

## ***Strengthening Destination Image through the Arakan Sahur Festival in Increasing Tourist Visits in Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency***

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### ***Abstract***

*This study aims to analyze the strengthening of destination image through the Arakan Sahur Festival in increasing tourist visits in Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency. The background of this study is based on the suboptimal utilization of the festival as a strategic instrument in building destination image, despite its strong cultural potential and high tourism appeal. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, documentation, and questionnaires as supporting data involving the Tourism Office, event organizers, MSMEs, cultural communities, and tourists. Data analysis is based on Place Branding theory by Simon Anholt, which includes six dimensions: presence, place, potential, pulse, people, and prerequisite. The findings indicate that the Arakan Sahur Festival contributes to strengthening the destination image, particularly in terms of popularity and socio-cultural dynamics. However, the strengthening of destination image is not yet optimal due to limitations in facilities, environmental management, and consistency of public communication. Nevertheless, the festival has a positive impact on increasing tourist visits and local economic activities. This study concludes that strengthening destination image through cultural festivals requires integrated, collaborative, and sustainable strategies to enhance regional tourism competitiveness.*

*Keywords: Arakan Sahur, Destination Image, Cultural Festival, Tourist Visits, Tourism Branding.*

### **1. Introduction**

The development of regional autonomy in Indonesia has provided broad space for local governments to independently manage regional potential, including the tourism sector as one of the main drivers of the regional economy. In the context of global competition, tourism is no longer viewed merely as a recreational activity, but has evolved into a strategic industry that plays a role in increasing regional revenue, creating employment opportunities, and strengthening local identity. This condition requires local governments not only to rely on natural resource potential, but also to build a strong and competitive destination image through planned and sustainable branding strategies. Tourism branding is important because tourists' perceptions of a destination are strongly influenced by the image formed through communication, experience, and the identity displayed by the region (Natasya, 2025).

Destination image is one of the main factors influencing tourists' decisions in choosing a travel destination. Image is not only shaped through promotion, but also through direct experience, social interaction, and cultural representation offered by a region. Research shows that a positive destination image can increase visit interest, tourist satisfaction, and the likelihood of repeat visits (Muhammad Fahmi, 2022). Therefore, strengthening the destination image is a crucial aspect in the development of regional tourism, particularly in facing increasingly competitive inter-destination competition.

One strategy widely used in strengthening destination image is through the organization of cultural festivals. Cultural festivals not only function as entertainment, but also as symbolic communication media capable of representing local identity authentically. Festivals provide

tourists with direct experiences through a combination of distinctive cultural, social, and visual elements, thus creating strong emotional impressions. Previous studies show that cultural festivals play a significant role in enhancing destination image, expanding media exposure, and attracting tourist interest through unique experiences that differ from other destinations (Nyoman & Wilantari, 2023). In addition, festivals also contribute to strengthening social cohesion within the community and driving local economic growth through the involvement of business actors, particularly MSMEs.

Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency, Jambi Province, is one of the regions with strong cultural potential to be developed as a regional tourism identity. One of the traditions that has become a local cultural icon is the Arakan Sahur Festival, originating from the tradition of the Kuala Tungkal community in waking people for sahur during the Ramadan month. This tradition has undergone a transformation from a simple social practice into an organized cultural festival with various visual attractions, such as decorated vehicle processions, illuminated miniature boats, and distinctive traditional music. These unique characteristics make the Arakan Sahur Festival a great potential instrument for strengthening destination image based on local culture.

Despite its great potential, the utilization of the Arakan Sahur Festival as an instrument for strengthening destination image has not run optimally. This can be seen from the still limited visual identity management, the absence of a consistent branding narrative, and the lack of integration of an effective public communication strategy. In addition, limitations in facilities, supporting infrastructure, and environmental management also constitute factors affecting tourists' experiences. This situation reveals a gap between the cultural potential possessed and the implementation of tourism branding strategies carried out by the local government. In practice, the success of destination branding is largely determined by identity consistency, the quality of the tourism experience, and the involvement of various stakeholders in its management process.

Theoretically, the strengthening of destination image can be analyzed through the place branding approach. Place branding is a strategic process of building and managing the reputation of a region through the integration of various elements, such as identity, communication, and the experiences perceived by the public. The Place Brand Hexagon model developed by Anholt explains that the image of a region is formed through six main dimensions: presence (popularity), place (environmental conditions), potential (economic potential), pulse (socio-cultural dynamics), people (community character), and prerequisite (supporting facilities) (Simon Anholt, 2010). These six dimensions interact with each other in forming tourists' perceptions of a destination (Nyoman & Wilantari, 2023). Thus, the strengthening of destination image does not only depend on promotion, but also on the overall quality of the experience offered.

Previous studies tend to discuss the Arakan Sahur Festival from the perspective of cultural values, tradition preservation, and general tourism development. However, studies that specifically position this festival as a strategic instrument in strengthening destination image through the place branding approach are still limited. Moreover, not many studies have integrated aspects of communication, local government policy, and stakeholder participation within a single comprehensive analytical framework. This indicates the existence of a research gap that forms the important basis for this research.

Based on these conditions, this research has novelty in examining the Arakan Sahur Festival as a strategic instrument for strengthening destination image through an integrated place branding approach. This research does not only analyze the festival as a cultural activity, but also as a tourism communication medium involving various actors, including the local government, community, business actors, and tourists. With this approach, the research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of tourism branding studies as well as a practical contribution to the formulation of regional tourism development policies.

Based on the above description, the objective of this research is to analyze the strengthening of destination image through the Arakan Sahur Festival in increasing tourist visits in Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency. This research is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of cultural festivals in building destination image and to serve as a basis for formulating more effective, integrated, and sustainable tourism development strategies.

## 1. Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the process of strengthening destination image through the Arakan Sahur Festival in increasing tourist visits in Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research is oriented toward understanding meaning, process, and social dynamics occurring in an empirical context in a naturalistic manner. This approach enables researchers to comprehensively explore the perceptions, experiences, and interactions among actors involved in the tourism branding process that cannot be explained quantitatively (Al, 2019). Meanwhile, the case study design was used because this research focuses on a specific phenomenon in a real context, namely the Arakan Sahur Festival as an instrument for strengthening destination image.

The research was conducted in Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency, Jambi Province, with the main locus in Tungkal Ilir District as the center of the Arakan Sahur Festival. The selection of this location was based on the consideration that the area serves as the center of cultural, economic, and regional tourism activities with the highest festival organization intensity. The research was conducted in 2026, particularly during the Ramadan period when the festival takes place, so that the data obtained is current, contextual, and relevant to the phenomenon being studied.

The types of data in this research consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly through interactions with informants in the field, while secondary data were obtained from official documents, government reports, media publications, and relevant scientific literature. The use of both types of data aims to obtain a comprehensive picture and strengthen the validity of findings through the triangulation process (Samiaji Sarosa, 2021).

Data collection was carried out through four main methods: in-depth interviews, observation, documentation, and limited questionnaires. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to provide the researcher with flexibility in exploring information in depth while remaining within the research focus framework (Nafisatur, 2024). The information explored includes branding strategies, forms of tourism communication, festival management, and perceptions of destination image. Observation was conducted in a non-participatory manner to directly observe the implementation of the festival, branding activities, and interactions between local communities and tourists. Documentation was used to collect data in the form of archives, activity reports, media publications, and tourist visit statistics. In addition, questionnaires were used as supporting data to identify tourists' perceptions of destination image more broadly.

The informant selection technique in this research used purposive sampling, that is, the intentional selection of informants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Ezezi Isaac, 2023). The informants in this research include: (1) the Tourism, Youth, and Sports Office as a policy actor; (2) the Arakan Sahur Festival organizing committee as technical implementers; (3) MSME actors as representatives of economic impact; (4) cultural communities as guardians of traditional values; and (5) tourists as recipients of destination experience. This technique was used to ensure that the data obtained is in-depth, relevant, and in accordance with the needs of research analysis.

The research instruments consist of interview guidelines, observation guidelines, and documentation sheets systematically prepared based on the Place Branding theoretical framework by Simon Anholt. The instruments refer to six main dimensions: presence (destination popularity), place (environmental conditions), potential (economic potential), pulse (socio-cultural dynamics), people (community character), and prerequisite (facilities and infrastructure) (Simon Anholt, 2010). These six dimensions are used as analytical indicators in examining the strengthening of destination image through the cultural festival.

The data analysis technique in this research uses an interactive analysis model encompassing three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Muhajirin et al., 2024). Data reduction was conducted by simplifying, grouping, and focusing data in accordance with the research theme. Data presentation was conducted in the form of systematic descriptive narrative to facilitate interpretation. Subsequently, conclusion drawing was conducted by connecting field findings with the place branding theoretical framework to produce a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Samiaji Sarosa, 2021).

To ensure data validity, this research uses triangulation techniques, both source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from various informants, while method triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Additionally, data validity was also strengthened through the member check technique, namely re-confirming with informants regarding the interview results that had been conducted. This step aims to ensure that the data obtained is consistent with actual field conditions.

Conceptually, the research flow begins with the identification of the tourism branding phenomenon through the Arakan Sahur Festival (Hariandi et al., 2023), followed by field data collection through various techniques, data analysis based on place branding dimensions, and the drawing of conclusions regarding the strengthening of destination image and its implications for tourist visits. The research workflow can be described as follows: (1) problem identification, (2) data collection, (3) theory-based analysis, (4) interpretation of findings, and (5) conclusion drawing. With this flow, the research is expected to address the problem systematically, validly, and in a scientifically accountable manner.

## 1. Results and Discussion

### Results

The research findings indicate that the Arakan Sahur Festival plays a significant role in strengthening the destination image of Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency, particularly in the Kuala Tungkal area as the center of the activity. Findings obtained through in-depth interviews with various key informants, field observations, and documentation analysis indicate that this festival has undergone a transformation from a simple local tradition into an organized cultural event with strong tourism appeal. This transformation is reflected in the increasing scale of implementation, the involvement of various actors, and the widening intensity of promotion. The Arakan Sahur Festival is no longer understood merely as an activity for waking people for sahur, but has developed into a representation of the cultural identity of coastal communities with strong historical, religious, and social values.

The level of destination popularity has increased significantly alongside the growing exposure of the Arakan Sahur Festival across various media. Publications through social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube show an increase in public interaction in the form of views, comments, and the spread of festival-related content. Online media and television coverage has further expanded the reach of information to the wider public. The festival's inclusion in national agendas such as Kharisma Event Nusantara indicates that it has gained recognition as one of the region's featured events. This situation demonstrates that the Arakan Sahur Festival has been able to build public awareness of the Kuala Tungkal destination, although public communication management is still not fully structured and consistent in conveying the branding identity.

The environmental conditions of the destination indicate that the festival venue has considerable potential to support tourism activities. The downtown Kuala Tungkal area as the main festival location is relatively accessible to both local residents and visitors from outside the region. The open spatial layout allows the procession to be carried out on a large scale with the involvement of various community groups. Field observation results indicate some constraints, such as limited sanitation facilities, suboptimal waste management, and inadequate supporting facilities such as rest areas and sanitation. The high density of visitors at the peak of activities also affected visitor comfort and safety levels, so the quality of the tourism experience was not fully optimal.

The economic potential generated by the Arakan Sahur Festival shows a considerable contribution to local economic activities. Interviews with MSME actors indicate an increase in sales turnover during the festival, particularly in the culinary, beverage, and local craft sectors. The presence of large numbers of tourists creates broad business opportunities for the community, both in the form of micro-enterprises and informal businesses developing around the activity venues. The festival also functions as a promotional medium for local products that can be recognized by visitors from outside the region. However, the economic impact generated

is still temporary and has not been fully sustainable, thus requiring development strategies capable of integrating the festival with long-term local economic strengthening.

The socio-cultural dynamics that occurred during the Arakan Sahur Festival indicate a very high level of community participation. Community involvement is evident in various stages of activities, from preparation to the implementation of the festival. Community creativity is reflected in the making of illuminated miniature boats, decorative lights, and traditional music performances that characterize the festival. Community enthusiasm in participating in activities creates a festive and interactive atmosphere, thus providing tourists with an authentic cultural experience. The interaction between local communities and visitors is one of the main attractions that reinforces social values within the festival.

The role of local communities constitutes an important factor in shaping destination image through direct interaction with tourists. The research findings indicate that the community demonstrates a friendly, open, and participatory attitude in welcoming visitors. Community involvement in festival activities is not only as cultural actors, but also as part of the tourism experience perceived by tourists. Tourists interviewed gave positive assessments of the social interactions they experienced, creating a positive impression of the Kuala Tungkal destination. This situation indicates that the social aspect makes a large contribution to building a culturally-based destination image.

The aspect of facilities and infrastructure indicates that there are still various limitations that pose challenges in the development of the festival as a tourism branding instrument. The availability of public facilities such as parking areas, transportation, sanitation, and traffic management has not been fully able to accommodate the growing number of visitors each year. An integrated tourism management system, such as tourist information centers and visitor management, is also not yet optimally available. These limitations affect the quality of tourism services received by visitors and indicate the need for improved infrastructure support.

The implementation of tourism branding strategies through the Arakan Sahur Festival still shows various limitations in its execution. Strong visual identity, an official slogan, and a consistent branding narrative have not been fully developed in every promotional activity. Publications conducted are still informative in nature and have not been directed toward building a strong destination image. Coordination among stakeholders in festival management is also still not running optimally, so the potential of the festival as a branding instrument has not been maximized. This situation indicates that the festival is still positioned as an annual cultural activity, not yet fully integrated into the regional tourism branding strategy.

Overall findings indicate that the Arakan Sahur Festival has great potential in strengthening the destination image of Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency. The festival is capable of presenting a strong cultural identity, increasing destination exposure, and providing economic and social impacts for local communities. Various constraints still found, particularly in aspects of facilities, environmental management, and consistency of communication strategies, indicate the need for more targeted and sustainable development. Optimization of the festival as a tourism branding instrument requires integration among cultural potential, destination management, and effective communication strategies.

## Discussion

The research findings indicate that the Arakan Sahur Festival plays a strategic role in strengthening the destination image in Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency through various mutually integrated dimensions. In the perspective of place branding, the image of a destination is not only formed through promotional activities, but also through experience, social interaction, and cultural representation offered to tourists. The Arakan Sahur Festival as a local cultural event is capable of serving as an effective communication medium in building destination identity, as it presents distinctive symbols, narratives, and experiences that differ from those of other regions. The uniqueness of the sahur procession with illuminated miniature boats, traditional music, and religious nuances serves as the main attraction that reinforces the differentiation of the Kuala Tungkal destination amid inter-regional tourism competition.

When analyzed based on the presence dimension, the Arakan Sahur Festival has successfully increased the level of destination recognition and popularity. Exposure through social media, mass media coverage, and the festival's involvement in national agendas indicates that it has a broad reach in building public awareness. This aligns with the concept that popularity is the initial stage in the formation of destination image, where the higher the level of exposure of a region, the greater the opportunity to attract tourist visit interest. However, this increase in popularity has not been fully accompanied by the strengthening of a consistent brand identity, so the destination image formed is still general in nature and has not established a strong positioning in the minds of tourists.

On the place dimension, the environmental conditions of the destination constitute an important factor influencing tourists' perceptions of the quality of experiences received. The research findings indicate that although the festival location has good potential, there are still various limitations in environmental management, such as cleanliness, the comfort of public spaces, and supporting facilities. In the context of place branding, the direct experiences perceived by tourists will be highly determinative of the image formed, so the quality of the physical environment must be a primary concern in destination development. The discrepancy between tourists' expectations and conditions in the field has the potential to reduce the overall quality of the destination image.

From the potential dimension, the Arakan Sahur Festival demonstrates a contribution to local economic development, particularly through the increase in MSME activities during the festival. This indicates that the festival does not only function as a promotional medium, but also as a driver of the community economy. In place branding theory, economic potential constitutes one of the important indicators in building destination appeal, as tourists do not only seek cultural experiences, but also economic activities that support destination sustainability. However, the still temporary nature of economic impact indicates that festival management has not been fully directed toward long-term economic development.

On the pulse dimension, the Arakan Sahur Festival has a very prominent strength in creating vibrant and attractive socio-cultural dynamics. The high community participation, creativity in festival organization, and enthusiasm of visitors indicate that this festival is capable of creating a dynamic and interactive atmosphere. In the perspective of place branding, socio-cultural dynamics constitute an important element in creating emotional attachment between tourists and the destination. Memorable and authentic experiences are the main factors that encourage tourists to revisit or recommend the destination to others.

The people dimension also demonstrates the important role of local communities in shaping destination image. The friendliness, openness, and active participation of the community in festival activities provide tourists with positive social experiences. This aligns with the concept that local communities represent the social identity of a region, so interactions occurring between the community and tourists will influence perceptions of the destination. The success of the Arakan Sahur Festival in involving the community indicates that the socio-cultural potential has been well utilized in supporting the strengthening of destination image.

Nevertheless, on the prerequisite dimension, various limitations are still found that pose obstacles to the optimization of tourism branding. The availability of public facilities, accessibility, transportation, and traffic management has not fully supported the increase in the number of visitors. In the context of place branding, infrastructure and facilities constitute the basic elements that must be fulfilled so that tourists' experiences can run smoothly. The limitations on this aspect indicate that the strengthening of destination image has not been supported by adequate infrastructure readiness.

Overall, this discussion indicates that the Arakan Sahur Festival has strong potential as an instrument for strengthening destination image based on local culture. However, its effectiveness is still influenced by various factors, such as the consistency of branding strategies, the quality of environmental management, and the support of facilities and infrastructure. Therefore, a more integrated and sustainable strategy is needed involving various stakeholders, including local governments, communities, and business actors. The integration of cultural, communication, and destination management aspects is key to enhancing regional tourism competitiveness and

strengthening the position of the Arakan Sahur Festival as the branding identity of Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research indicates that the Arakan Sahur Festival plays a strategic role in strengthening the destination image of Tanjung Jabung Barat Regency through the utilization of local culture as a tourism identity. The festival is capable of increasing destination popularity, expanding regional exposure at the regional and national levels, and providing tourists with authentic cultural experiences. The unique cultural attractions presented, such as the sahur procession, community visual creativity, and distinctive religious nuances, constitute important elements in building destination differentiation. The high community participation and positive social interaction further strengthen tourists' perceptions of Kuala Tungkal as a destination with rich culture and strong social character.

The research findings also indicate that the Arakan Sahur Festival contributes to increasing community economic activities, particularly local MSME actors. The increase in the number of tourists during the festival has an impact on the increase in economic transactions in the culinary, craft, and service sectors. This situation demonstrates that cultural festivals not only function as tourism promotional tools, but also as drivers of the local economy capable of providing direct benefits to the community. Nevertheless, the economic impact generated is still temporary and has not been fully integrated into long-term economic development strategies.

The strengthening of destination image through the Arakan Sahur Festival has not run optimally because there are still various limitations affecting the quality of tourists' experiences. Limitations in the aspects of facilities and infrastructure, such as parking, sanitation, and traffic management, indicate that destination readiness has not fully supported the increase in tourist visits. Suboptimal environmental management, particularly in terms of cleanliness and comfort of public spaces, also constitutes a factor that can affect tourists' perceptions of the destination. Furthermore, the absence of a strong visual identity, an official slogan, and a consistent communication strategy indicates that tourism branding is still partial and has not been systematically integrated.

The management of the Arakan Sahur Festival as a tourism branding instrument requires a more targeted, integrated, and sustainable approach involving various stakeholders. The local government needs to strengthen its role as the main coordinator in formulating a clear branding strategy, including in the preparation of destination identity, management of public communication, and development of supporting infrastructure. The involvement of the community, MSME actors, cultural communities, and the younger generation also needs to be optimized within a more systematic collaboration framework to create synergy in regional tourism development.

The future development of the Arakan Sahur Festival needs to be directed toward innovation based on the use of digital technology, the strengthening of cultural narratives, and integration with the creative economy sector. Optimization of social media as a promotional tool, consistent and attractive content packaging, and the strengthening of visual identity are important steps in enhancing destination competitiveness. Future research is recommended to quantitatively examine the relationship between destination image and tourist visit interest, as well as to explore digital-based and economically sustainable branding strategies so that regional tourism development can be carried out more comprehensively and sustainably.

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