



Strengthening Urban Identity Through Semanggi: A Local Wisdom-Based City Branding Strategy for Surabaya

Bawa Mulyono Hadi ^{1*}, Sugiharto ², Tonny Hendartono ³, Ristanti ⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Sekolah Tinggi Pariwisata Ambarrukmo Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email: bawamulyonohadi@stipram.ac.id ^{1*}, bawamh@sages.ac.id ²

*Penulis Korespondensi: bawamulyonohadi@stipram.ac.id

Abstract City branding is a strategic approach to enhancing a city's competitiveness by leveraging unique local characteristics to create a strong and distinctive identity. This study examines the role of semanggi—a traditional Surabaya dish—as a cultural icon in strengthening the city's branding. Although semanggi carries deep symbolic meaning and historical significance for Surabaya's residents, its potential as a city branding asset remains underutilized in formal tourism and marketing programs. Adopting a qualitative exploratory case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving local stakeholders, small and medium-sized culinary enterprises, cultural figures, and municipal representatives. Thematic analysis identified five key dimensions of semanggi's role in city branding: (1) visual representation in urban spaces and promotional media; (2) cultural narratives and heritage preservation; (3) community pride and participation; (4) local economic resilience; and (5) strategic promotion by municipal authorities. The findings suggest that integrating semanggi into Surabaya's branding strategy can reinforce cultural identity, differentiate the city in competitive tourism markets, and promote sustainable local entrepreneurship. The study contributes to the theoretical discourse on culinary-based place branding and offers practical recommendations for incorporating local wisdom into destination marketing. Limitations include the single-case scope and qualitative focus, pointing to opportunities for comparative and mixed-method research in the future.

Keywords: City Branding; Cultural Identity; Local Wisdom; Place Marketing; Surabaya.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly competitive global tourism landscape, cities are compelled to craft distinctive and authentic identities to attract visitors, investors, and residents. City branding has emerged as a strategic communication and marketing process that promotes a city's unique qualities through both tangible and intangible elements, including architecture, culture, events, and gastronomy (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2021; Lucarelli, 2020). The success of city branding lies not merely in creating visual symbols or slogans but in developing narratives that resonate emotionally with the target audience (Anholt, 2010).

Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest metropolitan area, possesses a rich cultural heritage and vibrant community life that can be leveraged for city branding. Among its unique cultural assets is *semanggi*, a traditional dish made from clover leaves served with spicy peanut sauce. For local residents, *semanggi* is more than a culinary product—it is a symbol of resilience and creativity, particularly associated with women vendors who have preserved this heritage over generations. Despite its symbolic value, *semanggi* has yet to receive systematic attention as a central element of Surabaya's branding strategy (Islamia, 2020; Yeh et al., 2023).

Previous research emphasizes the potential of gastronomy in shaping destination identity and enhancing tourists' experiential engagement (Zhang et al., 2022; Recuero-Virto, 2024). In

Surabaya, *semanggi* has been featured sporadically in food festivals, local souvenirs, songs, and visual media, yet remains underrepresented in strategic place marketing initiatives. Leveraging *semanggi* more effectively could meet the rising demand for authentic cultural experiences among contemporary travelers (Jafarli & Canavari, 2025; Zaini & Ismail, 2024).

This study aims to analyze *semanggi* as an embodiment of local wisdom and cultural identity, assess its potential as a city branding asset, and propose strategies for its integration into Surabaya's tourism marketing. By adopting a qualitative exploratory case study approach, this research contributes to the theoretical discourse on culinary-based city branding and provides practical implications for local governments, tourism stakeholders, and community actors.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

City Branding

City branding is a multidimensional process aimed at shaping and communicating a city's distinct identity to various target audiences. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) emphasize that city branding extends beyond the creation of a logo or slogan; it involves managing perceptions through coherent narratives, cultural symbols, and experiential offerings. Anholt's (2010) City Brand Hexagon framework - comprising *Presence, Place, People, Pulse, Potential, and Prerequisites* - provides a comprehensive lens for understanding city branding dynamics. Within this framework, gastronomy is positioned as a critical component of both "Place" and "Pulse," offering sensory and cultural experiences that reinforce a city's image.

Cultural Identity and Urban Identity

Urban identity refers to the emotional and symbolic connection between inhabitants and their environment (Relph, 1976). It encompasses shared history, traditions, and cultural expressions that distinguish one city from another. Gastronomic heritage, when embedded in everyday practices, becomes a powerful expression of cultural identity. Ramadania (2025) highlights the interplay between city identity and city branding, noting that authentic cultural narratives can significantly influence tourists' decision-making. In the case of Surabaya, *semanggi* reflects local resilience, community solidarity, and historical continuity, making it a compelling medium for strengthening city identity.

Local Wisdom

Local wisdom comprises inherited systems of knowledge, values, and practices that guide a community's way of life. Sibarani (2012) argues that local wisdom serves as the foundation for sustainable development, including cultural tourism. Zaini and Ismail (2024)

further stress the importance of integrating local wisdom into creative economy strategies to ensure community participation in tourism initiatives. Deeply rooted in Surabaya's cultural memory, *semanggi* embodies such wisdom and holds substantial potential as a city branding asset.

Creative Economy and Culinary Tourism

The creative economy leverages ideas, culture, and creativity to generate economic value (Howkins, 2001). In tourism, local gastronomy functions not only as a consumable product but also as an immersive cultural experience that tells a story about place, history, and people (Richards, 2018). Jafarli and Canavari (2025) found that successful place branding in heritage-based destinations relies on synergy between government, entrepreneurs, and local communities—a principle directly applicable to Surabaya's culinary branding efforts involving *semanggi*.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative exploratory case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the symbolic meanings, perceptions, and strategic possibilities associated with *semanggi* as a city branding icon. According to Yin (2018), exploratory case studies are particularly suitable for investigating complex phenomena where the boundaries between the subject and its context are not clearly defined. Creswell and Poth (2018) further emphasize that qualitative approaches are ideal for capturing social dynamics and symbolic meanings within their natural settings.

Data Collection Methods

Three primary data collection techniques were used in this study:

1. In-depth Interviews – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including local food entrepreneurs, cultural practitioners, municipal tourism officials, and academics specializing in tourism and cultural studies. The interview protocol was guided by the six dimensions of Anholt's City Brand Hexagon and adapted iteratively based on emerging insights.
2. Participant Observation – Field observations were conducted at *semanggi* production sites, culinary hubs, public spaces, and tourism events where *semanggi* was featured. Observations focused on visual representations, social interactions, and cultural performances associated with *semanggi*.

3. Document Analysis – Secondary data were obtained from official tourism promotion materials, city branding reports, media coverage, academic literature, and visual artifacts such as posters, murals, and social media content.

All research procedures complied with ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring data confidentiality, and maintaining respectful engagement with participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, following six steps: (1) familiarization with data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report. Inductive coding was combined with theoretical interpretation to connect findings with existing frameworks on city branding and cultural identity. NVivo software was used to manage and organize the coding process.

Trustworthiness and Validity

To ensure research quality, this study adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four trustworthiness criteria:

- a. Credibility – Achieved through triangulation of data from interviews, observations, and document analysis.
- b. Transferability – Enhanced by providing rich contextual descriptions and direct quotations from participants.
- c. Dependability – Maintained by keeping an audit trail documenting each stage of the research process.
- d. Confirmability – Strengthened through reflexive journaling to reduce researcher bias.

4. FINDINGS

Visual Representation in Urban Spaces

Observations revealed that *semanggi* imagery appears sporadically in murals, MSME logos, and local souvenirs. However, its visual integration into official tourism promotion materials remains limited. While murals in public markets reinforce cultural recognition among residents, they are rarely featured in high-visibility city campaigns targeting tourists.

Cultural Narratives and Heritage Preservation

Interviews with cultural practitioners emphasized *semanggi*'s symbolic meaning as a food of resilience, historically associated with working-class communities and particularly with women vendors. Oral histories and traditional songs often reference *semanggi* as a symbol of togetherness, local pride, and endurance.

Community Pride and Participation

Local residents consistently described *semanggi* as a source of pride and a marker of Surabaya's uniqueness. Community-led food festivals and informal culinary tours frequently highlight *semanggi* as a "must-try" dish for visitors.

Local Economic Resilience

Vendors and MSME owners reported that *semanggi* sales contribute significantly to household income, particularly for women-led microenterprises. Its low production cost and reliance on locally sourced ingredients make it both economically and environmentally sustainable.

Strategic Promotion by Municipal Authorities

Document analysis indicated that the municipal government has sporadically included *semanggi* in tourism promotion events. However, there is no dedicated policy framework positioning it as a core branding element.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings support the theoretical proposition that gastronomy can serve as a bridge between cultural identity and place marketing (Zhang et al., 2022; Recuero-Virto, 2024). In the case of Surabaya, *semanggi* functions both as a tangible product and an intangible cultural symbol, fulfilling Anholt's (2010) City Brand Hexagon dimensions of "Place" and "Pulse."

Despite its strong cultural capital within the local community, *semanggi*'s branding potential is hindered by inconsistent visual and narrative representation in official campaigns. Integrating *semanggi* into Surabaya's core brand narrative could enhance differentiation, authenticity, and emotional resonance with visitors.

The active role of local communities in promoting *semanggi* aligns with Jafarli and Canavari's (2025) assertion that place branding benefits from collaborative governance involving government, businesses, and citizens. Scaling up grassroots initiatives through municipal support could strengthen brand coherence and market reach.

Furthermore, positioning *semanggi* within a sustainability framework - emphasizing local sourcing, minimal environmental impact, and economic benefits for women-led enterprises - corresponds with global trends in responsible tourism marketing. This alignment could appeal to ethically conscious travelers and situate Surabaya's brand within the broader discourse on sustainable urban tourism.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study identifies *semanggi* as a culturally rich yet underutilized asset for Surabaya's city branding. As both a culinary product and a symbolic representation of resilience, local wisdom, and community pride, *semanggi* strongly aligns with the principles of cultural identity-based place marketing. The research highlights its contributions across five dimensions—visual representation, heritage preservation, community participation, economic resilience, and municipal promotion—while also noting its limited and inconsistent integration into official branding strategies.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings extend the literature on gastronomy-led place branding by illustrating how a local culinary icon can serve as a strategic branding asset that enhances destination authenticity and emotional resonance. From a practical perspective, policymakers and tourism stakeholders could adopt several strategies to optimize *semanggi*'s branding potential: Develop visual identity guidelines that incorporate *semanggi* imagery into urban design and promotional media, Institutionalize cultural festivals centered on *semanggi* to increase visibility and tourist engagement, Foster partnerships with local communities and MSMEs to ensure grassroots ownership of branding initiatives, and Integrate sustainability principles by emphasizing local sourcing, minimal waste, and gender-inclusive economic benefits.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its single-case scope and qualitative approach, which may restrict generalizability. Future research could adopt mixed-method designs, conduct comparative studies with other cities, and explore digital marketing strategies to enhance brand visibility and engagement. Such efforts could further illuminate how local culinary icons contribute to sustainable and competitive city branding in diverse cultural contexts.

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