

Opportunity and Threats of Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour Bus Program in The Promotion of Tourism Destinations to Foreign Tourists

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess how well the Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour Bus (SSCT) program works to make Surabaya a more alluring tourist destination for international visitors. This research looks at how SSCT works as a tool for branding Surabaya city to foreign tourists. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method which is one of the effective approaches to describe a practice. Direct observation during the internship, interviews with staff at the tourist information center, and analysis of 2024 visitor visit data were used to collect data. The findings show that although the Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour (SSCT) program successfully integrates local culture in the city branding strategy through strong historical narratives and cultural experiences, limitations in global promotion, digital access, and multilingual support are the main challenges in effectively reaching foreign tourists. With this, the author identifies opportunities in the SSCT program by expanding promotional channels, improving accessibility for international payments, and strengthening internationally packaged local cultural narratives are some of the recommendations.

Keywords: *SSCT Bus, City Branding, Tourism Attractions, Foreign Tourist*

Abstrak

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menilai seberapa baik program Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour Bus (SSCT) bekerja untuk membuat Surabaya menjadi tujuan wisata yang lebih memikat bagi pengunjung internasional. Penelitian ini melihat bagaimana SSCT bekerja sebagai alat untuk pencitraan kota Surabaya kepada wisatawan asing. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif yang merupakan salah satu pendekatan efektif untuk menggambarkan sebuah praktik. Pengamatan langsung selama magang, wawancara dengan staf di pusat informasi wisata, dan analisis data kunjungan pengunjung tahun 2024 digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun program Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour (SSCT) berhasil mengintegrasikan budaya lokal dalam strategi city branding melalui narasi historis dan pengalaman budaya yang kuat, keterbatasan dalam promosi global, akses digital, dan dukungan multibahasa menjadi tantangan utama dalam menjangkau wisatawan mancanegara secara efektif. Dengan ini penulis mengidentifikasi peluang dalam program SSCT dengan memperluas saluran promosi, meningkatkan aksesibilitas untuk pembayaran internasional, dan memperkuat narasi budaya daerah yang dikemas secara internasional adalah beberapa rekomendasi.

Kata Kunci: *Bus SSCT, City Branding, Atraksi Wisata, Foreign Tourist*

Introduction

The second-biggest city in Indonesia, Surabaya, has enormous potential as a travel destination in addition to being a hub for industry and the economy. (Trisantoso Julianto, 2016, p. 244) The city draws tourists, particularly foreigners, with its intriguing fusion of modernity, culture, and history. The ancient city area, Suramadu Bridge, and Tugu Pahlawan are a few of Surabaya's most popular tourist attractions. Additionally, religious tours like those to Sunan Ampel Religious Area and Al-Akbar Mosque enhance the city's tourism offerings. Surabaya has a lot of potential to become into one of Indonesia's most popular tourist destinations, particularly if it is properly developed and advertised.

Innovative marketing techniques that adhere to international trends are essential for boosting the number of foreign visitor visits. Strong city branding may enhance Surabaya's reputation as a welcoming destination by utilizing eye-catching imagery, engaging films, and visitor endorsements. The introduction of the Surabaya Sightseeing and City Tour (SSCT) program, a tour bus created by the Surabaya City Culture, Youth and Sports and Tourism Office's tourism sector to introduce and promote tourist destinations in Surabaya, is one of the city's commendable tourism promotion strategies. The Surabaya Shopping and Culinary Track was the original name of this program when it started in 2013. When the bus fleet started to grow in 2024, this program was renamed the Surabaya sightseeing city tour bus. (Trisnaningrum, 2015, p. 3)

The promotion of local culture through initiatives like SSCT can be examined as a type of city branding of Surabaya to the foreign tourist. In order to

make a city more appealing from an economic, social, cultural, and diplomatic standpoint, city branding is a strategic process that involves developing and promoting a city's image, identity, and distinctive advantages to both domestic and foreign audiences. The historical significance of Surabaya is then leveraged as city branding by showcasing tourism attractions with ties to the past for international visitors. (Dinnie, 2010, p. 3)

Even though the Surabaya Shopping and Culinary Track (SSCT) was created as a component of a municipal branding plan to present Surabaya to the world, there are still a number of challenges in its implementation when it comes to attracting foreign visitors. The dearth of promotions that aggressively target consumers around the world is one of the biggest obstacles. The official Instagram account @surabayasparkling and tourist information centers are examples of promotional media that have not been successful enough in reaching foreign tourists who are more used to looking for information on international websites and platforms. Furthermore, there are still few foreign-language promotional materials available from SSCT, and they lack cultural adaptations and gripping stories that could evoke strong feelings in prospective travelers. Practical barriers to accessibility include the offline reservation system and rupiah-only cash payments, particularly as the official city government website does not currently accept international payments. These problems lessen the perception of service professionalism and make it more difficult for SSCT to succeed as a Surabaya city branding tool internationally.

According to SSCT data from January to December 2024, there were over 5000 domestic travelers overall, compared

to only about 113 foreign tourists from TIC. The months of March, August, and September typically see the highest number of foreign visitors; yet, domestic visitors continue to predominate, with the gap between foreign and local visitors being quite wide. Although the SSCT has rebranded and developed its fleet, it still has a very small number of foreign tourists. One of Surabaya City's city brands, SSCT, ought to be able to develop into a powerful and comprehensive brand. These issues have piqued my interest in researching this subject.

The Surabaya Shopping and Culinary Track (SSCT) Bus service is utilized as a tactic to develop Sparkling Surabaya city branding, according to Eva Hany Fanida's journal. The Surabaya City Government started this program in an attempt to draw tourists to historical sites, shopping malls, and culinary excursions. The public responded well to SSCT because of its reasonable ticket costs and original idea for a city tour. Research reveals a number of shortcomings, though, including a small fleet (only one bus with 24 seats), an ambiguous ticketing system, a small number of tour routes, and a lack of community and private sector involvement in administration. The idea of a three-sector partnership which includes the public, business, and community sectors is really thought to improve services and the efficacy of municipal branding. In order to make Sparkling Surabaya branding more effective and sustainable in drawing tourists, researchers advise cross-sector cooperation and the development of SSCT services. (Eva Hany Fanida et al., 2018, p. 102)

Caisar Pieter Vega Arwanto talked about Sparkling Surabaya's city branding plan in his research, which aims to boost tourism in the city. The author analyzes the

marketing methods used using Anholt and Kotler's theory through a qualitative approach and literature review method. Through a variety of platforms, including its website, Instagram, SSCT Bus, and events like Car Free Day, Surabaya works to enhance its reputation as a city. The "Sparkling Surabaya" branding captures the essence of a welcoming, tidy, and tourist-rich city. The findings indicate that community engagement, infrastructural development, and marketing tactics are crucial for drawing tourists. Additionally, this branding increases the city's competitiveness in the tourism industry both domestically and internationally. (Arwanto et al., 2020, p. 326)

Leily Suci Rahmatin and Kartika Indriana of Desvidyauralia investigate the evolution of the Surabaya Sightseeing and City Tour (SSCT) Bus as a strategy for advancing urban tourism. More over ten years have passed since SSCT Bus, then known as Surabaya Shopping and Culinary Track, began operations. The reservation procedure is frequently troublesome, and there is only one fleet with 20 seats, despite the public's strong interest. Because it only uses the general account @surabayasparkling and lacks a particular social media account, promotion is also deemed unproductive. To help SSCT Bus reach more tourists and assist the growth of Surabaya city tourism, this study suggests adding a fleet, improving the online and offline ticket booking system, and implementing a more targeted digital marketing plan. (Indriana & Rahmatin, 2024, p. 223)

By using the city branding framework to assess how the Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour (SSCT) influences the city's reputation internationally, this study sets itself apart from the three earlier publications. This study highlights how

SSCT functions as a comprehensive city branding tool integrating identity formation, brand communication, and image perception among foreign visitors whereas previous studies mainly concentrated on local tourism promotion, branding strategies, or the technical aspects of SSCT operations.

This study examines the transnational aspect of branding initiatives, including the cultural narratives woven into the SSCT experience and how they are interpreted by audiences around the world, in contrast to earlier research that tended to emphasize advertising strategies and domestic traveler participation. Additionally, in light of contemporary tourism and branding dynamics, this research is both topical and contextually relevant, drawing on first-hand insights gained from field observation and internship experience as well as the most recent statistics from 2024.

This study provides a deeper understanding of how Surabaya may use experiential branding to increase its worldwide appeal by presenting SSCT as a strategic platform for place identity articulation and city image construction, rather than just as a tourism product.

Research Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology with the goal of thoroughly describing Surabaya City's tourism promotion strategies through the city branding initiative. The primary emphasis of the study is the responses from international tourists, as well as the promotional strategies employed by the Surabaya City Government, particularly by the Department of Culture, Youth, Sports, and Tourism (DISBUDPORAPAR), in the Surabaya Shopping and Culinary Track (SSCT) program. In-depth interviews, literature reviews, and direct observation

were the methods used to gather data. During the author's four-month internship from January to April 2025 at the Tourist Information Center (TIC), observations and interviews were carried out to gather empirical data relevant to the field's conditions. To bolster the conclusions, data on tourist visits was also examined. This strategy was selected due to its capacity to uncover social realities and challenges in the comprehensive execution of city branding from the viewpoints of program actors and users.

Theoretical Framework

According to Simon Anholt (2007), city branding encompasses six dimensions: tourism promotion, investment potential, export products, culture and heritage, governance, and people. In essence, city branding is a strategy to build a positive image of a city in the eyes of the international public through consistent communication and the reinforcement of local values. The SSCT can be considered a city branding tool as it highlights Surabaya's historical identity as the "City of Heroes" as well as a destination for historical tourism.

Joseph Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability of an actor to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or material incentives. One instrument of soft power is cultural diplomacy, which Nicholas Cull (2008) describes as cultural exchange aimed at building a positive image and mutual understanding. The SSCT serves as a form of non-state cultural diplomacy, where the history and culture of Surabaya are directly conveyed to foreign tourists, creating experiences that shape positive perceptions of the city and Indonesia as a whole.

The combination of City Branding and Cultural Diplomacy perspectives

positions the SSCT not merely as a tourist transportation service, but as a strategic instrument for building Surabaya's image on the international stage. The SSCT utilizes historical narratives, cross-cultural interactions, and visitors' direct experiences as a medium to strengthen the city's identity while supporting Indonesia's broader cultural diplomacy.

Result and Discussion

Disbudporapar started the SSCT program to promote Surabaya's tourist attractions to both domestic and international travelers. The Surabaya Shopping and Culinary Track was the original name of this program when it started in 2013. This program was renamed the Surabaya sightseeing city tour bus in 2022. (Ezra & Santoso, 2024, p. 314) The morning and afternoon departure times for SSCT buses have the potential to change based on the current route theme.

Beginning in early 2024, all passengers, both foreign and local tourists will be told to congregate in front of the Surabaya tourism information center before to the group's departure to the bus fleet. Since the tourism office had just one bus fleet before, it increased by one in the middle of 2024. Due to the expansion of its fleet, SSCT has changed its name to Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour Bus and adopted a new branding. Subsequent changes included the departure point being split into two locations, Surabaya Square and the Surabaya Hero Monument, each of which has its own tour itinerary. The SSCT bus departure point is currently consolidated into one departure point for two bus fleets, called Surabaya Square, due to the inefficiency of the two-point departure.

Morning and afternoon departure times are available for SSCT buses; the

morning departure time is 09.00 WIB, and the afternoon departure time is 13.00 WIB. Every day, the bus route is different. Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, SSCT buses run three days a week. The process for purchasing tickets is done via the official website, tiketwisata.surabaya.go.id. Once the ticket has been purchased, it has to be re-registered at the Surabaya Tourism Information Center, which is also where I will be interning.

City branding is a crucial tool for creating a favorable perception of a city in the eyes of the global community in the age of globalization and city-to-city competition. A city is a brand that can be expressed through its laws, customs, and tourism attractions in addition to being an administrative unit. (Riza et al., 2012, p. 294) Promotional strategies in shaping city branding through cultural attractions, tourist destinations, historical values are one of the best ways to maximize city branding.

Thus far, the SSCT program has only been promoted via the Surabaya Tourism Information Center, where I also assisted in promoting this bus service to both domestic and international travelers, and the official Instagram page [@surabayasparkling](https://www.instagram.com/surabayasparkling). To ensure that it can keep expanding and being effective at drawing tourists, particularly those from overseas, SSCT also has an evaluation program that involves gathering feedback from travelers while they are traveling. This includes suggestions for tour guides, which are filled out by Cak and Ning Surabaya, as well as suggestions for destinations. (Candra & Prasetyo, 2022, p. 97)

Every two to four months, SSCT routes are altered with new themes based on which month falls on a significant event or which themes are appropriate to be elevated as the theme of destination selection. For

instance, from November to December 2024, SSCT will feature the special theme of Heroes' Day with a route that includes historical sites in Surabaya, including City Hall, Unair Ethnography Museum, Sports Museum, Graha Wismilak, Education Museum, and Surabaya Museum. DISBUDPORAPAR utilizes existing resources in Surabaya as a tourist attraction, especially to foreign tourists. As a city that earned the nickname City of Heroes, the history that occurred in Surabaya is very attached. In the context of maximizing this resource, DISBUDPORAPAR highlights tourist destinations that are part of the original history of Surabaya such as one of them Kota Lama, where the famous event that once occurred in this area was the shooting of Brigadier General Aubertin Walter Sothorn Mallaby on October 30, 1945 by *arek-arek Suroboyo* at Jembatan Merah. (Lokajaya et al., 2020, p. 179)

DISBUDPORAPAR has used the historical and cultural aspects of their city branding to promote Surabaya's educational and historical tourist attractions. Many tourists are interested in joining the bus tour because they are interested in the historical side of Surabaya and historical places, the majority of tourists who are interested in history are Dutch tourists. Based on observations during the internship, the majority of Dutch tourists want to know the other side of history that they knew before by finding out through visiting this historical destination in Surabaya.

This use might then turn into one of Surabaya's selling factors for international visitors. It would be appropriate to promote the trip package because their primary goal is to explore Surabaya's tourism attractions. Making people engaged and linked voluntarily is the core of building city branding, that leaving a real and

unforgettable cultural experience for foreign tourist.

One of the organizations involved in promoting this program to international travelers is the Tourism Information Center. When international visitors visit TIC to learn more about Surabaya's tourism attractions, TIC's job is to engage with them and introduce the SSCT Bus program. (Trisnaningrum, 2015, p. 9) TIC staff will explain and introduce about the SSCT Bus tour by interacting with tourists and explaining things that match the foreign tourist's interest in the SSCT Bus program, for example if the foreign tourist is interested in history, the TIC staff will recommend and introduce routes related to the foreign tourist's interest. According to TIC data for the entire year 2024, 5,358 domestic tourists participated in the SSCT trip, compared to a dramatically lower number of foreign tourists 113. This striking disparity highlights the program's limited visibility and global reach, even though it has great promise as a tool for city branding tool. There is an urgent need to improve international promotional efforts and user accessibility for visitors from across the world, as the data shows that the current access mechanisms and promotional techniques are still significantly more efficient at drawing in local tourists than foreign ones.

Due to the fact that most foreign visitors are unable to pay online, ticket reservations can be made offline at the Surabaya tourism information center. Cash payments are also allowed. By encouraging foreign tourists to join the bus tour, this is also one of the tactics to facilitate their participation in the SSCT Bus tour. It also serves as a catalyst for the introduction of culture and the development of worldwide branding. In the context of diplomacy, this branding is significant

because satisfied foreign visitors will act as unofficial ambassadors, disseminating information about Surabaya via digital reviews, social media, and personal recommendations an organic and very successful kind of SSCT as a city branding.

When it comes to city branding, SSCT turns into a product that presents Surabaya to the outside world. However, in order for this experience to be a successful city branding of Surabaya, the program's accessibility and advertising must be planned with a worldwide audience in mind. Unfortunately, this is when the difficulties start to appear in real life. The small number of SSCT promotional outlets that aggressively target international travelers is one of the primary obstacles. Direct connection through tourism information centers and the official Instagram account @surabayasparkling are still key components of SSCT advertising today. This is insufficient to reach a worldwide audience that is used to searching for travel-related information on websites and other international platforms. The SSCT has not properly supplied sufficient advertising materials in a variety of foreign languages, despite being a program that caters to foreign tourists. Route information, booking instructions, and tour specifics are typically simply offered in either English or Indonesian, lacking any cultural adaptations or captivating stories that might attract visitors from diverse origins. However, in the context of city branding, build up some commercial promotion to other foreign tourist from language which is plays a crucial role in creating favorable impressions and emotional bonds.

Foreign visitors must make reservations offline and pay in cash at the tourism information center, which is not only inconvenient but also lessens the

convenience and impression of service professionalism because not all visitors are willing to exchange their currency into Indonesian currency. This is one major practical barrier: the SSCT ticket booking system can only be made through the city government's official website and does not yet support international payments.

The way that tour content is created and routes are planned reflects the incorporation of local culture. For instance, one of the places visited during this SSCT program is Peneleh Village Heritage Tourism, which is open to tourists. The way of living in a Surabaya village that upholds local customs and gotong royong values is visible to visitors. The history of struggle, indigenous knowledge, and modern cultural manifestations are the three primary components of the local culture fostered by SSCT. The SSCT strengthens Surabaya's reputation as a courageous, resilient city that is closely linked to its people's past experiences by portraying it as the City of Heroes. Stories of defiance and cultural tenacity appeal to both local and foreign tourists, helping to create a city brand that is both distinctive and emotionally impactful. Through carefully chosen tour routes based on monthly themes, such Ramadan, Heroes' Day, or City Anniversary, the SSCT program has significantly shown a strong aim to exhibit Surabaya's cultural experience. (Niovitta & Sarno, 2018, p. 110) Foreign visitors are welcome to discover traditional places that reflect local character, historical sites, and gastronomic delights. Nevertheless, there are still a lot of issues with promotion that prevent this show from reaching a global audience.

Not to be overlooked is modern culture. The SSCT has modern theme parks, artistic murals, and MSME centers that sell Surabaya-made creative goods

along some of its courses. These characteristics show Surabaya's dedication to conserving its history while welcoming modernity, which is essential for establishing the city as creative and progressive in the eyes of the world community. Yet, some difficulties still exist even though SSCT has been successful in integrating local culture into its branding approach. A significant challenge is the scarcity of bilingual tour guides who can tell the stories of Surabaya in an engaging way. A key target audience for city branding initiatives, international tourists, may find it more difficult to hear cultural tales as a result of this restriction. The program's ability to effectively promote Surabaya as a culturally diverse and alluring travel destination may be limited if these issues are not resolved.

However, there are more obstacles standing in the way of Surabaya's city brand being effectively communicated on a worldwide level. Staff at the Surabaya Tourism Information Center and the official Instagram account @surabayasparkling have been the only sources of promotion for the SSCT thus far. Disseminating information to foreign tourists is hampered by inconsistent promotion in worldwide platforms or global tourism media. However, as most foreign visitors have trouble using Indonesian digital payment methods, ticket booking options that are exclusively available online and in local systems are also problematic. Language limitations and the absence of multilingual narratives in advertisements and city tours might lessen the impact of the cultural experience being communicated, according to my observations from my internship. The SSCT helps to create a favorable impression of Surabaya from the standpoint of city branding, but the quality of the visitor experience particularly emotional

and cultural engagement is crucial to enhancing that perception.

In order to draw tourists, investment, and international recognition, a city creates and promotes a distinctive image by emphasizing its distinctive cultural assets, values, and identity, according to city branding theory. (Riza et al., 2012, p. 294) This strategy has been used by Surabaya, a hero city with a rich local history and culture, through the Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour (SSCT) program. This program creates and communicates Surabaya's identity as a resilient, culturally dynamic, and modern metropolis, serving as both a tourism promotion tool and a strategic municipal branding strategy.

The Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour (SSCT) program has emerged as a progressive move that merits appreciation in the development of Surabaya's city branding. However, the Surabaya Culture, Youth and Sports and Tourism Office (Disbudporapar) must take into account a number of strengthening measures in order to maximize its potential, particularly in addressing foreign tourists. International expansion of SSCT promotion media is necessary. Promotion is now restricted to the tourism information center's content and the local Instagram account @surabayasparkling. Establishing collaboration with these platforms is crucial, especially considering the characteristics of foreign tourists who use more international platforms. Because people will feel more comfortable visiting places they are familiar with, working with international travel influencers can help increase the reach of advertising. (Kock et al., 2018, p. 7) Foreign visitors should find the SSCT ticket booking system's digitization more user-friendly. Their access may be hampered by technical

limitations like the absence of foreign payment options. Thus, creating bilingual websites and offering worldwide payment options like PayPal, credit cards, and even international e-wallet systems would be practical ways to increase access.

To guarantee that international visitors can completely understand Surabaya's cultural and historical narrative, it is imperative to strengthen the ability of multilingual tour guides. Speaking English, Mandarin, or other languages that are frequently used by international visitors is just as important as having advisors who speak Indonesian.

The allure of SSCT as a city branding medium will be increased by incorporating local culture into the travel experience. For instance, travelers will have a more profound and significant cultural experience if local art performances, typical food displays, or traditional craft demonstrations are offered during or at tour stopping spots. This city tour will benefit from cooperation with MSMEs and local communities. This partnership would not only boost the local economy but also highlight Surabaya's genuine side, which is crucial for cultural diplomacy. A sustainable city branding strategy is built on a people-to-people relationship, which is strengthened by direct engagement with local populations. Since hotels, airlines, and international travel agencies are some of the ways that foreign visitors arrive in Surabaya, collaborating with them to include their services in the tour package will help promote the SSCT Bus program. This will significantly boost the number of interactions with foreign visitors.

Conclusion

The Surabaya municipal Government strategically uses city

branding from their tourist attraction resources potential to draw in foreign tourists through the Surabaya Sightseeing City Tour Bus (SSCT) program. SSCT serves as a vehicle for tourists and a platform for cultural diplomacy by promoting local cultural values, municipal history, and thematic tour concepts. The program has made strides in terms of fleet, routes, and branding, but it is still not very successful at drawing in foreign visitors. Limited worldwide promotional channels, a dearth of information in multiple foreign languages, and booking and payment systems that are less user-friendly for foreign visitors are some of the primary challenges noted.

Although SSCT's cultural experience has great promise as a city branding tool, it needs to be enhanced by a more comprehensive worldwide marketing plan, the digitization of inclusive service systems, and the development of bilingual tour guides. Another key element in extending the program's reach is cooperation with local communities, MSME participants, and the private sector, including lodging facilities and travel agencies. Overcoming these challenges will enable SSCT to grow into a more potent and competitive city branding tool for drawing in foreign visitors to Surabaya.

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