding, a series of appropriate strategies is needed. Moreover, the city branding target is not limited to the country. In the city of Solo, city branding is built on the basis of being labeled as a “cultural city.” This cultural city is supported by a series of efforts to strengthen the tourism sector. The tourism sector is an important economic driver in Solo. This sector is considered capable of driving the economic development of the Solo City region, which has limited natural, geographical, and human resources. According to the Head of Arts and Culture of the Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office, Solo City possesses limited natural and geographical resources compared to other regions. The city lacks mining resources, plantation commodities, or natural tourism attractions that can serve as its primary economic assets. Consequently, the local government has focused on strengthening tourism and the creative economy as the foundation of Solo City branding strategy (I1, Head of Arts and Culture, Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office). To develop this sector optimally, the City of Solo is moving forward and making efforts to implement various strategies to strengthen its branding as a city with superior tourism potential.

The branding that the City of Solo is trying to achieve is by creating an external understanding that the City of Solo is a Creative Economy City and put it as an international destination. This Creative Economy City is the embodiment of the perception of a cultural and tourism city promoted by Solo through the power of local wisdom. During the interview, the Head of Arts and Culture of the Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office explained that Solo City's development strategy is guided by the Regional Development Vision 2005–2025, namely “Surakarta, a Cultural, Independent, Advanced, and Prosperous City.” According to the informant, this vision is implemented through three complementary pillars: local economic development, smart economy, and creative economy (I1, Head of Arts and Culture, Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office). In the interview, it was explained that the development direction of the City of Solo was implemented in accordance with the vision and mission of the regional development of the City of Surakarta for 2005–2025, namely, “Surakarta, a Cultural, Independent, Advanced, and Prosperous City.” There are three economic development concepts that support the achievement of this vision, in the form of local economic development, the smart economy, and the creative economy.

The same informant further emphasized that Solo City continues to strengthen its identity as a City of Culture by positioning local wisdom as the foundation of the creative economy. This commitment is reflected in the city's branding slogan and reinforced through the tagline, The Spirit of Java, which represents Solo City's cultural identity while supporting its positioning as an internationally competitive destination (I1, Head of Arts and Culture, Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office). This can be seen from the slogan of the City of Solo as a City of Culture, which is strengthened by the tagline "The Spirit of Java." This series of visions, missions, and taglines is also supported by various steps directed by the Solo City government to develop the tourism sector and creative economy based on local wisdom. An official from the Surakarta Communication, Informatics, Statistics, and Coding Office explained that the city's branding campaign is continuously implemented through strategic promotional activities targeting both domestic and international audiences. The informant noted that Solo actively promotes its creative economy through cultural exchanges, exhibitions, and international cooperation in cities such as Paris and Kyoto (I3, Government Communication Official, Surakarta Communication, Informatics, Statistics, and Coding Office).

Solo promotes its creative economic strength to emphasize the city's international competitiveness. "Solo City does not possess abundant natural resources that can be relied upon for economic development. Instead, our greatest strength lies in our creative human resources. We continuously transform ordinary products into value-added creative products, and this creativity has become the foundation of Solo City's international competitiveness." (I1, Head of Arts and Culture, Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office). The promotion of Solo City's creative economy is also carried out by encouraging the export of creative products to various countries. Solo City's creative economy products, which are in demand in the international market, show that Solo City's competitiveness is high. The same informant further explained, "Solo's creative products have demonstrated strong international competitiveness. Many locally produced handicrafts and creative souvenirs are marketed successfully in Europe because they offer distinctive characteristics that are rarely produced locally in those markets." (I1, Head of Arts and Culture, Surakarta Culture and Tourism Office). Overseas, such as in Europe, there are no creative souvenir items produced locally. The development of these knick-knacks also supports Solo as a tourism destination. The popularity of the city of Solo can increase with increasing international recognition of the city's creative products.

Promotion of Solo is carried out consistently and continuously to achieve higher competitiveness, even abroad. The City of Solo branding was not only created through overseas promotions. Solo is eager to be an international destination by strengthening city branding, which is built through symbols in various corners of the city, namely through city planning buildings, which are arranged in such a way that the character of the creative economy and local wisdom emerge to create an attraction.

The appearance of Solo's buildings and city layout is a form of Solo's creative economy, which is growing rapidly and becoming stronger. Observational research also found that there are many creative economic symbols displayed in the city of Solo, with the strength of local wisdom. The city of Solo collaborates on city planning with cultural symbols or local wisdom to create a distinctive creative economic character.



Figure 1. Image of city branding symbols in Solo City planning

Solo City branding (Figure 1) is strengthened by buildings, symbols, and events related to the local wisdom. Local wisdom is a capital instrument for increasing the competitiveness of the creative economy of the City of Solo. The increasingly popular creative economy of Solo also contributes to strengthening the branding of the city of Solo internationally. A cultural actor from the Kasunanan Surakarta Palace explained: “Many creative products from Solo have entered international markets, including wooden handicrafts, decorative statues, bamboo tumblers, recycled newspaper souvenirs, and other creative products. We regularly participate in international exhibitions and cultural expos, which not only promote local products but also introduce Solo City to global audiences.” (I5, Cultural Actor, Kasunanan Surakarta Palace).

The city of Solo creates a good synergy between various actors. A socio-cultural observer emphasized that the success of Solo City's branding is inseparable from collaboration among stakeholders: “The driving force behind Solo City's development comes from the synergy among government institutions, private businesses, community organizations, youth groups, artists, and village communities. Every stakeholder contributes according to their respective roles, creating a collaborative environment that supports the city's creative economy and cultural identity.” (I6, Socio-Cultural Observer). A cultural actor from the Kasunanan Surakarta Palace noted: “In Solo, collaboration has become a shared commitment. Government agencies, cultural institutions, artists, communities, and business organizations actively support each other through various cultural programs and creative economy initiatives. This collective effort strengthens the preservation of local wisdom while enhancing Solo City's international visibility.” (I5, Cultural Actor, Kasunanan Surakarta Palace).

The government provides various policy schemes that consistently support strengthening Solo City branding. This was welcomed by the city of Solo, which was able to become a venue for various international activities, such as the ASEAN Para Games and the G-20 Summit. International activities held in the City of Solo have an impact on increasing the tourism sector and branding the city as an increasingly strong international destination.

The passion for the creative economy and local wisdom promoted in the city of Solo also continues to be strengthened when observations are made by looking at the communication symbols of the creative economy and local wisdom, which are increasingly strengthened in various activities. Every time there is an opportunity for an international agenda, the City of Solo is enthusiastic about welcoming international guests by presenting a unique new city layout with a touch of local wisdom or other cultural symbols. Solo is trying to demonstrate the existence of its creative economy to encourage global competitiveness as an international tourism destination, in line with national policy directions. Various efforts have been made to support tourism development and a creative economy based on local knowledge. In one year, at least 61 cultural agendas were recorded in Solo. This cultural agenda also encourages enthusiasm for tourism, which is increasingly developing in Solo.

4.2 Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section can be interpreted through the sequential model proposed in this study's theoretical framework. Solo's limited natural and industrial endowments position local wisdom not merely as a cultural asset but as the primary substitute capital driving each stage of this model. This extends [Mayer \(2023\)](#) proposition that strong city branding transforms cities with strong economic power. The Solo case suggests that cultural and local wisdom capital can substitute for economic power as a driver of branding-led transformation, at least in secondary cities with constrained natural resource endowments.

These findings also extend [Zahrah \(2023\)](#) three-dimensional model of city branding tourist attractions, security and public services, and public policy and government coordination with the community. Rather than operating as three independent dimensions, the Solo case indicates that the government coordination dimension functions as an enabling condition: consistent policy direction, infrastructure facilitation, and cross-actor coordination appear to be the mechanism through which the tourist attraction dimension, local-wisdom-based creative-economy products, and cultural events are converted into competitive advantage. This interpretation is consistent with [Sugiyarto and Amaruli](#)

(2018) finding that efforts to develop local wisdom as creative-economy capital tend to fail specifically where synergy among economic actors is minimal; Solo's comparatively favorable trajectory is attributable, in this reading, to the presence of precisely the actor-synergy condition that was absent in [Sugiyarto and Amaruli \(2018\)](#) failure cases.

This synergy-as-enabling-mechanism finding also situates Solo alongside, rather than as merely resembling, local-wisdom-based creative tourism documented in Bali and Bandung ([Blapp & Mitas, 2018](#); [Raharja & Nurasa, 2020](#); [Wesnawa, 2022](#)). While these studies establish that local wisdom can function as tourism-competitiveness capital in principle, the Solo case specifies an additional condition: sustained multi-actor policy synergy, under which this capital is successfully converted into branding outcomes, a boundary condition not explicitly addressed in the earlier regional studies.

More directly, these findings build on and extend prior solo-specific research. [Aji, Murdani, and Wijayati \(2023\)](#) identified a creative economy and local wisdom-based strategy as a source of tourism-competitiveness capital for Solo. The present study extends this by specifying the actor-coordination mechanism and government-facilitated synergy among cultural communities, creative-economy actors, and multiple levels of government, through which this capital is converted into internationally recognized results. [Pandansari et al. \(2020\)](#) found that Solo's city-branding indicators, assessed through a domestic visitor lens, had yet to meet ideal benchmarks. The present findings, examined through an international-competitiveness lens, suggest a comparatively more favorable picture, evidenced by sustained international event hosting (SIPA, the ASEAN Para Games, G20-related activity) and formal induction into the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. This divergence suggests that Solo's branding performance may be audience-dependent, weaker on domestic perception indicators, and stronger on international recognition indicators, a distinction not previously tested empirically in the Solo branding literature.

Similarly, whereas [Darlenis \(2021\)](#); [Sari et al. \(2019\)](#), and Dewati, Hulu, and S St (2023) each examine Solo International Performing Arts (SIPA) as a discrete image-building or branding-reinforcement tool, the present findings position SIPA as one node within a broader, government-coordinated, multi-event synergy encompassing SIPA, the ASEAN Para Games, Solo International Ethnic Music, the International Mask Festival, and the Mangkunegaran Jazz Festival, among others, consistent with, but structurally more extensive than, the single-event framing of these earlier studies. The findings are also extended. [Putri \(2020\)](#) quantitatively linked the image of Solo's traditional markets to general branding success: while Putri's model addresses a single perceptual antecedent of domestic branding success, the present qualitative findings suggest a parallel but distinct pathway, national-government-endorsed public diplomacy, operating specifically on the city's international competitiveness outcome. Finally, this study moves beyond the descriptive cataloguing of Solo's international events and MICE potential offered by [Walenta and Suharto \(2024\)](#) and [Nugroho et al. \(2018\)](#) by identifying the underlying coordination mechanism, rather than the events themselves, as the explanatory factor linking local wisdom and international competitiveness. This perspective highlights that sustainable city branding depends not only on the existence of cultural assets and international events but also on the strategic integration of actors, policies, and communication practices that transform these resources into global competitiveness.

The clearest theoretical contribution of these findings concerns the city branding–public diplomacy nexus identified in the Literature Review. [Sevin \(2025\)](#) theorizes that city branding and city diplomacy scholarship have developed with limited dialogue, and specifically that both fields have under-examined the linkage between nation-states and the cities within them. Melissen's (2005) foundational public-diplomacy framework is built around national governments engaging foreign publics, largely bypassing municipal actors. The present findings, particularly the central government's endorsement of Solo's MICE positioning and its role in supporting Solo's formal induction into the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in October 2023 ([Atmaja & Swasto, 2023](#); [UNESCO, 2023](#)), provide empirical substance to [Sevin \(2025\)](#) theorized nation-state–city linkage in a case where national and local branding efforts are explicitly co-produced rather than pursued autonomously.

This addresses, at least partially, the gap identified in this study's Literature Review: city-branding research to date has largely measured branding success through domestic or resident-oriented outcomes, and public-diplomacy research has not yet empirically tested the nation-state-city nexus in a secondary, culturally branded city context of this kind. In this respect, the Solo case offers a preliminary empirical anchor for [Sevin \(2025\)](#) conceptual model and suggests that future theorizing of city branding should treat national government endorsement as a distinct input alongside local government policy and community synergy, rather than treating the government as a single undifferentiated actor category, as in Suminar, [Ayu, Dwihantoro, and Lokantara \(2020\)](#) agent-based conception of creative-economy branding.

Taken together, these interpretations indicate that Solo's international competitiveness is best understood not as a direct product of local wisdom or creative-economy activity alone, but as the outcome of a sequential, multi-actor process in which government-coordinated synergy converts cultural capital into branding outcomes and national-level public diplomacy converts branding outcomes into international recognition. This interpretation should be read with appropriate caution given the qualitative, single-case design; nonetheless, it offers a theoretically grounded account of how, and not only that, city branding contributes to international competitiveness in a resource-constrained secondary city

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

To enhance a region's economic strength, cities can leverage city branding, which, when supported by the right policies, drives economic growth. This study explores the dimensions, strategies, challenges, and solutions involved in implementing city branding, using Solo, Indonesia, as a case study. The findings indicate that city branding significantly impacts tourism in Solo. The effectiveness of city branding in Solo is derived from strengthening three key aspects: tourist attractions, security and public services, and government coordination with the community. Solo has effectively used branding to promote its cultural identity, drawing on local wisdom to enhance its appeal. The success of this branding approach stems from the comprehensive synergy between local government, society, and city planning symbols.

This research highlights the importance of community involvement and government policies in city branding initiatives. To successfully develop city branding in other cities, it is essential to ensure full government engagement and strong collaboration with the citizens. These strategies are recommended for future city branding programs because they can lead to sustainable economic and social development. This study contributes to the city branding literature by demonstrating how a coordinated approach that integrates local culture and community participation can enhance a city's global competitiveness. The practical implications of these findings suggest that effective city branding requires collaboration across various sectors, providing a model for other cities seeking to improve their international standing through branding.

5.2 Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged to appropriately contextualize the findings. First, the research is confined to a single case study Solo City, Indonesia which inherently restricts the generalizability of the findings to other cities or regional contexts with different socio-political, economic and cultural characteristics. Second, the reliance on qualitative methods, while appropriate for the exploratory nature of this study, introduces the possibility of researcher subjectivity in data interpretation. Although thematic analysis and multiple data sources were employed to enhance reliability, the findings remain inherently interpretive and cannot be fully replicated or verified statistically. Third, the use of snowball sampling may have produced a limited range of perspectives, as participants were predominantly drawn from local government agencies, cultural institutions, and the creative economy sector, while voices from international tourists, foreign investors, and diaspora communities who represent critical constituencies of an international destination—were not systematically included. Finally, the cross-sectional design of this study does not account for the longitudinal evolution of Solo City's branding efforts, and the absence of

quantitative indicators, such as tourist arrival data disaggregated by specific branding initiatives or measurable improvements in the city's international perception index, represents a constraint in fully evaluating the tangible effectiveness of Solo's city branding strategies.

5.3 Suggestions and Directions for Future Research

Building on the findings and acknowledged limitations of this study, several directions for future research are proposed. Future studies should conduct comparative analyses across multiple cities in Indonesia or Southeast Asia pursuing analogous city branding strategies, as a comparative framework would enable researchers to identify generalizable best practices and isolate context-specific variables that determine the success or failure of such initiatives in the future. The integration of mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative insights with quantitative instruments such as international tourist perception surveys or econometric analyses of tourism revenue attributable to specific branding activities would substantially strengthen the rigor and replicability of the findings in this domain.

Longitudinal research designs are also strongly recommended to track the dynamic evolution of Solo City's branding trajectory, particularly in relation to its candidacy for the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and the sustained growth of the MICE industry. Furthermore, future studies should systematically incorporate perspectives from international tourists, foreign investors, and diaspora communities to provide a more externally validated assessment of the effectiveness of a city's international brand. The role of digital diplomacy and social media in amplifying city branding efforts represents a promising and underexplored avenue for research. Finally, exploring how Solo's cultural tourism model aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and replicating the analytical framework of this study in other Indonesian cities transitioning from resource-dependent to creative economy models would contribute meaningfully to the urban planning and regional development literature.

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Author Contributions

HH contributed to the methodology, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, original draft preparation, visualization, project administration, and funding acquisition. HH, HW, and ADM contributed to conceptualization, validation, and review and editing of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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