

Strategic Preferences Towards the Challenges of Destination Branding: A Case Study in Nusa Tenggara Timur Province

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Abstract—This study aims to rank strategical preferences pertaining to the challenges of destination branding in the Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) Province. Scarcity of empirical research into the related area of study, and the rise of tourism along with the challenges it encompasses, justifies a gap for the aforementioned agenda. We employed the Fuzzy - Technique for Order Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution (F-TOPSIS) in order to identify the order of preferred approaches based on level of importance and urgency, which was done through questionnaire spread and interviews upon regional tourism stakeholders in NTT. Research results present the five most desired strategies as sustainable safety and security, developing distinctive tourist attractions, involving host community and multiple stakeholders, user generated content and social networking, and partnering with branding experts. Additionally, managerial implications were discussed. Our research is contended beneficial for providing a blueprint of practical approaches that can be employed for strengthening the branding process of tourism destinations.

Keywords— *Destination Branding, Strategic Preference, Fuzzy – TOPSIS, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia*

I. INTRODUCTION

Destination competitiveness is a critical enabler for tourism development [1], one which is instrumental for enhancing regional and national economies [2], [3]. Accordingly, competitiveness presents destinations with advantageous positions [4], with the ultimate goal as to generate repeat visits and unsolicited ambassadors for the place itself [5]. Such notion leads tourism destinations into seeking for efforts to amplify marketing strategies that aids for increased visitors, revenue, and to facilitate for achieving long-term prosperity

among the local people. As destinations necessitates for marketing strategies, it implies that they are not merely that of geographical locations. Thus, destinations are more regarded as that of brands [6], [7] which entail a more complex backdrop as opposed to that of general business products.

Similar to that of general business products, the destination brand requires proper efforts in regards to the branding process itself. [8] asserts that destination branding involves the selection of a consistent brand element mix in aim to identify and distinguish a destination through positive image building. Moreover, it has become the center of marketing initiatives [9]. [7] underlines the importance of destination branding as it provides a strong starting point for satisfying the aim of destination marketing. Branding is even considered to be at the very heart of destination marketing strategies [10]. Nonetheless, researchers note that destination branding entails a unique setting which presents various challenges. Such are mainly categorized as that of financial, political, and environmental issues among others [5].

Considering the significance of destination branding and the challenges that it encompasses, academic literature presents very limited studies upon the related subject [11]. In specific, works related to the strategies for managing destination branding challenges are very scarce; the groundworks of such studies can be found in [12] and [7]. [13] further conceptualized a strategic framework for managing the challenges of destination branding for the rural tourism context. Albeit, literature still calls for further studies, such as underlined in [14] who asserts the gap for multi-disciplinary researches in association with destination branding. The call is indeed magnified

considering the specific topic of strategies in facing the challenges of destination branding.

Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) Province of Indonesia is a growing powerhouse in regards to its tourism sector, evident by the escalation of tourists visits that recorded a fourfold increment from 2014 to 2019 [15], and to the increasing exposure of its destinations in the mainstream media. Efforts in marketing strategies are apparent through worldwide promotions and branding initiatives. Recently, the regional government has branded the province with the tagline “*Exotic East Nusa Tenggara*”, conveying a promise of a unique and precious experience for tourists. [16] underlines that destinations with the exotic brand promote the “once-in-a-life-time” experience and entail premium prices. Following the emphasis of the tourism sector in NTT as the locomotive of economy by the regional government, marketing endeavors through destination branding and managing the challenges it entails become quintessential for the region’s development. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, attention towards the tourism sector has not seen any halt by both national and regional government, which further intensifies related challenges.

This study aims to rank critical strategies for managing the challenges of destination branding within the context of tourism in the NTT Province through the application of a Fuzzy – TOPSIS approach. Fuzzy – TOPSIS is recognized as a prevalent multi-criteria decision making (MCDM) technique that provides for the ranking of criteria (i.e. strategies). The analysis is provisioned to serve regional tourism stakeholders with important insights for managing the challenges of destination branding. Recalling the gap in literature and the significant uprise of the tourism sector initiatives in NTT, this study contests its contribution.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Branding is considered as a central aspect when it comes to destination marketing strategies [7], [9], [10], [17]. Ruiz-Real et al. [14] asserts that although destination branding lacks consistency when it comes to definition, it is agreed that the concept encompasses aspects far beyond mere recognized names, logos, taglines, and symbols. Qu et al. [18] argue that destination branding is a source for competitive advantage generated through differentiation and uniqueness, and furthermore communicates it [19]. Moreover, [20] explains that destination branding creates emotional connections with tourists and further serves for reducing consumer search costs and perceived risks. Accordingly, destination branding as a marketing tool serves for the creation and sustainment of distinct values as a source for gaining advantage over other destinations.

The branding of destinations however, cannot be planned and managed in the same manner as that of commercial products [14]. [21] underlines the complexity of the place product that requires marketing through partnerships due to entailing a representation of multiple stakeholders [22] both from the private and public sector. [23] argues the dynamic nature of the place product, rendering destination brands to have less stability than that of products. Moreover, the intangible characteristic of the destination product, one in which consumers cannot test the product before buying [24] is another differentiating factor. This alludes to the more complex decision-making process for the destination product consumers.

Literature points to many challenges related to destination branding which stems from the aforementioned characteristics above. The involvement of multiple stakeholders such as governments at the national and regional level, business entities, travel agencies, NGOs, and the local community renders complexity in developing the brand identity [18], as there would be the need to reconcile the varying interests [21]. This can be seen as a political pressure involved within the branding process. Moreover, the diverse membership can create constant misunderstandings of branding between experts and government officials [25]. Such circumstance creates imbalance of creativity throughout the branding process.

Limited financial resource is another challenge towards destination branding. [21] regards this condition as that of paucity that renders decision-makers to have to work with minuscule budgets to develop a brand. In such circumstance, DMMOs should work effectively with their budgets. [26] asserts the impact of global financial crisis towards the reduction of public funding addressed to DMMOs. The recent novel coronavirus pandemic affecting the global economy, particularly the tourism sector in the majority of countries in the world, has magnified the impact of funding prioritization in the tourism sector. Accordingly, destinations should embrace the lack of resources and be more thorough in their managerial processes to develop destinations in their maximum potential. [26] further asserts the “sustainable reputation” to be engraved in the minds of the tourism market following the success of managing the limited resources.

The multiple stakeholder and financial challenges are also presented in [27], [5], and [28]. Moreover, other challenges asserted in these literatures include political interferences, environmental issues, lack of long-term commitment, the intangible nature of the destination, and delivery challenges, particularly in terms of communicating the brand benefits and

brand promise [7]. Furthermore, authenticity of destination branding [29], and the difficulty in measuring the success of branding [30] are added to the picture.

Considering the various challenges presents upon destination branding, very limited research has been undertaken in regards to strategies for managing the challenges. These studies include [5], [7], and [31]. Furthermore, [13] presented a strategic framework for managing the challenges of destination branding in the context of developing rural tourism. This framework encompasses eleven strategies including: (1) Strong local leadership, (2) Partnering with destination branding and marketing experts, (3) Effective communication on destination brand benefits strategy, (4) Less political interference, (5) Adequate funding and budget support, (6) Host community and multiple stakeholders' involvement, (7) Premium destination development strategy, (8) Identifying and managing distinctive tourist attractions, (9) Food and cultural festival, and local MICE, (10) User-generated content and social networking, and (11) Sustainable safety and security. The particular set of strategies indeed, require further empirical investigation upon to tests its validity. [14] asserts the gap for multi-disciplinary studies in association with destination branding, and the call is indeed magnified considering the specific topic of strategies for managing the challenges of destination branding.

This research draws its agenda based on the literature reviewed above which presents the gap concerning strategies for managing the challenges of destination branding. In specific, we adopt the strategic framework developed by [13] in order to rank strategical preferences from multiple stakeholders' perspective. Referring to the potential and development of tourism in NTT, this research sets its backdrop at the regional context of the particular province.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

A preliminary research was conducted through comprehensive literature review in regards to destination branding, its challenges, and strategies for managing the challenges. Accordingly, a theoretical framework for managing the challenges of branding rural tourism destination was adopted from [13], which was then used to assess criticality levels of each strategy through the application of the Fuzzy – TOPSIS method. Expert data for the analysis are collected through questionnaire spread and interview upon multiple regional destination stakeholders in the NTT Province, namely head of government tourism agencies, entrepreneurs, local public figures, tourism businessmen/women, and tourism lecturers.

Fuzzy – TOPSIS is an effective technique used for analysing rankings or criticality among alternatives (i.e. strategies). The method is regarded simpler than the tedious process in the conventional Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) [32]. As the traditional TOPSIS technique is criticized for its inability to handle ambiguities of human's judgements [33], the use of fuzzy numbers in TOPSIS deals with the issue. Linguistic variables from experts' opinion are translated into fuzzy numbers for the TOPSIS scales for the criticality weight of each strategy, and are presented in Table I.

Table I. TOPSIS Scales

Linguistic Variable	Fuzzy Number
Very Low (VL)	(0, 0.05, 0.15)
Low (L)	(0.1, 0.2, 0.3)
Medium Low (ML)	(0.2, 0.35, 0.5)
Medium (M)	(0.3, 0.5, 0.7)
Medium High (MH)	(0.5, 0.65, 0.8)
High (H)	(0.7, 0.8, 0.9)
Very High (VH)	(0.85, 0.95, 1)

The fuzzy TOPSIS is done for *k* decision makers D_r ($r = 1, \dots, k$) and a decision-making problem of *m* criteria and *n* alternatives A_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$), through the following steps:

Step 1. Aggregate the weights of criteria and ratings of alternatives through the equations:

$$w_j^- = \frac{1}{k} [w_j^{-1} + w_j^{-2} + \dots + w_j^{-k}]$$

$$x_{ij}^- = \frac{1}{k} [x_{ij}^{-1} + x_{ij}^{-2} + \dots + x_{ij}^{-k}] \tag{1}$$

where the weight of the *j*th criterion (*C_j*) is expressed by w_r^j

Step 2. Construct fuzzy decision matrices of the criteria and alternative through the following equations: $w^- = [w_1^- + w_2^- + \dots + w_n^-]$

$$(2) \quad D^- = a_j \begin{bmatrix} C_1 & C_2 & C_j & C_m \\ x_{11}^- & x_{12}^- & x_{1j}^- & x_{1m}^- \\ \vdots & \vdots & \vdots & \vdots \\ x_{n1}^- & x_{n2}^- & x_{nj}^- & x_{nm}^- \end{bmatrix}$$

Step 3. Construct a normalized fuzzy decision matrix through the following equations:

$$R^- = [r_{ij}^-]_{n \times m}$$

$$r_{ij}^- = \left(\frac{I_{ij}^-}{U_{ij}^-}, \frac{M_{ij}^-}{U_{ij}^-}, \frac{U_{ij}^-}{U_{ij}^-} \right), \text{ and } u_j^- = \max U_{ij}^- (\text{benefit criteria})$$

$$r_{ij}^- = \left(\frac{L_{ij}^-}{U_{ij}^-}, \frac{M_{ij}^-}{M_{ij}^-}, \frac{L_{ij}^-}{L_{ij}^-} \right), \text{ and } L_j^- = \max L_{ij}^- (\text{cost criteria}) \tag{3}$$

Step 4. Construct a weighted normalized decision matrix through the following equation:

$$V^{\sim} = [V_{ij}^{\sim}]_{n \times m}, V_{ij}^{\sim} = X_{ij}^{\sim} \times W_{ij}^{\sim} \tag{4}$$

Step 5. Complete the Fuzzy Negative Ideal Solution, A^{-} and the Fuzzy Positive Ideal Solution, A^{+} , through the following equations:

$$\begin{aligned} A^{+} &= \{V_1^{+}, V_j^{+}, \dots, V_m^{+}\} \\ A^{-} &= \{V_1^{-}, V_j^{-}, \dots, V_m^{-}\} \end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

where

$$V_j^{+} = (1, 1, 1) \text{ and } V_j^{-} = (0, 0, 0)$$

Step 6. Compute the distances indicated by each alternative from using the following equations:

$$\begin{aligned} d_i^{+} &= \sum_{j=1}^n dV(V_{ij}^{\sim}, V_j^{+}) \\ d(X^{-}, Z^{-}) &= \sqrt{\frac{1}{3} [(L_X - L_Z)^2 + (M_X - M_Z)^2 + (U_X - U_Z)^2]} \end{aligned} \tag{6}$$

Step 7. Compute the closeness coefficient through the following equation:

$$CC_i = \frac{d_i^{-}}{d_i^{+} + d_i^{-}} \tag{7}$$

Step 8. Compute ranks of alternatives based on CC_i in a decreasing order.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 40 participants took part in providing expert opinion regarding strategic preferences towards managing the challenges of destination branding at the regional context of NTT. The experts ranged from government officials in regional tourism agencies from 7 districts (14 participants), local public figures (11), entrepreneurs and business representatives (9), and tourism lecturers (6). All participants had at least 5 years of experience in their respective employment related to regional tourism.

Results from the weighted normalized fuzzy decision matrix presenting the 11 strategies under the categories of level importance and urgency are shown in Table II. Subsequently, the closeness coefficient index (CC_i) was calculated based on d_i^{+} and d_i^{-} in order to reveal the final results concerning rankings of strategy preferences as displayed in Table III. It is pointed that sustainable safety and security was considered the foremost priority of efforts that should be undertaken in order to strengthen destinations branding. This is followed by the development of distinct attractions, and the

inclusion of host community and other related stakeholders at number 2 and 3, respectively. Furthermore, at the end of the spectrum lies communicating branding benefits at number 10, and limiting political interference at number 11.

Table II. Normalized Fuzzy Decision Matrix

Strategy	Importance	Urgency
Local food festival and MICE	(1.82, 2.82, 3.93)	(1.94, 3.00, 4.16)
Communicating brand benefits	(1.85, 2.85, 3.97)	(1.73, 2.71, 3.82)
Adequate funding and budgeting	(1.81, 2.85, 4.02)	(1.75, 2.79, 3.99)
Limiting political interference	(1.70, 2.71, 3.85)	(1.82, 2.79, 3.36)
Local leadership	(1.82, 2.97, 4.02)	(1.81, 2.97, 4.04)
Involving host community and stakeholders	(2.08, 3.21, 4.25)	(2.13, 3.28, 4.33)
Partnering with branding experts	(1.97, 3.09, 4.16)	(2.05, 3.11, 4.25)
Distinctive tourist attractions	(2.09, 3.21, 4.25)	(2.14, 3.20, 4.33)
Premium destination	(1.98, 3.09, 4.16)	(2.04, 3.08, 4.23)
UGC and social networking	(2.03, 3.08, 4.21)	(2.06, 3.11, 4.25)
Sustainable safety and security	(2.18, 3.25, 4.35)	(2.15, 3.23, 4.35)

Table III. Final Results of Fuzzy TOPSIS

Strategy	di+	di-	Cci	Rank
Local food festival and MICE	0.619	0.583	0.485	7
Communicating brand benefits	0.867	0.410	0.321	10
Adequate funding and budgeting	0.770	0.505	0.396	9
Limiting political interference	1.159	0.000	0.000	11
Local leadership	0.634	0.595	0.484	8
Involving host community and stakeholders	0.117	1.078	0.902	3
Partnering with branding experts	0.294	0.885	0.751	5
Distinctive tourist attractions	0.104	1.063	0.911	2
Premium destination	0.311	0.869	0.736	6
UGC and social networking	0.259	0.915	0.779	4
Sustainable safety and security	0.000	1.159	1.000	1

In light of the results, emergence of sustainable safety and security as the prime strategical preference underlines the necessity for creating a more conducive travelling environment for potential visitors, especially that of foreign tourists. Referring to the Travel and Tourism Competitive Index (TTCI) by the World Economic Forum (WEF), Indonesia ranks 80th worldwide in regards to safety and security [34], suggesting that the country as a whole is relatively lagging behind concerning the aforementioned criteria. In line with this finding, [35], [36] and [37] underline the critical importance of safety and security considerations influencing tourists' decision-making in selecting a destination. Considering the state of tourism in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, protocols for safety and security should rightly be critical for creating the desired image for travelling. [38] in particular, supports safety awareness as a critical component for image repair after major crises. Furthermore,

according to our experts from the regional government category, cleanliness, healthy, safety, and environment (CHSE) certification and protocols have accordingly been propelled upon destinations and related sectors such as restaurants and hotels to push for the preconditioned environment for tourism recovery in the “new normal era”.

Development of distinctive tourist attractions that comes as second priority, is considered imperative for enhancing the uniqueness of destinations in NTT relative to neighboring provinces such as Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB) or Bali. The experts underline that such strategy is strongly correlated with the “Exotic East Nusa Tenggara” brand that pushes to create awareness among travelers of the once-in-a-lifetime experience offered. NTT indeed, puts forth distinct attractions such as the Komodo islands and the three-colored lake of Kelimutu among others, as attractions one would never experience elsewhere. Literature such [39] and [40] do suggest that the essence of branding is to develop a unique identity and personality that is different from all competitive destinations, thus underpinning the conscious endeavours to promote distinct attractions in NTT.

The involvement of host community and multiple stakeholders which ranks as the 3rd priority suggests the emphasis on developing a brand image through an integrated consensus. On a similar note, works of [9] and [6] underline that successful destination brandings stem from proper stakeholder engagement within the upstream stages in vision and perspective identification. Accordingly, the developed brand would truly represent the identity and expectations in congruence. In addition, several public sector representatives expressed the necessity for multiple stakeholders’ participation as the government alone may not possess all knowledge and understandings upon the roots of community and environmental values. This argument also alludes significance towards partnering with branding experts (ranked 5th) which is to provide a proper foundation for the branding process [20], as well as to serve for being the independent actor to reconcile the varying interests among multiple stakeholders. Moreover, the branding expertise could prevent brand inconsistencies which unfortunately has been materialized throughout the years in NTT and Indonesia in general.

User generated content (UGC) and social networking through the internet, revealed as the 4th preference, comes as a critical ingredient for amplifying brand awareness. This is particularly practical in regards to communications strategy which is aimed at attracting, converting, and creating loyalty among customers [6]. The rise of social media has revolutionized the way business operate, and accordingly, [41] even argue that

people though UGCs can serve for co-creators of destination brands. The virtue of UGC has even propelled the Indonesian government in general to utilize UGC for political agenda purposes [42], hence such would be beneficial if were embedded into destination brandings. As acknowledged by our experts however, the state of UGC and social media networking in the NTT Province is lacking in terms of holistic management that sees discrepancies between terms and logos being used.

Among other strategies, it is worth highlighting the development of premium destination (ranked 6th) which has been focused upon by the Indonesian government towards Labuan Bajo in NTT. The premium destination is associated with that of luxury and unique experiences entailing higher prices charged towards tourists [43] which to a high degree correlates with the exotic brand being promoted in NTT.

V. CONCLUSION

This research contributed in enriching the destination branding literature, particularly in regards to the approaches for managing related challenges. We employed the fuzzy – TOPSIS method for ranking strategical preferences from regional tourism stakeholders’ viewpoint for branding the destination in NTT Province. Our results demonstrated the five top preferences as sustainable safety and security (1st), developing distinctive tourist attractions (2nd), involving host community and multiple stakeholders (3rd), User generated content and social networking (4th), and partnering with branding experts (5th). Our research is contended beneficial for providing a blueprint of practical approaches that can be employed for strengthening the branding process of tourism destinations, particularly within regional or rural destinations.

Despite its contributions, this study recognizes several limitations. Firstly, the limited research timeframe halted for the inclusion of a more comprehensive set of experts from all stakeholder categories, which perhaps would provide more robust results. Secondly, as the study was conducted within the COVID-19 pandemic, participants may have certain biases due to the circumstances that heavily affected tourism in general. Future studies may include a richer set of strategies for managing the challenges concerning destination branding, and further verify our findings upon different tourism contexts.

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